

**Making Fandom Work: Industry Space and Structures of Power at the San Diego
Comic-Con**

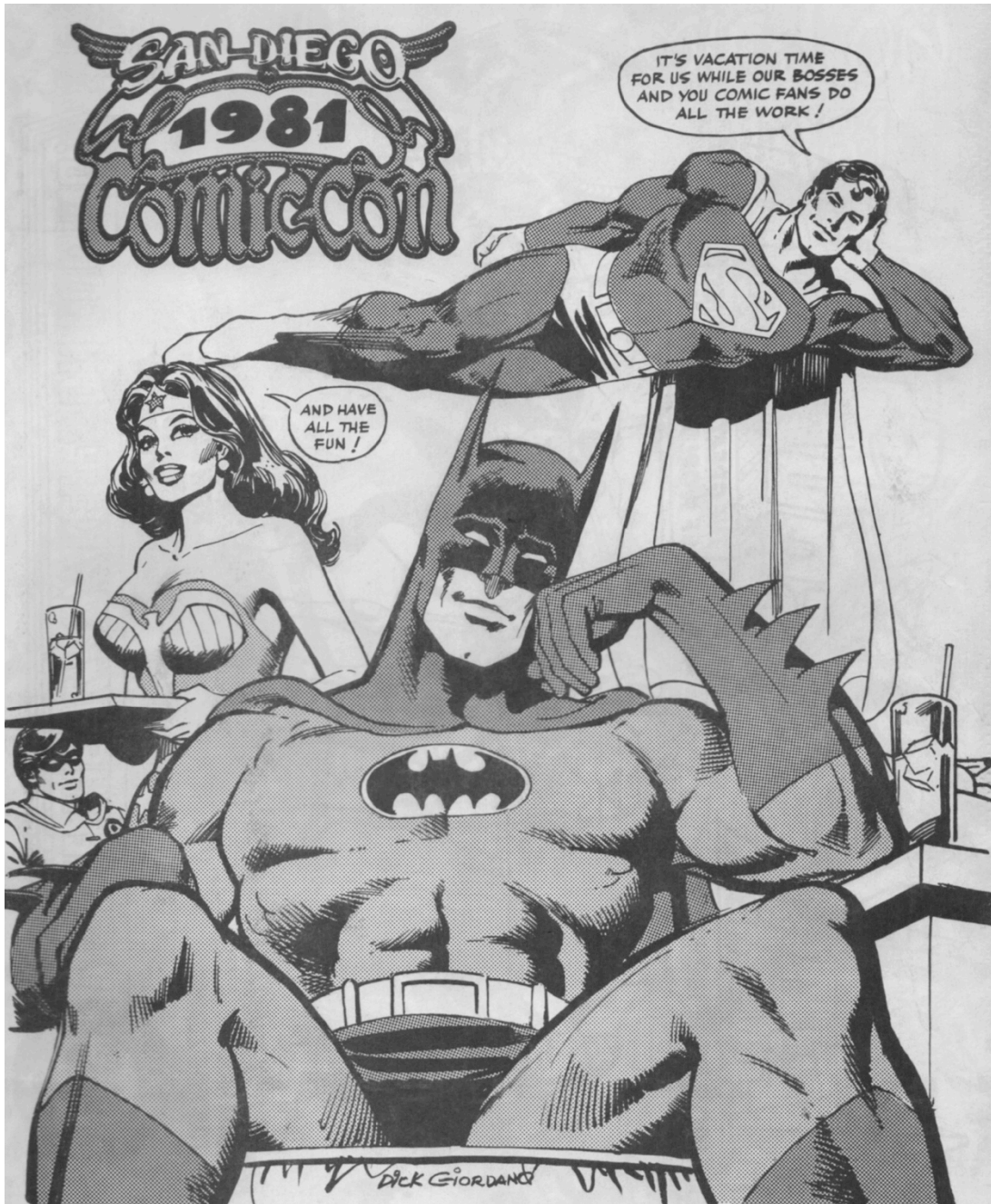
by

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Comic-Con Souvenir Book Cover, Dick Giordano, 1981

(Stadler, Mark, ed. *1981 San Diego Comic-Con Souvenir Book*. San Diego: San Diego Comic-Con, Inc., 1981.)

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For Daddy

*I only have to close my eyes dear
And suddenly I'm where you are*

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It seems strange, at the end of a process so dependent on intensive research and critical thought, to shift gears and channel something directly from my heart onto the page. Some people talk about their dissertation or book as a labour of love. But if I'm speaking from the heart here, I should confess that most of the time it just felt like a lot of really hard work; hard work that was fueled by the love and generosity of a lot of people, whom I'm incredibly lucky to have in my life. It's really *their* love that made *my* labour possible.

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ABSTRACT
**Making Fandom Work: Industry Space and Structures of Power at the San Diego
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by

Erin Hanna

Chair: Sheila C. Murphy

This dissertation examines the San Diego Comic-Con, a large, popular culture convention that attracts over 130,000 attendees each year. Though Comic-Con was founded by a small group of fans in 1970, media industry promotion has become an increasingly prominent part of the event in recent years. Drawing upon extensive archival and field research, as well as political economy, media industry studies, cultural studies, and fan studies, this dissertation offers a detailed examination of the event space alongside extensive analysis of the discourses that circulate within and about Comic-Con. Ultimately, I argue that the industry's presence structures the Comic-Con experience by situating attendees within an economic logic driven by large-scale media production and marketing.

I begin with an overview of Comic-Con's history, highlighting the ways in which the founding of the convention allowed for an integration of professionals and fans across a broad swath of popular culture. Analyzing discourses about movie blogger Harry Knowles, creator of the website aintitcoolnews.com, my second chapter argues for an understanding of exclusivity as something that shapes the meaning around a particular audience or experience by producing a sense of limits. Chapter Three considers how the space of the Comic-Con lines produces an economy of waiting, where attendees' time is exchanged for exclusive promotional material and experiences. My fourth chapter examines Hall H, a 6500-seat room that is home to the largest and most popular film and television panels at Comic-Con. Here I consider how space and discourse work together to transform exclusive content into large-scale promotion. Finally, Chapter Five provides an historical examination of Comic-Con's Exhibit Hall, tracing the growth of the space since 1970 in order to demonstrate how it was shaped and defined by the presence of retail business, support of and for consumerism, and the interests and investments of media conglomerates. This chapter's use of archival research bolsters my argument throughout this dissertation, that the Exhibit Hall, and Comic-Con as a whole, is a space structured around making fandom work—both literally and figuratively—in concert with the economic interests of the media industries.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Comic-Con and the Future of All Media

“This is the future, not just of comics, but of all media. Movie studios are going to come to this convention every year to see what’s new”

-Jack Kirby, 1971¹

I had no idea it would get this big... To me, it’s just become too much of an ordeal. I don’t know of any way to make it smaller, though. I guess in some ways it’s become too much of a success.

-Shel Dorf, Comic-Con Founder, 2006²

Prologue

In July 2009, I traveled to the San Diego Comic-Con to witness what I had been hearing about for several years: the massive proliferation of the entertainment industry at the convention, promoting an array of television shows, films, and franchises. Though Comic-Con was founded as a small fan convention in 1970, in recent years, many journalists have taken notice, describing Hollywood’s increasing prominence at the event.³ When I arrived in San Diego, it became immediately clear that these claims had not been exaggerated. As I walked the downtown streets, I saw traces of Comic-Con everywhere, but not, as one might expect, in the form of publicity for the convention itself.

¹ Jack Kirby qtd. in Dan Vedo. "Comic-Con International: San Diego Souvenir Book 2004." San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State Comic Arts Collection.

² Shel Dorf qtd. in John Wilkens, "Comic-Con's Shel Dorf Watches Sadly from the Sidelines as T-Shirts Trump Talent," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 16, 2006, E-1.

³ For example, see proclamations like: “San Diego event was once for comic geeks; now its about the whole entertainment machine.” Rob Salem, "Showbiz Titans Descend on Comic Convention," *The Toronto Star*, July 23, 2009, E1. Or, “It used to be cool to be square at the fanboy fest in San Diego, but now its overrun with those Hollywood types.” Geoff Boucher, "Comic-Con 2009; Geek Out," *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 2009, D1.

Instead, rickshaw drivers offered me rides in carts adorned with ads for a host of films and television shows being promoted at Comic-Con (figs. 1 & 2). Opting to make my way to the convention center on foot, I saw ‘vandalized’ posters for “The Institute for Human Continuity,” part of a viral marketing campaign for the film 2012 (Roland Emmerich, 2009) (fig. 3). When the San Diego Convention Center was finally in sight, I spotted a man in military garb sitting in the crow’s nest of a large white vehicle that read “Warning: Public Roads for Humans Only,” reminding me to call a toll free number to “report violators;” promotion for District 9 (Neill Blomkamp, 2009) (fig. 4). A carnival with games, snow cones, and cotton candy was also stationed at the far end of the convention site to promote the upcoming season of Heroes (NBC, 2006-2010) (fig. 5). Indeed, it seemed that Hollywood had descended not just on Comic-Con, but also on downtown San Diego itself. Even more pronounced than Hollywood’s presence on the streets of San Diego, was the sea of humanity flowing in and out of the convention center (fig. 6). Fans, too, filled the city core. After Comic-Con ended, I walked around the convention center and through the downtown streets. Traces of Comic-Con remained in the structures, billboards, and crowd control barriers that were slowly being dismantled and in detritus from the convention that still covered the streets. But in the absence of the crowds and the promotion, the city felt empty and vacant; like a ghost town.

Blind Men and Elephants

As I have learned over the past six years, explaining the San Diego Comic-Con to the uninitiated is complicated. As a popular culture convention that is covered extensively in the press, many have at least heard of it. Some may have seen references to

Comic-Con on shows like *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-),⁴ watched the coverage on cable channels like Spike TV or G4, or seen highlights and interviews with celebrities on shows like *Entertainment Tonight* (CBS, 1981-) or *Access Hollywood* (NBC, 1996-). Others may have read about it in industry trades, like *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter*, or stumbled upon articles in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, and in the pages of their local paper. Many more will have seen content about the convention online, coverage on entertainment news sites like *Collider*, *The Wrap*, or *Entertainment Weekly* (which also covers Comic-Con in its magazine), corporate websites belonging to Marvel or Warner Bros., or popular culture blogs like *Grantland* or *Gawker*.

Comic-Con organizers have invoked the parable of the blind men and the elephant to describe the vast array of experiences offered at the event: “each blind man touches a different part of the animal and each comes away with a different thought on what the beast looks like... Comic-Con is a lot like that elephant. Everyone who visits it comes away with a different view.”⁵ It is true that there are many different ways to experience

⁴ *The Big Bang Theory* is one of the top-rated sitcoms on network television and in syndication. In January 2014, for example the show hit a high of 25.28 million viewers in live-plus-seven-day ratings and almost ten million viewers in syndication—a significantly greater proportion of the population than Comic-Con’s over 130,000 attendees. Amanda Kondoljoy, “‘The Big Bang Theory’ Delivers Its Largest Live Plus 7 Audience Ever,” *TV by the Numbers*, last modified January 27, 2014, <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2014/01/27/the-big-bang-theory-delivers-its-largest-live-plus-7-day-audience-ever/232358>; “Syndicated TV Ratings: ‘Wheel of Fortune’ Is Number One in Households & Total Viewers, ‘Dr. Phil’ Tops Talkers for Week Ending January 19, 2014,” *TV by the Numbers*, last modified January 29, 2014, <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2014/01/29/syndicated-tv-ratings-wheel-of-fortune-is-number-one-in-households-total-viewers-dr-phil-tops-talkers-for-week-ending-january-19-2014/232662/>. For example, a January 30th, 2014 episode, “The Convention Conundrum,” details the characters’ various attempts to secure Comic-Con tickets. For a summary, see: Joe Comicbook, “The Big Bang Theory: The Convention Conundrum Recap,” *ComicBook.Com*, last modified January 30, 2014, <http://comicbook.com/blog/2014/01/30/the-big-bang-theory-the-convention-conundrum-recap/>

⁵ Dan Vado, ed. *Comic-Con International Update 2* (San Diego: Comic-Con International, 2006), 3. This analogy is also appears in the Comic-Con coffee table book, published in 2009. San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2009), 18.

Comic-Con. Attendees can curate their own particular experience, choosing four days of activities from over six hundred hours of programming, which includes 1075 panels devoted to comics, film, television, toys, games, and myriad other niches of popular culture and fandom, anime film screenings, an independent film festival, the academic Comic Arts Conference, the over one thousand exhibitors in the over 460,000 square foot Exhibit Hall, and the increasing number of off-site activities and events sponsored by advertisers as wide-ranging as Legendary Pictures, Nintendo, and HGTV.⁶ Because each attendee has differing and highly individualized investments and interests, it would be incredibly difficult to produce a totalizing account of Comic-Con that accurately represents the possible range of experiences available. And yet, this is precisely what gets worked and reworked in discourses about the event, which attempt to encapsulate Comic-Con for the vast majority of audiences, nearly all of whom have never attended. Despite Comic-Con's sizeable crowd of over 130,000 attendees, the majority of media consumers will never see Comic-Con for themselves. To most, the event only exists as a concept, pieced together through articles, images, and footage. If Comic-Con is like that elephant, then even the most savvy media consumer is rendered blind—unable to take in the complexities of the big picture. And this is precisely what makes studying it so important.

This dissertation represents one possible account of the Comic-Con experience and is, to date, the only substantive academic work on the convention itself. Drawing upon four summers of field research at Comic-Con and extensive archival research, this

⁶ Gary Sassaman, ed. *Comic-Con International Souvenir Book 2012* (San Diego: Comic-Con International, 2012). The *San Diego Comic-Con Unofficial Blog* also produced a useful infographic with an overview of the event: Karry Dixon and Sarah Lacey, "Infographics: How SDCC Compares to Other Conventions," *San Diego Comic-Con Unofficial Blog*, last modified November 4, 2013, <http://sdccblogger.com/2013/11/how-sdcc-compares-to-other-conventions/>

project sheds significant light upon a very complex and under-examined media event, with a longstanding history of bringing media producers and consumers together in a single space. It also weaves together an understanding of Comic-Con with popular discourses about the convention and its fans in order to emphasize the ways in which media industry promotion works to shape and define the event from without and within. This dissertation contributes a much-needed examination of Comic-Con to studies of media events, media industries, and fans, but it is also about much more and much less than the entirety of the event itself. For this reason, I structure this research around two key interventions: First, that fans are a constituent part of the political economy of media industries, both as consumers and laborers. As such, they are subject to the hierarchies and power imbalances inherent in capitalist production. Secondly, I argue that the relationship between fans and industry is a product of both discursive and spatialized power structures. By examining the industry's presence at Comic-Con and the discourses that circulate at and about it, I connect the materialities of this media event to popular discourses about fans, their relationship to media industries, and their perceived power as productive consumers in the contemporary media landscape. Ultimately, this dissertation provides an examination of Comic-Con that complicates overly utopian discourses about the power of contemporary audiences by asking how such discourses are produced and circulated in relation to the lived experiences of media consumers.

This project's key challenge is that it simultaneously combats the problem of a single, totalizing view of Comic-Con or its fans, but in constructing an argument about the power imbalances between fans and media industries, it also threatens to substitute another in its place. The structure of a large project with a cohesive, overarching

argument makes this paradox somewhat unavoidable, but I believe that my selection of case studies and my method of examining both the event and the discourses about it provide a convincing view of what is the main focus of this project: the formative presence of the media industries at Comic-Con.

While my case studies focus primarily on the American film industry, or Hollywood, this is not the only industrial presence at Comic-Con.⁷ For this reason, I frequently use broader terminology like ‘the industry’ or ‘the media industries.’ This is a deliberate choice that emphasizes my methodological approach and acts as a reminder that the various industries represented at Comic-Con—film, television, comics, video games, toys, etc.—are actually part of a more monolithic, capitalist institution, what Adorno and Horkheimer called, “the culture industry.”⁸ While I do not apply Adorno and Horkheimer’s fraught term throughout this dissertation, I do reference the industry, more generally, and in a similar spirit. Rather than becoming further embroiled in debates about the pessimism of Adorno and Horkheimer’s theories or the veracity of their claims,⁹ I refer to the media industries at Comic-Con in order to acknowledge the increased consolidation and concentration of media ownership since the event was

⁷ I touch on the comic industry’s role at Comic-Con in this chapter and at greater length in Chapter Five.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (New York: Continuum, 2002).

⁹ The anthology, *Rethinking the Frankfurt School* (2002) provides an overview of some of these debates. Jeffrey T. Nealon and Caren Irr, eds., *Rethinking the Frankfurt School* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002). Desmond Hesmondhalgh suggests that these challenges might be overcome by using an alternative term, “cultural industries... because it refers to a type of industrial activity but also invokes a certain tradition of thinking about this activity and about relationships between culture and economics, texts and industry, meaning and function.” David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles; London: SAGE, 2007), 15.

founded in 1970 and to emphasize political economy's critique of capitalism.¹⁰ For this reason, my argument returns again and again to the economic impetus for the industry's significant outreach to fans and the power of the industry to shape and define the Comic-Con space, just as it shapes and defines culture. While I recognize that there are a multitude of different ways to approach this topic, mine grows out of a desire to produce media studies scholarship that is attentive both to the economic power wielded by the media industries and how this power shapes conceptions of what it means to be a media consumer.

How then, to begin tracing the contours of Comic-Con? One way, which I deploy throughout this dissertation, is to look at how discourses shape and define the event and its significance to popular culture. According to Comic-Con International,

It's a gathering of men, women, and children drawn together by the magic of creativity and the age-old tradition of storytelling, especially in comics, but including other areas of the popular arts—movies, television, animation, and science fiction and fantasy, to name just a few. And that's the way it was planned to be from the very beginning, back in 1970...¹¹

Not surprisingly, this 2009 quote demonstrates the organization's investment in producing a sense of temporal consistency, suggesting that while Comic-Con has changed, this current iteration is ultimately a product of its original design. In the press, this history is often invoked to produce contrasts that drive home the broadening of the event's scope and influence that accompanied the increasing inclusion of media industry

¹⁰ I discuss this approach further in my next section on methodology.

¹¹ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 18.

promotion. This happens so frequently that these descriptions have now become somewhat rote. Below are three representative examples of how writers often gesture towards Comic-Con's beginnings:

In 1970, 300 comic-book fans convened in the basement of a dumpy San Diego hotel for the first Comic-Con. Conceived as a peaceful nerd Eden where fanboys could score a dusty back issue of the X-Men or an autograph from its co-creator, Jack Kirby... in the last decade, Comic-Con has exploded into the most important pop culture event on Hollywood's calendar... Crowd reaction at Comic-Con can rocket a film to riches (Iron Man) or kill it in its cradle (Stealth). ("Building Comic-Con," *Entertainment Weekly*)¹²

The event began in the Nixon years as a swap meet for musty old pulp, but this year it had a red carpet and Hollywood squads selling comedies such as "Pineapple Express" and "Hamlet 2" as much as capes. ("Oh, Right, Comic Books," *Los Angeles Times*)¹³

What began in 1970 with 300 comics aficionados gathering at the city's U.S. Grant Hotel has mushroomed into one of the largest promotional

¹² Nisha Gopalan, Clark Collis, and Adam B. Vary, "Building Comic-Con," *Entertainment Weekly*, July 25, 2008, 27.

¹³ Geoff Boucher, "Oh, Right, Comic Books," *Los Angeles Times*, last modified July 28, 2008, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/28/entertainment/et-comicon28>

bazaars on Hollywood's calendar. ("Studios, Networks Play to Comic-Con," *Hollywood Reporter*)¹⁴

These representative samples of writing about Comic-Con's historical trajectory draw upon three intersecting themes: the increased profile of its attendees and their particular tastes, the broadening of Comic-Con to include all kinds of media and media products, and the significance of the event and its attendees to media industry promotion.

Such themes certainly resonate with more optimistic academic discourses about fans, found in the three "waves" of fan studies which have attempted to recuperate fandom's marginalized cultural position, observe and understand hierarchies within fan cultures, and contend with the proliferation of "fandom's growing cultural currency."¹⁵ Most notably, they resonate with Henry Jenkins definition of convergence culture as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."¹⁶ Jenkins' *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) provides a foundation for thinking about the ways in which events like Comic-Con get articulated as important parts of popular culture. *Convergence Culture* and Jenkins more recent book, *Spreadable Media*

¹⁴ Gregg Kilday and James Hibberd, "Studios, Networks Play to Comic-Con," *Hollywood Reporter*, last modified July 23, 2009, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/studios-networks-play-comic-con-86869>

¹⁵ Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, "Introduction: Why Study Fans?," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 1-10.

¹⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 3.

(2013), suggest that this importance grows out of the increased engagement and productivity of audiences in relation to the media industries.¹⁷

At the heart of these approaches, however, is the very elusive notion of the audience and, in the case of this dissertation, the fan. Here, I view fandom as a construction of a massive amount of cultural discourse, much of it circulated through the media and all of it very firmly situated within the political economy of the media industries.¹⁸ For this reason, my dissertation is less concerned with defining what it means to be a fan, and more interested in examining fandom as a discursive construct. I apply the term fan throughout this dissertation in order to indicate the way in which the industry approaches Comic-Con attendees as consumers, rather than making assumptions about how attendees define or identify themselves.¹⁹ Following from Eileen Meehan's suggestion that, "In studying subcultures, we must be very cognizant of the 'raw' materials provided by media corporations and of the economic system that constitutes the circumstances in which we act," I argue for an approach to Comic-Con that gives

¹⁷ In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins argues that "Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others," cautioning that, "Producers who fail to make their peace with this new participatory culture will face declining goodwill and diminished revenues" *ibid.*, 3, 24. Similarly, *Spreadable Media*, a book Jenkins co-wrote with two digital strategists working the media industries, Sam Ford and Joshua Green, argues that the "shift from distribution to circulation signals a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content..." Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, Postmillennial Pop (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 2.

¹⁸ Eileen Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy," in *Consuming Audiences? Production and Reception in Media Research*, ed. Ingunn Hagen and Janet Wasko (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2000), 83.

¹⁹ Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers identify the need for such work in their essay, "The Political Economy of Audiences," suggesting, "it might be interesting to study more closely the discourses produced by the industry around fandom in order to lure the audience." Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers, "The Political Economy of Audiences," in *The Handbook of Political Economy of Communications*, ed. Janet Wasko, Graham Murdock, and Helena Sousa (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 428.

significant weight to these circumstances.²⁰ Though Comic-Con may produce an array of different experiences open to all who attend and though it may be many different things to many different people, this breadth does not necessarily translate when accounting for the capitalist system within which the convention functions.

The implications for this kind of analysis extend far beyond Comic-Con. Rather, my study of the event and the event space serves as a way to untangle the increasingly complex relationship between media industries and their audiences at a time when production and consumption both seem to fall under the category of media work.²¹ Such interactions are increasingly mediated and expedited through social networks like Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook; crowdsourcing sites like Kickstarter allow audiences to offer financial support to their favorite media personality or television program; and online shopping and streaming interfaces like Amazon and Netflix encourage us to share key details about our tastes and buying habits. All of these interactions are framed as a collaborative project to make the media more responsive, more interactive, more pleasurable—better. As one writer put it, drawing parallels between the real space of Comic-Con and the virtual spaces of social media,

Twitter is successful because it, like Comic-Con, levels the playing field. Attendees may not walk away from Comic-Con having had a personal conversation with the creative folks behind ‘Lost’ or ‘The Twilight Saga: New Moon.’ But attendees of those hot-ticket panels will walk away knowing that those well-paid creative folk care about what the fans

²⁰ Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy," 90.

²¹ Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 35. I discuss notion this in greater detail in the next section.

think.²²

As this quote illustrates, in bringing audiences ever closer to the media they consume, these interactions also perpetuate an underlying power structure that allows the media industries to capitalize on an increasingly engaged consumer base while reaffirming their own economic and cultural power as producers.

The online examples above are controlled through software interfaces and constructed using a set of elaborate codes and algorithms, allowing the experiences to unfold almost seamlessly. Comic-Con similarly naturalizes interactions between media producers and consumers as a pleasurable use of leisure time, but the process through which the event unfolds, in real time and space, means these encounters are much less likely to appear seamless. That is, in fact, part of the fun of attending Comic-Con; it feels exclusive, unpredictable, exciting, and ever changing. For this reason, Comic-Con acts as a space of *discontinuity*, where the ideologies that underpin the relationship between media producers and consumers are extremely strong but also highly visible.²³ Pairing my field research at Comic-Con with a sustained examination of discourse about the event, I treat both as complimentary and overlapping texts. As Foucault argues, “a statement is always an *event* that neither the language nor the meaning can quite exhaust” (my emphasis).²⁴ Thus, my dissertation takes Comic-Con as not only an event space that produces meaning, but also as the context for a series of discursive events.

²² Maureen Ryan, "Only Connect: The Appeal of San Diego Comic-Con - the Watcher," *Chicago Tribune*, last modified 9 July 2009, 2012, http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment_tv/2009/07/san-diego-comiccon.html

²³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

By studying Comic-Con from the purview of media industry studies, rather than as an event singularly shaped and controlled by fans, and combining my field research with discourse analysis, I offer an alternative theoretical frame and a different set of methodological tools through which to understand the relationship between media industries and fans. In the following section, I provide a more detailed description of my theoretical approach in this project, which is to view fans as an integral part of the political economy of the media industries. I differentiate my intervention from fan studies in that I examine how this category of media consumer, particularly broadly defined at Comic-Con, can be viewed as a construct that is shaped and influenced by the media industries, rather suggesting that fans themselves are reshaping the contemporary media landscape.²⁵ In forming these arguments, I draw upon ethnographic and archival research methods in order to illustrate how the significant ideological influence of the media industries manifests in the space and time of Comic-Con and how this influence is inflected in popular discourses about the convention and its fans. The second half of this chapter serves as an introduction to Comic-Con itself, highlighting historical details that are key to understanding the more contemporary analyses offered throughout this dissertation. While this project does not offer a complete history of Comic-Con, researching its forty-five year tenure in San Diego has deeply informed the way I understand and write about Comic-Con today.²⁶

²⁵ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*.

²⁶ I revisit this historical context in the fifth and final chapter of this dissertation. Comic-Con's official history is painted in broad strokes in the coffee table book commemorating the event's fortieth anniversary, *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans, and Friends* (2009), and in bits and pieces spread over forty-five years of articles and anecdotes published in convention program books, progress reports, and event guides. The innumerable articles published about Comic-Con provide some historical detail, while the Internet is also a source of piece-meal accounts, most notably, the blog *Comic-Convention Memories*

Economies and Blindspots: Locating Labor in a Political Economy of Fandom

When, in 1977, Dallas W. Smythe suggested that western Marxism had developed a significant “blindspot” in foregrounding ideology at the expense of a historical materialist focus on the mass media, he signaled an important divergence in scholarly work growing out of Marxism and political economy.²⁷ Despite critiques that his emphasis on economics represented a return to “vulgar Marxism,” foregrounding economic concerns need not exclude their ideological repercussions.²⁸ In fact, as I will discuss, Smythe’s theorization of the “audience commodity” suggests that questions of

(comicconmemories.org) and San Diego State University Library’s oral history project, *Comic-Con Kids* (comiccon.sdsu.edu). Rob Salkowitz’s book *Comic-Con and the Business of Popular Culture* (2012) joins *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans, and Friends* as the only other book published about Comic-Con, but though it contains some details about the past, it focuses on the Comic-Con in the present, particularly as it relates to the future of the comic book industry. San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*; “About Us,” *The Comic-Con Kids*, last modified 2013, <http://comiccon.sdsu.edu/about-us>; Mike Towry, “Welcome to Comic-Convention Memories,” *Comic-Convention Memories*, last modified December 10, 2009, <http://www.comicconmemories.com/2009/12/10/welcome-to-comic-convention-memories>; Rob Salkowitz, *Comic-Con and the Business of Popular Culture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012).

While an entire dissertation could (and should) be written detailing the event’s long history, the historical details I deploy throughout this project emphasize my own arguments about the industry’s significant influence and involvement at Comic-Con and the role of fans in the political economy of media industries. However, other stories need to be told, particularly of the event’s founders in their place in the early days of organized comic book fandom. In an attempt to counter overly utopian discourses about fans, this dissertation often errs on the side of caution and critique. I hope that future work on the topic, my own included, will build on this critical approach to provide a complete history that honors the contribution of these fans while also acknowledging the complexity of their position in relation to the industry. Bill Schelly’s book, *Founders of Comic Fandom* (2010) is a useful resource, profiling ninety important figures in 1950s and 1960s comic fandom, including Comic-Con’s founder, Shel Dorf. Bill Schelly, *Founders of Comic Fandom: Profiles of 90 Publishers, Dealers, Collectors, Writers, Artists and Other Luminaries of the 1950s and 1960s* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010).

²⁷ Dallas W. Smythe, “Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism,” *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1, no. 3 (1977): 1; Eileen Meehan, “Commodity Audience, Actual Audience: The Blindspot Debate,” in *Illuminating the Blindspots: Essays Honoring Dallas W. Smythe*, ed. Janet Wasko, Vincent Mosco, and Manjunath Pendakur (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1993), 379.

²⁸ Janet Wasko and Eileen Meehan, “Critical Crossroads or Parallel Routes? Political Economy and New Approaches to Studying Media Industries and Cultural Products,” *Cinema Journal* 52, no. 3 (2013): 153. Meehan’s analysis of Smythe’s contribution similarly suggests that this economic approach can open up a space to think critically about media industries and audiences. Meehan, “Commodity Audience, Actual Audience: The Blindspot Debate,” 379.

economics and ideology need not exist at two ends of a theoretical or methodological spectrum.²⁹ On the contrary, acknowledging the very real economic power of media industries and examining how that power is enacted upon audiences is instrumental to my ideological critique of the relationship between media industries and fans at Comic-Con.³⁰

Economic analysis, of course, is a key methodology used to study the business of making media. In studies of media industries, political economy allows for the examination of the media as a business with an input and output of capital, whose products fit within an array of larger cultural, historical, political, technological, and economic contexts.³¹ Growing out of Marx's assertion that the material "relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness," political economy approaches have been both contentious and formative

²⁹ Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism; Dallas Walker Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Pub. Corp., 1981).

³⁰ Simone Murray's discussion of fans, media conglomerates and intellectual property and Eileen Meehan's work on the role of audiences in the political economy of the media industries represent two extremely productive, if uncommon, examples of such an approach. Simone Murray, "'Celebrating the Story the Way It Is': Cultural Studies, Corporate Media and the Contested Utility of Fandom," *Continuum Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 18, no. 1 (2004); Eileen Meehan, "Why We Don't Count: The Commodity Audience," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); "Commodity Audience, Actual Audience: The Blindspot Debate; "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy." Daniel Biltereyst and Philippe Meers also provide an excellent overview of the intersections between political economy and audience research, demonstrating the productive possibilities for future studies in this area. Biltereyst and Meers, "The Political Economy of Audiences."

³¹ Wasko and Meehan differentiate between these two strains of economic analysis: "media economics," which "celebrates the individuals, working cohorts, companies, and markets constituting the entertainment-information sector of the US economy" and political economy, which "contextualizes those individuals, working cohorts, and markets within the ongoing development of capitalism" Wasko and Meehan, "Critical Crossroads or Parallel Routes?," 150.

in the development of cultural studies and reverberate in fan and industry studies, alike.³² The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies developed, in part, as a reaction to the economically deterministic base/superstructure model of classical Marxist political economy wherein, “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal also controls the means of mental production.”³³ Rather than eschew Marxism all together, members of the Birmingham School drew on western Marxism. In particular, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony allowed early scholars of cultural studies to consider how “subaltern groups” obtain and negotiate power and, as Stuart Hall describes, “*displaced* some of the inheritances of Marxism in cultural studies” (original emphasis).³⁴

A similar divide exists in industry studies. While some scholars have drawn heavily on political economy to examine industrial modes of production, recent work has also been critical of totalizing and economically deterministic approaches to media industries.³⁵ For example, Eileen Meehan asserts that her research into the television ratings industry affirms Smythe’s emphasis on the economic underpinnings of the mass media and suggests that given her findings, Smythe’s economic theorization was “insufficiently vulgar.”³⁶ Douglas Kellner, on the other hand, suggests limitations to such

³² Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Nahum Isaac Stone (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & company, 1904), 11.

³³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Ruling Class and Ruling Ideas," in *Media and Cultural Studies Keywords*, ed. Douglas M. Kellner and Meenakshi Gigi Durham (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1976), 39.

³⁴ Antonio Gramsci, "History of the Subaltern Classes," in *Media and Cultural Studies Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), 44; Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 281.

³⁵ Wasko and Meehan detail these critiques in their 2014 *Cinema Journal* “In Focus” contribution. Wasko and Meehan, "Critical Crossroads or Parallel Routes?."

³⁶ Meehan, "Commodity Audience, Actual Audience: The Blindspot Debate," 379.

an approach, arguing that, “some political economy analyses reduce the meanings and effects of texts to rather circumscribed and reductive ideological functions, arguing that media culture merely reflects the ideology of the ruling economic elite that controls the culture industries and is nothing more than a vehicle for the dominant ideology.”³⁷ The compromise has been a more broad, theoretical application of political economy, informed by cultural studies’ concern with “examining cultural practices from the point of view of their interaction with, and within, relations of power” in order to provide a contextual framework that accounts for the significant social and cultural influence that accompanies economic power.³⁸ Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren advocate such an approach in their textbook, *Media Industries: History, Theory Method* (2009), describing their objective to “articulate the diverse academic traditions and common threads defining media industry studies while also illustrating how integrated analyses of media texts, audiences, histories, and culture could enable more productive scholarship.”³⁹ Perhaps the most significant examples of such approaches can be seen in the subfield of production studies, which uses ethnographic methods to examine the cultures of media production alongside the production of media culture.⁴⁰

³⁷ Douglas M. Kellner, "Media Industries, Political Economy, and Media/Cultural Studies: An Articulation," in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 102.

³⁸ Tony Bennett, "Putting Policy into Cultural Studies," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 23.

³⁹ Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, eds., *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 2.

⁴⁰ According to Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell, production studies examines, “how media producers make culture, and, in the process, make themselves into particular kinds of workers in modern mediated societies.” Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, eds., *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2. Other examples of work in production studies include: John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and*

However, as Janet Wasko and Eileen Meehan argue, some of these more recent media industry studies approaches have also “claim[ed] the study of media production in a more palatable form for cultural analysts, policy wonks, and the media industry itself,” by divesting the field of the more critical and Marxist strains of political economy.⁴¹ While this dissertation represents a contribution to this growing field of media industry studies, it is deeply informed by Wasko and Meehan’s assertion that “contextualized approaches of political economy and cultural studies provide strong and ample tools” that have long been deployed by political economists in the service of work that is more critical of the media industries.⁴² For this reason, I draw on these overlapping methodologies in order to differentiate this project as one that embraces, rather than rejects “the critique of capitalism and capitalist media” that Wasko and Meehan note is frequently absent in media industry studies.⁴³

Like media industry studies, fan studies is concerned with the cultural production of media, but its emphasis on fans and fan communities has grown out of a larger cultural studies project: to account for the potential power of audiences and consumers. The study of fans as more than just passive or even pathological consumers is also representative of how British cultural studies was taken up in the United States, particularly by John Fiske, who argued for the audience’s ability to make meaning in their lives through resistant

Television (Durham, N.C., 2008); Vicki Mayer, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁴¹ Wasko and Meehan, "Critical Crossroads or Parallel Routes?," 156.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

readings of popular culture texts.⁴⁴ Fiske's work, while influenced by the Birmingham School, further distanced cultural studies from western Marxist and political economy approaches. With this gradual paradigm shift, from consumption as something inherently passive to something that is potentially active and empowering, cultural studies and fan studies, in particular, demonstrated significant investment in examining audience-based modes of media and cultural production.

However, much in the same way that media industry studies have moved away from critical political economy by emphasizing the complexity of cultural production, in studying fans as producers—of cultural texts, of resistant readings, and of communities—the economic factors informing such productivity are also frequently minimized.⁴⁵ While political economy foregrounds the economics of producing media commodities, in laying the foundation for fan studies, cultural studies often takes audiences out of this strictly economic equation, instead imagining a space for audience practices that resist the hegemonic framework of capitalist institutions. Henry Jenkins describes fans' ability to make something more of media texts, something that transcends their economic value and status as commodities, while John Fiske draws on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to describe fandom as "a shadow cultural economy."⁴⁶ This "shadow cultural economy," as Fiske explains it, is a fan culture, "with its own systems of

⁴⁴ Joli Jenson, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Categorization," in *The Adoring Audience*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992); John Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁴⁵ Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), 28.

⁴⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 51-52; John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (New York: Routledge, 1992), 30.

production and consumption” that “echoes many of the institutions of official culture,” but exists outside “the economic sphere.”⁴⁷

Bourdieu’s “The Forms of Capital” (1983) allows for a more fluid reading of the relationship between cultural, social, and economic capital, even emphasizing the importance of economics and class. In this essay, Bourdieu argues for a system of exchange based on the accumulation of different kinds of capital. Though cultural and social capital appear to exist outside the realm of traditional understandings of economic exchange, he argues they can ultimately be converted to economic capital or power, which, as he points out, “amounts to the same thing.”⁴⁸ Despite Bourdieu’s assertions that “all practices, including those purporting to be disinterested or gratuitous, and hence non-economic,” should be analyzed as “economic practices directed towards the maximizing of material or symbolic profit,” Fiske identifies this economic emphasis as a “weakness” in Bourdieu’s work.⁴⁹ Instead, he distinguishes “popular cultural capital” as “not typically convertible into economic capital,” suggesting that “its dividends lie in the pleasures and esteem of one’s peers in a community of taste rather than of one’s social betters.”⁵⁰ The goal of such work seems to be to create a space for fan productivity outside of traditional economic boundaries or to imagine fandom as an economy only in the most abstracted

⁴⁷ “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” 30, 33.

⁴⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press Inc., 1986), 243.

⁴⁹ *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 16 (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 183; Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” 32.

⁵⁰ “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” 34.

sense of the word.⁵¹ Eileen Meehan provides a useful counterpoint, describing a “grey market” in which fans produce, sell, and circulate unlicensed goods.⁵² This “grey market,” does not transcend the economic operations of “official culture,” but is deliberately excluded because fans “appropriate property and cut into the profits of copyright holders.”⁵³ While downplaying fans’ role as part of the economic system of “official culture” lays the groundwork for thinking about how this group produces their own kind of culture, it is worth considering that this “shadow cultural economy” is not really outside of “official culture” at all.

This is precisely the kind of argument Henry Jenkins makes in *Convergence Culture*, when he suggests that “rather than talking about producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands.”⁵⁴ Jenkins’ description indicates a need to reconfigure and re-imagine theoretical paradigms in order to situate producers and consumers along the same continuum of “convergence culture.” As I have argued, while this book lays the groundwork for thinking about fans and industry as participants and collaborators in the production of *mainstream* culture, Jenkins’ theorization of “convergence culture” perpetuates some of the problems of earlier fan studies by continuing to downplay the economic implications for this dramatic shift in the way

⁵¹ For a more detailed analysis and critique of the use of Bourdieu and his applicability to fan studies, see: Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 20-36; Cornel Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (Oxford: Polity, 2005), 32-42.

⁵² Meehan, "Commodity Audience, Actual Audience: The Blindspot Debate," 391.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 391-92.

⁵⁴ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3.

media audiences and producers interact.⁵⁵ Despite the productivity of fans in creating new cultural uses for texts, their status as consumers in the traditional economic sense also means that these activities form a key context through which to understand the political economy of media industries. As mainstream culture has seemingly expanded to make space for the once marginal position of fandom, the line between fan subcultures and mainstream audiences has been somewhat obscured.⁵⁶ For this reason, fan studies might also benefit from considering how fans' practices, as both producers and consumers, inform the system of media production. If fans and active audiences, more generally, are really producing culture that is informed by and circulated within a capitalist system, why not examine their productivity as a form labor and the cultural texts they produce within a similar paradigm as industry studies?

While Abigail De Kosnik argues for just such an approach, she frames it within the paradigm of valorizing fan practices: "fan activity, instead of being dismissed as insignificant and a waste of time at best and pathological at worst," she argues, "should be *valued* as a new form of publicity and advertising, authored by volunteers, that corporations badly need in an era of market fragmentation" (my emphasis).⁵⁷ However, De Kosnik's convincing argument that fandom should be understood as a form of labor also implies that the value associated with such work can only be only understood in

⁵⁵ I use the word mainstream here to distinguish Jenkins arguments in *Convergence Culture* from his earlier book, *Textual Poachers* (1992). Unlike Jenkins' earlier study of fandom, which deals with select audiences and communities, *Convergence Culture* attributes this kind of grassroots, participatory culture to a much wider reaching segment of media consumers and producers, suggesting that fans are not the only participants in convergence culture. "This book's argument," Jenkins asserts, "is that the greatest changes are occurring within consumption communities." *Ibid.*, 244.

⁵⁶ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979). I discuss Hebdige's theories in greater detail in Chapter Two.

⁵⁷ Abigail De Kosnik, "Fandom as Free Labor," in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholz (New York: Routledge, 2012), 99.

relation to its impact upon the media industries. In this way, her suggestion that one way to compensate fan labor is to consider such productivity as “the first rung on the reputation ladder for aspiring creative professionals,” makes explicit what is implied so frequently in popular and academic discourses about fans and industry. First, fans, neither economically compensated nor recognized as professionals, represent the lowest possible position in a hierarchy of media industry labor; and, second, that recognition by the industry represents a key aspirational goal for fans.⁵⁸ It is only when we begin to think about fandom as part of the political economy of media industries that such power imbalances and hierarchies come into greater relief.

De Kosnik’s argument draws upon Tizianna Terranova’s definition of free labor in the digital economy.⁵⁹ Whereas Henry Jenkins would later celebrate the blurring of the lines between production and consumption as consumers become increasingly engaged and influential, Terranova suggests that, “Free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited.”⁶⁰ As Terranova argues, thinking about labor could be beneficial to both political economy and cultural studies and her work is particularly useful as it provides a framework for thinking about

⁵⁸ Ibid., 110. As Caldwell’s account of “digital sweatshops” suggests, climbing the professional ladder (which almost always begins below-the-line) in the media industries is not necessarily a glamorous or rewarding experience. Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 160-67.

⁵⁹ De Kosnik, "Fandom as Free Labor," 99; Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy."

⁶⁰ There are other overlaps between Terranova and Jenkins’ work, as both use Pierre Levi’s notion of “collective intelligence” to very different ends. While Jenkins deploys Levi’s theories to suggest that collectivity allows consumers “to exert a greater aggregate power in their negotiations with media producers,” Terranova cites Levi’s notion of collective intelligence as one of a number of overly utopian formulations of collectivity in the digital economy that “needs to be understood historically, as part of a specific momentum of capitalist development.” Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 27; Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," 44.

labor that falls outside the institutionalized structures of employment.⁶¹ It is the erasure of clear boundaries between production and consumption and the accompanying theories of, and discourses about, the productivity of media consumers that allow for such labor to exist. This dissertation examines the ideological and spatial structures that surround the free labor of fans, reproducing some of the institutionalized hierarchies of waged labor. However, as is particularly evident in Comic-Con's amalgam of audiences with a wide variety of investments and sliding scales of productivity, consumerism is the one thing that unites this demographic and frames the potentialities of their free labor.

Desmond Hesmondhalgh criticizes work on free labor for its tendency to focus on underdeveloped questions of exploitation and for presuming that unpaid labor is inherently problematic.⁶² His solution is to dismiss the idea of unpaid—or, more accurately, non-institutional—labor and shift his focus back to the politics of labor *in* the creative industries.⁶³ While I agree with the need to complicate these issues, dismissing discourses about the productivity of media consumers does not make them disappear, especially when, as this dissertation illustrates, they fuel so much of the popular rhetoric about contemporary fan culture. For this reason, my project takes a media industry studies and political economy approach to fan cultures in order to shift the critique from the question of payment to the question of profit. In other words, rather than focusing on the valuation of fan labor, my approach in this dissertation is to think critically about the

⁶¹ "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," 35.

⁶² David Hesmondhalgh, "User-Generated Content, Free Labour and the Cultural Industries," *Ephemera* 10, no. 3/4 (2010): 273-79.

⁶³ "Doing so," he argues, "allows us to take seriously the lives of workers in a way that the focus on 'prosumers,' 'producers' and even free labor sometimes might discourage." *Ibid.*, 281.

often overlooked ways in which the industry seeks to capitalize on the fan demographic and reify their own place at the top of a hierarchy of cultural production.

One way to do this is by returning to Dallas W. Smythe's assertion that "the first question historical materialists should ask about mass communications systems is *what economic function for capital do they serve*" (original emphasis).⁶⁴ Smythe's theory of the "audience commodity," introduced in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* and developed in Smythe's 1981 book, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, and Consciousness in Canada*, revolves around two key ideas: First, that, "the commodity form of mass-produced, advertiser-supported communications under monopoly capitalism... is audiences and readerships;" and the corresponding notion that "the material reality under monopoly capitalism is that all non-sleeping time of most of the population is work time."⁶⁵ Because audiences—or more accurately, their time—is a commodity, how they spend this time becomes a form of labor that produces value for the media industries. Ultimately, what Smythe offers is a top-down approach to media industries and audiences, but one that is also highly critical of the ways media industries profit upon the activities of audiences. While Henry Jenkins celebrates convergence culture as something that "occurs within the brains of individual consumers," Smythe's work provides a critical counterpoint, arguing, "Much of the *work* that audience power does for advertisers takes place in the heads of audience members" (my emphasis).⁶⁶ By asking us to think about the ways in which activities we traditionally associate with

⁶⁴ Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁶ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3; Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*, 23.

consumption help to sustain the profitability of the media industries, Smythe's work on the audience commodity adds a much needed critical and historical perspective to contemporary theories about the productivity of media audiences.

In this context, it would seem that Smythe's theories have been underrepresented in contemporary work on media industries and fans. Recent mentions of Smythe's work range from complete dismissal,⁶⁷ to short summaries⁶⁸ and passing references.⁶⁹ In contrast, political economists like Eileen Meehan and Janet Wasko, Vincent Mosco, and Manjunath Pendakur, the editors of *Illuminating the Blindspots: Essays Honoring Dallas W. Smythe* (1993), demonstrate the exciting possibilities for work that engages with Smythe's theoretical paradigms.⁷⁰ In 2013, Henry Jenkins dismissed Smythe's work, saying it was "no longer adequate for describing the many ways fans and other audiences generate value—not just through the "commodity" value of their own attention but also through their 'work.'"⁷¹ But reading this quote, I can think of no better reason to revive such an approach. Focusing, as Smythe does, on the economic value of the audience commodity and their labor, does not foreclose on important questions about power and

⁶⁷ Hesmondhalgh, "User-Generated Content, Free Labour and the Cultural Industries," 279-80.

⁶⁸ Philip M. Napoli, *Audience Evolution: New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audiences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 83; Julie D'Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 65; Trebor Scholz, ed. *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Gray, *Watching with the Simpsons: Television, Parody, and Intertextuality* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 63; Derek Johnson, *Media Franchising* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 215; Mayer, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*, 104, 08.

⁷⁰ Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy; "Commodity Audience, Actual Audience: The Blindspot Debate; "Why We Don't Count: The Commodity Audience; Janet Wasko, Vincent Mosco, and Manjunath Pendakur, eds., *Illuminating the Blindspots* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1993).

⁷¹ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, 127.

productivity posed in cultural studies of fandom, it merely reframes these questions by redirecting considerations of power to the material conditions under which fans and industry labor to produce culture.⁷² Not only does this allow for the inclusion of fan practices (and audience practices more generally) in the political economy of the media industries, it also fills a significant void in studies of fandom and convergence culture: an intensive, critical examination of the hierarchies of power and labor that grow out of this inclusion.

Many contemporary scholars, like Terranova, who have taken up questions of free labor in relation to media production and consumption, connect this expanded notion of media work to the rise of a new, digital economy.⁷³ Such research represents an important contribution to studies of digital media and its users, particularly in countering some of the more utopian discourses about the democratizing space of the Internet.⁷⁴ However, this focus also advances the idea of free labor as a direct product of technology and technological change. While digital media undoubtedly plays a role in spurring the productivity of media consumers, as Dallas Smythe's work illustrates, the notion that

⁷² Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism; Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*.

⁷³ See, for example: Mark Andrejevic, "Watching Television without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans," *Television & New Media* 9, no. 24 (2008); "Exploiting Youtube: Contradictions of User-Generated Labor," in *The Youtube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm, Sweden: National Library of Sweden, 2009); Hesmondhalgh, "User-Generated Content, Free Labour and the Cultural Industries; Scholz, *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*.

⁷⁴ Terranova and Hesmondhalgh do not pull any punches in this regard. Terranova asserts, "it has been easy to dismiss the notions of a "hive mind" and a self-organizing Internet-as-free-market as a euphoric capitalist mumbo jumbo." Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," 44. Ten years later, Hesmondhalgh expresses similar discontent: "If I read one more time about how Time magazine nominated 'you' as person of the year in 2006, and how this marked the beginning of a new era of user-generated, content, I think I'll post a video on YouTube. It will be of me holding my head in my hands and screaming." Hesmondhalgh, "User-Generated Content, Free Labour and the Cultural Industries," 268.

media consumers perform labor that impacts the profitability of media industries dates back well before the emergence of a digital economy.⁷⁵ While the kinds of promotional and consumer activities happening at Comic-Con are highly mediated and closely tied to technology, the event also represents a unique moment in which the audience commodity becomes highly visible and free labor unfolds in real time and space.

For this reason, my study of Comic-Con also represents a contribution to scholarship on media spaces, which suggests that we must treat “electronic media, and the social processes that shape our perception and use of space” as “allied phenomena.”⁷⁶ As Nick Couldry argues in *The Place of Media Power* (2000), examining the actual spaces in which media producers and consumers interact is key to understanding how the industry produces, reproduces, and naturalizes its own authority and power.⁷⁷ As such, my primary arguments about Comic-Con are not just about the event space, but also about how power gets expressed through this space. From my first trip to Comic-Con in 2009, before I knew I would be spending the next five years of my life studying the event, the convention acted as a heuristic through which I understood these larger questions of

⁷⁵ Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism; Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*.

⁷⁶ Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy, "Introduction: Orientations: Mapping Mediaspace," in *Mediaspace: Place, Scale, and Culture in a Media Age*, ed. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1. In addition to Couldry and McCarthy's *MediaSpace*, other examples of such work include: Nick Couldry, *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age*, Comedia (London; New York: Routledge, 2000); Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Caldwell, *Production Culture*; Timothy J. Havens, "Exhibiting Global Television: On the Business and Cultural Functions of Global Television Fairs," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 47, no. 1 (2003); Daniel Herbert, *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014). In 2014, I participated in an SCMS workshop called "Studying Media Industry Event Spaces," with Avi Santo, Tim Havens, and Tamara Falicov, which discussed some of the advantages and challenges of such approaches. Avi Santo et al., *Studying Media Event Spaces*, *Society for Cinema and Media Studies* (Seattle, WA: March 19, 2014).

⁷⁷ Couldry, *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age*, 4.

power. In each year that I attended, I gained a better understanding of precisely how power circulated discursively, as an ideological expression about the place of fans in the political economy of media industries; but I also learned that these ideologies grew out of and shaped the event space itself. Drawing upon four summers of field research, I deploy my understanding of Comic-Con as an event space in concert with extensive discourse analysis and archival research in order to demonstrate how the media industries exercise their significant economic and cultural power at the convention.

Because parts of this project draw upon field research and participant observation it might be considered “philosophically ethnographic” for its emphasis on “lived experience” at Comic-Con.⁷⁸ Absent, however, is the goal of “producing a holistic description of a culture.”⁷⁹ As I stated earlier in this introduction, producing an accurate account of the diverse selection of attendees at Comic-Con would be an impossible task, even with a rigorous application of ethnographic methods. While my attendance at Comic-Con might easily be encapsulated as participant observation, my arguments about the nature of Comic-Con and their focus on the intervention of industry promotion at the event raise questions about the very nature of participation itself and what that means at Comic-Con. Take, for example, the message printed on the back of the Comic-Con badge:

By attending Comic-Con® or any part of Comic-Con, you agree to allow San Diego Comic Convention/Comic-Con International (SDCC), its agents, licensees or assignees, the right to use your image and/or likeness

⁷⁸ Eric W. Rothenbuhler and Mihai Coman, "The Promise of Media Anthropology," in *Media Anthropology*, ed. Eric W. Rothenbuhler and Mihai Coman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc., 2005), 3.

⁷⁹ Ellen Seiter, *Television and New Media Audiences* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 10.

by media now known or hereafter devised for advertising and/or promotional purposes. You also agree not to take pictures or videos where posted or announced as prohibited and agree that any permitted photos or videos will not be used for any commercial purposes and will not be made publically available or generally displayed without prior written consent of SDCC.⁸⁰

This ‘fine print’ represents one of the many ways that participation in the event is, necessarily, also a tacit, legal agreement to participate in the promotional machinations of Comic-Con’s “agents, licensees or assignees.” I learned this first hand when my research compelled me to participate in industry promotions that “required” me to be photographed, requested personal information, like my email address, or simply scanned the barcode on my Comic-Con badge to obtain that information instead.⁸¹ In 2013, at a panel promoting *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Bryan Singer, 2014), the moderator excitedly announced that a company called Crowdzilla was going to photograph the entire crowd.⁸² The huge group photo, which also allowed users to zoom in on individual faces in the crowd, would be posted online so that fans could tag themselves to show all their friends that they were there. Attendees would effectively have to choose between staying in the room and being photographed, or leaving and missing at least a portion of the panel that many had lined up for hours to see. I use such examples to problematize a fundamental aspect of ethnographic research at Comic-Con, and to raise a question that

⁸⁰ San Diego Comic Convention. "Comic-Con International Badge, 2012." Collection of the Author.

⁸¹ For example, in order to enter the *Ender's Game* exhibit stationed outside the convention center in 2013, I was photographed for an “ID card” and “dog tags” and was asked to share my email address in order to receive a copy of the photo, which I was also encouraged to post to social networking sites. This is a very common part of many promotional booths and interactive exhibits at Comic-Con.

⁸² "X-Men," *Crowdzilla*, last modified 2013, <http://go.crowdzilla.net/x-men/>

underpins this dissertation. If I was a participant observer at Comic-Con, with whom was I participating and what does that participation entail?

Given that the focus of my research is on media industry promotion at the event, my field research provides a critical account of what it was like to be on the receiving end of this promotion. However, collecting this information also meant consenting to be a part of the very process I was critiquing. In this sense, I was a participant, sharing this experience with a large group of attendees. However, in the sense that Comic-Con is also an industry space, I was *not* a participant. Rather, I was excluded from the industrial machinations behind these promotions and placed in the position of an audience member, continually receiving, interpreting, and critiquing these live, paratexts all around me.⁸³ For this reason, my approach to field research at Comic-Con, which focuses on the meaning produced and circulated through the event space, grows out of my own experiences at the event. My individual investments as an academic and my own critiques of the industry's role in the event were key to my personal experience, but did nothing to fundamentally alter the experience of others or the overall atmosphere at the convention, nor did my personal investments manifest in the array of discourse and press coverage surrounding Comic-Con. Instead, while attending Comic-Con I became, to those outside the event, just another member of a very large crowd defined, spatially and discursively, as fans. It is for this reason that this project combines ethnographic research and discourse analysis. As I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, Comic-Con produces a sense of exclusivity that bolsters promotional value and relies on a careful control of access and information. My research as a participant observer allows me to

⁸³ Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

relay what it feels like to be on the receiving end of this exclusive access in a highly controlled environment. But examining the discourses that surround Comic-Con demonstrates how this exclusivity and control extends well beyond the event space.

Comic-Con is a popular, expansive, crowded, and high-paced event, so my approach to field research—taking notes, photographs, video, audio, and engaging in casual conversation with Comic-Con attendees, volunteers, and employees—often changed on the fly in order to gather as much information as possible in a variety of shifting and unpredictable contexts. Ultimately, I used this research to build an account of my own Comic-Con experience, which I analyzed during and after the event and re-examined through the lens of additional written accounts, video footage, and coverage published in the press and online. Rather than using my academic credentials to gain entry into Comic-Con—either as a participant in the concurrent Comic Arts Conference or by applying for one of their broadly defined press badges—I approached the event as a member of the general public. This entailed navigating complex and unpredictable ticket sales online; competing with thousands of others for hotel rooms in the city, often at inflated prices; and pouring over the schedule in an attempt to carefully orchestrate plans and back up plans for my activities on each day of the event.

Because of this project's focus, I was also faced with the ongoing challenge of maintaining my access to the most popular aspect of the event: media industry promotion. While at Comic-Con, I spent an average of four to six hours a day in line, a process that lengthened with each passing year. This included lines to gain entry to the convention in the morning, lines for individual panels throughout the day, lines for offsite promotions, and, in one case, a line to purchase tickets for the following year. When I first attended in

2009, I started my day at about 8:00 a.m. and by my fourth visit, in 2013, I arrived closer to 5:00 a.m., joining a large number of people who had slept in line overnight.⁸⁴ While in line, I spoke to other attendees and made attempts to converse with the frequently tight-lipped members of line security about the process of queuing and the organization and maintenance of the line. Given the nature of waiting in line, this process also presented one of the few opportunities for sustained contemplation during Comic-Con's frenetic four days. While I waited, I reflected upon the particular ways that the space and structure of the line guided me towards an understanding of where I stood as an attendee, both literally and figuratively.

More often than not, these lines led to film and television panels in one of two programming rooms: Hall H and Ballroom 20.⁸⁵ In addition to waiting to gain entry, I also spent significant time inside these rooms—often entire days—making notes, photographing the space, and recording those portions of the panels that were not prohibited by anti-piracy regulations. Over four years, I positioned myself at different locations in the rooms and experienced a sampling of different panels and promotions. I also attended smaller panels promoting comic books, games, animation, as well as the annual Comic-Con Talk Back Panel. Held each year on the last afternoon of Comic-Con and outside of the limelight of promotional spectacle, this three-hour panel provided me with a unique understanding of how some attendees see themselves in relation to both the media industries and Comic-Con organizers. These attendees—many of whom, as I observed over the years, were regulars at the panel—lined up behind a microphone and

⁸⁴ It is also worth mentioning that while I secured seats near the middle or front of programming rooms in 2009, by 2013, I was seated in the final few rows, even with my earlier arrival time.

⁸⁵ I discuss programming and programming rooms at greater length in Chapter Four.

shared their frustrations and grievances while Comic-Con's President, John Rogers, listened, made notes, apologized, and attempted to explain the challenges of organizing a convention for fans while simultaneously meeting the demands and specifications of what he frequently referred to as "the studios." It was here that I first observed that the desires of fans and the goals of organizers were often in tension, but continually being reconfigured in order to accommodate the demand of and for media industry promotion.

In addition to the programing rooms, I devoted significant time to touring the Exhibit Hall, a large space filled with an array of vendors and media industry booths offering photo opportunities, autographs, and giveaways.⁸⁶ This space was particularly challenging to document because unlike the panels in Ballroom 20 and Hall H, where I was required to remain a stationary member of the audience, the immense Exhibit Hall necessitated constant movement in order to maintain the flow of traffic in the overcrowded space. In this context, sound recordings, hundreds of hastily snapped photographs, a large collection of free promotional ephemera ranging from t-shirts to fliers and coupons, and the four page maps supplied in the Event Guide, helped me to reconstruct the space after the fact.

The Exhibit Hall, like so many spaces at Comic-Con, is demonstrative of how the organization of the event pushes back against critical reflection in the moment, providing, instead, constant stimulation and excitement. Perhaps the most significant challenge of this project, then, was to find ways to gather data while also accounting for this aspect of the experience. My solution, and the driving force behind the arguments in this dissertation, was to piece together my own impressions through field research and

⁸⁶ I discuss the Exhibit Hall at length in Chapter Five.

compare and contrast my experience with the industry's desired outcome: publicity in the form of discourses about Comic-Con, industry promotion, and fans, published online and in the popular press.

This leads me to one final methodological approach I have yet to discuss: archival research. Though this project grows out of my attendance at a media event, I do not rely on my own experiences as singular and definitive evidence. Rather, my accounts are bolstered throughout this dissertation by extensive archival research, drawing from both digital resources and traditional brick and mortar archives. Thus, my arguments are deeply informed by an understanding of Comic-Con's history, as well as extensive research into coverage of Comic-Con and fans in the popular and trade press. Though I do address aspects of Comic-Con's longer history, particularly in Chapter Five, because of this project's more contemporary focus, this history does not always figure as prominently. In the space that remains, then, I wish outline some key historical details that, I hope, will resonate throughout this dissertation until I return to it in the concluding chapter. In this way, the history of Comic-Con remains an important subtext in this project, just as it has accompanied me through my own process of research and writing.

Comic-Con: A History of the ProFan(e)

Morgan Spurlock's 2011 film, *Comic-Con Episode IV: A Fan's Hope*, provides a cursory introduction to Comic-Con's history. The film begins with a mock slide show, titled "1970 San Diego." The artificial whirr of the slide projector accompanies a series of black and white still images: A modest, stenciled sign that reads, "Comics Convention Registration"; a small dealers room, filled with boxes of comics and little else; an artist posing with his sketch of Tarzan; attendees enjoying a small art display; a table of six

unidentified panelists addressing a room full of attendees; and a father and son posing in matching superman costumes. Accompanying these images is an audio recording of a local news segment with the event's founder, Shel Dorf.⁸⁷

Announcer: The first annual Golden State Comic-Con gets underway this weekend at the U.S. Grant Hotel. Artist Shel Dorf says that he hopes to make this event an annual thing.

Interviewer: Will this be open to the public?

Dorf: Ah...yes. This is a chance for the amateur fan and amateur writer to really meet with the professionals and find the magic secret of how it's done.⁸⁸

When asked about the size of the gathering Dorf optimistically speculates that attendance at the 1970 convention could hit five hundred.⁸⁹ At that moment, the film cuts from the

⁸⁷ While Dorf is most commonly identified as the founder of Comic-Con, as I will describe, the event was also actually the product of a collective effort, spearheaded by Dorf. As I will discuss, he proposed the idea, having participated in one of the earliest known conventions specifically organized around comics (Detroit's Triple Fan Fair). He was also one of only two adults involved in Comic-Con and signed all the necessary contracts with the first venue, the U.S. Grant Hotel. Angela Carone and Maureen Cavanaugh, "The First Comic-Con," last modified July 22, 2010, <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2010/jul/22/first-comic-con>; Schelly, *Founders of Comic Fandom*, 103; Scott Shaw!, "Cartoonist-at-Large #1: The "Secret Origin" of San Diego' Comic-Con International," *Jim Hill Media*, last modified July 7 2005, http://jimhillmedia.com/blogs/scott_shaw/archive/2005/07/07/1717.aspx. While one of the other founding members of Comic-Con's organizing committee, Scott Shaw! (sic), was and is critical of what he perceived as Dorf's appropriation of the founder title in the context of a collective effort, I have not encountered any other significant evidence to suggest that the title was undeserved. Mark Habegger, "Scott Shaw!," *Comic-Con Kids*, last modified 2013, <http://comiccon.sdsu.edu/scott-shaw/>

⁸⁸ Notably, the announcer refers to Dorf, not as a fan or enthusiast, but an artist. Though he pursued a career as a commercial artist, he did not work in comics or cartooning until after founding Comic-Con. In 1977 he was hired as a letterer for Milton Caniff's comic strip, *Steve Canyon*. Schelly, *Founders of Comic Fandom*, 103. A full, unedited version of this 1970 interview is available online: "Channel 39 Pre-Con Interview of Shel Dorf," *Comic-Convention Memories*, last modified January 8, 2010, <http://www.comicconmemories.com/2010/01/08/recordings-of-the-1970-san-diego-comic-con-1-listen-to-them-here/>

⁸⁹ Actual attendance at the event was reportedly around three hundred. Today, Comic-Con admits over 130,000. David Glanzer, Gary Sassaman, and Jackie Estrada, eds., *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book* (San Diego: San Diego Comic-Con International, 2009), 60; Dixon and Lacey, "Infographics: How SDCC Compares to Other Conventions".

antiquated, black and white slide show images to color footage of Comic-Con today, accompanied by a lively score. The opening credits roll, interspersed with slow motion and time lapse photography of fans pouring into the convention hall, illustrating that Comic-Con has, indeed, exceeded its founder's wildest imagination. Like the examples I cited earlier in this introduction, *Comic-Con Episode IV* draws upon Comic-Con's history in the service of a coherent vision of what the event has become. Spurlock even goes as far as to compress and distort Comic-Con's history in order to produce this narrative. At least one of the images included in the slideshow, a photo of a podium bearing the signature "S" of the Sheraton Hotel chain, was most definitely not taken at the first Comic-Con, which was held at the US Grant Hotel.⁹⁰ As I argue throughout this dissertation, such a vision simply asks us to accept, even celebrate, the success of Comic-Con as a product of the power of fandom and the responsiveness of media industries to these audiences.

What the film, omits, however, is Dorf's later ambivalence, even downright dissatisfaction, about the event he had been instrumental in creating.⁹¹ Dorf passed away in November of 2009, the same year that Comic-Con celebrated its 40th anniversary. Having been hospitalized for quite some time, he was unable to take part in the celebrations that year, but friend Mark Evanier said Dorf, who had stopped visiting

⁹⁰ Comic-Con was not hosted at Sheraton Hotel, Harbor Island until 1973. Glanzer, Sassaman, and Estrada, *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book*, 66.

⁹¹ The epigraph of this introduction, found in a profile of Dorf published in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* in 2006, expresses some of this dissatisfaction. The title of the article, "Comic-Con's Dorf Watches Sadly From the Sidelines as T-Shirts Trump Talent" paints a similarly melancholy picture of Comic-Con's relationship to its founder. Wilkens, "Comic-Con's Shel Dorf Watches Sadly from the Sidelines as T-Shirts Trump Talent," E-1.

Comic-Con altogether in 2001, would have been unlikely to attend regardless. Explaining Dorf's complicated relationship with the event, Evanier said:

He didn't like how big the one he started had become, didn't like how top movie stars were eclipsing top comic creators. He wasn't the only person who felt that way but Shel had a more personal "didn't like." He didn't like having no piece of its annual seven-figure cash flow. In the 1980s, he'd quarreled with those handling operations, demanding this and that. When he didn't get it, he stormed out in a fit of pique, thereafter resisting all offers to come back, play a role and collect a paycheck or pension. I acted as go-between for some of those discussions but cannot explain why he preferred to play the angry exile. Still, he was proud of what he started, but from afar.⁹²

In his correspondence with and about Comic-Con, Dorf seemed to fluctuate between warm nostalgia and pride for what he helped to create and contempt for what it had become.⁹³ Having retired from the convention in 1984, Dorf remained a voice on the sidelines, attending the convention and sending occasional letters to members of the Comic-Con committee, including clippings from articles and old programs.⁹⁴ Relations

⁹² Mark Evanier, "Comic-Con Founder Shel Dorf Remembered," *Los Angeles Times: Hero Complex*, last modified November 10, 2009, <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/uncategorized/shel-dorf-remembered/>

⁹³ The San Diego History Center's Shel Dorf Collection includes several folders of Dorf's personal correspondence, which I cite below.

⁹⁴ Jackie Estrada, ed. *San Diego Comic-Con Souvenir Book 1984* (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention, Inc., 1984). In 1992, for example, he sent the committee a photocopy of his message from the 1983 program book. Attached was a letter that read: "I am writing because sometimes it helps to know your early history. This message I wrote in 1983 is a recap of what went before. It reaffirms how I have always felt and continue to feel about YOU, the volunteer worker." Shel Dorf. "Letter to Committee Members of San Diego Comic-Con, 1992." 1992, Series IX: Shel Dorf Correspondance, Folder 15, Box 3, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center.

soured as he grew farther and farther removed from the committee, evidenced by a letter he wrote to the Board of Directors to ask that they remove his founder credit from all future Comic-Con publications. He explained, “the con has changed so much from the friendly little fannish effort I started that I do not feel a kinship to it any longer.”⁹⁵

Ultimately, Dorf regretted and retracted this request, but tensions lingered, as evidenced by a 1999 letter to Comic-Con’s president, John Rogers.⁹⁶ Dorf, accepting an invitation to join Comic-Con’s thirtieth anniversary celebrations, wrote,

I now know that I will always feel a parental closeness to the con. Those first establishing five years were tougher than anyone could imagine... As a parent, I have been critical of different directions the thing took. But I did neglect to constantly say, ‘good work.’ My praise far exceeded my criticism. I hope we can reconcile past differences and move on.⁹⁷

By all accounts, Dorf’s ongoing ambivalence and outright anger was the product of the particularities of his personality paired with Comic-Con’s extreme growth and change in

⁹⁵ Also attached to this letter was a copy of a synopsis from a directors meeting in which the board voted to give their general manager a \$3000 raise and a \$3000 bonus. Several lines below, a motion was passed to reimburse Dorf for twelve dollars and sixty-two cents in postage after he mailed out souvenir books to “Friends of the Con.” The money would only be supplied on the condition that he sent them a list of the names. It read, “Know one would care except that we have a Dept. to do mailings, he doesn’t have a budget to do mailings or anything and he didn’t ask first” (sic). Dorf’s copy of the synopsis included handwritten notations. Both motions were marked with an exclamation point, punctuated by a handwritten note: “P.S. I’ve gone to my last Comic-Con.” "Letter to San Diego Comic-Con Board of Directors, May 27, 1994." May 27 1994, Series IX: Shel Dorf Correspondance, Folder 15, Box 3, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center.

⁹⁶ In retracting his request two months later, Dorf said that friends had advised him that it appeared “hostile.” He explained his actions by citing his depression about the death of Jack Kirby, which also seemed to symbolize the end of the Comic-Con he had created. Dorf said he “was lamenting the passing of the little fannish effort I began in 1969.” "Letter to Comic-Con Board of Directors, July 18, 1994." July 18, 1994, Series IX: Shel Dorf Correspondance, Folder 15, Box 3, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center; "Letter to John Rogers, August 9, 1999." August 9, 1999, Series IX: Shel Dorf Correspondance, Folder 15, Box 3, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center.

⁹⁷ "Letter to John Rogers, August 9, 1999."

the years after he retired as president. His frustrations seemed to grow as the event grew larger and as the Comic-Con committee itself became increasingly self-sustaining and financially solvent.⁹⁸ Dorf's assertion in 2006, that Comic-Con had "become too much of a success" due to its popularity with fans and the industry seems counterintuitive, but it is also indicative of the difficult position in which fans often find themselves, as Matt Hills puts it, "between consumerism and resistance."⁹⁹ While Dorf may have been resistant to some of Comic-Con's growth in his later years, this was not always the case. As president of Comic-Con for its first fifteen years, he helped the convention grow from three hundred attendees in 1970, to almost 5,500 in 1984.¹⁰⁰ This growth fulfilled Dorf's promise in the 1970 that: "The years to come will see us grow and San Diego will take it's rightful place in the world of fandom" (sic).¹⁰¹ Dorf's response, once this dream was seemingly realized, suggests that Comic-Con, and the relationships it fosters between fandom and industry, are much more complex and fraught than they are frequently made to appear.

⁹⁸ Dorf appeared to struggle with money, writing to a friend in 1994 that, "My family thinks I'm a real jerk and a failure in life for ending up flat broke while there is money from the con in three banks." "Letter to Harlan, October 24, 1996." October 24 1996, Series IX: Shel Dorf Correspondance, Folder 15, Box 3, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center.

⁹⁹ Many fans, Hills argues, must contend with their consumerist impulses and "anti-commercial beliefs." Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 29; Wilkens, "Comic-Con's Shel Dorf Watches Sadly from the Sidelines as T-Shirts Trump Talent," E-1. Henry Jenkins also identifies a tension in fans' relationship to media texts, which "typically involves not simply fascination or adoration, but also frustration and antagonism." Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, 23.

¹⁰⁰ Glanzer, Sassaman, and Estrada, *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book*, 82.

¹⁰¹ This statement was published in the program book for the March 21, 1970 minicon, a precursor to the first Comic-Con that summer. "San Diego's Golden State Comic-Con Program Book (Minicon)." March 21, 1970, Series I: Programs and Souvenir Books, Folder 1, Box 1, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center.

At the core of these complexities is the desire to experience a reciprocal relationship with the industry—not only to express love, but also to get something in return.¹⁰² Dorf said he saw Comic-Con as an “exchange of love... between the creative artist and the audience,” but felt that his protégés on the Comic-Con board of directors, and the increased industry presence, which he described specifically as “Hollywood,” had foregrounded business and economics over the love of the popular arts.¹⁰³ This thwarted desire to stage an equitable exchange of love between amateur fans and industry professionals illuminates the paradoxical narcissism of fandom that Cornell Sandvoss describes in *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (2005): “the particular investment in an external object at the heart of narcissistic self-reflection does not lead to self-love, but to the privileging of the external image and the object that embodies this image over the self.”¹⁰⁴ Dorf’s response might also be a way to illuminate some of the critical problems with Jenkins’ theory of “convergence culture,” wherein an audience of more active and empowered consumers work collectively to influence the productivity of media industries.¹⁰⁵ But while *Convergence Culture* “is about the work—and play—spectators perform in the new media system,” we must also be attentive to the ways that media

¹⁰² Karen Hellekson has described the “gift economy” of fan culture, based on “giving, receiving, and reciprocity” among fans, but outside the realms of commercial value. Karen Hellekson, “A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture,” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 3 (2009): 114. Suzanne Scott builds on this premise in order to argue that the industry uses a “regifting economy” to “balance the communal ideals of fandom’s gift economy with their commercial interests.” Suzanne Scott, “Repackaging Fan Culture: The Regifting Economy of Ancillary Content Models,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, last modified 2009, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0150>. Both Hellekson and Scott focus on the implications of this relationship for fans and fan communities, in particular.

¹⁰³ Malcolm Schwartz and Shel Dorf, “Shel Dorf Q&A,” in *1982 San Diego Comic-Con, Inc. Souvenir Book*, ed. Shel Dorf (San Diego: San Diego Comic-Con Inc., 1982); Wilkens, “Comic-Con’s Shel Dorf Watches Sadly from the Sidelines as T-Shirts Trump Talent,” E-1.

¹⁰⁴ Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, 114.

¹⁰⁵ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3.

industries similarly work to shape spectators and consumers within Jenkins' paradigm of convergence culture.¹⁰⁶ This exchange, which Jenkins frames in a positive light, is rarely an equitable one, as the media industries hold significantly greater economic and cultural power than their fan base. Moreover, these interactions must be reframed, both historically and contemporarily, as the byproduct of diverse and overlapping affective relationships (such as those between individual artists and fans, suggested by Shel Dorf) that are filtered through the economic investments of the media industries. While these investments have become increasingly apparent at Comic-Con, much like convergence culture, their appearance is less a product of a structural change in the practices of producers and consumers and is, instead, a question of scale and scope. As I discuss below, not only was Comic-Con founded on and through the overlaps between professionals and fans, but its early years also set the stage for the media industries' later, more intensified involvement in the convention.

The introduction to *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, asserts that "Over the four decades of the event, one thing has remained the same at Comic-Con: The convention is an event run by fans."¹⁰⁷ Given Comic-Con's ongoing reliance on volunteer labor for everything from co-ordination to crowd control, this seems relatively accurate. However, a fan event small enough to be concocted and organized by a small group, comprised primarily of teenagers, and a convention that necessitates a paid Board of Directors, are two very different entities. In 1970, Comic-Con's bank account topped out at \$16.80, while the organization's 2012 tax return

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 19.

documented revenue of \$14,234,879 and expenses of \$11,326,622, leaving them with \$2,908,257 in total funds.¹⁰⁸ Comic-Con also reported 3,500 volunteers and six paid employees with salaries ranging from \$12,774 to \$106,134 for workweeks from eight to sixty hours long.¹⁰⁹ Much has changed since Comic-Con was founded in 1970, growing out of what the official history describes as “an amazing confluence of fan groups” that emerged in San Diego during the mid-60s.¹¹⁰

Two of these fan groups were the “Underground Film Society” and the “San Diego Science Fantasy Society,” and, as the names indicate, their investment in popular culture was not limited to comic books. Though the two groups were comprised primarily of teenaged boys, an older member of the San Diego Science Fiction Fantasy Society, Ken Kruger, owned Alert Booksellers in Ocean Beach, which became a popular meeting spot.¹¹¹ In the late 1960s, the groups came together, calling themselves the “ProFanEsts.”¹¹² While the reference to profanity may signify the group’s devotion to secular, popular entertainment, this title also indicates the importance of fans and professionals joining together because of a mutual interest in popular culture. As one of the original members, Scott Shaw! (sic), recalls, “the group consisted of pros and fans

¹⁰⁸ "Comic-Con Committee Paperwork." February 6, 1972, Series IV: Comic-Con Committee Paperwork, Folder 12, Box 3, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center; "Organization Profile: San Diego Comic Convention," *NCSS: National Center for Charitable Statistics*, last modified 2014, <http://nccsweb.urban.org/communityplatform/nccs/organization/profile/id/953072188/>

¹⁰⁹ "Organization Profile: San Diego Comic Convention".

¹¹⁰ *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 22.

¹¹¹ Ibid; Shaw!, "Cartoonist-at-Large #1: The "Secret Origin" of San Diego' Comic-Con International".

¹¹² This group was also unofficially known as the “Woodchucks.” "San Diego's Golden State Comic-Con Program Book 1970." August, 1970, Series I: Programs & Souvenir Books, Folder 1, Box 1, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center; San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*.

and we were certainly profane at times.”¹¹³ Some members worked in publishing, retail, or as artists or writers. Others were fans who published their own fanzines.¹¹⁴ Over time, more fans and pros were brought into the fold, but it was not until the ProFanEsts met Shel Dorf and his group of comic fans that the idea for Comic-Con began to form.

In 1969, Shel Dorf responded to a classified ad from a twelve-year old aspiring comics dealer Barry Alfonso, who was looking for comics to buy. Dorf, having just moved to San Diego, was hoping to sell some of his comics to make extra money. Alfonso was unable to afford everything Dorf was selling, so he directed him to seventeen year-old Richard Alf, a mail order comic book dealer who ran ads in the pages of Marvel comics.¹¹⁵ Through Alfonso and Alf, Dorf met two other teenaged dealers, Bob Sourk and Mike Towry. Dorf, then thirty-five, became a kind of leader to the group and they formed a comic club called the “San Diego Society for Creative Fantasy.”¹¹⁶ According to most accounts, it was around this time that Dorf suggested the idea of holding a convention.¹¹⁷ When Bob Sourk met Scott Shaw! at a local bookshop, he

¹¹³ Shaw!, "Cartoonist-at-Large #1: The "Secret Origin" of San Diego' Comic-Con International".

¹¹⁴ Ibid; "40th-Anniversary Secret Origins of Comic-Con Panel," *Shel Dorf Tribute*, last modified Oct 10 2009, <http://www.sheldorftribute.com/2009/10/10/40th-anniversary-secret-origins-of-comic-con-panel/>

¹¹⁵ Mike Towry, "The Birthplace of Comic-Con International," *Comic-Convention Memories*, last modified February 15, 2010, <http://www.comicconmemories.com/2010/02/15/the-birthplace-of-comic-con-international/>; Jackie Estrada, ed. *20th Annual San Diego Comic-Con Souvenir Program Book* (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention Inc., 1989), 71; R.C. Harvey, "Shel Dorf, Founder," in *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book*, ed. Gary Sassaman (2009).

¹¹⁶ "Shel Dorf, Founder," 41; "San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No. 1 1973." Series III: Progress Reports and Newsletters, Folder 1, Box 1, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center.

¹¹⁷ Carone and Cavanaugh, "The First Comic-Con"; Harvey, "Shel Dorf, Founder; "San Diego's Golden State Comic-Con Program Book 1970." While the 1970 Comic-Con program confirms this narrative, suggesting that plans for the convention were in the works before Dorf's group met the ProFanEsts, Scott Shaw! says he never heard any mention of a convention at his first few meetings with Dorf. Based upon Shaw!'s interview with San Diego State University (filmed after Dorf's death) and evidence from Dorf's correspondence, there was no love lost between these two. Dorf wrote a letter to the *San Diego Tribune* suggesting that Shaw! had repeatedly lied about Comic-Con's true origins by claiming the idea for Comic-

invited him to attend one of their meetings.¹¹⁸ Over time, Shaw!'s friends from the ProFanEsts joined in and the two groups merged. After organizing a trial, one-day "Minicon" in March of 1970, the group was able to raise enough funds to run the first Comic-Con for three days that summer.

The "confluence of fan groups" that led to the founding of Comic-Con is also notable because a large number of their members, though only teenagers at the time, were already involved in the business of comic books or working in the creative industries.¹¹⁹ Several of the original committee members earned money as comic dealers and used these channels to promote Comic-Con and provide financing for the event.¹²⁰ Others went on to successful careers in writing, cartooning, and marketing.¹²¹ Even Shel Dorf

Con was formed after he joined and at his parents home: "Mr. Shaw has used you to get at me with his snide remarks and outright lie. He tried to rewrite history once before in an interview. I got him to write a retraction." The San Diego State interview suggests that Shaw!'s problems with Dorf's title as founder have continued even after Dorf's death. Shel Dorf. "Letter to Mr. John L. Nunes, San Diego Tribune, July 29, 1989." Series IX: Shel Dorf Correspondance, Folder 15, Box 3, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center; Habegger, "Scott Shaw!".

¹¹⁸ Shaw!, "Cartoonist-at-Large #1: The "Secret Origin" of San Diego' Comic-Con International".

¹¹⁹ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 20.

¹²⁰ Barry Alfonso, Richard Alf, Bob Sourk, and Mike Towry were all mail order dealers. Richard Alf, in particular, was such a successful dealer that he was able to provide the bulk of the funding to get Comic-Con off the ground. Mike Towry, "The Most Important Ads in Comic-Con History," *Comic-Convention Memories*, last modified April 21, 2010, <http://www.comicconmemories.com/2010/04/21/the-most-important-ads-in-comic-con-history>; Habegger, "Scott Shaw!". Ken Kruger, Comic-Con's first chairman and resident "grown-up," owned a bookstore in Ocean Beach and worked as a publisher for his own small presses, Shroud Publishers and Dawn Press. He published the early work of other founding Comic-Con members, Scott Shaw! and Greg Bear. Glanzer, Sassaman, and Estrada, *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book*, 48; Peter Rowe, "Ken Kruger; Ocean Beach Bookstore Was Launching Pad for Comic-Con," last modified November 26, 2009, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2009/nov/26/ocean-beach-bookstore-was-launching-pad-comic-con>; Greg Bear, "Biography," *Ken Kruger Tribute*, last modified <http://www.kenkruegertribute.com/biography/>

¹²¹ For example, Greg Bear went on to a very successful career as a science fiction and fantasy writer and Scott Shaw! became a cartoonist and writer who also worked as senior art director for marketing firm, Ogilvy & Mather, overseeing commercials and toy lines. After his time as a teenage comic book dealer, Barry Alfonso went on to work in the music industry, writing songs, press materials, and liner notes. He said his work on Comic-Con "helped [him] to develop invaluable writing and publicity skills." Shaw!, "Cartoonist-at-Large #1: The "Secret Origin" of San Diego' Comic-Con International"; Glanzer, Sassaman, and Estrada, *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book*, 42-51.

was able to secure more professional opportunities, including a “dream job” as a letterer for the *Steve Canyon* comic strip.¹²² As the name of Shaw!’s fan club, the ProFanEsts, suggests, Comic-Con, though founded by a group of individuals identifying themselves as fans of comics and popular culture, was not entirely outside of the industry. Instead, many of Comic-Con’s organizers had professional aspirations or were already contributing to the comic and publishing industries in some capacity.

It is not surprising, then, that Comic-Con has always represented the possibility of upward mobility for fans. For those with the inclination, the convention offered many opportunities to learn about and seek out work in the comic, film or television industries. “A San Diego Comic-Con Retrospective,” published in the 1979 souvenir book, emphasized two important aspects of the convention in its first ten years: It provided the opportunity for fans to “meet and play groupie” to “professional comic talent”; and it was a venue for “the upcoming amateur or semiprofessional artist” who wanted to share his (or, in rarer instances, her) work and “elevate himself and his career.”¹²³ In a letter published in the 1973 souvenir book, Dorf described how pivotal comic fandom was to the evolution of the art form:

We believe in comic fandom. It is the source (as has already been proven) of future artists, writers, and editors. The fan and the pro have a lot to offer

¹²² Harvey, “Shel Dorf, Founder.” While R.C. Harvey describes Dorf’s employment as a “dream job,” Bill Schelly writes that Dorf’s eleven year employment with Milton Caniff was a letdown, at least initially: “he hated lettering and the pay at first—\$35 a week to do six dailies and a Sunday strip—was paltry.” However, “later Shel admitted that this assignment had many positive ramifications in his life. For one thing, it allowed him to intensify his relationship with Caniff.” In addition to this job, Schelly writes, “In the 1970s, with all the connections he made as chairman of the San Diego Comicon, Dorf really came into his own. He became an inveterate interviewer and article-writer for industry fanzines and magazines.” Schelly, *Founders of Comic Fandom*, 103.

¹²³ Shel Dorf et al., “A San Diego Comic-Con Retrospective,” in *San Diego Comic-Con* (San Diego: 1979), 4.

each other. The sellers of rare material serve an even more important function—they help us fill the gaps in our collection and make available the stuff that has gone before. By studying the work of those who have laid the groundwork for the industry, we can learn to seek out new directions, and help to build and diversify the field of comics.¹²⁴

Dorf's statement demonstrates that, even in 1973, the overlaps between fans and professionals attending the event were already deeply ingrained. Not only that, but this relationship, as Dorf presents it, was also based on a mutual investment in advancing the comics industry. This conflation of fan and professional investments reverberates throughout Comic-Con's history and also underpins Morgan Spurlock's Comic-Con documentary.

The film profiles seven attendees, four of whom have explicitly stated or realized professional aspirations.¹²⁵ *Comic-Con Episode IV* is also punctuated by an array of

¹²⁴ Shel Dorf. "San Diego Comic-Con Program Book 1973." Series I: Programs & Souvenir Books, Folder 4, Box 1, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center.

¹²⁵ Skip Harvey ("The Geek") and Eric Hanson ("The Artist") travel to Comic-Con to pursue a career in the comic industry. Holly Conrad ("The Designer"), who designed *Mass Effect* costumes for competition in the masquerade, was ultimately contracted by *Mass Effect* producers, Bioware, to design costumes for them. Conrad and her friend Jessica Merizan also founded their own company around the time the film was produced, Crabcat Industries, which their site describes as "a costume fabrication shop, cosplay community, and new media entertainment company." Holly Conrad and Jessica Merizan, "Crabcat Industries," *Crabcat Industries*, last modified 2013, <http://crabcatindustries.com>. Conrad also works as a "Community Manager" for Maker Studios, what appears to be a marketing firm masquerading as an online content production studio. "Commercial," *Maker Studios*, last modified 2014, <http://www.makerstudios.com/commercial#>. Finally, the film profiles Chuck Rozanski ("The Survivor"), a long-time comic dealer who, at the time the film was produced, had attended Comic-Con for thirty-eight consecutive years. Rozanski, whose Mile High Comics is one of the largest comic book dealers in the country, purchased the mail order division of his business from one of Comic-Con's founding members, Richard Alf, in 1979. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, *The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 102-3. While the film depicts Rozanski's company as struggling to succeed at Comic-Con, as other media push comics out of the spotlight, the business itself appears to be going strong. As of 2012, Rozanski owned a 65,000 square-foot warehouse, a massive online business, and three retail stores in Colorado. Claire Martin, "Chuck Rozanski of Mile High Comics Talks About Life, Superheroes and Comic-Con," *The Denver Post*, last modified June 7, 2012, http://www.denverpost.com/ci_20798083/chuck-rozanski-mile-high-comics-life-superheroes-and

celebrity interviews. Not only do these celebrities serve as the film's de facto voices of authority, providing commentary that punctuates the narrative of the seven Comic-Con attendees, but they also share stories that bolster their own identity as fans of collecting, comics, and popular culture. For example, Guillermo del Toro speaks passionately of his own collection and quirks as a collector, Joss Whedon asserts that he would never sell his comics, and Kevin Smith suggests that his attendance at Comic-Con dates back to a time before it was "mainstream." In this way, the film reproduces the flattening out of the relationship between fans and industry at Comic-Con that I problematize throughout this dissertation.

Historically, Comic-Con encouraged a similar, if more modest, interaction between professionals and fans. From the first convention in 1970, organizers incorporated an art show to which both fans and professionals could contribute their work.¹²⁶ In 1979, Comic-Con held an amateur film festival¹²⁷ and, much later, in 2001, Comic-Con re-launched the film festival as the "Comic-Con International Independent Film Festival."¹²⁸ The festival has since expanded to cover all four days of the convention, and includes panels and workshops for burgeoning filmmakers. Starting in 1983, amateur comic fans and artists could bring portfolios for evaluation and consideration by

¹²⁶ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 44.

¹²⁷ Mark Stadler, ed. *San Diego Comic-Con Souvenir Book 1980* (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention, Inc., 1980). A 1979 article in the *LA Times* describes an "amateur film festival" as one of the highlights of that year's Comic-Con. "Comic Convention Will Judge Amateur Movies," *Los Angeles Times* 1979, A4.

¹²⁸ In 2001, the event was titled "Film Fest Friday" and in future years this one-day event expanded into the Comic-Con International Film Festival. Dan Vado, ed. *Comic-Con International Update 1* (San Diego: Comic-Con International, 2002), 34; Glanzer, Sassaman, and Estrada, *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book*, 109; "Comic-Con International Independent Film Festival," *Comic-Con International: San Diego*, last modified 2014, <http://www.comic-con.org/cci/film-festival>

companies like Marvel and DC Comics.¹²⁹ In the 1990s this process was formalized as the Portfolio Review and now encompasses comics, film, animation, video games and role-playing games.¹³⁰

However, industry-oriented programming dates back even earlier. For example, in 1973, Carmen Infantino, then the president and head publisher of DC Comics, offered “an informative talk on the production and economics of comics.”¹³¹ Comic-Con also introduced a Sunday Brunch in 1973 where fans could pay five dollars to “actually sit down at the same table with your favorite pro and delve into the inner workings of his (or her) mind.”¹³² Almost ten years later, a number of panels in Comic-Con’s 1982 program invited fans to learn from professionals about “How to Break Into TV” or “How to Break Into Comics.”¹³³ A noticeable trend emerges from these historical examples: though Comic-Con celebrated the fans and industries that made comics and popular culture, Comic-Con’s offerings frequently situated the relationship between fans and industry as

¹²⁹ Leonard Novarro, "Holey Moley!; Comics Convention Here Boasts Industry's First-Ever Trade Show," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 26 June 1984.

¹³⁰ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 46.

¹³¹ Chuck Graham and Barry Alfonso. "San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No.1 and 1973 Wrap-up Report." Series III: Progress Reports and Newsletters, Folder 40, Box 1, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center.

¹³² "San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No. 1 1973."

¹³³ Such panels are even more prominent in the present day. In 2013, over sixty-five panels were devoted to an array of professionalization topics, including: “Breaking into Comics the Marvel Way,” “Writing for TV: From First Draft to Getting Staffed,” “How to Get a Job in the Video Game Industry,” and “Creative Techniques for Innovative Creature Design.” Shel Dorf and Barry Short, eds., *Progress Report, No. 2*, San Diego Comic-Con (1982), 28-38; Jackie Estrada, ed. *2013 Comic-Con International: Events Guide* (San Diego: Comic-Con International, Inc., 2013).

an aspirational one; helping fans to be more like professionals and positioning fans as important and viable participants in the comic and entertainment industries.¹³⁴

The ease with which fan identification moved between amateur and professionalism at Comic-Con is not accidental. As I have discussed, Shel Dorf was explicit about his desire to close this gap between fan and professional or, at least, to facilitate the interweaving of fandom and cultural production by allowing “the amateur fan and the amateur writer to really meet with the professionals and find the magic secret of how it’s done.”¹³⁵ He would later elaborate on his motivations for founding Comic-Con:

I decided cartoonists were the only entertainers who didn’t hear the laughter and applause, so I created a public convention where the pros could meet their fans and the young hopefuls could get advice on their careers. Besides comics, we featured pros from science fiction, animation, and filmmaking.¹³⁶

Ultimately, this sentiment suggests that Dorf saw Comic-Con as a potential service or show of respect to artists, who “didn’t hear the laughter and applause,” while also allowing fans to benefit from their wisdom. This altruistic goal is certainly admirable, especially in relation to the experience of many comic artists who gave up the rights to

¹³⁴ As I discuss in Chapter Five, this professionalization was further established when Comic-Con introduced its Comic Book Expo trade show in 1984.

¹³⁵ "Channel 39 Pre-Con Interview of Shel Dorf".

¹³⁶ Shel Dorf, "Things I Like to Remember," in *Comic Buyer's Guide 1994 Annual: The Standard Reference for Today's Collector*, ed. Don Thompson and Maggie Thompson (Iola WI: Krause Publications, 1994). Dorf has made this claim on at least two other occasions: "Shel's Message: 'I Did It for Love'," in *1981 San Diego Comic-Con Souvenir Book*, ed. Mark Stadler (San Diego: San Diego Comic-Con, 1981); Schwartz and Dorf, "Shel Dorf Q&A."

their creations through work-for-hire contracts.¹³⁷ As Terranova argues, it is important to remember that free labor may not always be exploitative, particularly when viewed within an historical context.¹³⁸ Much like the early days of the Internet, Comic-Con was founded upon the idea of community building, in which participants' unpaid labor was "willingly conceded in exchange for the pleasures of communication and exchange."¹³⁹ But, when viewed from a contemporary context, it is possible to see how these principles simultaneously blurred the lines between fan and professional and reinforced a hierarchy around those who produce culture and those who consume it. This created a situation in which the work of Comic-Con's early (and young) organizers could be perceived as beneficial and empowering to fans even as it was explicitly geared towards serving artists and advancing the industry. As the rest of this dissertation illustrates, this dynamic has become increasingly complicated, as the industry presence at Comic-Con has shifted from individual artists to large corporations and conglomerates. However, the fact remains that the industry was always on Comic-Con's guest list.

¹³⁷ Work-for-hire contracts, in which artists sign over the rights to their creations to their employer, was and is quite common in the comic industry. The United States Copyright Act defines works made for hire as "a work prepared by an employee within the scope of his or her employment" or "a work specially commissioned for use... if the parties expressly agree in a written instrument signed by them that work shall be considered a work made for hire." United States Copyright Office, "Works Made for Hire," *copyright.gov*, last modified September, 2012, <http://www.copyright.gov/circs/circ09.pdf>. Many comic artists, including the creators of Superman, Jerry Segal and Joe Shuster, signed such contracts and watched the characters they created go on to great success, while they received none of the profits. Dorf, in fact, was instrumental helping Segal and Shuster to seek artistic and economic recompense from DC Comics. Schelly, *Founders of Comic Fandom*, 103.

¹³⁸ Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," 48.

¹³⁹ Such labor, Terranova argues, was free both in the sense that it is unpaid and that it was "pleasurable, not imposed." *Ibid.*

“Beyond Disentanglement”: Comic-Con, Comics and the Popular Arts

While this blurring of the lines between professional and fan complicates the celebratory nature of discourses about the Comic-Con as an event made *by* and *for* fans, we can also look to Comic-Con’s early years in order to interrogate one of the other common critiques of the event: that it has strayed too far from its origins (and its name), which grounded it in comic books and comic art. This complaint is exemplified by *Variety* writer Brian Lowry’s claim that in the 1970s, “Comic-Con was truly about comic books, and the only stars one was likely to see there were the artists and writers who created them.”¹⁴⁰ While based in reality, this critique presents an overly simplistic view of the event, one that is echoed by Shel Dorf’s assertion that Comic-Con had been hijacked by Hollywood.¹⁴¹

Not only was Comic-Con founded on the idea of providing a space for fans and industry to interact—and, specifically, for fans to show their appreciation to professionals and seek guidance—but this also extended beyond the boundaries of comic arts. In 1975, Comic-Con’s president at the time, Richard Butner, explicitly outlined their mission to be inclusive of different media and different kinds of fandom:

The San Diego Comic Convention is not concerned only with comic-art (comic books and stories). It has made films, television, science fiction, and animation permanent and important parts of its program. Why? It is simply that a fan of one field will more than likely be a fan of one or two or more of the others and, *each of these fields are interconnected with*

¹⁴⁰ Brian Lowry, "The Early Days of Comic-Con," *Variety*, last modified July 11, 2008, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117988845.html?categoryid=1019&cs=1&nid=2562?ref=sharethis>

¹⁴¹ Wilkens, "Comic-Con's Shel Dorf Watches Sadly from the Sidelines as T-Shirts Trump Talent," E-1.

others beyond disentanglement. To neglect any of them would be an injustice not only to the field ignored, but to its sister fields. (My emphasis)¹⁴²

Much in the same way that Comic-Con's history suggests that the convergence of media audiences and industry is not necessarily a contemporary phenomenon, this inclusion of different media and fields also evokes Jenkins's definition of convergence: "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."¹⁴³ While the scale of Comic-Con today, and the reach of media culture more generally, make these qualities more immediately discernable, Comic-Con has always included other media forms and other kinds of fan texts under the umbrella of the annual convention.¹⁴⁴

This breadth is frequently attributed to Dorf's experience as an organizer of the Detroit Triple Fan Fair, the 1965 event named for its association with film, science fiction and comic fandom.¹⁴⁵ Richard Alf described the Triple Fan Fair as "a kind of blueprint"¹⁴⁶ for Comic-Con and Dorf confirmed that Comic-Con was modeled upon this earlier event, which he described at length:

¹⁴² Richard Butner, "Richard! A Message from the Chairman," in *San Diego Comic-Con* (San Diego: 1975).

¹⁴³ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 2.

¹⁴⁴ Comic-Con's current organizers are very clear about this point, likely in an attempt to counter critiques about Hollywood's encroachment. The inclusion of all kinds of media in early incarnations of the event is a recurring theme in Comic-Con's official history. San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴⁶ "40th-Anniversary Secret Origins of Comic-Con Panel".

One part was a bazaar, where they would be selling all kinds of comic books and newspaper strips. A second part of it was where they would be showing old movies. And the third part was where we'd have guests from the science fiction and comics field doing live demonstrations... The main objective behind all this is to create a public gathering place for people who enjoy these media—science fiction, movies and comics with the accent on comics because there had already been science-fiction conventions.¹⁴⁷

Dorf's description illustrates how the convention was framed as a broad address to a diverse collection of fans and that the stated emphasis on comic books was seen as both a good fit and a necessary addition to these other more established fan cultures.¹⁴⁸ Not only did the Triple Fan Fair figure into the founding of Comic-Con, but its influence is also evident in the aesthetic overlaps between the promotional materials for both events, which incorporate very similar logos that emphasize comic art, science fiction/fantasy and film (figs. 7 & 8).¹⁴⁹ When Comic-Con was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1975, the support of the comic arts, paired with the inclusion of other media forms, was institutionalized in their mission statement: "(1) to promote the historical and educational appreciation of the artistic media as it relates to comics, science fiction, and related art forms, and (2) to organize, promote, sponsor, hold and conduct an annual

¹⁴⁷ Schwartz and Dorf, "Shel Dorf Q&A."

¹⁴⁸ This description also complicates our understanding of fan cultures by demonstrating the overlaps and differing investments, particularly when fandom is framed around a particular medium or text.

¹⁴⁹ Towry, "Welcome to Comic-Convention Memories"; "Friday Flashback 006: The History of Comic-Con (and Then-Some!) through Logos", *Toucan: The Official SDCC Blog*, last modified October 18, 2013, <http://www.comic-con.org/toucan/friday-flashback-006-history-of-comic-con-and-then-some-through-logos>

“comic convention” which will be a forum for the historical and educational appreciation of comics and related art forms.”¹⁵⁰

From the beginning, then, Comic-Con sought to include other media forms and featured notable guests from the worlds of film, television, and science fiction.¹⁵¹ The 1973 souvenir book, for example, included a large component of comic art, but also incorporated clippings of old film advertisements, even an autographed photo of Joan Crawford.¹⁵² Significantly, film screenings at Comic-Con were not always thematically linked to comics or science fiction. In addition to screenings of old serials like *Flash Gordon* (Frederick Stephani, 1936) or *Superman* (Spencer Gordon Bennet and Thomas Carr, 1948), fans could also see selections including Laurel and Hardy shorts and the film noir, *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1945).¹⁵³

The convention was also closely tied to *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966-1969) throughout its history. In early programs, this investment in the show is quite evident. The 1973 book included a call to fans, by one of the show’s writers, David Gerrold, for a letter writing campaign to convince NBC to push the upcoming *Star Trek Animated Series* (1973-1975) into prime time instead of airing it as a Saturday morning cartoon. Gerrold also called for

¹⁵⁰ San Diego Comic Convention Inc. "Articles of Incorporation of San Diego Comic Convention." August 4, 1975, Series VII: Comic-Con Committee Paperwork, Folder 12, Box 3, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center.

¹⁵¹ Notable examples include Frank Capra, Gene Roddenberry, and Ray Bradbury "San Diego Comic-Con 1974 Program Schedule." Series IV: Comic Con Advertising, Folder 1, Box 3, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center; *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 23.

¹⁵² Crawford’s inscription read: “for all my friends at the San Diego Comic Convention, with affection” and was followed by an explanation that she was the inspiration for “The Dragon Lady” in the popular comic strip *Terry and the Pirates* by Milton Caniff. Dorf, "San Diego Comic-Con Program Book 1973."

¹⁵³ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 40. These screenings are particularly notable because of issues of access in the 1970s. Though older films like these are widely available now, Comic-Con may have offered cinephiles a rare opportunity to access hard to find films.

a feature film: “Paramount has to be convinced that even one movie would be profitable.”¹⁵⁴ The appearance of this article in the Comic-Con program indicates the importance of the gathering as a way to bring together different fandoms and mobilize around shared interests. Thus, Comic-Con stands out as an event that, in offering a space of collectivity, also fostered fan labor aimed at the entertainment industry. Today this kind of collective fan activism is frequently mobilized online, through websites and social networking.¹⁵⁵ Most recently, the successful 2013 *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter campaign, headed by director Rob Thomas in collaboration with Warner Bros., represents the ways in which the fan labor behind such campaigns has been redirected towards more reliable forms and predictable models of consumption. Instead of writing letters asking for the media they want, fans need only type in their credit card number.

The most notable non-comic presence of the 70s, however, was the first preview of *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), an event that is frequently mentioned in literature published by and about Comic-Con.¹⁵⁶ In 1976, a year before the film was released in theatres, Lucasfilm’s publicist Charlie Lippincott ran a panel called “The Making of *Star Wars*,” which featured a slideshow preview of the film.¹⁵⁷ Though the reception of this

¹⁵⁴ Gerrold would get his wish in 1979, with the release of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (Robert Wise). Dorf, "San Diego Comic-Con Program Book 1973."

¹⁵⁵ See, for example, the successful campaign surrounding NBC’s *Chuck*: Mel, "Chuck Campaign: Watch/Buy/Share," *ChuckTV.net*, last modified 18 Mar 2009, <http://chucktv.net/about-2/chuck-campaign-watchbuyshare/>

¹⁵⁶ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 23, 26; Brian J. Robb, "The Man Who Sold Star Wars," *Star Wars Insider*, January/February 2008, 28-9; Estrada, *San Diego Comic-Con Souvenir Book 1984*; Jeff Jenson, "'Star Wars': Comic-Con '76 Pics," *Entertainment Weekly*, last modified August 2, 2011, http://www.ew.com/ew/gallery/0,,20399642_20511617_20990681,00.html

¹⁵⁷ Paul Cullum, "'Star Wars' 30th Anniversary: How Lucas, ILM Redefined Business-as-Usual," *Variety*, last modified May 4, 2007, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117964328.html?categoryid=2533&cs=1>

preview was mixed, it was part of what we might now refer to as a synergistic promotional strategy that included Howard Chayken's Marvel comic book adaptation.¹⁵⁸ This first preview would be the beginning of a long-running relationship between Lucasfilm and Comic-Con. As an early occurrence of film promotion at the event, it has been cited as evidence against "a common and somewhat frustrating misconception that Hollywood only recently discovered Comic-Con."¹⁵⁹ The presence of *Star Wars* at the 1976 convention is also significant within a larger industrial history of film marketing and promotion, for Lippincott is credited with "pioneering the marketing of genre pictures to their core audiences."¹⁶⁰

Other examples of early Comic-Con film previews include, *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), *Outland* (Peter Hyams, 1981) and *The Right Stuff* (Philip Kaufman, 1983). The latter three films were presented by Jeff Walker, a specialist in the marketing of "genre entertainment" at conventions, who was hired by Warner Brothers after their head of marketing was "booed off the stage" during the *Superman* preview.¹⁶¹ Walker, an individual who was able to turn his own passion for genre entertainment into a career, would spend the next three decades as a specialty publicist, helping Hollywood market their films to fans at Comic-Con.¹⁶² Despite his employment as a publicist for the industry, Comic-Con's programming director, Eddie

¹⁵⁸ Steve Sansweet, "Which Came First..." in *San Diego Comic-Con International 2007 Souvenir Book*, ed. David Glanzer (San Diego: San Diego Comic-Con 2007), 59.

¹⁵⁹ "Connotations: "And the Icon Award Goes To...," *Comic-Con Magazine*, 2009, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Cullum, "'Star Wars' 30th Anniversary: How Lucas, ILM Redefined Business-as-Usual".

¹⁶¹ "Genre Pro Delivers Conventional Wisdom," *Daily Variety*, July 19 2006, A-1.

¹⁶² Ibid.

Ibrahim, presented Jeff Walker with Comic-Con's Inkpot Award for "fandom services" in 2011.¹⁶³ Not only does this award once again demonstrate the conflation of labor (in this case, paid) for the benefit of the industry with a service provided to fans at Comic-Con, but it also demonstrates that film promotion, though present in the event's early years, has only grown in prominence and acceptability.

Despite the higher profile of other media forms at Comic-Con, comic art is still very much a part of the event today. In fact, in 2013, twenty-six percent of Comic-Con's panels were devoted to comics, as opposed to a total of twenty-three percent featuring film and television.¹⁶⁴ The perception of long-time attendees like Brian Lowry and even Comic-Con's founder, Shel Dorf, has been that Comic-Con ceded its convention space to other media (especially Hollywood), which pushed comics into the margins. While this suggests a nostalgic backlash against changes in popular culture, it is also a problem with very real economic ramifications, particularly for dealers like Chuck Rozanski, the owner of Mile High Comics, profiled in Spurlock's film. These dealers rely upon Comic-Con for a portion of their annual income. Thus, the economics of the comics industry, and the media industries in general, are similarly interconnected in such critiques, seemingly beyond disentanglement. For this reason, I argue that the 'problem' of Hollywood's saturation of Comic-Con has been confused with, even replaced by, a more emotional critique of the status of comics at the event. In other words, comic art did not get pushed out through the inclusion of other kinds of media and media fandom, but by the increased

¹⁶³ allthingsfangirl, "Jeff Walker Awarded Inkpot at Comic-Con 2011," *YouTube.com*, last modified July 26, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wH404disj7Q>. Jeff Walker and Charles Lippincott are fascinating figures, not just in the history of Comic-Con, but also in the history of the American film industry. As publicists who built careers on helping Hollywood to understand fans and "genre entertainment," their work represents a fruitful topic for future research.

¹⁶⁴ Dixon and Lacey, "Infographics: How SDCC Compares to Other Conventions".

industry presence at Comic-Con. And by far the earliest and most profound industry presence at Comic-Con was the comic book industry itself.

Long before Hollywood “discovered” Comic-Con, the comic industry had paved the way for more intensive promotional campaigns. Marvel began advertising in the souvenir books in 1975 and DC Comics followed in 1976.¹⁶⁵ Supplementing the wide variety of material and illustrations contributed by artists, these full-page spreads featured popular superheroes welcoming fans to Comic-Con. In 1980, for example, a Marvel ad showed three fans—a man, a woman, and a young boy—surrounded by Marvel heroes. It read, “When San Diego Fans Talk, Marvel Listens” (fig. 9).¹⁶⁶ A year earlier, Rick Marschall, then the editor of Marvel’s magazine division, convinced the company “to set up a goodwill table” to promote a new comic book series, which, he claimed, may have “helped to start the ball rolling” and opened the door to an increasing number of publishers promoting their books at the event.¹⁶⁷

But the comic industry is not what it was when the event was founded in 1970. The two largest comic producers, Marvel and DC, are now part of large media conglomerates and comics are just a small part of what these companies produce. In 2005, Marvel Comics changed its name to Marvel Entertainment, literalizing this shift away

¹⁶⁵ Shel Dorf, ed. *San Diego Comic-Con Souvenir Book (1975)* (San Diego: San Diego Comic-Con, 1975); Shel Dorf and Jackie Estrada, eds., *1976 San Diego Comic-Con Souvenir Book* (San Diego: San Diego Comic-Con, 1976).

¹⁶⁶ Stadler, *San Diego Comic-Con Souvenir Book 1980*.

¹⁶⁷ I return to this part of Comic-Con’s history in Chapter Five. Rick Marschall, “Remembrances of Cons Past,” in *1984 San Diego Comic-Con*, ed. Jackie Estrada (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention, Inc., 1984).

from comics as a medium and towards their viability as intellectual property.¹⁶⁸ Just four years later, Disney purchased Marvel for \$4 billion, incorporating the comic company's valuable intellectual property into the massive media conglomerate.¹⁶⁹ Shortly after Marvel's sale to Disney, DC underwent a very similar change when, in 2009, DC Comics was renamed DC Entertainment and folded into Warner Bros.¹⁷⁰ Part of a larger trend of conglomeration and horizontal integration, the most prominent companies in the comic industry are now owned by two of the largest media conglomerates: Disney and Warner Bros.

Flip through the pages of recent Comic-Con programs and you will see comic art, articles about comic book history, and tributes to great comic book artists. Ask a comic book fan why they attend Comic-Con and they will surely tell you it is about their love of the comic arts. But walk into the convention, walk around the streets of downtown San Diego, and the experience becomes something quite different. Film and television advertising is everywhere, from massive interactive exhibits (take, for example, the *Enders Game* experience, sponsored by HGTV) to viral marketing (masked men handing out DIY style flyers for the film *Escape Plan*), to skyscrapers adorned with massive banners (fig. 10). Even though Comic-Con contains the word comic, even if, in the hearts and minds of some attendees and fans, it is a celebration of the comic arts, even if the

¹⁶⁸ "Marvel Entertainment L.L.C.," *Gale Business Insights: Global*, last modified 2014, http://bi.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/global/company/215489?u=lom_umichanna

¹⁶⁹ David Goldman, "Disney to Buy Marvel for \$4 Billion," *CNN Money*, last modified 2009, http://money.cnn.com/2009/08/31/news/companies/disney_marvel/

¹⁷⁰ While DC has been part of Time-Warner since the merger in 1989, this restructuring represented a concerted effort to focus on film and television. Marc Graser, "Warner Bros. Creates Dc Entertainment," *Variety*, last modified September 9, 2009, <http://variety.com/2009/film/news/warner-bros-creates-dc-entertainment-1118008299/>

organization's mission statement emphasizes "comics" before "related popular artforms," as a medium, comics are a tiny part of the media industries, particularly in terms of hard numbers and profit.¹⁷¹ In 2012, the estimated size of the entire American and Canadian comics market was about \$680 million. That same year, Marvel grossed \$611,075,000 domestically on a single film, *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012).¹⁷² Instead of being valuable as a material commodity, comics' economic value now lies in their status as intellectual property, a way to deliver branding and marketable ideas to eager consumers, also known as fans.

This is no less true of Comic-Con, which, in recent years, has exploded in size, scale, and scope and received increased media attention as a site of film and television promotion. Take for example, 2012's *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013) panel, which clearly demonstrates how effective Marvel Entertainment has been at transforming Iron Man from a moderately well known character, present in the pages of Marvel Comics since 1963, to a lucrative intellectual property and multi-media franchise. During the presentation, Marvel president Kevin Feige was "interrupted" mid-sentence by the sound of Luther Vandross' "Never Too Much." The crowd erupted as the large screens in Comic-Con's Hall H cut to an image of Robert Downey Jr., emerging from behind the massive black curtains in the back of the hall. He grooved down the aisle, illuminated by the explosion of camera flashes and the light from an Iron Man glove on his right hand.

¹⁷¹ For the most recent version of Comic-Con's mission statement, see: "Toucan: The Official Blog of Comic-Con International, Wondercon Anaheim, and Ape, the Alternative Press Expo," *Toucan: The Official SDCC Blog*, last modified 2012, <http://www.comic-con.org/toucan/toucan-official-blog-of-comic-con-international-wondercon-anaheim-and-ape-alternative-press>

¹⁷² Brigid Alverson, "Nycc: Griep's White Paper Report Gives Comics Industry a Gold Star," *Comic Book Resources*, last modified October 10, 2013, <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=4840>; "Marvel's the Avengers," *Box Office Mojo*, last modified 2014, http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=avengers11.htm&adjust_yr=2012&p=.htm

He flashed the prop to the audience and the cameras as he made his way to the stage amidst 6,500 screaming fans. When Downey Jr. reached the stage he asked three questions, each one met with an increasing frenzy of cheers and applause: “Alright, I have three questions. How much do I love you? Question number two: How much do you love me? Last question, question number three: Why aren’t we watching any footage yet?”¹⁷³

On the surface, this spectacular introduction, building up to Marvel’s presentation of footage promoting *Iron Man 3*, seems like quite a departure from some of Comic-Con’s founding ideals as a grassroots convention. But in many ways, this panel is simply a crass reconfiguration of Dorf’s original desire to celebrate “entertainers who don’t hear the applause,” and organize a convention “for the public to attend, to gather and pay tribute to them.”¹⁷⁴ This scene does exactly that. Downey Jr. did more than give fans a chance to pay tribute; occupying his *Iron Man* alter ego, Tony Stark, he *demand*ed applause.¹⁷⁵ So, instead of awarding this applause to under-recognized cartoonists, as Dorf intended, the restructuring of the media industries and the conglomeration of the comic industry has funneled that recognition back towards the tried and true Hollywood star system. This transference of the character Iron Man/Tony Stark to superstar Robert Downey Jr. further demonstrates that the economic value of comic books lies not in the

¹⁷³ For footage of this entrance, see: Gareth Von Kallenback, "Robert Downey Jr. Iron Man 3 Comic Con Entrance," *YouTube*, last modified July 14, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4OHn77YNZI>

¹⁷⁴ Mark Stadler, ed. *1981 San Diego Comic-Con Souvenir Book* (San Diego: San Diego Comic-Con, Inc., 1981), 3.

¹⁷⁵ Marvel repeated this gimmick in 2013, when actor Tom Hiddleston appeared onstage, and in full costume, as Loki. The villain demanded that attendees pledge their loyalty to him by screaming his name in exchange for a sneak preview of *Thor: The Dark World* (Alan Taylor, 2013).

material itself, but in how that material can be shaped, reshaped, repackaged, and sold to audiences in perpetuity.

Ultimately, Comic-Con, an event built by and upon comic book fandom has, like the comic industry itself, been eclipsed by larger interests and investments. This is not to say, however, that comics are not important to those in attendance, to the individual artists who sell their work, to the burgeoning writers and artists who go every year to network and look for jobs, or for those fans who have been with the convention since its early days. Theirs' is an important story; one that I hope will populate the pages of future work (my own, included) on the past, present, and future of Comic-Con. But this dissertation is about the industrial machinations that have eclipsed these interests and investments. Thus, while the history of comics fandom and the comic industry informs this project, as a media industry scholar writing primarily about the twenty-first century, my critique is similarly informed by the significant concentration of the media industries, wherein the stories told in comic books have become industrially and textually interwoven within media franchises.

This is a rather lengthy way of explaining that this dissertation is not about comic books. It is about the ideological power of the media industries, who have proven consistently adept, not only at making meaning through the texts that they produce, but also at reconfiguring their own economic models, their modes of production and distribution, and, most importantly here, their promotional practices. As the *Iron Man 3* example demonstrates, the media industries are also adept at occupying and reconfiguring space in such a way as to materialize their hegemonic power. This is most evident in the way that audiences are asked to engage with industry promotion in spaces like Comic-

Con. Even in the midst of discourses about the democratization of media and the positioning of audiences as increasingly influential and powerful, the media industries' ability to make its own power real and felt, to control and dominate a space, and to materially change the meaning of the products that they produce, must not be ignored.

Chapter Outline

As I have outlined, my method is informed by both cultural studies and political economy approaches and is primarily concerned with the ways in which power informs the relationship between media audiences and industries at Comic-Con and beyond. Power is made manifest at Comic-Con in numerous ways, which I explore throughout this dissertation. The organization of the chapters that follow reproduces both the trajectory of my research and the experience of attending Comic-Con. In Chapter Two, I begin outside the time and space of the event in order to consider how fans are courted as an exclusive audience, both in terms of their taste and their perceived access as insiders. I argue that such exclusivity also allows for the implementation of limits and controls that produce value around industry products and promotion. In making this argument, I examine the case of popular movie blogger, Harry Knowles, suggesting that his rise to prominence at the turn of the century is a model for how the industry seeks to produce and capitalize upon what has frequently been called "geek chic." While Knowles has attended Comic-Con numerous times and is one of the producers of Morgan Spurlock's Comic-Con documentary, this case study sits on the periphery of Comic-Con itself. Not only is it an entry point into the complex relationship between the industry and their audiences, but it also demonstrative of this project's applicability beyond the confines of Comic-Con's limited time and space.

Chapter Three represents an entry into the convention itself, examining the liminal space of the Comic-Con line as a threshold that not only bolsters the perceived exclusivity of Comic-Con attendees, but also enhances the value of industry promotion. Attendees carefully plan and willingly wait for long hours to gain entry into the event and its promotional panels. In examining the practice of waiting in line and the value it produces, I suggest that the control of bodies and their movement through the space, the enforcement of rules and regulations, and the production of hierarchies among attendees and industry personnel all work to produce a system of exchange. This “economy of waiting” interpellates Comic-Con attendees as a kind of audience commodity that produces value *for* the media industries. Moving deeper into the convention space, Chapter Four examines what happens after the line and builds upon my discussion of the limits of exclusivity and the economy of waiting in order to discuss Comic-Con’s largest venue for promotional panels, Hall H. Here, I examine the organization of the space alongside the discourses that circulate within and about the Hall. These qualities produce a different kind of exclusivity, wherein the industry strategically shares previews and special content at Comic-Con in order to produce publicity and buzz that circulates more widely.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I move to Comic-Con’s Exhibit Hall, the over 460,000 square foot space where small dealers and large corporate promotional booths co-exist in a frenetic, crowded environment. In many ways, this space represents the deepest core of the Comic-Con experience, as it has been a fixture since the earliest days of the event. This chapter traces the history of this space from its early designation as the Dealers’ Room in 1970 through its gradual shift into the Exhibit Hall. In doing so, I demonstrate

how this space has been shaped and defined by the presence of retail business, the support for and of consumerism, and the interests and investments of media industries. This return to Comic-Con's history concludes the dissertation by attempting to unravel how the event has developed as a capitalist space that is significantly shaped by the media industries. The epilogue to this dissertation moves back outside, this time to examine Universal's marketing campaign for *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (Edgar Wright, 2010) during Comic-Con 2010, an example of how promotion also occurs beyond the walls of the convention center. Drawing upon my discussions of exclusivity, fan labor, space, and promotion, I demonstrate how the industry wields its significant power to control content and define the role of fans, even in the absence of box office success.

Most significant to this project is my assertion that these, and the other enunciations of power I discuss throughout this dissertation, are formed and intertwined through the micro-context of the event space and the macro-context of post-industrial capitalism. While this may, in and of itself, seem quite obvious, as Wasko and Meehan remind us, attention to economic power is often characterized as reductionist in contemporary media industry studies.¹⁷⁶ The same is true in the case of fan studies, which, as I have discussed, seeks power for media audiences beyond the economic realm. Rather than downplaying the significance of a single media event or disavowing the formative economic power of the media industries, this dissertation considers both very deeply. In doing so, the work that follows complicates and interrogates discourses about fans, media industries, and Comic-Con.

¹⁷⁶ Wasko and Meehan, "Critical Crossroads or Parallel Routes?," 153.

CHAPTER 2

Ain't it Cool?: Harry Knowles, Geek Chic, and The Limits of Exclusivity

Obviously there is a paradox in the inextricable entanglement of the masses and the media ... Our relationship to this system is an insoluble 'double bind'—exactly that of children in their relationship to the demands of the adult world. They are at the same time told to constitute themselves as autonomous subjects, responsible, free, and conscious, and to constitute themselves as submissive objects, inert, obedient, and conformist.

-Jean Baudrillard, 2001¹

"Nerds have never been more important for Hollywood"

-Marc Graser, *Variety*, 2008²

Prologue

In 2013, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone came to San Diego to promote their new film, Escape Plan (Mikael Håfström, 2013). While they did not schedule a panel at Comic-Con, they did solicit Comic-Con attendees to make up the audience for a special preview screening of the film, three months before its October premiere. Tickets to the screening were raffled off online, given away at the Summit Entertainment booth in the Exhibit Hall, and handed out on the streets of downtown San Diego. I got my passes from a pair of taciturn men wearing masks and dressed in black from head to toe (fig. 11). On an average day, one would probably go out of the way to avoid these odd, even menacing characters, but at Comic-Con, such costumes signify

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), 220-21.

² Marc Graser, "H'w'd Woos Nerd Herd," *Variety*, 14 Jul-20 Jul 2008, 22.

something very different. Many, myself included, approached the men to investigate what they were giving away and I was not the least bit surprised when one of them handed me a DIY-style flyer advertising a “Special Fan Screening” of *Escape Plan* hosted by Arnold and Sly themselves (fig. 12). A seasoned veteran of Comic-Con lines, I arrived well in advance of the time listed on the flyer. I waited in line around the corner from the Reading Gaslamp Theater for several hours before being funneled into a gated area around a red carpet, with no discernable entrance or exit. The audience waited there, in direct sunlight, for over two hours before Stallone and Schwarzenegger arrived. During that time we served as a kind of Hollywood prop, a backdrop for the stars’ arrival, while another more mobile audience gathered across the street waiting, of their own accord, to take pictures of the whole thing. Before Stallone and Schwarzenegger arrived, security mobilized and asked the audience to vacate the platforms being used as seats for “safety reasons,” though a more likely explanation is that they were obscuring the movie posters and threatening the visual composition of the imminent red carpet arrival (fig. 13). After a brief meet and greet (almost exclusively with the press), the stars were shuttled into the theater and we followed shortly after. Once everyone was seated, Stallone and Schwarzenegger reappeared with the director to introduce the film. They received a very awkward and halfhearted standing ovation before reciting an equally lackluster set of remarks about the importance of fans. Schwarzenegger said, speaking for himself and, seemingly, for Hollywood as a whole, “I am here at Comic-Con because I love the Comic-Con fans. You are the most... passionate and the most energetic fans that you can have anywhere in the world, right here at Comic-Con. We love your enthusiasm and we love your passion for the movie industry and about our movies.” Stallone echoed this

sentiment saying that San Diego should be called “Holly-Diego” because the fans were bringing back the true passion for cinema that Hollywood once exhibited. At the end of the campy film, which received more laughs than cheers, the audience filed out of the theatre and were handed an autographed Escape Plan poster. The exchange was complete. The “fans” were celebrated by the action superstars, identified as insiders who are key to the continued success of show business, and rewarded at the end of the screening with a unique souvenir: Autographs that were worth something only because audiences have continually helped to produce and perpetuate a value around the names Stallone and Schwarzenegger. Realistically, however, the majority of the audience that night were not die-hard fans of the action superstars, but an assembly of people like me, who had stumbled upon one of the many free events and giveaways at Comic-Con. It was only when we were corralled in a somewhat confining holding area and, subsequently, in the space of a movie theatre, that we were consolidated spatially and discursively as a group of fans.

Introduction

In April 2012, Harry Knowles, blogger, self-proclaimed “Head Geek,”³ and founder of one of the earliest and most well-known movie blogs, *Ain’t It Cool News* (*AICN*),⁴ appeared in puppet form at the red carpet premiere of *Comic-Con Episode IV: A*

³ “Head Geek” is Knowles’ oft-cited alias, used in articles about him, on his own website, and in his book. While I have been unable to trace the origins of this title, it is safe to say that it serves the dual function of indicating his role as the founder of *Ain’t It Cool News* and to remind his readers of his perceived status in a hierarchy of geek culture. Harry Knowles, Paul Cullum, and Mark C. Ebner, *Ain’t It Cool?: Hollywood’s Redheaded Stepchild Speaks Out* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 319.

⁴ *AICN* was founded in 1996. I will describe Knowles’ trajectory in detail in this chapter. In short, the site’s dissemination of behind the scenes reports and test-screening reviews, information previously reserved for industry insiders, became a source of significant angst for Hollywood, who felt his tactics were interfering with their marketing strategies. Knowles’ interesting persona paired with the industry reaction against him led the media to hone in on his site as new kind of rags to riches story for the Internet age. With his

Fan's Hope, Morgan Spurlock's 2011 documentary celebration of the event and its fans. Knowles, who produced the film along with other geek industry icons Stan Lee, Joss Whedon, and Legendary Pictures' president Thomas Tull,⁵ included this red carpet footage as part of a nine-minute episode of his short-lived YouTube video series for Nerdist Industries, a subsidiary of Legendary Pictures.⁶ In this segment, Knowles receives an unexpected phone call summoning him to the Los Angeles premiere of his film. Activating his transporter, he disappears with a flash of light, reappearing moments later on the red carpet. "Woah, I'm a puppet," he proclaims, "I've been Hensonized!"⁷

increasing fame and notoriety, however, Knowles also received increased acknowledgement from the industry, which began embracing his site and inviting Knowles to work with them rather than against them.

⁵ While Whedon and Lee served only as executive producers, Knowles and Tull were billed both as producers and executive producers of the film.

⁶ Chris Hardwick created the *Nerdist Podcast* in 2010 and the enterprise has since grown into a network of podcasts, video series, a website and newsletters, and a television program on BBC America, all of which are produced under the banner of Nerdist Industries. In July 2012, Thomas Tull's Legendary Pictures acquired Nerdist Industries, noting in the press release, "We've been impressed with how Chris and Peter have harnessed the Nerdist platform to create and deliver high-quality, relevant content, and then develop one-on-one relationships with the fans we see as Legendary's core psychographic." Both Nerdist Industries and Legendary Pictures are significantly invested in the same fan or geek demographic drawn to Comic-Con. While space does not allow for a full exploration of Legendary Pictures' business model, it represents a fruitful area for future research. Similarly, Hardwick's own rise to fame as an actor/comedian-turned-nerd-icon, and his prominent placement as an in-demand moderator at many of Comic-Con's high-profile promotional panels, could serve as a highly contemporary counterpoint to this chapter's discussion of Harry Knowles and his relationship to Hollywood. "Legendary Entertainment Acquires Nerdist Industries," *Legendary.com*, last modified 10 July, 2012, <http://www.legendary.com/news/post/legendary-acquires-nerdist/>. In September 2013, Knowles successfully raised \$128,029 on Kickstarter in order to relaunch the series independently. As of April 2014, six episodes have reportedly been filmed (according to the comments section on the show's Kickstarter page), but not yet released. Many backers have complained about a lack of updates or delivery of rewards. LLC Ain't We Cool Productions, "Future Filmgeekdom: Ain't It Cool with Harry Knowles," *Kickstarter*, last modified September 5, 2014, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/385528808/future-filmgeekdom-aint-it-cool-with-harry-knowles/posts>

⁷ "What Does Comic-Con Mean to You? Ain't It Cool with Harry Knowles," *Ain't It Cool with Harry Knowles*, last modified 12 April, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSS6Jdz5Mmw>. The Jim Henson Workshop designed a puppet version of Knowles for the series. This, he has said, is part of the reason he was coaxed into collaborating with *Nerdist.com* on the web series. Niall Browne, "Exclusive Interview: Harry Knowles Talks 'Ain't It Cool' & the Nerdist Channel," *Movies in Focus*, last modified May 1, 2013, <http://www.moviesinfocus.co.uk/#/latest/4561138761/Exclusive-Interview-Harry-Knowles-Talks-'Ain't-It-Cool'-The-Nerdist-Channel/2008008>

That Knowles appeared in 2012 as a puppet on a Hollywood red carpet is of some significance. First, the Jim Henson Workshop's puppet creation demonstrates how recognizable, even iconic, Knowles' has become. This is due, in part, to his physical appearance. As an extremely overweight, red haired man, who often wears loud Hawaiian shirts, Knowles is unique and identifiable while simultaneously exhibiting the more generic physicality of the nerd or geek.⁸ In this way, Knowles' body makes him an easy target, both for fame, notoriety and public recognition, and for the destabilization of this authority through the denigration of the abject geek body. Even more significant is the fact that "puppet Harry" evokes Knowles' enduring, and often contested, non-corporeal mobility; his ability to move, shape, and be shaped discursively.⁹ This was made possible first, by his presence online; then, by his network of "spies" and writers providing behind-the-scenes industry 'secrets' on his website; and finally, through his transition from transgressor to Hollywood insider, or, as he has been less charitably

⁸ Perhaps the best example of this stereotype is *The Simpsons*' (Fox 1989-) "Comic Book Guy," whose body size and hair color is similar to Knowles, but pre-dates his appearance in the public eye by almost six years. Despite this fact Harry Knowles was incorporated into the "Comic Book Guy" persona in 2008, when the character was depicted blogging on a website called "Ain't I Fat News." This further demonstrates how Knowles identity and practices became increasingly recognizable, while also being slotted into a pre-existing geek stereotype. Nathan Rabin, "The Simpsons (Classic): "Three Men and a Comic Book"," *A.V. Club*, last modified January 30, 2011, <http://www.avclub.com/tvclub/the-simpsons-classic-three-men-and-a-comic-book-5079>; Harry Knowles, "I Am Comic Book Guy!!!," *Ain't it Cool News*, last modified May 7, 2008, <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/36621>

⁹ Due to a severe back injury suffered in his early twenties and his continuing struggle with his weight, Knowles is sometimes confined to a wheelchair. While Knowles is notorious for accepting invitations and free flights to special previews and set visits and has always been a fixture in the Austin movie scene, he now travels with much less frequency due to ongoing health problems. In 2008, he revealed that he had been diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes and underwent lap band surgery to reduce his weight. "Harry Was Jumping, Squirming and Squealing Throughout the Ruins and Was Shocked by That Reaction," *Ain't it Cool News*, last modified April 4, 2008, <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/36269>; "Harry's Day in Surgery Is Today! I'm Finished - Back Home & Playing Speed Racer Wii! Now With..." *Ain't it Cool News*, last modified May 20, 2008, <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/36817>. In 2011, he finally underwent surgery and began an extensive rehab process to repair his spinal injury. "What's Happening with Harry," *Ain't it Cool News*, last modified January 15, 2011, <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/48088>.

characterized, Hollywood's "sock puppet."¹⁰ This trajectory exemplifies what I will describe in this chapter as the limits of exclusivity, which elevate fan audiences to the status of industry insiders and collaborators, while also producing power imbalances that limit what and how such audiences can contribute.

Knowles's rise to fame in the late 1990s and early 2000s parallels Comic-Con's explosive growth and rise in popularity during that time. In 1997, the *Hollywood Reporter* ran an item titled "San Diego Comic Con Draws Hit Hungry Hollywood." While the story focused primarily on the industry's growing interest in the event as a place to negotiate and purchase the rights to comic books for film or television adaptations, it also noted the industry's burgeoning marketing presence, citing the promotional appearances of actors David Hasselhoff, Tia Carrere, and director Paul Verhoven.¹¹ As I discuss elsewhere in this dissertation, the history of industry marketing at Comic-Con extends much farther back than 1997.¹² However, this *Hollywood Reporter*

¹⁰ Ron Wells, "Deconstructing Harry: Ain't It Unethical (Part One)," *Film Threat*, last modified June 8, 2000, <http://www.filmthreat.com/features/159/>. Beyond implications that Knowles had become a voice shaped and controlled by Hollywood's influence, the term "sock puppet" has a specific meaning online: "the act of creating a fake online identity to praise, defend or create the illusion of support for one's self, allies or company." It is likely that Wells applied this term, in spite of Knowles' well-known public persona, to indicate the degree to which he and his site were actively working to advance and promote Hollywood's agenda. Brad Stone and Matt Richtel, "The Hand That Controls the Sock Puppet Could Get Slapped - New York Times," *New York Times*, last modified July 16, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/16/technology/16blog.html?ex=1342238400&en=9a3424961f9d2163&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&_r=0

¹¹ While it was and still is standard practice for B-list (or below) celebrities to make appearances at Comic-Con (and conventions, more generally) for the purpose of selling autographs or speaking on panels, this presence is more accurately understood as a kind of self-promotion and an attempt to capitalize on their own celebrity, but is not necessarily tied to upcoming projects. This should be distinguished from the industry promotion identified in *The Hollywood Reporter* article, which links the appearance of all three celebrities to a desire to promote their upcoming work; in this instance, their visits to Comic-Con were likely arranged by studio marketing departments. This is most evident in Paul Verhoven's case, as the studio, Sony, is even mentioned alongside the note about his preview of *Starship Troopers* (1997). George Johnston, "San Diego Comic Con Draws Hit Hungry H'wood," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 22, 1997.

¹² See my discussion in Chapter One and Chapter Five.

article represents one of the earlier mentions of Comic-Con in the industry trades, suggesting that the event was gaining a higher profile in Hollywood at this time.

That same year, Comic-Con itself published a press release highlighting the event's "increased media attention."¹³ By the time the 6500-seat Hall H opened in 2004, the buzz about Comic-Con's appeal to the industry had extended beyond the trade press with the *New York Times* calling it "a vital promotional tool in movie marketing campaigns" and the *Globe and Mail* proclaiming, "this year the studios were out in force, spending about \$250,000 apiece to rev up the buzz on upcoming projects."¹⁴ While, as an article on CNN.com acknowledged, "the convention has always been a powerful marketing tool," a discursive shift was occurring in which articles linked the event's promotional power to the rising power of nerds, geeks, and fans, both as a demographic of consumers, whose taste in film had become increasingly connected to popular blockbuster filmmaking, and as producers of early buzz and publicity.¹⁵

Responding to Comic-Con's increased profile in 2004, the *Los Angeles Times* described, "the multitudes crammed into giant meeting halls to pass judgment on Hollywood's latest works in progress, often setting the tone for how the completed films will be received by the general public"¹⁶ and the *New York Times* suggested that "an

¹³ David Glanzer. "Press Release: Comic Con International Enjoys Increased Media Attention." San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State Library Comic Arts Collection.

¹⁴ As I described in my chapter outline, Hall H is a space at Comic-Con dedicated to large-scale panels promoting Hollywood film. I discuss this space at length in Chapter Four. Laura M. Holson, "Can Little-Known Heroes Be Hollywood Hits?," *New York Times*, July 26, 2004, 1; Johanna Schneller, "Pradas Woo the Pocket Protectors," *The Globe and Mail*, August 20, 2004, R1.

¹⁵ Nick Nunziata, "The Birth of Hype," *CNN.com*, last modified 27 July, 2004, <http://www.cnn.com/2004/SHOWBIZ/Movies/07/27/comic.con/index.html>

¹⁶ John Horn, "Studios Take a Read on Comic Book Gathering; Hollywood Courts a Genre's Enthusiasts, Who Can Raise or Lower Movie's Fortunes," *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 2004, E1.

eager reception at Comic-Con... can be more valuable than a red carpet appearance at a movie's premiere or a trip to the 'Tonight Show.'"¹⁷ Such assertions about the importance and influence of the Comic-Con audience were also part of a larger body of writing about geeks, nerds, fans, and Hollywood.¹⁸ This expansive discourse linked taste, consumption, and cultural production to technological developments associated with the Internet and digital media in order to suggest that, "the economic hegemony of the geek in the 1990s, when high tech and the Internet were driving the economy, has somehow been converted into a cultural hegemony."¹⁹ Drawing a direct line between economic and cultural power, such discourses suggested that by leveraging their high levels of disposable income and, more importantly, their willingness to spend it, geeks could wield significant power as arbiters of taste.

The perceived power of this demographic was also a source of anxiety for the media industries, unsure of how best to track and exploit this highly engaged audience.

¹⁷ Holson, "Can Little-Known Heroes Be Hollywood Hits?," 1.

¹⁸ See, also: Ben Fritz and Marc Graser, "Drawing H'w'd Interest," *Daily Variety*, July 22, 2004, 19; Borys Kit, "Sith Unveiling Wows Comic-Con Crowd," *Hollywood Reporter*, July 26, 2004; Ben Fritz, "Geek Chic... but 'Netsters Wary of Showbiz Wooing," *Variety*, August 2-8, 2004, 1, 41; Peter Bart, "Geek Chic: Hollywood Corrals Nerd Herd..." *Variety*, August 2-8, 2004, 1, 3.

While these terms are often accompanied by particular definitions and associations, my interest—in geeks, nerds, fans, etc.—is centered on discourse that situates them, often by conflating or oversimplifying such terms, as a particular demographic that is both targeted by and talking back to Hollywood. As such, these discourses are far less concerned with individual identities or making distinctions between such groups and focus instead on how, as an amalgam of consumers sharing similar qualities, this demographic might operate in relation to the media industries. For this reason, I refer to these terms interchangeably in referencing this demographic. For work on this topic that foregrounds identity politics associated with terms such as geek and nerd, particularly in relation to gender and race, see: Christine Quail, "Nerds, Geeks, and the Hip/Square Dialectic in Contemporary Television," *Television & New Media* 12, no. 5 (2011); Ron Eglash, "Race, Sex, and Nerds," *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002); Lori Kendall, "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in U.S. Popular Culture," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2(1999); ""The Nerd Within": Mass Media and the Negotiation of Identity among Computer Using Men," *Journal of Men's Studies* 7, no. 3 (1999); ""Oh No! I'm a Nerd": Hegemonic Masculinity on an Online Forum," *Gender & Society* 14(2000).

¹⁹ Lev Grossman, "The Geek Shall Inherit the Earth," *Time.com*, last modified 25 Sept, 2005, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1109317,00.html>

As such, a key aspect of this discourse is the connection of the power of this demographic to its use of technology, particularly in the late 1990s, as an influx of users began to amass rather anonymously in online space.²⁰ As one 1999 article in *Variety* suggested, the power of the internet, harnessed not only by movie bloggers like Harry Knowles, but also by consumers at large, presented a significant hurdle for Hollywood:

Thanks to the Web, Hollywood is suffering from an overload of information—and misinformation—on everything from on-the-set rumors to breathless test-screening reactions to script coverage. Anyone with a computer and some cash can launch a Web site that potentially makes or breaks a deal, and that influences the public on whether to see a pic.²¹

The idea that “anyone” could access and disseminate this information is an unrealistic and overly broad assertion. As such, it is indicative of a complex discursive construct in which utopian ideas about the users of digital media intersect with exaggerated anxieties about the disruption of the media industries’ power. Such discourses define audiences through their ability to interfere with the operations of the media industries, while simultaneously exhibiting the ways the media industries seek to control audiences by authorizing and valorizing these practices. This is precisely what happened by 2008, when Hollywood appeared to resolve some of this initial anxiety by incorporating the Internet into their marketing practices and learning “to speak geek.”²² In other words, as a

²⁰ Drawing on Ron Eglash, Christine Quail notes the correlation between “the explosion of consumer computing technology” and “new media representations and sociocultural discourses of nerds.” Eglash, “Race, Sex, and Nerds; Quail, “Nerds, Geeks, and the Hip/Square Dialectic in Contemporary Television,” 465.

²¹ Marc Graser and Chris Petrikin, “.Com before Storm: Web Sites' Techno Tattle Has H'wood Rattled,” *Daily Variety*, October 20, 1999, 1.

²² Marc Graser, “H'wood Learns to Speak Geek,” *Daily Variety*, July 28, 2008, 1.

VP of marketing for Warner Bros put it, studios began to use “social networking...to empower one fan to impact thousands of potential viewers.”²³ Rather than push back against discourses that suggested geeks were becoming important consumers and tastemakers, Hollywood embraced this notion by incorporating this demographic into their business plan.

Such articles and industry responses are exemplary of the ongoing discursive tension between the hegemony of Hollywood as the bearers of economic power and owners of the means of production and the industry’s demonstrable investment in, and anxiety about, this specialized “geek” audience, who are purported to wield significant cultural capital as a newly discovered and technologically empowered demographic of tastemakers. Many articles condensed the increased importance of this audience into two words, encapsulating a discourse that continues to this day: “geek chic.”²⁴

²³ "H'w'd Woos Nerd Herd," 1.

²⁴ In identifying the rise of what she refers to as the “fanboy” demographic made up of “16-to-35 year old males,” Susanne Scott identifies several articles that concern themselves with the increased power and influence of this segment of the audience. It is worth noting, however, that of the four articles Scott names, three of them cite Comic-Con directly. Suzanne Scott, "Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and the Politics of Incorporation" (University of Southern California, 2011), 35; Grossman, "The Geek Shall Inherit the Earth"; Rebecca Winters Keegan, "Movies: Boys Who Like Toys," *Time Magazine*, last modified April 19, 2007, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1612687,00.htm>; Adam B. Vary, "The Geek Was King | EW.Com," *Entertainment Weekly*, last modified December 21, 2007, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20168142,00.htm>; Scott Brown, "Scott Brown Rallies America's Nerds to Embrace Their Rise to Power," *Wired*, last modified April 21, 2008, http://www.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/16-05/pl_brown

In addition to the articles cited by Scott, a number of other articles cite Comic-Con alongside the rise of what they describe as “geek chic”: Bart, "Geek Chic: Hollywood Corrals Nerd Herd..." 1,3; Fritz, "Geek Chic... but 'Netsters Wary of Showbiz Wooing," 1, 41; Marc Graser and Jonathan Bing, "Genre Pix Cultivate Geek Chic," *Variety*, July 28-August 8, 2003, 8; Susan Wloszczyna and Ann Oldenburg, "Geek Chic; Nerd Is the Word for Popularity in a Wired World," *USA Today*, October 23, 2003, D1; Schneller, "Pradas Woo the Pocket Protectors," R1; Borys Kit, "Mainstream Drowning in Comic-Con's Geek Chic," *Hollywood Reporter*, last modified July 24, 2008, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/mainstream-drowning-comic-cons-geek-116236>

Celebrations of “geek chic” highlight the value, and often, productivity, of this particular segment of culture. This phrase has been deployed in numerous contexts from the tech industry, to fashion, to popular culture, but in all of these cases, the term is suggestive of a level of acceptability in mainstream culture.²⁵ As such, “geek chic” might be broadly understood to demarcate a semantic shift in the cultural understanding of the word geek, from a negative to positive descriptor of social and cultural engagement. More importantly, as an evocation of what Christine Quail calls “the hip/square dialectic,” the term succinctly captures the way that exclusivity has been positively coded into discourses about this demographic and their practices.²⁶

It is not uncommon to encounter distinctions and calls for a specificity of particular terms such as geek, nerd, or dork,²⁷ but for the media industries, the phrase “geek chic” ultimately represents efforts to locate and name a particular demographic, what might be described in marketing terms as an affinity group.²⁸ Most importantly, as many of the articles highlighting “geek chick” stress, this demographic is highly identifiable as fans.²⁹ For this reason, this dissertation minimizes examinations of the

²⁵ A simple Google search of the phrase yields a high volume of hits. The term also turns up frequently in print. See, for example: Miguel Bustillo, "The Sugar Daddies of Silicon Valley; How California's Wealthy New-Tech Wonder Boys Are Changing Public Policy," *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 2000, 10; Don Oldenburg, "Geek Tycoon: 'Napoleon' Is Cool with Retailers," *The Washington Post*, September 4, 2005, D1; Anne D'innocenzio, "Chic to Be Geek," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 18, 1996, 1.

²⁶ Quail, "Nerds, Geeks, and the Hip/Square Dialectic in Contemporary Television."

²⁷ See, for example: Ann Hoevel, "Are You a Nerd or a Geek?," *CNN.com*, last modified December 2, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/12/02/nerd.or.geek/>

²⁸ Robert Marich describes affinity group marketing as “targeting consumers who already have a preexisting kinship to an element of a movie, such as die-hard fans of an actor, genre such as horror, and subject matter such as religious or hobby interests.” *Marketing to Moviegoers: A Handbook of Strategies and Tactics*, 3rd ed. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2013), 399.

²⁹ For example, Fritz writes “As fandom has become fashionable, Hollywood has targeted and wooed geeks.” Fritz, "Geek Chic... but 'Netsters Wary of Showbiz Wooing," 1.; Wloszczyna and Oldenburg declare, “What was once the obsessive domain of geek fans has achieved mass-media popularity.”

particularities and distinctions between different fan groups, focusing instead on the way in which popular discourse and industry practices paint a broader picture of fans and how they work for and with the industry. While, as I will discuss, defining and understanding fan culture has meant something very different for academics, who seek to both argue for the importance of examining fans and to say something about what such groups contribute to culture, thinking about fandom from the point of view of the industry reveals something more about how and why these discourses set fans apart as an influential and exclusive demographic that works double duty as consumers and citizen marketers.³⁰

It is significant that so many articles in the popular and trade press invoke the rise of the Internet and movie bloggers alongside Hollywood's presence at Comic-Con. Both examples feed into the rhetoric that this previously marginalized audience of fans, nerds, and geeks were not just accepted, but also influencing mainstream culture. However, a key tension is also present: While seeking to identify, describe, and empower a somewhat subjectively defined segment of consumers by suggesting their ability to influence media production, these discourses also demonstrate the industry's ongoing attempts to retain their power in the cultural hierarchy. For this reason, these discourses fit quite comfortably within the paradigm of hegemony that Dick Hebdige, building on the work of Stuart Hall and Antonio Gramsci, describes in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*

Wloszczyna and Oldenburg, "Geek Chic; Nerd Is the Word for Popularity in a Wired World," D1.; and Graser and Bing describe Comic-Con's "thousands of die hard genre fans who often constitute the bulls-eye for marketing campaigns." Graser and Bing, "Genre Pix Cultivate Geek Chic," 8.

³⁰ "Citizen marketers" is a term used by marketing experts, Jackie Huba and Ben McConnell, to describe people who "create what could be considered advertising content on behalf of people, brands, products, or organizations." Rising above the level of "a typical fan... they are on the fringes, driven by passion, creativity, and a sense of duty. Like a concerned citizen." Terms like this one are common in business and marketing how-to books. Jackie Huba and Ben McConnell, *Citizen Marketers* (Chicago, IL: Kaplan Publishing, 2007), 4.

(1979). In asserting their power, the dominant class must find ways to win the consent of subordinate groups without appearing overtly oppressive.³¹ In this case, the media industries achieve this goal by presenting themselves (and their audiences) as collaborators rather than adversaries.

This tension, I argue, grows out of what I am calling the limits of exclusivity, a paradigm through which to understand how setting limits, both upon audiences and content, works to reinforce the industry's power as media producers. Exclusivity produces value (around an audience or marketing content), while its limits exert significant control. In this chapter exclusivity functions as a way to theorize how Comic-Con's key demographic is identified and valorized, both through their collaboration with and potential threat to Hollywood. Exclusivity can apply, not only to the identification and containment of particular demographics, but also to particular kinds of spaces and experiences. In Chapters Three and Four, I build on this discussion to demonstrate how exclusivity's limits are deployed through the regulation and control of lines, the spatial configuration of the convention, and the content presented in Comic-Con's Hall H. In these cases, exclusivity works to bolster the industry's power in the face of this highly engaged and potentially unruly audience.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the limits of exclusivity, considering how these limits have informed both academic and lay-theories of media audiences, particularly through the framing of subcultural (or niche) and mainstream consumers. Then, I consider the career of movie blogger Harry Knowles of *Ain't It Cool News*, arguing that his website's initial threat and subsequent embrace by the industry provides

³¹ Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style*, 15-6.

a model through which to understand how discourses about “geek chic” operate to simultaneously identify, elevate, and contain fan practices at Comic-Con.

Theorizing the Limits of Exclusivity

It is important to remember that exclusivity is not defined by the *presence* of a special experience or a special group, but by the power to produce *absences*, and by what and who is excluded.³² However, in applying the term, this process of exclusion signals and is frequently eclipsed by its outcome: the production of an exceptional group of individuals, products, or experiences. At Comic-Con for example, collectors can purchase “exclusive” products, film studios screen “exclusive” footage and throw “exclusive” parties, and, as I discuss throughout this dissertation, the space, time, and cost of the event itself produces limitations that result in restricted access.³³ The “inaccessibility” of these products and experiences become, what Mark Jancovich describes as, “one of the pleasures of the scene,” and adds value not only to the experiences at Comic-Con, but also to those individuals who get to experience the event.³⁴ For this reason, Comic-Con’s attendees are frequently marked as an exclusive group; first, for overcoming the economic, spatial, and temporal challenges in order to attend the event and consume this

³² The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines exclusive as: “Having the power or function of excluding.” “Exclusive, Adj. And N.,” *OED Online*, last modified 2013, <http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/65833>

³³ See my description of the self-imposed attendance limits and the proposed expansion of the San Diego Convention Center in Chapter Three. I will also provide a more detailed analysis and examples of exclusivity in the Comic-Con event space in Chapter Four. Finally, in Chapter Five I discuss the sale of exclusive collectibles at Comic-Con. It is worth noting that the exclusivity of industry parties at Comic-Con is even more amplified, as Comic-Con attendees are usually denied access to such events, which are attended instead by industry insiders, celebrities, and select members of the press.

³⁴ Mark Jancovich, “Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital and the Production and Distribution of Cultural Distinctions,” *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2002): 320.

exclusive content and, second, through their (resulting) identification as “tastemakers” and “influencers.”³⁵

In delineating a boundary between inclusion and exclusion, the limits of exclusivity function, as Bourdieu puts it, as a way of “organizing the image of the social world” so that “objective limits become a sense of limits, a practical anticipation of objective limits acquired by experience of objective limits, a ‘sense of one’s place.’”³⁶ However, while Bourdieu suggests that limits “leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded,” I argue that such limits also invite positive identification and inclusion by reminding an exclusive group that they have access, while others do not.³⁷ Jancovich describes how niche publications use this kind of “inaccessibility” to situate cult texts and audiences as exclusive, suggesting that such magazines “act as gatekeepers that manage the difficult balance between inclusion and exclusion on which the scene depends,” to keep it small and subcultural.³⁸ Comic-Con, I argue, performs a similar function. However, in order to overcome the economic limitations of selling to an exclusive audience, the industry leverages that exclusivity to increase the economic value of their products and marketing campaigns for a broader audience. In the case of Harry Knowles, discourses in the popular and trade press similarly foregrounded the limits associated with industry outsider and insider status, demonstrating how Hollywood exploited such limits in order to contain and control his

³⁵ Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, 145.

³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 471.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Jancovich, "Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital and the Production and Distribution of Cultural Distinctions," 320.

potentially unruly position as consumer/blogger and convert his practices into industry marketing. The limits of exclusivity are what allow this kind of conversion to take place as a naturalized, and ideologically loaded operation, for, as Bourdieu suggests, “the *sense* of limits implies *forgetting* the limits” (original emphasis).³⁹

For this reason, attempts to theorize the exclusivity of particular audiences are also mired in the need to define the tastes of subcultures in opposition to the mainstream, which, as some scholars have noted, produces overly simplistic understandings of both.⁴⁰ A similar tension exists when exclusivity is deployed as a business or marketing strategy. Many businesses target a small, specialized group of consumers and/or limit access to products in order to maintain an air of exclusivity, while also trying to achieve the basic goal of capitalist organizations: To increase revenues by selling more product and capturing the largest group of consumers possible.⁴¹ If, as Eileen Meehan suggests in the case of the *Star Trek* franchise, fans are highly motivated and predictable consumers, while “the unreliable buyer is the source of revenue,” then exclusivity is a way to repackage the product and its core audience as more appealing, prestigious, or interesting to “mundanes.”⁴² While Meehan does not discuss exclusivity, her tongue-in-cheek reference to fans in relation to “mundanes” suggests a similar kind of exclusive

³⁹ Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 471.

⁴⁰ Jancovich, "Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital and the Production and Distribution of Cultural Distinctions," 374; Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*, 1st U.S. ed., Music/Culture (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996), 14, 93-4.

⁴¹ This problem has been noted in marketing literature discussing the challenges of selling luxury goods online, as marketers attempt to expand their market while simultaneously seeking a reputation of exclusivity, the same identity sought by their consumers. Nadine Hennings, Klaus-Peter Wiedmann, and Christiane Klarmann, "Luxury Brands in the Digital Age--Exclusivity Versus Ubiquity," *Marketing Review St. Gallen* 29, no. 1 (2012); Uché Okonkwo, "Sustaining the Luxury Brand on the Internet," *Brand Management* 16, no. 5/6 (2009).

⁴² Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy," 84.

framework around niche audiences. Meehan's reference to mainstream audiences as "mundanes" is also an ironic gesture that highlights the disconnect between the attribution of increased cultural power to fans even as their economic value is diminished in relation to the mainstream. Exclusivity, then, functions as both a theory and a practice; theoretically, exclusivity is a way of understanding the stratification or hierarchies of taste produced through a process of restricted access, and exclusivity can be deployed, in practice, as a form of restriction and limitation that produces value. However, a key problem emerges from these two approaches to exclusivity: theorists and practitioners must find ways to account for that which is excluded when certain tastes and/or content are delineated and defined through the limits of exclusivity.

A large body of work exists in subcultural studies, outlining how marginalized or subcultural tastes are defined by and in opposition to the mainstream.⁴³ Part of cultural studies' broader populist approach to the study of everyday life and culture, such work hinges upon a dichotomy between cultural practices that work with or against dominant ideology. This dichotomy between subcultures and the mainstream has been criticized for producing somewhat simplistic and homogenous views of both groups. In her book, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (1995), Sarah Thornton critiques what she calls the "the myth of the mainstream" in subcultural studies, which reduces the notion of mainstream culture to something that subcultural groups subvert or oppose and, in doing so, produce an oversimplified dichotomy that explains little about either group.⁴⁴

⁴³ See, for example: Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style*; Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*; Jancovich, "Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital and the Production and Distribution of Cultural Distinctions"; Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton, eds., *The Subcultures Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁴⁴ Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*, 14, 93-94.

Mark Jancovich similarly critiques Jeffery Sconce's argument that paracinema fans identify, through their unconventional tastes, "in opposition to a loosely defined group of cultural and economic elites."⁴⁵ Sconce, he argues, fails to interrogate the definition of mainstream cinema against which paracinema fans define themselves: "Rather than investigate the contradictory and problematic nature of [the mainstream], he conflates it with an equally problematic term, 'Hollywood.'"⁴⁶ While both authors provide apt critiques of the pitfalls of oversimplifying very complex cultural formations, particularly when studying these groups, their ideological construction, and their various hierarchies around taste, such critiques also reflect a very specific cultural studies approach, one invested in the interrelations between politics and identity.

In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Dick Hebdige's seminal work on the topic, he suggests that subculture "begins with a crime against the natural order," however seemingly minor, "but it ends in the construction of a style."⁴⁷ Hebdige argues that while subcultural style represents "symbolic challenges to a symbolic order," such transgression is ultimately contained through commodification and the identification that places subcultural practices along a spectrum of dominant ideologies.⁴⁸ In this way, a subculture becomes incorporated into both the economic and ideological structures of capitalism. For example, Hebdige identifies how punk was popularized, in the 1970s, as a mainstream fashion trend. The popular fascination with punk style enabled the media to

⁴⁵ Jeffery Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," *Screen* 36, no. 4 (1995): 374.

⁴⁶ Jancovich, "Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital and the Production and Distribution of Cultural Distinctions," 309.

⁴⁷ Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style*, 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 92-94.

situate a transgressive subculture in relation to dominant ideologies about family values by either identifying punk as a threat to such values or marveling that punk could successfully co-exist with them. In both cases, the transgressive and disruptive practices were contained by situating punk as part of dominant culture rather than outside of it.⁴⁹ While the unique style and practices associated with punk set it apart as an exclusive subculture, these traits also became limits that allowed punk to be easily identified and placed in conversation with mainstream culture. In this way, the limits of exclusivity, which produce such a division between subcultures and dominant culture, might be understood through Hebdige's description of hegemony, which suggests the containment of "subordinate groups... within an ideological space."⁵⁰

Indeed, the dichotomy between subculture and mainstream cultures that underpin this kind of work, and much of early cultural studies, derives from Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which is contingent on the relationship between a dominant and dominated group. It is important to note that hegemony is not just about the power that results from the naturalization of dominant ideologies, but, as Richard Dyer asserts:

hegemony is an *active* concept—it is something that must be built and rebuilt in the face of both implicit and explicit challenges to it. The subcultures of subordinated groups are implicit challenges to it, recuperable certainly, but a nuisance, a thorn in the flesh; and the political

⁴⁹ Ibid., 94-99.

⁵⁰ In discussing hegemony, Hebdige builds primarily upon Stuart Hall's interpretation of Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Ibid., 16; Gramsci, "History of the Subaltern Classes; Stuart Hall, "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect'," in *Mass Communication and Society*, ed. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janet Woollacott (London: Arnold, 1977).

struggles that are built within these sub-cultures are directly and explicitly about who shall have the power to fashion the world.⁵¹

If the goal is to understand something about the individuals that comprise these groups, and the hierarchies and social structures within them, critiques such as Thornton and Jancovich's are well founded. However, the fact remains that such dichotomies exist, not just in the minds of academics, but in the production and reproduction of culture itself. In essence, the discursive separation between dominant and subcultural groups is part of this struggle. However, building on Marx and Engels' assertion that "the ruling ideas are nothing more than the expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas," I suggest that the divide between dominant and subcultural groups might also be understood as a discursive formation that grows out of and feeds into material relations.⁵²

Comic-Con's increased profile as a promotional space in the 2000s and the emergence of discourses about "geek chic," while not always explicitly or causally linked, reveal much about the way this particular event and its attendees have been incorporated into the industrial logic of the culture industries. While a vast number of people in attendance at Comic-Con might firmly identify with a particular fan culture or subcultural group (or no group at all), the media industries are less invested in further fragmenting their audience according to such distinct taste cultures, and much more interested in amalgamating this collection of individuals in order to fit them into a more unified

⁵¹ Richard Dyer, "Stereotyping," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 356.

⁵² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology, Part One, with Selections from Parts Two and Three, Together with Marx's 'Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy*, ed. C. J. Arthur, [1st ed. (New York International, 1970), 64.

demographic built around the discursively constructed exclusivity of fan, geek or nerd audiences. Take, for example, Harry Knowles own description of Comic-Con:

For most, Comic-Con is the one point in the year where we don't care what people think of us, because we are amongst family—the more than 100,000 people who are “one of us.” That's empowering. We could fill a major football stadium with that number (we wouldn't, but we could). Instead we take over the city of San Diego and its fabled Convention Center. We come in costume, we come to buy... but most of all we come to belong. To take our place in Hall H and have the gigantic entertainment companies of the world pitch us their wares.⁵³

Doing away with the specificities that divide fan groups and emphasizing what brings them together, Knowles quote reinforces the idea that Comic-Con represents a kind of utopian community that can only be achieved when fans embrace their role as consumers and work *with* the media industries.

As Thornton argues, “references to the mainstream are often a way of deflecting issues related to the definition and representation of empirical social groups.”⁵⁴ However, rather than attempting to correct these oversights by uncovering inherent qualities of particular taste cultures, I am interested in how these simplistic understandings function and circulate in discourses about audiences and exclusivity. In examining the discourses that produce these kinds of cultural meanings and how they play out, my goal is not to argue about the accuracy of dichotomies between industry and fans, or geeks and the

⁵³ Michelle Wells, ed. *Comic-Con Episode IV: A Fan's Hope* (New York: DK Publishing, 2011), 7.

⁵⁴ Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*, 114.

mainstream; instead I seek to understand how and why such dichotomies are produced and who they serve. What is the outcome of singling out an exclusive audience, defining them according to abstract notions of taste, and setting them apart from so-called ‘mainstream consumers’ by inviting them to identify, instead, with the work of the media industries? To begin answering this question, it is worth thinking about how exclusivity has functioned in early fan studies as a way to theorize and valorize the study of fans as a significant subcultural group.

The Limits of Theorizing Exclusivity

Many scholars seek to identify and understand fan cultures through discussions of taste. Not only does taste serve as a way to categorize individual practices or groups of fans, but it also produces a kind of shorthand through which to infuse these taste cultures with particular meanings. In this regard, it is useful to consider Bourdieu’s assertion that “taste classifies and it classifies the classifier.” A succinct summation of his approach in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984), Bourdieu takes the position that taste is produced and reproduced through the practices of particular groups rather than applying the concept deterministically, to a formal or aesthetic analysis of cultural objects.⁵⁵ This statement also suggests that classification is indeed a discourse that produces meaning, not only about the tastes of particular individuals or groups, but also about the rhetoric, interests, and ideologies that underpin classification itself. Bourdieu’s work, which denaturalizes taste and places it within a social and class context, suggests that there is much more to be gained by studying how expressions of taste operate to classify particular groups along class lines than by understanding form and

⁵⁵ Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 6.

aesthetics. In this regard, Bourdieu's historically and sociologically grounded approach to cultural theory was of significant interest to the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, which, as the field emerged, sought methods that would disrupt what they saw as the problematic isolation of "intellectual and cultural autonomy from economic and political determinants" present in structuralist Marxism.⁵⁶ Although Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams recognized the potential applicability of Bourdieu's work to British cultural studies in 1980, they also took issue with the "functionalist/determinist residue in [his] concept of reproductions which leads him to place less emphasis on the possibilities of real change and innovation." Garnham and Williams saw this as running counter to the larger project of cultural studies, which was to seek out moments of negotiation and resistance.⁵⁷

This legacy of ambivalence towards Bourdieu's work as it relates to the early aspirations of cultural studies may account for why scholars frequently draw on those aspects of his work that help to explain taste as a function or expression of different forms of capital, rather than focusing on how powerful social and class structures produce and reproduce such hierarchies. This is particularly true of the first wave of fan studies, where a number of scholars used Bourdieu's work as a way of valorizing not only fan cultures, but also these cultures' *particular* taste in media, while downplaying his

⁵⁶ Nicholas Garnham and Raymond Williams, "Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Culture: An Introduction," *Media, Culture & Society* 2(1980): 210.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 222. Elizabeth Wilson observes that, "At times, the system of hegemony described by Bourdieu seems hermetically closed and able to reduce all elements within it to grist for the mill of its functioning" and Morag Shiach suggests that "For Bourdieu it would seem that it might be possible to imagine [the 'popular' as a site of resistance], but it is not at all clear that it is possible to theorize or mobilize it." Elizabeth Wilson, "Picasso and Pâté De Foie Gras: Pierre Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture," *Diacritics* 18, no. 2 (1988): 55; Morag Shiach, "'Cultural Studies' and the Work of Pierre Bourdieu," *French Cultural Studies* 4(1993): 218.

assertions that taste, as a quality of class and social standing, is both arbitrary and infinitely reproducible.⁵⁸

In *Textual Poachers*, for example, Henry Jenkins draws on Bourdieu to argue that “fans’ transgression of bourgeois taste and disruption of dominant cultural hierarchies insures that their preferences are seen as abnormal and threatening by those who have a vested interest in the maintenance of these standards.”⁵⁹ In addition to using taste as a way of arguing for the value of studying fans, Jenkins also implicitly presents fan cultures as the solution to the “functionalist/determinist”⁶⁰ problems of Bourdieu’s work by making a space for resistance: “fans,” he argues, “assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons.”⁶¹ Implicit in Jenkins’ description of fan cultures, then, is the notion that we should understand fans, not as cultural dupes, but as what Bourdieu calls “agents of consecration,” which he describes as “organizations which are not fully institutionalized: literary circles, critical circles, salons, and small groups surrounding a famous author or associating with a publisher, a review, or a literary or artistic magazine.”⁶² Though Bourdieu’s analysis of art excludes sustained consideration of popular culture, the similarities between his description of “agents of consecration” and Jenkins’ analysis of fan culture supports the critique that Jenkins has reproduced some of the problematic hierarchies of taste and

⁵⁸ Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 3, 6.

⁵⁹ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, 17.

⁶⁰ Garnham and Williams, "Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Culture: An Introduction," 222.

⁶¹ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, 18.

⁶² Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 121. Elana Shefrin builds upon Jenkins’ work to make precisely this claim. "Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, and Participatory Fandom: Mapping New Congruencies between the Internet and Media Entertainment Culture," *Critical Studies in Media Communications* 21, no. 3 (2007): 269.

class in an effort to argue, not only for the legitimacy of fan culture, but also for the legitimizing function of fans themselves.

Such a reading of fan culture fits well within Bourdieu's own paradigm, which suggests that "art and cultural consumption... fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences."⁶³ Jenkins simply reproduces naturalized standards of taste within his own habitus of academic fan studies by conflating taste and value and by situating fan practices in opposition to the mainstream. In short, by seeking to identify fans as an exclusive audience whose tastes (and texts) are worthy of academic study, Jenkins proves the central focus of Bourdieu's work, eloquently encapsulated by Randal Johnson in his introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993):

The role of culture in the reproduction of social structures or the way in which unequal power relations, unrecognized as such and thus accepted as legitimate, are embedded in the systems of classification used to describe and discuss everyday life—as well as cultural practices—and in the ways of perceiving reality that are taken for granted by members of society.⁶⁴

This legitimizing approach to fan tastes, then, also reproduces and legitimizes the connection between taste and class, a rhetorical maneuver evident in Jenkins' suggestion "that fans cannot as a group be dismissed as intellectually inferior; they are often highly educated, articulate people who come from the middle classes, people who should 'know better' than to spend their time constructing elaborate interpretations of television

⁶³ *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 6-7.

⁶⁴ Randal Johnson, "Editor's Introduction: Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature, and Culture," in *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York Columbia University Press, 1993), 2.

programs.”⁶⁵ All this, Jenkins suggests, goes to prove that fans represent the “other” in relation to “sanctioned culture.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Fiske’s seminal essay on the “cultural economy of fandom” draws upon Bourdieu’s forms of capital in order to set fandom apart from “official culture” as a “shadow cultural economy” that relies heavily on “discrimination and distinction.”⁶⁷ “Fans,” he argues, “are among the most discriminating and selective of all formations of people and the cultural capital they produce is the most highly developed and visible of all.”⁶⁸ In both cases, taste and exclusivity are deployed together in order to identify a distinct group and elevate their cultural practices. If locating fan taste served a rhetorical purpose in early academic studies of fan cultures, this legitimating function, if not its ultimate purpose, is markedly similar to the surge in popular and industry discourses about the power and influence of fan audiences in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Even before the San Diego Comic-Con became a magnet for such discourses, their nexus could be found in Austin, Texas, home of the well-known movie blogger, Harry Knowles.

“I can straddle the fence”: Harry Knowles and Hollywood

Upon his arrival on the *Comic-Con Episode IV* red carpet, Harry professes, “This is a really special premiere for me, cause this is the first premiere I’ve been to where I’m one of the producers for this movie.”⁶⁹ That Knowles’ first successful foray into the

⁶⁵ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, 18.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁷ Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” 34.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁹ “What Does Comic-Con Mean to You? Ain’t It Cool with Harry Knowles”.

production side of the film industry was a documentary celebration of Comic-Con and its attendees is of no small significance.⁷⁰ Comic-Con and convention culture, more generally, played a significant role in the formative years of his life, shaping his future identity as Head Geek. They also led, if somewhat circuitously, to the founding of the *Ain't it Cool News* blog and his ultimate integration into the industrial logic of Hollywood promotion and, later, production.

Harry Knowles began participating in comic conventions from a very young age, first attending Comic-Con in the early seventies.⁷¹ His parents were comic and movie memorabilia collectors who owned the first comic shop in Austin and frequently attended regional collectors' conventions as dealers.⁷² It was at just such a convention, on January 24, 1996, that Knowles was struck and thrown by a dolly carrying 1200 pounds of

⁷⁰ Knowles' previous ventures in film production were unsuccessful. He and James Jacks attempted to produce a film version of *John Carter of Mars* (Edgar Rice Burroughs, 1964) for Paramount, but after years in development, Paramount gave up their option on the film. Disney subsequently bought the rights and produced *John Carter* in 2012. Revolution Studios also hired Knowles as a creative producer, but his two film projects—*Ghost Town* and *Scale*—were never realized. Hal Espen and Borys Kit, "Ain't It Cool's Harry Knowles: The Cash-Strapped King of the Nerds Plots a Comeback," *Hollywood Reporter*, last modified March 23, 2013, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/aint-cools-harry-knowles-cash-430734>

⁷¹ While the *Hollywood Reporter* suggests that Knowles first attended Comic-Con as an eight month old in 1972, Knowles has also reported attending for the first time in 1973. Despite his young age, his account of the 1973 convention, which was briefly derailed by the fire marshal, seems accurate based on my archival research. Ibid; Wells, *Comic-Con Episode IV: A Fan's Hope*, 7; Graham and Alfonso, "San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No.1 and 1973 Wrap-up Report."

⁷² Espen and Kit, "Ain't It Cool's Harry Knowles: The Cash-Strapped King of the Nerds Plots a Comeback". In his book, Knowles emphasizes the impact of convention culture, writing, "some of my earliest memories were spent at collectors' conventions in the company of figures who were stalwarts of the popular imagination." Later, he states, "coming of age at collectors conventions prepared me for my singular path in a couple of important ways" and goes on to say that conventions taught him to dig for information, "develop a nose for news," and hone "the carnival barker's ability to size up his mark, an eye for instant appraisal, and a storyteller's sense of what the audience requires at any given moment." Knowles, Cullum, and Ebner, *Ain't It Cool?: Hollywood's Redheaded Stepchild Speaks Out*, 22, 62-6.

memorabilia, severely injuring his back and temporarily paralyzing him.⁷³ With his ballooning weight, a severe back injury, and no health insurance, Knowles was bedridden after the accident. Knowles said of this time, “I was really in bad shape. It was incredibly depressing. I didn’t know whether I would walk or not. For a half a year or so I just laid here... I always had this dream of going into the movie business, and here I was in bed, with no future.”⁷⁴ Knowles sought neither legal council (his injury happened on city property), nor professional medical advice. Instead, he fell deeper into a process that was already underway, escaping online: First, by reading and writing about film in newsgroups; then, by constructing his own rudimentary website, which became *Ain’t it Cool News* in February of 1996.⁷⁵

The website was founded to be “a people’s forum,”⁷⁶ providing a voice that existed separately from the film industry and the popular press.⁷⁷ As Knowles put it:

There was always a healthy market for the latest scripts, a currency exchange rate in production and casting tidbits, a handicappers line on the

⁷³ Espen and Kit, "Ain't It Cool's Harry Knowles: The Cash-Strapped King of the Nerds Plots a Comeback"; Knowles, Cullum, and Ebner, *Ain't It Cool?: Hollywood's Redheaded Stepchild Speaks Out*, 2-3.

⁷⁴ qtd. in Bernard Weinraub, "The Two Hollywoods; Harry Knowles Is Always Listening," *New York Times*, November 16, 1997, 119.

⁷⁵ The website’s title comes from a line of dialogue spoken by John Travolta in *Broken Arrow* (John Woo, 1996). Knowles, Cullum, and Ebner, *Ain't It Cool?: Hollywood's Redheaded Stepchild Speaks Out*, 14. Prior to starting *AICN*, Knowles was a frequent poster on newsgroups and covered the weekend box office for *The Drudge Report*. Espen and Kit, "Ain't It Cool's Harry Knowles: The Cash-Strapped King of the Nerds Plots a Comeback". While numerous articles (cited throughout this chapter) discuss Knowles’ biographical information, Knowles provides a firsthand account of his accident, his early forays online, and the founding of his website in his biography.

⁷⁶ Knowles qtd. in Juan B. Elizondo Jr., "For Immediate Release," *Associated Press*, September 17, 1997.

⁷⁷ Eben Shapiro, "Movies: Weird Web Site Spooks Hollywood," *Wall Street Journal*, November 4, 1997, B1. Knowles paints the institution with broad strokes, writing that he “distinguishes [himself] from the fatted caftan-wearing pashas of the fourth estate who cover movie sets as if they’re courtrooms.” Knowles, Cullum, and Ebner, *Ain't It Cool?: Hollywood's Redheaded Stepchild Speaks Out*, 99.

weekend numbers. It has just always resided within the industry. What I help facilitate, and more correctly, what the Internet provides for, is the expansion of that sort of ancillary interest into a universal audience.⁷⁸

The fact that Knowles framed his intervention in terms of economics suggests a shared terminology and significant ideological overlaps with the industry. Providing a voice separate from the industry is not the same as pushing back against it. Instead, Knowles' site was a response to a perceived exclusion of audiences from the inner workings of the media industries. Knowles further validates this approach by drawing an analogy between this fannish interest in the economics of the media industries and sports fans tracking their favorite team through statistical analysis.⁷⁹ In this way, Knowles' outsider status helped to bolster his own claims to objectivity, without necessarily taking an oppositional approach.

As his 2011 production credit demonstrates, by disseminating behind the scenes information previously reserved for industry insiders, the fame and notoriety Knowles achieved through *AICN* would eventually allow him to realize his dream of working in "the movie business."⁸⁰ But, ultimately, Knowles' reliance on the industry, both as a resource and as the subject matter of his website, made his claims to objectivity and his assertion that he could successfully, "straddle the fence" between geeky outsider and Hollywood insider increasingly difficult to maintain.⁸¹ Precipitating this conflict of interest was his website's invasion of what had previously been considered proprietary,

⁷⁸ *Ain't It Cool?: Hollywood's Redheaded Stepchild Speaks Out*, 70.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 70-1.

⁸⁰ Weinraub, "The Two Hollywoods; Harry Knowles Is Always Listening," 119.

⁸¹ qtd. in Shapiro, "Movies: Weird Web Site Spooks Hollywood," B1.

insider information, accompanied by an explosion of discourse about Knowles in the popular and trade press. Beginning in 1997, this extensive coverage of *AICN* helped to shape and define Knowles' work in relation to Hollywood and functioned to express larger industrial anxieties about the newfound power of audiences and consumers online.

AICN contained information gleaned from Knowles' anonymous industry connections online, meticulous research, and intelligence solicited from test screening audiences. Drawing on these resources, the site offered unauthorized production information and early, sometimes negative, reviews of films to its readers. Knowles outlines his early approach, which was to uncover seemingly insider information, primarily through his own research and with the assistance of others online, and to romanticize his own image and writing by attributing it to his network of "spies"⁸²:

If, for example, *Variety* ran a story about the new James Bond movies, saying it was actively filming in Beijing or Bangkok or something, I would go to a Web site that had a Bangkok newspaper and do a search for Bond in the Thai language. Then I would go to a newsgroup that had people from Thailand and beg for a translation of the article. They would send me one, and I would take the information from *Variety* and the information I got from the newspaper in Bangkok and mix it in with

⁸² Knowles is frequently quoted as saying he preferred to refer to his sources as "spies" because "it's so much more romantic." To Young, "Who's Bugging Hollywood," *The Sunday Times*, October 26, 1997. See also: Rex Weiner, "Cybergeek Leaks Freak Pic Biz," *Variety*, July 28-August 3, 1997, 1; Neil McIntosh, "Movie Buff Who Took on Hollywood... and Won Review Websites," *The Scotsman*, November 26, 1997, 11. The word "spies" pervades almost all of the early discourse about Knowles' site, celebrating, perhaps even reinforcing, the paranoia around his practices. For more examples of articles referencing Knowles "spies," see: Sharon Churcher, "How an Internet Buff with Studio 'Spies' Is Sealing the Fate of Big Budget Movies," *Mail on Sunday*, August 31, 1997, 47; Lianne Hart and Elaine Dutka, "This Guy Is Driving Hollywood Nuts!," *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 1997, F1, F4; Alison Macor, "Deconstructing Harry; with a Network of Hollywood Spies," *Austin American-Statesman* December 25, 1997, 42.

information from people on the Internet who claimed to read scripts and such, and I would fashion a report that I would post to the newsgroups. Instead of saying “I have no life and I’ve just spent seven hours researching the new James Bond movie for no money,” I would say, “I’m Harry Knowles and I have spies.”⁸³

This quote suggests that by attributing his research to spies, Knowles was able to play up the idea of illicit knowledge obtained through dubious means and/or insider channels. Not only did this allow Knowles to paint himself in a more glamorous light in his position as outsider, but it also played upon the industry’s own enforcement of boundaries and limits in order to add value to the information he was disseminating. As Nick Couldry argues, such boundaries between the “media world” and the “ordinary world” also reinforce and naturalize the power of the media industries.⁸⁴ It comes as little surprise, then, that as Knowles gained notoriety and networked online, these fictitious spies became a reality. Knowles would draw upon gossip from anonymous industry insiders and recruit readers to attend and review test screenings, subsequently curating and publishing the results of the reviews on his website. While Knowles’ “real” spies might be seen as transgressors, working both outside and inside the industry, Hollywood’s ability to reframe their own boundaries, maintaining the allure of the “media world” in relation to the “ordinary world,” also allowed them to contain these practices by simply making them a part of the business model.⁸⁵

⁸³ Knowles, Cullum, and Ebner, *Ain't It Cool?: Hollywood's Redheaded Stepchild Speaks Out*, 51-52.

⁸⁴ Couldry, *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age*, 44-50.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 42-50.

A year and a half after *Ain't it Cool News* went online, Knowles had become a bona fide celebrity and conflicting reports suggested that the site was logging numbers like 600,000 unique visitors a month and 167,000 a day.⁸⁶ He was also the subject of a wide variety of newspaper and trade articles, which called him “the most hated man in Hollywood,” “Hollywood’s worst nightmare,” and “the biggest, best and worst thing to happen to Hollywood since television.”⁸⁷ The fact that this last example invokes the relationship between Hollywood and television is suggestive of a set of anxieties that extend beyond a lone individual. Instead Knowles operated as a sign standing in for a whole host of anxieties around the emergence of the Internet and the unpredictable activity of its users. But, as media scholars have demonstrated, similar discourses about the threat of television to Hollywood often elided much larger and more complex institutional changes, masking the significant ways in which the film industry sought to

⁸⁶ Christopher Kelly, "All Your Movie Are Belong to Us: When Fanboys Take over Film Culture," *Texas Monthly*, February 2008, 58; Young, "Who's Bugging Hollywood." As *Hollywood Reporter* has noted, it is difficult to locate any concrete documentation of the site's number unique visitors in the late 1990s. Espen and Kit, "Ain't It Cool's Harry Knowles: The Cash-Strapped King of the Nerds Plots a Comeback". The numbers cited in articles about *AICN* vary and it is unclear if the authors are indicating overall hits or the number of unique visitors. In addition to the numbers cited above, other articles published in 1997 suggested that *AICN* had 25,000 hits a day in 50 diff countries. Weiner, "Cybergeek Leaks Freak Pic Biz," 1; Bruce Haring, "Net 'Movie Nut' Gets the Reel Story but Insider Reports on Scripts, Screenings Aren't Popular with Studios," *USA Today*, September 4, 1997, 6D. While an article in *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* suggested that 150,000 people visited *AICN* each day, *The Washington Post* reported that the site “is logged on to 176,000 times a day.” Christine Biegler, "Harry Knowles Knows Too Much; "Internet Guerilla" Angers Hollywood," *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, December 10, 1997; Shapiro, "Movies: Weird Web Site Spooks Hollywood," B-1. Finally, in an interview for the *Austin American-Statesman*, Knowles himself claimed to have gone from 10,000 readers to 2 million. This number is supported and clarified by another article in *The New York Times*, which suggested *AICN* had “2 million hits a month.” Gregory Kallenberg, "The Fanatic Harry Knowles Home Grown Movie Web Site Is a Hit," *Austin American-Statesman*, October 2, 1997, E5; Weinraub, "The Two Hollywoods; Harry Knowles Is Always Listening," 119. While these numbers vary wildly, they all reflect the significant traffic *AICN* was receiving, particularly at a time when the Internet was not nearly as accessible as it is today.

⁸⁷ While many more articles exist, these quotes represent a sampling of the dominant discourse about Knowles in 1997. Churcher, "How an Internet Buff with Studio 'Spies' Is Sealing the Fate of Big Budget Movies," 47; Weinraub, "The Two Hollywoods; Harry Knowles Is Always Listening," 119; Kallenberg, "The Fanatic Harry Knowles Home Grown Movie Web Site Is a Hit," E5.

shape and control the medium as it developed.⁸⁸ Similarly, Knowles' influence may have been exaggerated in the press both as a way to simplify a larger set of issues and to sensationalize the story.⁸⁹ The end result was that Knowles became widely known as a threat to Hollywood's pre-existing business model. Ultimately, identifying him in this way represented a first step towards containing his seemingly transgressive practices.

According to the press, studios were so threatened that they were reportedly "passing around his photo to keep him out of previews."⁹⁰ This anecdote, in particular, is indicative of the growing media hype around Knowles, which reveled in his mysterious and transgressive methods of disseminating information about Hollywood. If studios were on the lookout for Knowles, this was likely a practice confined to Austin, Texas, where he has always resided. Further, Knowles was never secretive about his identity or appearance, blogging under his real name and using a cartoon version of himself on *Ain't it Cool News* as a "Good Housekeeping Seal of sorts."⁹¹ Even without the site itself as a reference point, most of the articles published about him make reference to Knowles' appearance; his large frame, his red hair, and his propensity for loud Hawaiian shirts, further suggesting that he would always stand out in a crowd and could be easily

⁸⁸ Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), 127; Janet Wasko, "Hollywood and Television in the 1950s: The Roots of Diversification," in *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen 1950-1959*, ed. Peter Lev (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

⁸⁹ The press is, of course, also part of the media industries and invested in selling their product.

⁹⁰ Weiner, "Cybergeek Leaks Freak Pic Biz," 1. This claim was made in a number of other articles, including: Churcher, "How an Internet Buff with Studio 'Spies' Is Sealing the Fate of Big Budget Movies," 47; Young, "Who's Bugging Hollywood; McIntosh, "Movie Buff Who Took on Hollywood... and Won Review Websites," 11.

⁹¹ Knowles, Cullum, and Ebner, *Ain't It Cool?: Hollywood's Redheaded Stepchild Speaks Out*, 48.

identified without the assistance of a photo.⁹² While the core claim may be true, it was clearly exaggerated, demonstrating that the press was as interested in constructing Knowles' transgressive potential as it was in reporting on it.

Studios were also said to be taking measures to keep Knowles' so-called "spies," a reported network of "at least 1200 movie fanatics," out of test screenings.⁹³ It's difficult to imagine, in this contemporary moment, that an audience member would be ejected from a test screening "because he was suspected of being 'a user' of the Internet," but this is precisely the anxious and suspicious atmosphere in which Knowles surfaced in the late 1990s, when studios were still navigating the somewhat new terrain of online marketing.⁹⁴ This particular anecdote is also illustrative of the way that focusing on technology elides space and materiality as a key source of the industry's underlying anxieties. While the Internet acted as a delivery mechanism that expedited commonplace word-of-mouth discourses circulating after test screenings, the screenings themselves were significant as bounded, media spaces and part of the industry's institutionalized practices. Maintaining their "separation" from the everyday was essential to "legitimate[ing] the enormous concentration of symbolic power in media institutions."⁹⁵ Thus, the focus on identifying Knowles and his "spies" at the screenings was also about

⁹² See, for example: Angela Dewar, "The Most Feared Man in Hollywood; Harry Knowles Can Destroy Any Movie with His Website Reviews," *Sunday Mail*, March 29, 1998, 1; Elizondo Jr., "For Immediate Release; Kallenberg, "The Fanatic Harry Knowles Home Grown Movie Web Site Is a Hit," E5; Christopher Reed, "Internet Hack Takes Shine Off Tinsletown; Harry Plays Dirty with Hollywood," *The Guardian*, January 8, 1998, 14; Louis Black, "The Fan--Harry Knowles," *Texas Monthly*, May 1998, 106.

⁹³ Weinraub, "The Two Hollywoods; Harry Knowles Is Always Listening," 119.

⁹⁴ Young, "Who's Bugging Hollywood."

⁹⁵ Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 83.

policing and reinforcing these boundaries as material substantiations of media industry power.

According to the press, the reason for these extreme responses was Knowles' ability to affect the buzz around the films he reported on, the management of which had been traditionally under the control and purview of studio marketing departments.⁹⁶ Chris Pula, former head of marketing for Warner Bros. and vocal opponent of Knowles' practices claimed, "what's disturbing is that many times the legitimate press quotes the Internet without checking sources. One guy on the Internet could start enough of a stir that causes a reactionary shift in the whole marketing paradigm."⁹⁷ In other words, Pula was worried that instead of disseminating information that was controlled and released by marketing executives like him, the "legitimate" press would look online instead, to bloggers like Harry Knowles. In this critique, Pula manages to denigrate the practices of journalists who draw upon the Internet as a source, while also reinforcing their authority by framing traditional journalism as "legitimate." Once again, while the focus appears to be on the threat posed by the Internet, Pula is very clearly concerned with the transgression and reification of boundaries offline, seeking to encourage and bolster the traditional, institutionalized practices of journalists as a part of the media industries.

It is not surprising that Pula would react this way given that the failure of the Warner Bros. film, *Batman and Robin* (Joel Schumacher, 1997), was frequently attributed to the negative reports posted on *AICN* leading up to its June 1997 release. The

⁹⁶ Kimberly Owczarski provides several examples of studio reactions to Knowles, suggesting that "Hollywood industry insiders believed that unsanctioned Web sites such as *AICN* threatened the Hollywood system of film marketing because individual users could post reactions to early test screenings." Kimberly Owczarski, "From Austin's Basement to Hollywood's Back Door: The Rise of Ain't It Cool News and Convergence Culture.," *Journal of Film and Video* 64, no. 33 (2012): 4.

⁹⁷ Pula qtd. in Weiner, "Cybergeek Leaks Freak Pic Biz," 1.

failure of this film, along with *Speed 2* (Jan de Bont, 1997), another box office disappointment that was panned by Knowles and test screening audiences on the site, was also instrumental in increasing Knowles' own profile in the press.⁹⁸ Leading up to *Batman and Robin*'s release in June of 1997, Knowles published numerous negative reviews culled from his informants at various test screenings around the country. When this attracted the attention and ire of Pula, who referred to Knowles and his readers as "fanatics, the nerd-geek crowd," Knowles responded by publishing fifty-two negative reviews of the film on his site.⁹⁹ What ultimately, and tellingly, alarmed Pula, Warner Bros., and other industry representatives, was not that the film received bad reviews—on the contrary, they had access to *all* the official test screening data, while Knowles only had information from his "spies"—it was the fact that what they considered proprietary information culled from test screenings had been released to the public. As producer Sean Daniel said, in reference to leaks from test screenings, "The credibility is questionable, but the existence of these opinions are very real."¹⁰⁰ In the ensuing discursive explosion about Knowles and *AICN*, industry representatives criticized Knowles' practices, suggesting it was unfair to judge an unfinished product.¹⁰¹ This critique was rapidly

⁹⁸ Owczarski, "From Austin's Basement to Hollywood's Back Door: The Rise of Ain't It Cool News and Convergence Culture.," 9. According to an article in *The Hollywood Reporter*, "Knowles estimates he did 300-400 interviews in the months prior to "Batman and Robin's" release." Paula Parisi, "The Trouble with Harry," *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 24, 1999.

⁹⁹ Martyn Palmer, "The Revenge of the Nerd," *The Times*, March 16, 2002.

¹⁰⁰ qtd. in Rex Weiner, "Www.H'w'd.Ticked: Cybercix Put Exex in Fix," *Daily Variety*, July 29 1997, 1.

¹⁰¹ For example, an unnamed Fox executive complained, "The problem is that people are seeing a movie in an unfinished form. It has temp music, it may be 15 or 20 minutes too long, the color isn't right, the sound isn't right. And they go out on the Internet and review it as if it were finished. It's unfair." qtd. in Weinraub, "The Two Hollywoods; Harry Knowles Is Always Listening," 119. Joe, Farrell, the head of National Research Group, a firm specializing in test screenings said, "I'm afraid that what he is doing could diminish the opportunities for a filmmaker to fine-tune his film through audience reaction before presenting it to the studio or to exhibition." qtd. in Weiner, "Cybergeek Leaks Freak Pic Biz," 1. Jeffrey Godsick, vice-

funneled into anxieties about how to deal with the new medium of the Internet, which seemed to make all users a potential ‘threat.’ Pula, adding to his steady supply of sound bites on the topic, said of Knowles and his ilk, “what they’re doing is scary and inappropriate. They’re interrupting the process. They’re taking an unfinished product and judging it. And that’s unfair to the director, to the people working on the film and to the consumer.”¹⁰²

Such critiques grew out of the premise that studios used test screenings to predict how audiences, or a particular segment of the audience would receive a film. However, test screenings also function as a way of determining how best to market a film to audiences by “gaug[ing] the degree of difficulty in selling moviegoers an unseen film.”¹⁰³ If *Batman & Robin* was, as Knowles put it, “a 200-megaton bomb,”¹⁰⁴ Warner Bros.

president of publicity at Fox said “It’s really not fair to judge a work of art in progress” while an unnamed “marketing expert” asked, “What right does Knowles have to condemn our product before its even finished?” qtd. in Churcher, “How an Internet Buff with Studio ‘Spies’ Is Sealing the Fate of Big Budget Movies,” 47. Bob Levin president of worldwide marketing for Sony Pictures stated that judging a film based on test screenings “is like reviewing a play that opens in Boston and suggesting it’s the same show that will open on Broadway.” qtd. in Hart and Dutka, “This Guy Is Driving Hollywood Nuts!,” F1, F4. Producer and Director Sean Daniels stressed, “The preview must be confidential in order for it to be of value to the film-makers and studio.” qtd. in Young, “Who’s Bugging Hollywood.” “Perhaps the only moderate voice was, notably, not a marketing specialist, but president of production at Fox, Tom Rothman, who stated, “Reviewing unfinished product may be unfair to film-makers, but it has little impact from a studio point of view. Pre-opening buzz is greatly overblown. Like any sort of new technology, these Internet reviews will explode for about a month, then be forgotten. What matters most is whether people like the film.” qtd. in Hart and Dutka, “This Guy Is Driving Hollywood Nuts!,” F1, F4.

¹⁰² qtd. in Weinraub, “The Two Hollywoods; Harry Knowles Is Always Listening,” 119.

¹⁰³ Marich, *Marketing to Moviegoers: A Handbook of Strategies and Tactics*, 58.

¹⁰⁴ Knowles qtd. in Reed, “Internet Hack Takes Shine Off Tinsletown; Harry Plays Dirty with Hollywood,” 14; Biegler, “Harry Knowles Knows Too Much; ‘Internet Guerilla’ Angers Hollywood; McIntosh, “Movie Buff Who Took on Hollywood... and Won Review Websites,” 11; Shapiro, “Movies: Weird Web Site Spooks Hollywood,” B-1. This quote was taken from Knowles’ own review, written after a preview screening of the film. He described the process of obtaining tickets in his review: “I secured them from the coolest cat (yes, I am kissing ass) in town. He scored them from someone who is in the know. The mix of things if you will. The typical secret envelope with my name on it, and a pass for *Batman & Robin*.” While the original post and comments are not archived on the site for reasons unclear to me, in an earlier review of *Speed 2*, Knowles mentions his plans to attend a preview screening of *Batman & Robin* on June 17th, 1997, three days before the film was released in theaters. Harry Knowles, “Speed II: Cruise Control

wanted to keep that information to themselves for as long as possible. At issue, then, was not just the content of the reviews, but also the control of the information—how and when it was consumed, and how it would negatively affect a carefully orchestrated marketing strategy. As Pula tellingly asserted, “its not a product until we release it as a product.”¹⁰⁵ This response suggests the fundamental disjuncture occurring as a result of Knowles’ practices: while the studios felt they were funding and conducting test screenings, Knowles was asking his readers and informants to treat them as preview screenings. While test screenings allow studios to collect information that assists in the marketing of a film, preview screenings function as marketing tools in and of themselves.¹⁰⁶ Pula’s aggressive critique of Knowles suggests that at that time, the industry was invested in controlling their product by maintaining clear, often material, lines between the processes of production and consumption. As I will discuss, the solution to maintaining control of both processes was to blur the conceptual lines between industry insider and consumer by inviting Knowles to function both as avid movie fan and an unofficial arm of the marketing process.¹⁰⁷

If the reaction to Knowles and his infiltration of insider information and Hollywood test screenings seems histrionic now, it is only because the mode of marketing to consumers, particularly in the Internet age, has shifted so dramatically as the

Review," *Ain't it Cool News*, last modified June 11, 1997, <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/1710>. Knowles' review of *Batman & Robin* was reposted, without explanation, on *AICN* in 2007: "Batman & Robin Review," *Ain't it Cool News*, last modified January 27, 2007, <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/1634>

¹⁰⁵ qtd. in Haring, "Net 'Movie Nut' Gets the Reel Story but Insider Reports on Scripts, Screenings Aren't Popular with Studios," 6D.

¹⁰⁶ Finola Kerrigan, *Film Marketing* (Oxford: Elsevier Ltd., 2010), 50; Marich, *Marketing to Moviegoers: A Handbook of Strategies and Tactics*, 56-63.

¹⁰⁷ I will discuss the important overlaps between material and ideological boundaries in the next chapter.

media industries have found ways to regain their powerful footing on and though this emerging medium.¹⁰⁸ Director of marketing for Columbia TriStar Interactive, Ira Rubinstein, encapsulated the strategy for controlling fan discourse and reactions: “What can the studios do to control fan sites? We’re turning it on its ear by actively encouraging it.”¹⁰⁹ Importantly, this broad strategy is applicable beyond virtual spaces and extends to media spaces like Comic-Con. If Rubenstein indicated the tack Hollywood would take in dealing with Knowles’ and the Internet’s disruption of the standard practices of marketing, Chris Pula (whose responses to Knowles, ironically, often flew in the face of Hollywood PR) explained why such a strategy was necessary and why it would ultimately be effective: “We almost have to make him an insider. Harry has to figure out if some of his appeal comes from his guerilla rebel attitude and if that appeal will diminish if he becomes another cog in the studio’s marketing process.”¹¹⁰ Through this encapsulation might seem cynical, it is also somewhat accurate. As an Austin, TX blogger and fan, Knowles was easily positioned at a spatial and ideological distance from Hollywood.¹¹¹ As I will discuss, in finding ways to overcome that distance and by inviting Knowles in, the industry maintained their control over the boundaries that perpetuate media power while eliminating any traces of transgression.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example: Andrejevic, "Watching Television without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans; Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy." Despite asserting the “utopian potential of blogging,” Chuck Tryon acknowledges its significant absorption into a “promotional machine in which consumers collaborate with media producers in marketing films and television shows.” Chuck Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 127.

¹⁰⁹ Weiner, "Cybergeek Leaks Freak Pic Biz," 1.

¹¹⁰ Pula qtd. in Shapiro, "Movies: Weird Web Site Spooks Hollywood," B-1.

¹¹¹ Owczarski, "From Austin's Basement to Hollywood's Back Door: The Rise of Ain't It Cool News and Convergence Culture.," 5-10.

Pula's ongoing reaction to Knowles might have been symptomatic of anxieties about his own career, and an attempt to shift scapegoat status from the marketing department to fans and bloggers. He was fired in December of 1997, after a run of box office failures that year.¹¹² In March of 1998, it was announced that Brad A. Ball, former vice president of marketing for McDonalds, would be appointed as Pula's replacement, demonstrating the studio's desire to approach movie marketing by developing branding strategies to attract particular demographics.¹¹³ This hire is indicative of the larger shift I discuss in in relation to Knowles, from a paradigm that distances audiences from the production process to approaches that invite them to participate, invest, and feel close to the industry. Incorporating Knowles and, by extension, the potentials of the Internet, into "the studio's marketing process" would diffuse the immediate threat of such transgressive practices by placing this new kind of buzz back in the control of the studios. It would also operate as a powerful form of ideological control. As Pula indicated, if Knowles, and fans in general, gained much of their exclusivity at that time through public discourses about their transgressions against the industry, the industry would offer to substitute another kind of exclusivity: insider status.

The Inside-Outsider

In 1998, *Premiere* published an article entitled, "Has Harry Knowles Gone Hollywood?"¹¹⁴ Describing his increased entanglement with studios through all expenses paid visits to premieres, movie sets, and film roles, the article raised questions about

¹¹² Wayne Friedman, "That's All, Folks: Did WB Make a Scapegoat of Fired Marketing Cheif Chris Pula?," *Hollywood Reporter*, December 16, 1997.

¹¹³ Paul Karon, "Biz Watches as Ball Bats for Warners," *Daily Variety*, April 1, 1998, 3.

¹¹⁴ Gregg Kilday, "Has Harry Knowles Gone Hollywood?," *Premiere*, December, 1998, 45.

exactly what role Knowles was playing in relation to Hollywood. Accompanying the article was a cartoon that depicted Knowles carrying a swag bag, adorned with Cannes, Sundance, and “Set Access” badges. He was pictured sheepishly crossing a velvet-roped threshold to enter a world premiere, leaving two decidedly disgruntled spectators behind him (fig. 14). The cartoon read, “Embraced by those who ignored him! He’s... *The Inside-Outsider*”(my emphasis).¹¹⁵ This cartoon places Knowles in a material and ideological space that is neither entirely outside, nor inside the industry. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Comic-Con attendees are similarly positioned in this way through the liminality of the line. In the image, Knowles is situated at the limits of two exclusive groups: Too much of an insider to be fully aligned with his fellow fans and readers, and still reliant on industry invitations and passes to move freely from outsider to insider.¹¹⁶

Observations about Knowles’ involvement with the industry began as early as 1997. Many of the articles praising the rebellious nature of his site also reported that the industry was working to curry favor with Knowles. This included a visit to the closed set of *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998) and his attendance at the premiere and after party for *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven, 1997).¹¹⁷ This particular invitation seemed to be part of larger peacemaking process as Sony had, only months prior, filed a cease and desist order against Knowles after he published unauthorized photos of the film’s “bugs”

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ In her article on Harry Knowles, Owczarski traces the trajectory of Knowles’ relationship to the industry, arguing that “AICN’s legacy... is about outsiders having an opportunity to affect the filmmaking process,” describing Knowles’ movement between outsider and insider as a move between “weak ties to strong ties.” Owczarski, “From Austin’s Basement to Hollywood’s Back Door: The Rise of Ain’t It Cool News and Convergence Culture.,” 18, 16.

¹¹⁷ Shapiro, “Movies: Weird Web Site Spooks Hollywood,” B-1; Reed, “Internet Hack Takes Shine Off Tinsletown; Harry Plays Dirty with Hollywood,” 14; Weinraub, “The Two Hollywoods; Harry Knowles Is Always Listening,” 119.

on his website. Knowles removed the images but replaced them with a copy of the legal document. Fearing a PR backlash, Sony ultimately relented and sent Knowles “official” images to post instead.¹¹⁸

By the time *Premiere* published their article on Knowles in December of 1998, he had also attended the Los Angeles premiere of *Rush Hour* (Brett Ratner, 1998), was flown to New York for the Madison Square Garden premiere of *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich, 1998), traveled to the London set of *The Mummy* (Stephen Sommers, 1999), attended the Sundance and Cannes festivals, and was given a small role in Robert Rodriguez’s *The Faculty* (1998).¹¹⁹ At that time, Knowles was also actively soliciting birthday and Christmas gifts on his site. This message was posted to all his readers, reasoning, “deep down inside if you had a million or so people reading what you wrote every day, wouldn’t you ask for pwessssseenntts?”(sic)¹²⁰ Though he said he would accept any gifts from anyone, it is also likely that Knowles was targeting readers who were members of the industry and had the means and motivation to fulfill his requests.¹²¹ Knowles confirms this in his book, but maintained that collecting presents was not his primary interest:

¹¹⁸ For more on Sony’s reaction to Knowles, see: Shapiro, "Movies: Weird Web Site Spooks Hollywood," B-1; Weiner, "Cybergeek Leaks Freak Pic Biz," 1; Young, "Who's Bugging Hollywood; McIntosh, "Movie Buff Who Took on Hollywood... and Won Review Websites," 11; Biegler, "Harry Knowles Knows Too Much; "Internet Guerilla" Angers Hollywood."

¹¹⁹ These trips were chronicled on his website. See, for example: Harry Knowles, "The Trip to Armageddon!!!!!!," *Ain't it Cool News*, last modified October 31, 1997, <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/21>; "Guess Who's Coming to La????!!!" *Ain't it Cool News*, last modified November 3, 1997, <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/235>

¹²⁰ While it no longer exists on the website, this post was reprinted in *The Ottawa Citizen*. Richard Helm, "Cyber Guru Loses His Cool," *The Ottawa Citizen*, December 13, 1998, D2.

¹²¹ Ron Wells was highly critical of Knowles’ tendency to accept “pwesents” from the industry. Ron Wells, "Ain't It Criminal: Deconstructing Harry (Part Three)," *Film Threat*, last modified July 17, 2000, <http://www.filmthreat.com/features/186/>

I get a lot of freebies through the site—swag, I call it. I have had computer problems and people have sent me hardware or memory; I get free videotapes, CDs, DVDs, scripts, laserdisc—either from companies, the filmmakers themselves, or from zealous fans...If I was strategic about it, I could double or triple the amount of swag I pocketed, but then that would defeat the whole purpose. Obviously I'm not in it for the money—or the swag.¹²²

Despite being presented with insider trips and swag, however, *Premiere* noted that Knowles had only been invited to a single “official” press junket.¹²³ This notable distinction marks the special treatment Knowles received as something exclusive by positioning it outside the limits of what is normally offered to the press. However, it also situates these perks in a morally questionable zone, suggesting that studios did not expect Knowles to display the same kind of objectivity associated with professional film critics (however contentious that presumption may be). Instead, studios offered him social capital and objectified cultural capital in order to encourage more positive reviews or a charitable position towards their films.¹²⁴

Given that his audience was purportedly in the hundreds of thousands, even millions, providing Knowles with special treatment before he disseminated information and reviews of their films on his website represented a very minimal economic risk for studios, with a substantial return in the form of free publicity and increased ticket sales. It

¹²² Knowles, Cullum, and Ebner, *Ain't It Cool?: Hollywood's Redheaded Stepchild Speaks Out*.

¹²³ According to Kilday, he was invited to Dreamworks' press preview of *Prince of Egypt* (Chapman, Hickner, and Wells 1998) Kilday, "Has Harry Knowles Gone Hollywood?," 46.

¹²⁴ Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 243.

was Knowles who shouldered the bulk of the risk in accepting and often soliciting these gifts, as his reputation as a critic was significantly damaged, while the studios, performing their accepted capitalist function, were seemingly immune. The material traces of Knowles' interactions with the industry—the swag and trips, transporting him outside of his room in Austin and on to sets and movie premieres—bolstered those boundaries, situating him neither fully inside nor outside of the industry. We take it for granted that the media industries hinge upon converting cultural capital to its most basic, objectified state, economic capital.¹²⁵ As an outsider-turned-insider who was first and foremost identifiable as a fan or a geeky blogger, Knowles was unable to make the same seamless conversion.

Highly critical reactions to Knowles' practices appeared regularly in the comments section of his website, but he also received plenty of vocal criticism from journalists and other bloggers who suggested that he had become precisely what Chris Pula had predicted: “another cog in the studio's marketing process.”¹²⁶ Instead of fulfilling the promise that *AICN* was founded to provide “a resource for entertainment news that is outside the control of Hollywood,”¹²⁷ Knowles was accused of operating as a mouthpiece for the industry, as Hollywood's “sock puppet.” This phrase comes from one of the more damning and extensive critiques of Knowles, a three-part story published on *FilmThreat.com* in 2000. In the article, Ron Wells lists a number of complaints against

¹²⁵ In media industry studies, for example, this acceptance of the media industries' basic capitalist function has been used as a misguided way to argue against emphasizing economics and in favor of highlighting culture. Wasko and Meehan, “Critical Crossroads or Parallel Routes?,” 153; Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*.

¹²⁶ Shapiro, “Movies: Weird Web Site Spooks Hollywood,” B-1.

¹²⁷ Knowles qtd. in *ibid.*

AICN and Knowles' integrity, first among them, his open solicitation of gifts and perks from studios, which, Wells charges, were taken in exchange for positive reviews and publicity on *AICN*.¹²⁸

While Wells and other critics of Knowles' practices suggest that these were explicit or duplicitous transactions,¹²⁹ for Knowles and representatives from the industry, these exchanges seemed to exist in a morally and economically gray area. In June 1998, Knowles admitted to being swayed by VIP treatment when he wrote a positive review for *Godzilla* after a Madison Square Garden screening: "The studio will pay to send me places, and it will influence my review. Anybody who pretends otherwise is absurd."¹³⁰ Recognizing his own critical fallibility, Knowles retracted his review upon seeing the film a second time, less than a week after the special May 1998 screening.¹³¹ In December of 1998, Knowles was once again resistant to the idea that these perks and gifts operated as payment, suggesting that, "People say, 'Oh, if they rub Harry's feet, Harry's going to love them. But it's not really that way. I can't allow myself to get biased on a film, because that would alienate my readership.'¹³² As is evident from his contradictory responses, Knowles seemed to experience some difficulty explaining his

¹²⁸ Wells' other critiques figure more specifically within the realm of the ethics of Internet blogging and journalistic integrity: Knowles' misreporting of information, "misdirection of credit," use of pseudonyms for his other writers on *AICN*, his selective respect for the privacy of his colleagues and sources, and his poor prose. Wells, "Deconstructing Harry: Ain't It Unethical (Part One)".

¹²⁹ Peter Howell, "Laughing at a Lie Simply Ain't So Cool," *The Toronto Star*, March 4, 1998, D3; Wells, "Deconstructing Harry: Ain't It Unethical (Part One)".

¹³⁰ Knowles qtd. in Bob Blakey, "Hollywood Fears Knowles and His Web," *Calgary Herald*, June 29, 1998, B10.

¹³¹ Ibid; Harry Knowles, "2nd Viewing of *Godzilla* (1998), *Mulan* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Reviews," *Ain't it Cool News*, last modified May 22, 1998, <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/1654>

¹³² Knowles qtd. in Kilday, "Has Harry Knowles Gone Hollywood?," 46.

own stance in relation to the special treatment, trying to justify his participation with the media industries as an insider who was also capable of journalistic integrity. As he chose to accept the industry's gifts and invitations, claiming that he could "straddle the fence" between insider and outsider, Knowles found himself accountable to both groups.¹³³ Industry representatives, however, were far less ambivalent about the ethics of enticing Knowles; "He's a tastemaker with a great deal of influence and a following online. And online opinion tends to lead the wave of opinion in the culture these days, so that's a potent position he finds himself in."¹³⁴ Given his willingness to work with the industry, Knowles was much more valuable to them in his capacity as an amateur blogger whose purpose was to act as an influencer and arbiter of taste.

"Geek Chic," Ain't it Cool?

If, as I have argued, exclusivity is about limits, then identifying Knowles and the geek demographic as an exclusive group also helps to place limits upon how such groups can function in relation to the industry. In the case of Harry Knowles, that meant either as a radical transgressor, or as a privileged insider. As some have argued, Knowles' positioning, first, as "the plucky little guy tripping up the megabucks corporations,"¹³⁵ then, as Hollywood's literal and metaphorical 'puppet,' is symptomatic of the industry's increased investment in a more engaged and vocal consumer base accompanying

¹³³ Knowles qtd. in Shapiro, "Movies: Weird Web Site Spooks Hollywood," B1.

¹³⁴ Marc Shmuger, Universal Pictures' head of marketing qtd. in Claudia Puig, "Moviemakers Abuzz About Power of the Net," *USA Today*, July 21, 2000, 2E.

¹³⁵ McIntosh, "Movie Buff Who Took on Hollywood... and Won Review Websites," 11.

convergence culture.¹³⁶ Arguing from a fan studies perspective, Suzanne Scott describes the “incorporation paradigm” through which the industry encourages and highlights the practices that best serve their interests. Encapsulating such practices in the figure of the “fanboy,”¹³⁷ Scott argues that a gendered divide arises in which the industry encourages male-dominated, “affirmational” fan practices that help to promote their product, while marginalizing “transformative” and unsanctioned texts produced primarily by women.¹³⁸ Kimberly Owczarski, considering the industrial implications of convergence culture, argues, “*AICN* provide[s] an important case study for understanding how convergence culture developed in the early years of the Internet and for chronicling how Hollywood moved from a conflicted to a more synergistic relationship with participatory-minded consumers such as Knowles.”¹³⁹ As is the case throughout this dissertation, my interest in Harry Knowles lies somewhere between these fan and media industry centered approaches, but emphasizes and critiques the capitalist power structures that form the basis for convergence culture. In this way, I suggest that discourses about Knowles and his relationship to Hollywood are symptomatic of the industry’s own attempts to negotiate, control, and ultimately neutralize the power of a demographic that they themselves were instrumental in constructing and empowering, what John Caldwell

¹³⁶ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Owczarski, "From Austin's Basement to Hollywood's Back Door: The Rise of Ain't It Cool News and Convergence Culture.," Scott, "Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and the Politics of Incorporation," 40; Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence*, 125-48.

¹³⁷ While Scott does not discuss Knowles’ at length in her dissertation, she does refer to him in passing as the “ur-fanboy,” identifying his blogging with the kinds of affirmational practices she criticizes. Scott, "Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and the Politics of Incorporation," 40.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27, 33.

¹³⁹ Owczarski, "From Austin's Basement to Hollywood's Back Door: The Rise of Ain't It Cool News and Convergence Culture.," 5.

describes as “producer-generated users.”¹⁴⁰ That is to say, the same media discourses that suggest either an antagonistic or unethically close relationship between Knowles and Hollywood also work to situate his influence in relation to the industry and, ultimately, as a part of it. The same is true for wider reaching discourses about “geek chic” and the Comic-Con audience, where this demographic’s exclusivity and power as tastemakers is argued by identifying their significance to the industry.

Puppet Harry’s 2011 red carpet interview with struggling comic artist Skip Harvey, one of the subjects featured in *Comic-Con Episode IV*, encapsulates the kinds of discourses of empowerment circulated in and around geek culture. Harry reminds us of his own role as “Head Geek” before asking Skip, who is identified as “the geek” in the film, how he feels about this label.¹⁴¹ Skip replies:

It’s no longer derogatory. That’s the greatest part about the world we live in. That’s no longer a derogatory term. Now we are the tastemakers and the trendsetters. We’re the people that draw your art and make your music and edit your movies and program your video games. So being a geek now, it used to get me beat up but now it actually gets me in movies, so how could I possibly argue?¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Caldwell calls “producer-generated users” user-generated content’s “evil twin,” describing how the industry appropriates and capitalizes on amateur production. Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 336-39.

¹⁴¹ Spurlock follows the story of seven different attendees, which the film identifies both by name and by the short-hand titles: “The Collector,” “The Geek,” “The Designer,” “The Survivor,” “The Soldier,” and “The Lovers.”

¹⁴² “What Does Comic-Con Mean to You? Ain't It Cool with Harry Knowles”.

Demonstrating the longevity of this discourse, almost ten years earlier, Knowles defined a similarly empowering trajectory for “geeks” and their relationship to popular culture in his book:

And now, the denizens of these once-isolated, overly balkanized, discrete worlds of private wonder, these fan-based pockets of enthusiasm, which have been kept subterranean and marginalized for far too long by the admen and programming czars and captains of consciousness, held apart by their lack of access and their own social failings—waiting for something like the Internet, maybe, to unleash them—seem on the verge of entering the mainstream as a newly emboldened, mutually fanatical coalition. An invisible bloc or silent army, and for once, a force to be reckoned with—geometrically expanding, and, quite possibly, entering its own golden age. A Geek Forum. Geek Like Me.¹⁴³

Both of these quotes dovetail with the academic discourses I discussed earlier in this chapter, which identify a meaningful division between subcultures and the mainstream and place fan cultures in a liminal, but powerful position between these two cultural fields. Not only are Skip and Harry proud to be geeks, but they have also reclaimed the word by suggesting that this identity is advantageous, not detrimental. Much like early studies of fan cultures, seeking to identify and argue for the importance of this particular group, Harvey and Knowles’ embrace of their geekiness also celebrates how a highly engaged and unconventional popular culture audience might seemingly transcend divisions between the margins and the mainstream.

¹⁴³ Knowles, Cullum, and Ebner, *Ain't It Cool?: Hollywood's Redheaded Stepchild Speaks Out*, 61.

Interestingly, although Skip identifies himself with geeks who are artists and creators of popular culture, he travels to Comic-Con in the film with the hopes of landing a job as a comic book artist, but is repeatedly turned down. His geek success, then, is based solely upon his notoriety as a subject in Spurlock's film, rather than on the quality of his own creative output. As I have shown, Knowles' success as a geek is similarly contingent on his relationship with Hollywood. Thus, such discourses about geek pride are also a manifestation of geek privilege, and are significantly connected to the leap in cultural and economic capital these individuals have experienced through their interactions with the industry. By suggesting that they have gained mainstream significance through marginalized cultural practices, these descriptions of geekiness imagine a way for such audiences to experience the best of both worlds through exclusivity. By highlighting their unique status as tastemakers and cultural creators, and by suggesting that the creative contributions of geeks are significant to a broader swath of popular culture, Harvey and Knowles seek empowerment by excluding mainstream audiences from geek or fan culture, while simultaneously bringing the texts associated with geek and fan culture to the attention of the mainstream.

There are many ways to theorize the dynamics between producers and consumers under convergence culture: as an "incorporation paradigm,"¹⁴⁴ "a synergistic relationship"¹⁴⁵ or the exploitation of "producer-generated-users."¹⁴⁶ Key to all of these understandings, however, is the way this audience is set apart and framed as exclusive

¹⁴⁴ Scott, "Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and the Politics of Incorporation."

¹⁴⁵ Owczarski, "From Austin's Basement to Hollywood's Back Door: The Rise of Ain't It Cool News and Convergence Culture.," 5.

¹⁴⁶ Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 336.

from the mainstream. Exclusivity, then, celebrates the potential power of these fans to function as consumer-advocates who hold the industry accountable for the products they produce, but ultimately defuses this threat by excluding them from this process, directing them to see themselves, instead, as productive participants working with (or, more accurately, for) the industry towards a common goal. As such, fans enter the industrial labor hierarchy at the very bottom, below-below-the-line, occupying a liminal position as neither full-fledged producers, nor mainstream consumers.¹⁴⁷ While calling fans below-below-the-line laborers threatens to further obscure the difference between producers and consumers in convergence culture, it also follows from Dallas Smythe's work on the audience commodity, which suggests that we reconfigure our understanding of labor time to include time spent consuming and talking about media.¹⁴⁸ When fan production and consumption is deployed as labor, it exists in relation to the media industries and, within convergence culture, fan power is framed as most productive when it reifies (whether through incorporation or by shaping the tastes of the mainstream) the industry's core capitalist function: to make a profit.¹⁴⁹ In this context, one where audiences are asked to work with the industry without seeing themselves as an official labor force, it is useful to imagine where that labor fits in the hierarchy of the media industries.

Ain't it Profitable?

The extensive discourse about Knowles leveled off over the mid to late 2000s, as did his audience of readers. By 2013, his website was still active but struggling

¹⁴⁷ I will discuss this liminal position further in the next chapter.

¹⁴⁸ Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*, 39-41.

¹⁴⁹ Scott, "Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and the Politics of Incorporation," 145; Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, 3.

economically, prompting *Hollywood Reporter* to suggest that Knowles had become “a victim of his own pioneering success in reinventing the way movies are covered.”¹⁵⁰

Certainly, his propensity for accepting ‘perks’ in the form of set visits, premieres, and swag hurt him financially. As one of his former writers, Drew McWeeny (aka Moriarty) explained,

Ain’t it Cool News has always been a business that was run like a really great hobby. As a result, I don’t believe it is the business it could have or even should have been. People came to him and offered venture capital. There were some fairly major overtures made. But Harry would not get into a position where someone else could say yes or no.¹⁵¹

There is no question that *AICN* was, and continues to be, a passion project, especially given its current financial challenges.¹⁵² Maintaining *AICN*’s unique approach and aesthetic, which Knowles describes as “[not] quite professional”¹⁵³ while the site was gradually absorbed into the capitalist logic of Hollywood and while other more professional and industry-run sites began to offer offer significant competition, has put

¹⁵⁰ Espen and Kit, "Ain't It Cool's Harry Knowles: The Cash-Strapped King of the Nerds Plots a Comeback". Espen and Kit reports that his readership, in 2013, had dropped to 300,000 unique monthly visitors, a number they claimed was half as many readers as 1997, despite the explosion of internet usage and access in the past sixteen years. The notion that Knowles had become a victim of his own success echoes Shel Dorf’s lamentations about Comic-Con growth, which I discussed in the introduction. Wilkens, "Comic-Con's Shel Dorf Watches Sadly from the Sidelines as T-Shirts Trump Talent," E-1.

¹⁵¹ McWeeny qtd. in Espen and Kit, "Ain't It Cool's Harry Knowles: The Cash-Strapped King of the Nerds Plots a Comeback".

¹⁵² According to *Hollywood Reporter*, in 2012 Knowles discovered he owed \$300,000 in back taxes. While the site was said to earn approximately \$700,000 a year from advertising at the height of its success this number had “dipped to the low-six figures” by 2012. Knowles had no cash on reserve and had to use money from his own savings account to keep the site afloat. Ibid.

¹⁵³ qtd. in *ibid.*

Knowles in a vulnerable position as he is reliant on the culture industries to supply both his economic and cultural capital.¹⁵⁴

Perhaps most disarming is that Knowles' film fandom, which motivated him to voraciously consume and engage with the industry's products, lead logically to his interpellation into its powerful structures.¹⁵⁵ This is the same logic that underpins the elevation of fans by suggesting that their productivity sets them apart, crudely aligning the aspirations of fan cultures with the basic aspirations of the industry: to produce something of economic value. As Matt Hills argues, through "the basic valuation of 'production' and the basic devaluation of 'consumption'... Fandom is salvaged for academic study by removing the taint of consumption and consumerism."¹⁵⁶ While the industry is most often and explicitly aligned with producing something of economic value, it is fans' complicated and ambivalent relationship to mainstream consumerism that frequently leads to the disavowal of the economic imperative behind their own productivity. Thus, Knowles' incorporation into the industry fueled its accumulation of economic capital by extending its marketing reach. Knowles, on the other hand, sought to collect more cultural capital in the form of free trips, advance screening, and swag or, as he was fond of calling them, "presents."¹⁵⁷ As *Wired* put it in 2004: "instead of stock

¹⁵⁴ During his financial struggle, Knowles turned to Hollywood, "offering discounted advertising packages to studio marketers" in order to raise funds. Ibid. More recently, Knowles' Kickstarter campaign gained significant financial and promotional traction due to the support of industry insiders like Peter Jackson and Guillermo del Toro. Ain't We Cool Productions, "Future Filmgeekdom: Ain't It Cool with Harry Knowles".

¹⁵⁵ As I have discussed with regards to Shel Dorf and Comic-Con, Matt Hills identified this bind as "an inescapable contradiction which fans live out... While simultaneously 'resisting' norms of capitalist society... fans are also implicated in these very economic and cultural processes." Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 29.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 30.

¹⁵⁷ Wells, "Deconstructing Harry: Ain't It Unethical (Part One)"; "Ain't It Criminal: Deconstructing Harry (Part Three)".

options and dollars, the opinionated Texan cashed in on Hollywood clout and mainstream media buzz.”¹⁵⁸ When he did receive economic compensation from Hollywood, it was in exchange for banner ads posted on his site, a practice necessary for his economic survival, but one that opened him up to further criticism from the press and other bloggers.¹⁵⁹ Most importantly, in getting closer to the industry, Knowles was also getting closer to his own dreams of making films.¹⁶⁰ But, if Knowles opted to collect “payment” for his labor in the form of objectified and embodied cultural capital doled out by Hollywood, how did he compensate his large network of so-called spies?

In March of 1998, the *Toronto Star* published a highly critical article by Peter Howell, who suggested that Knowles’ “credibility nosedived” when Hollywood Pictures (owned by Disney), published a positive review on an ad for *An Alan Smithee Film: Burn Hollywood Burn* (Arthur Hiller, 1997) and falsely attributed it to Knowles.¹⁶¹ In actual fact, the blurb was authored by one of his many acolytes, “Agent Apple Crisp,” who had emailed Knowles a review, which was subsequently published on the site. Though Knowles initially exhibited outrage, his angry tone shifted to a celebratory one when Disney notified him that they would correct their error and cite the original author. “I had always hoped my Agents would be credited and taken SERIOUSLY by the studios,” Knowles write, “What this means is you! Yeah, YOU!! Can be USED just as overtly as a

¹⁵⁸ Tiffany Lee Brown, "Street Cred," *Wired*, last modified October, 2004, http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/10.04/streetcred_pr.html

¹⁵⁹ Black, "The Fan--Harry Knowles," 156; Howell, "Laughing at a Lie Simply Ain't So Cool," D3; *ibid*; Wells, "Deconstructing Harry: Ain't It Unethical (Part One)"; "Ain't It Criminal: Deconstructing Harry (Part Three)".

¹⁶⁰ Weinraub, "The Two Hollywoods; Harry Knowles Is Always Listening," 119.

¹⁶¹ Howell, "Laughing at a Lie Simply Ain't So Cool," D3.

Hollywood Reporter correspondent or Siskel and Ebert or Telenoticias!”¹⁶² Capping off his critique, Howell also noted that Knowles had begun running film ads on his site, including one for the film in question, *Burn Hollywood Burn*. This suggested that Knowles investment and involvement in the Hollywood Pictures film was different than that of a fan or critic. The core of Howell’s criticism was that Knowles was exhibiting questionable credibility as a critic by implicitly suggesting that his readers (and by extension, he himself) write positive reviews for bad films in order to get attention from Hollywood. However, it is the note about the site’s banner ads and Knowles’ own comments that demonstrate precisely who was being “used” and how.

As others have noted, *AICN*, and blogs in general, rely on the kind of “collective intelligence” Jenkins celebrates in *Convergence Culture*.¹⁶³ However, blogging also represents precisely the kind of “free labor” that Terranova argues can be both “pleasurably embraced” and “exploitative.”¹⁶⁴ Knowles has maintained the title of “Head Geek” by culling information from his own research and connections, but more importantly, by drawing on the feedback and reviews of his spies in order to produce content from his site. Unlike his network of contributors and spies, however, his identity has never been anonymous.¹⁶⁵ While Hollywood undoubtedly used Knowles, both to aid in the marketing of their films and to reconfigure their own approaches to marketing in

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 4; Owczarski, "From Austin's Basement to Hollywood's Back Door: The Rise of Ain't It Cool News and Convergence Culture.," 9; Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence*, 134.

¹⁶⁴ Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," 37.

¹⁶⁵ In an interview with *Film Threat* Knowles discusses two reasons for making his writers anonymous: The first was to create a set of imagined characters that could be developed through their reviews; second, Knowles cited the need to anonymize industry insiders. Ron Wells, "The Geeks Strike Back: Deconstructing Harry (Part Two)," *Film Threat*, last modified June 22, 2000, <http://www.filmthreat.com/features/160/>

the age of the Internet, Knowles was also using his “spies” from the very beginning; to bolster and romanticize his own image, to provide invaluable information, and even to supply content for his website. However, while the banner ads provided Knowles with the economic capital to maintain the site and his collector lifestyle, he asked his “Agents” to work for the sheer pleasure of being “taken seriously” by Hollywood, just like any other (paid) film critic.¹⁶⁶ Knowles’ suggestion that his contributors should celebrate being “USED just as overtly as a Hollywood Reporter correspondent,” indicates that he may serve not only as a model case, but also a how-to-guide for incorporating fans’ free labor into marketing practices. His site, from the beginning, reproduced the very same mechanisms that Hollywood employed in tempting him with insider status. Knowles asked his contributors to work for the love of film culture, the glory of recognition, and the occasional insider perks he provided them, while he himself was courted and compensated by the studios.¹⁶⁷

The case of Harry Knowles demonstrates how the exclusivity of geek/fan culture is a discursive construction that produces the value of this demographic by conflating discussions about their influence upon mainstream culture with their utility to Hollywood. If Knowles represented the burgeoning power of a disembodied, virtual mobility produced through online networks in the late 1990s, Hollywood’s response was to

¹⁶⁶ I refer primarily to Knowles’ readers and spies, who he recruited as informants. Though he hired some core staff as the site developed, in these early days, the operation was run entirely by Knowles. It is unclear exactly when Knowles began paying key staff members and it is unclear how much compensation they receive. The 2013 *Hollywood Reporter* article suggests that Knowles was scraping money together, in part, to pay staff. Espen and Kit, "Ain't It Cool's Harry Knowles: The Cash-Strapped King of the Nerds Plots a Comeback". However, a 2000 article describes a then major site contributor, Moriarty (now known as Drew McWeeny) as unpaid, while claiming Robogeek, aka Paul Alvarado-Dykstra was a paid member of the *AICN* staff. Wells, "The Geeks Strike Back: Deconstructing Harry (Part Two)". Knowles’ 2004 book describes twelve members of his “inner circle,” writing, “some of them have regular jobs, some of them support themselves however they can.” At no point does he give any indication that these contributors are paid. Knowles, Cullum, and Ebner, *Ain't It Cool?: Hollywood's Redheaded Stepchild Speaks Out*, 149.

¹⁶⁷ Wells, "Deconstructing Harry: Ain't It Unethical (Part One)".

incorporate his practices into their own mode of production and marketing; but his success and access hinged upon the free labor performed by his “spies” outside. I would argue that while Knowles, lionized as a lone individual, became the discursive nexus for Hollywood’s anxiety about losing control of their marketing information and falling behind in the digital age, it is the proliferation of his network of anonymous “spies” that likely incited industry wide-panic.

Knowles extreme visibility as a symbol and figurehead of this transgressive circulation of unauthorized information, however, made it easier for Hollywood to contain and control it.¹⁶⁸ If Knowles’ transgression was contained through his incorporation into the industrial logic of Hollywood, Comic-Con is representative of how the industry sought to control the larger, amorphous power symbolized by Knowles’ network of spies, containing this much larger segment of geeks, nerds, fans and movie buffs by making them highly visible in real space. Instead of working for Knowles, this network of spies could work directly for Hollywood. *Entertainment Weekly* captured this sentiment in 2008:

Hollywood wouldn’t be at Comic-Con at all if it weren’t for the Internet. Harry Knowles of Ain’t It Cool News and other bloggers burst onto the scene in the mid 1990s, reaching millions. Hollywood needed to cater to them fast. Comic-Con was the answer. ‘It’s mutual exploitation,’ says producer Gale Anne Hurd (The Terminator). Sure, but no one doubts that

¹⁶⁸ Not only was this visibility the outcome of the immense amount of discourse about Knowles and his website, but his physical appearance, both unique and quintessentially geeky, allowed him to function as a kind of figurehead, or as he has called it, “Head Geek.” While this chapter focuses on Knowles’ visibility as a discursive construct, further exploration of Knowles’ physicality and its relation to geek culture represents a fruitful area for future research.

the fans are the ones in the driver's seat. 'You get that feeling, says comic-book writer Brian Michael Bendis (Torso), 'that Hollywood is afraid not to come.'"¹⁶⁹

The first half of this statement presents Hollywood's presence at Comic-Con as a concrete, pragmatic response to the need for a shift in marketing strategy that accompanied the rise of the Internet. The second half, however, is demonstrative of how such strategies are cloaked in somewhat subjective statements about collaboration (or, in this case, the more cynical "mutual exploitation") and fan power.

Variety similarly deployed the phrase "geek chic" in 2004 as a way to encapsulate the increased investment of studios in Comic-Con and their attempts to manage and control this particular segment of the audience.¹⁷⁰ The two articles cited Comic-Con's "promotional frenzy" as a key example of Hollywood's increased investment in fan audiences and gestured towards a moment of discovery as the power of the Internet was being harnessed in unlikely ways and with unpredicted outcomes, ushering in new attitudes and interactions between production industries and consumer publics.¹⁷¹ Like so

¹⁶⁹ Gopalan, Collis, and Vary, "Building Comic-Con," 27.

¹⁷⁰ The first article, written by Peter Bart, describes the success of the *Blair Witch Project* (1999), launched primarily through an online viral marketing campaign and driven by word-of-mouth. Though the success of this film seemed to set the stage for a new kind of low-budget multimedia blockbuster, neither fans, nor Hollywood could reliably replicate this amateur success story. Bart also identifies Harry Knowles as a significant figure in defining the Internet as both a fan and industry space. Bart, "Geek Chic: Hollywood Corrals Nerd Herd..." 1, 3. The second article, published in the same issue, also connects Hollywood's monetization of the geek demographic, its increased marketing presence at Comic-Con and the rise of movie blogs like *Ain't it Cool News*. Fritz, "Geek Chic... but 'Netsters Wary of Showbiz Wooing," 1, 41.

¹⁷¹ Bart, "Geek Chic: Hollywood Corrals Nerd Herd..." 1, 3; Fritz, "Geek Chic... but 'Netsters Wary of Showbiz Wooing," 1, 41.

For other examples of articles noting the increased influence of geek culture on mainstream media production, see: Gregory Ellwood, "The Geeks Shall Inherit the Industry," *Daily Variety*, July 26, 2007; Grossman, "The Geek Shall Inherit the Earth"; Wloszczyna and Oldenburg, "Geek Chic; Nerd Is the Word for Popularity in a Wired World," D1.

many other articles on the topic, the authors suggest that the democratizing possibilities of the Internet have provided opportunities for industry outsiders, in this case, “geeks,” to assert their presence and power as a significant and influential demographic. However, these articles also stand out from the rest, as they suggest a failure to maintain geek power in a sustainable way, particularly when working against or outside of dominant industrial practices. Ben Fritz points to media conglomerates’ colonization of movie blogs and their investment in Comic-Con as a promotional site in order to suggest that this seemingly powerful collection of tastemakers “couldn’t survive without the trailers, interviews and junket access provided by studios” and that “Comic-Con would undoubtedly be a mere shell of what it is today without the presence of studios and videogame companies.”¹⁷² And, in a critical moment fitting more appropriately within the Frankfurt School than the Hollywood trades, Peter Bart even suggests that Hollywood’s power is such that it can rapidly reconfigure a new media democracy into an “old plutocracy.”¹⁷³

This tension between media as a democratic and plutocratic force is certainly not new, but in the wake of the emergence of the Internet as an entirely new media form, uncertainty about who wields the ultimate power—the media industries or their audiences—was continually negotiated in the popular press. Despite their skepticism about “geek chic” as a game-changing grassroots movement, Bart and Fritz, in identifying “geeks” as a noteworthy demographic, still work to reinforce the power of this audience as a collective, suggesting, for example, “there’s no individual voice out

¹⁷² Fritz, “Geek Chic... but 'Netsters Wary of Showbiz Wooing,” 11.

¹⁷³ Bart, “Geek Chic: Hollywood Corrals Nerd Herd...” 3.

there that can wound a movie as it wends its way through production and post-production, but that eerie disdainful hum across geekdom and wreak serious damage.”¹⁷⁴ Such an assertion demonstrates the complexity and ambivalence of these discourses, which are almost impossible to separate from the ways audiences and the industry actually participate in culture.

Whether we see the “geek” demographic as powerful arbiters of cultural taste, or powerless pawns, it is important to understand how such discourses have been deployed by media industries in order to better harness and control this power. As the rest of this dissertation will demonstrate, placing these same discourses in the context of a live media event helps to bring them into even greater relief. The industry’s approach to Comic-Con bears a striking resemblance to the assimilation of Harry Knowles and *Ain’t it Cool News* into the logic of Hollywood marketing and publicity. It is for this reason, perhaps, that by the mid 2000s Comic-Con was described as “an industrial trade show masking as a fan show.”¹⁷⁵ The implication of such a statement, of course, is that attendees are situated more closely to industry insiders than consumers. However, a more accurate description of the event might be that in inviting attendees ‘inside’ by sharing exclusive content, the industry asks fans not only to consume, but also to reproduce marketing and publicity. In the next chapter, I examine exactly how this move from outside to inside happens at Comic-Con by considering how waiting in line facilitates this sense of boundary crossing, produces value around industry promotion, and reinforces a hierarchy that places the media industries in a position of significant power over fans.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ I will discuss this analogy in greater depth in Chapter Five. Ibid., 1.

CHAPTER 3

The Liminality of the Line: Comic-Con's Economy of Waiting

“The concomitant of technical progress is the narrow-minded determination at all costs to buy nothing that is not in demand, not to fall behind the careering production process, never mind what the purpose of the product might be. Keeping up, crowding and queuing everywhere takes the place of what were to some extent rational needs.”

-Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (1951)¹

“Everything’s a line here. That’s the way it is.”

-Fan at Comic-Con Talk Back, 2011²

Prologue

When my alarm clock rang at 4:30 a.m. on Sunday, July 24th, 2011, I begrudgingly slid out of bed and prepared for my last day at Comic-Con 2011. Looking out the window of the Omni Hotel, the streets seemed quiet, but not empty. Fans were already making their way to the convention center, so I dressed quickly, readying myself for a long morning, which would inevitably be spent waiting in various lines. The first order of business on this particular day was to pre-register for next year’s Comic-Con.³ This year, the huge increase in the demand for passes (particularly those including entry

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, Radical Thinkers (London Verso, 2005), 118.

² Held during the last few hours of Comic-Con, the Talk Back panel provides attendees with a forum where they can speak directly to organizers and give feedback and suggestions about the event. John Rogers, *Comic-Con Talk Back 2011*, Comic-Con Panel, *Comic-Con International 2011* (San Diego: July 24, 2011).

³ As it turned out, this was the last year in which Comic-Con offered onsite pre-registration, which gave attendees the opportunity to purchase advance passes for the next Comic-Con a full year in advance. I will discuss this system at greater length later in this chapter.

into preview night⁴) and difficulties with the online ticketing system had created a sense of uncertainty and insecurity about ticket sales that made pre-registering a priority for any fan wishing to ensure their attendance at Comic-Con 2012. With a limited window—from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. each day—to pre-register, I thought it wise to arrive early and wait. In anticipation of the long lines, many attendees had spent the better part of a chilly San Diego night sleeping outside on the hard concrete paths that stretched along the waterfront. When I arrived, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of people ahead of me. After about five hours, I had completed the process and secured passes for 2012 with Preview Night, without spending the night outside. With nothing to do but wait, I had some time to reflect on Comic-Con and just how much of my time was spent line: four to six hours each day. I found myself wondering why I, along with many of the other 130,000 attendees, would consent to spend the better part of four days waiting in line. What ultimately led me to this somewhat obvious question was the fact of my immediate situation that morning. That year, Comic-Con set aside a fixed number of badges to be sold each day.⁵ Those who wished to pre-register had to present their 2011 badge (documenting that they had paid admission that day) before they would be allowed to purchase a maximum of two tickets for the following year. By the time I completed my transaction, the absurdity of my situation finally began to set in. I (and thousands of

⁴ Preview night occurs the evening before Comic-Con and gives ticketholders access to the Exhibit Hall before the rest of the attendees descend on the convention center the next morning.

⁵ As of yet, I have been unable to get a clear record of the exact number of badges sold. For example, differing reports online count 2400, 4800, and 10,000 badges sold each day: VA, "Pre-Registration Update," *San Diego Comic-Con*, last modified July 21, 2011, <http://www.comicconguide.com/2011/07/pre-registration-update.htm>; Cal4niatropics, "Comic Con 2012 San Diego, Ca," *YouTube*, last modified August 4, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILSRFZXcSyk>; "Badges for 2012 Comic-Con Quickly Sell Out," *San Diego*, last modified July 21, 2011, <http://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/Badges-for-2012-Comic-Con-Quickly-Sell-Out-125966973.html>

others) had paid admission to Comic-Con International that day so that I could spend five hours in line, pay them again, and potentially repeat the process the following year. At the exhausting end of the four-day event, it all seemed like a lot of money, time, and most of all, work. What was at the end of all these lines that was so worth waiting and working for? And what did all that work actually produce?

Introduction

Every year at Comic-Con, over 130,000 people descend upon downtown San Diego, fill the convention center, and flood the surrounding streets.⁶ Providing an apt description of the scene, Jonah Weiland, editor of the Comic Book Resources website, likened the event to “a city erupt[ing] inside a city.”⁷ The massive scale and spectacle of the crowds at Comic-Con may seem overwhelming and excessive to the uninitiated, but for those who attend regularly, dealing with a large number of people has simply become part of the event, particularly as the convention has grown over the years. Having been hosted at a number of hotels in the seventies and at San Diego’s former Convention and Performing Arts Center in the eighties, Comic-Con has seen significant growth since 1991, when it was first held at the newly constructed San Diego Convention Center. At that time, the convention’s attendance rose to over 15,000, and it occupied 90,000 square feet of the then 1.7 million square foot convention center.⁸ Ten years later, the

⁶ As I discuss below, attendance numbers have grown dramatically in the past ten years. However, it is very difficult to locate precise numbers and breakdowns of attendees for each day of the convention. Comic-Con International, "About Comic-Con International," *Comic-Con.org*, last modified 2014, <http://www.comic-con.org/about>.

⁷ Jonah Weiland qtd. in Peter Rowe, "Decoding the Con's Secret Power While Movie and TV Stars Grab Most of the Attention, Fans' Passions Are Served by Narrowly Focused Panels," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 11, 2012, A1.

⁸ Built to bolster San Diego’s tourism and trade show economy, the San Diego Convention Center hosted 1.1 million people at 354 events in 1989, its first year of operation, and was well equipped to host Comic-

Convention Center completed its first expansion and its size grew to 2.6 million square feet.⁹ By that time, Comic-Con's attendance had more than tripled, hitting 53,000.¹⁰ For the next ten years, the event continued to grow, fill, and overwhelm the convention center until 2007, when it reached what organizers described as a "self-imposed" attendance limit.¹¹ While, in 2012, Comic-Con organizers claimed that this limit was "approximately 125,000"¹² over the four days of the convention, they never publicize daily attendance numbers and overall attendance has been widely reported to be higher, with estimates reaching up to 140,000.¹³ As of 2014, Comic-Con's own website vaguely reported "attendance topping 130,000 in recent years."¹⁴

The crowds are a recurring part of discourses describing Comic-Con; so much so that the spectacle overshadows the very micro-organizational tactics that this event requires in order keep it running smoothly. In order for organizers to control the crowds, it is necessary to control how, when, and how many attendees move through the

Con's moderate convention crowd. "History," *San Diego Convention Center*, last modified 2012, <http://www.visitsandiego.com/aboutus/history.cf>; Rogers, *Comic-Con Talk Back 2011*.

⁹ "History".

¹⁰ Glanzer, Sassaman, and Estrada, *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book*, 109.

¹¹ "Comic-Con to Stay in San Diego," *Comic-Con.org*, last modified September 30, 2010, http://www.comic-con.org/cci/cci_pr10_stayinsandiego.php

¹² Comic-Con president John Rogers has publicly stated that they would never release exact numbers. The reasons for this secrecy were not made clear. Ibid; John Rogers, *Comic-Con Talk Back 2012*, Comic-Con Panel, *Comic-Con International 2012* (San Diego: July 15, 2012).

¹³ Two articles published in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* in July of 2012 reported attendance of "more than 130,000" and "around 140,000," while the official website for San Diego's Gaslamp Quarter erroneously claims Comic-Con attendance is "125,000 PER DAY" (original emphasis). Lori Weisberg and Roger Showley, "Fixing the Con's Cons from Rush to Get Tickets, to Crush in Hall H, Fans Have Plenty of Ideas for Improving Event," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 26, 2012, C1; Rowe, "Decoding the Con's Secret Power," A1; "Gaslamp's Comic Con Tips," *Gaslamp.org*, last modified 2012, <http://www.gaslamp.org/comic-con>

¹⁴ Comic-Con International, "About Comic-Con International".

convention center. In an interview, David Glanzer, Comic-Con's director of marketing and public relations, touched on the implementation of crowd control strategies such as, "the transformation of certain corridors of the convention center to one-way avenues for pedestrian traffic to limit bottlenecking in the meeting areas" and a "division of the team dedicated to handling lines."¹⁵ Because the crowds at Comic-Con have exploded in the past decade, so, too, have the rules by which attendees must conduct themselves. In fact, the 1991 Comic-Con Event Guide suggests that organizers wished to avoid overburdening attendees with rules, which were characterized as a kind of impediment: "You're here to have fun. We're here to make it possible for you to have fun, not to impose rules on you."¹⁶ By 2012, facing approximately five times the attendees, rules had been reframed as a necessary part of Comic-Con: "You're here to have fun. We're here to make it possible for you to have fun. For all that to happen, Comic-Con has a few rules that are necessary for the safety and comfort of everyone at the convention. Please comply so that you and everyone else can enjoy the convention."¹⁷ Not only have rules and procedures become increasingly necessary to satisfy institutional regulations and safety requirements associated with such a large crowd, but they are also a necessary part of structuring the event, making it a success, and keeping attendees, press, dealers, and industry professionals happy, or at least satisfied.

¹⁵ Alesandra Dubin, "Strategy Session: How Comic-Con Managed Huge Lines of Attendees," *BizBash*, last modified 26 July, 2012, http://www.bizbash.com/strategy_session_how_comic-con_managed_huge_lines_of_attendees/san-diego/story/23905; Rowe, "Decoding the Con's Secret Power," A1.

¹⁶ Bill Stoddard, ed. *1991 San Diego Comic-Con Events Guide* (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention Inc., 1991), 2.

¹⁷ Jackie Estrada, ed. *2012 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide* (San Diego: Comic-Con International Inc., 2012), 2.

In actuality, Comic-Con's 2007 description of its 125,000 attendance cap as "self-imposed" is a kind of rhetorical maneuver, which implies that the number of tickets sold is the result of the organization's choice to set their own limits rather than making the very real external limitations—the Fire Marshal, the capacity limit of the convention center, and economic resources, to name a few—a dominant part of their official discourse. These external factors, however, can also function as convenient scapegoats to which Comic-Con organizers can defer when attendees express dissent and frustration about the creation and enforcement of rules. For example, when a new rule was introduced days before the 2012 convention, that baby strollers were no longer allowed in programming rooms, it was framed in such a way as to place full responsibility for the creation and enforcement of this rule upon a more powerful, institutionalized source: the Fire Marshal.¹⁸ These self-imposed limits work in combination with organizers' frequent attribution of rules and rulemaking to outside institutions, reinforcing Comic-Con's power and autonomy as an organizational body and bolstering that power by using pre-existing power structures to manage the event and its attendees. In this way, organizers can occupy an authoritarian position as enforcers of rules and regulations while disavowing some of that authority in order to maintain a sense of the fan-organized, grassroots event planning that has been foundational to Comic-Con's identity since 1970.¹⁹ The self-imposed attendance limit and enforcement of the Fire Marshal rules also model the same kinds of controlled behavior and self-discipline expected of attendees,

¹⁸ Ibid; "Important Information for Comic-Con Attendees," *Comic-Con 2012*, last modified July 12, 2012, https://web.archive.org/web/20120712023646/http://comic-con.org/cci/cci_important_info.php

¹⁹ As I described in the introduction, this interpretation of Comic-Con's history is key to the event's current identity. See: San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*.

who must now follow a host of rules and regulations to maintain order. In return, they are rewarded with unique consumer experiences such as celebrity encounters, previews, exclusive products and content, and free giveaways or swag.²⁰ In order to get these rewards and, indeed, in order to participate in Comic-Con at all, attendees must demonstrate their desire to work with organizers to make it a successful event. Thus, through the enforcement of limits and rules and the modeling of disciplined behavior, Comic-Con invites attendees to occupy a position as compliant subjects. That compliance is a key part of the production of Comic-Con as a successful event.

Such processes, as I describe them here, are extremely familiar to us, not only at a media event like Comic-Con, but also in our daily lives. Though we often take little notice, we are continually following rules, procedures, and working collectively to produce and maintain order every day. The context in which such power relationships are constructed at Comic-Con—a convention that brings media fans and industry together in a single space in order to participate in a massive spectacle, both celebrating and selling popular culture—means that these very mundane structures of power and control have repercussions beyond simply maintaining order. Understanding the functioning of power at Comic-Con in this way also provides some insight into how attendees carry this dynamic out into their daily lives as media consumers. In this chapter, I argue that the very same mechanisms, rules, and structures of control that make attendees complicit in ensuring the safe and orderly functioning of Comic-Con, also places them in a position of subjugation in relation to Comic-Con organizers, and even more significantly, the massive media industries that this event supports.

²⁰ Swag is a common term for free promotional materials such as bags or t-shirts, that are distributed for marketing purposes at trade shows and conventions.

Of the myriad ways in which this happens, there is one act that stands out as the ultimate proof of subjugation and compliance: waiting in line. With the explosion of attendance in recent years, lines have become a defining part of Comic-Con.²¹ In fact, it is safe to say that lines now structure the entire Comic-Con experience. In order to attend Comic-Con, one *must* spend time in line; depending on the length of the line and the determination of the attendee, this time can range from hours to days. To plan time at Comic-Con is to strategically plan for and around time spent in line. Lining up is such a common practice, in fact, that the Comic-Con Events guide has addressed it in their FAQ section since 2002, answering the question “What are all these lines for?” with a diverse range of possibilities:

Depending on where the line is, the reasons vary. There are often long lines at the ATMs in the lobby, the Starbucks, and FedEx, each of which is quite popular. On the Upper Level, there are lines for the various Autograph sessions, Badge Pick-up, popular programming events [panels], and (on Saturday) the Masquerade. In the Exhibit hall, a line could be for an individual booth event or for the concession stands.²²

Although this description indicates the exceptional abundance of lines at Comic-Con, the inclusion of everyday practices such as using an ATM, buying coffee, or mailing a package functions to normalize the process. The Events Guide also includes an

²¹ Todd VanDerWerff, "Comic-Con, Day 3: Lines, Lines, Everywhere Lines," *A.V. Club*, last modified July 24, 2011, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/comiccon-day-3-lines-lines-everywhere-lines,59389/>

²² With the exception of the removal of Kinkos from the list of possible lines in 2008, this message appeared unchanged in the Comic-Con Events Guides until 2013, when it disappeared completely. Presumably, the question finally became redundant, as everyone at Comic-Con expects to wait in line and knows exactly what they are for. Estrada, *2012 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*, 98; *2013 Comic-Con International: Events Guide*, 102.

assortment of “Programming Line Maps” which identify lines for specific rooms, how traffic is directed through the convention center, and which doors and halls are designated entrances and exits (figs. 15-17). Most recently, policies have been implemented specifically for those wishing to line up overnight and are outlined in a section titled “Line-up Rules” in the 2012 Events Guide.²³

As an ongoing topic of conversation, the line is a material locus of power at Comic-Con, where attendees are interpellated into a very particular power relationship, one that imposes rules, hierarchies and ideologies that structure the experience of standing in line.²⁴ In order to participate in exclusive experiences of media industry promotion and publicity at Comic-Con, attendees must follow the rules and procedures laid out by organizers. At the same time, however, attendees are also performing a very unusual and specific kind of labor that is key to the success of those segments of the media industries that promote their products at Comic-Con. To consent to waiting in line is to consent to interpellation into an ideology in which what awaits those in line is worth the effort and worth the wait, producing an economy of waiting at Comic-Con where people’s time is exchanged for exclusive promotional material.²⁵

Analyzing this economy of waiting is part of my larger project in this dissertation: to outline a political economy of media fandom by examining the system of labor and

²³ 2012 *Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*, 8.

²⁴ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

²⁵ Lawrence Liang suggests a very different “economy of waiting” in describing how a film’s gradual distribution through the windowing system is unevenly distributed outside of North America. However, the concept, as I apply it here is a way to imagine what is at stake when waiting in line and how the act is part of a larger power dynamic between, quite simply, those who do the waiting and those who are waited for. Lawrence Liang, "Meet John Doe's Order: Piracy, Temporality and the Question of Asia," *Journal of the Moving Image* 7(2008), http://www.jmionline.org/film_journal/jmi_07/article_04.php.

exchange that produces an imbalance in power between media producers and consumers at Comic-Con. Not only does the line function to control and organize the bodies of attendees, but the act of lining up and waiting in line also reproduces powerful hierarchies that persist in delineating the relationship between producers and consumers, even as this relationship appears to be “breaking down” under convergence culture.²⁶ In this chapter, I pursue this economy of waiting in three ways: real lines (queues in the event space), virtual lines (queues in virtual or digital space) and ideological lines. In the latter section, I draw on my discussion of real and virtual lines in order to demonstrate how, in spite of ongoing theorization about the productivity of fans, and media audiences more generally, this economy of waiting exposes and reinforces ideological lines that divide media producers and consumers.

The Economy of Waiting (in Line)

My discussion of Harry Knowles signaled the importance of an insider/outsider dichotomy underlying both popular and academic discourses about media producers and consumers. Examining the economy of waiting at Comic-Con re-imagines this dichotomy in the context of lived experience, where lines, limits, and boundaries are much more apparent. At Comic-Con, the practice of waiting in line produces a very clear divide between inside and outside, both in the literal sense of gaining entry and the metaphorical sense of being an exclusive attendee at an exclusive event.²⁷ Upon arrival at Comic-Con, the first order of business is to register by exchanging a barcoded email, sent to attendees after they have purchased their tickets online, for a single or multiple day Comic-Con

²⁶ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 20.

²⁷ I discuss the exclusivity of the event itself at greater length in the next chapter.

badge. The badge, consisting of a nametag attached to a lanyard, provides a visual marker to identify authorized Comic-Con attendees and must be worn at all times in order to gain entry into the various rooms and events within the convention center (fig. 18) Though, as I discuss below, most attendees have already spent time online, in virtual queues, to purchase their tickets, the badge pick-up is the first moment of lining up that happens at the event itself. While the process of obtaining the badge is quite smooth, thanks to the large number of convention center staff processing and printing badges, ensuring timely entry to the Convention Center, Exhibit Hall, and various programming venues means arriving early and waiting for an extended period.²⁸

This transaction, which begins with the presentation of ID and a proof of payment and ends with Comic-Con's distribution of its valuable badges, is an economic one. This economic exchange is also one way in which attendees move from outside to inside the space and transition from literal outsiders to insiders.²⁹ This transitional moment repeats every time an attendee dons their badge and enters the convention center, exhibit hall, or programming rooms, but because of the waiting that frequently occurs, it is rarely seamless or instantaneous. Waiting, of course, implies a temporal journey from a starting

²⁸ In addition to the convention center, there is also an off-site location in Mission Valley where attendees can claim their badges. In 2011, attendees traveling to the location caused "a severe back up of vehicles" on several highway exits, demonstrating that the crowds at Comic-Con do not necessarily operate in isolation from their surrounding environment. Robert J. Hawkins, "Comic-Con Badge Pickup Backs up Hotel Traffic," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, last modified July 20, 2012, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2011/jul/20/comic-con-badge-pickup-backs-hotel-circle-traffic/>

²⁹ Building on the work of Nick Couldry, Timothy Havens, John Caldwell, and Avi Santo similarly identify the importance of boundary crossing at industry trade shows as a form of media ritual. Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, 21-35; Timothy Havens, *Global Television Marketplace* (London: BFI Publishing, 2006), 72; John T. Caldwell, "Industrial Geography Lessons: Socio-Professional Rituals and the Boarderlands of Production Culture," in *Mediaspace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age*, ed. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 2004), 186; Avi Santo, "Hangin' out in Mickey's Joint: The Cultural Geography of Licensing Trade Shows and Cultivating Investment in Licensable IP" (paper presented at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, Chicago, IL, March 8 2013).

point to a destination. The lines at Comic-Con manifest this journey in a physical space, where the destination is a real place and a specific experience. The period of waiting, whether waiting for next year's Comic-Con, waiting for entry into the space, or waiting for specific events, represents a liminal time and space, in which attendees are neither insiders or outsiders.³⁰

This kind of liminal space and temporality, in which attendees are “neither here nor there... betwixt and between,” has been the subject of significant anthropological scholarship on ritual practices.³¹ *The Encyclopedia of Social Theory* (2006) describes the liminal phase, wherein: “the initiands live outside their normal environment and are brought to question their self and the existing social order through a series of rituals that often involve acts of pain: the initiands come to feel nameless, spatio-temporally dislocated and socially unstructured.”³² While the liminal ritual practices described by anthropologists bear little concrete resemblance to the practices of attendees in line at Comic-Con, they do share some of the qualities that produce this sense of liminality, namely, the dismantling and/or reconfiguring of the spatio-temporal and social orders. As Nick Couldry suggests in his study of media rituals, the concept of liminality has been broadly applied to account for the ritualistic nature of shared practices of media

³⁰ Henri Lefebvre calls this “compulsive time,” as it requires the completion of compulsory activities that do not fall completely under the categories of work or leisure. Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 1971), 53; Joe Moran, *Reading the Everyday* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 8.

³¹ Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1966), 95. See also: Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); Victor W. Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974). Nick Couldry provides a review of literature on liminality in *Media Rituals*. Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, 21-35.

³² Bjørn Thomassen, "Liminality," in *The Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, ed. Austin Harrington, Barbara L. Marshall, and Hans-Peter Müller (London: Routledge, 2006), 322.

consumption. However, “claim[s] that society ‘comes together’ ... are inextricably bound up with various dimensions of power, including... the need of media industries for audiences and social status.”³³ Considering the time and space of the line, then, is also a way to consider how power operates by dismantling and reconstructing systems of value and regulation.

This dismantling of the spatio-temporal and social order occurs because in order to gain entry to the event, attendees must submit to or, at the very least, negotiate a series of articulated and unspoken rules and conditions specific to Comic-Con. Such conditions, in turn, work to reconfigure space and time in the specific context of waiting in line. For example, Comic-Con’s policy on programming states that “Seating in all event rooms at Comic-Con is on a *first-come, first-served* basis” and emphasizes that “because of the sheer number of attendees, simply having a badge does not guarantee a seat in the programs and events or an autograph from a specific celebrity. If there is a specific program or presentation you would like to see, it’s always a good idea to plan accordingly and arrive early” (original emphasis).³⁴ Because Comic-Con does not clear rooms after each panel, once a room is full, those in line will only be admitted as people leave and seats become available. Given that wait times are often long and usually unpredictable, many attendees plan their time at Comic-Con around this policy. They line up overnight or in the early morning hours to ensure their entry into a particular room, remaining there for the entire day of programming, even if that means sitting in a room

³³ Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, 35.

³⁴ Estrada, *2012 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*, 12.

for hours watching panels of little or no interest to them.³⁵ The desire to gain access inside certain rooms, even for an hour-long event, can often override an entire day's worth of potential activities. Because lines for larger rooms grow increasingly prohibitive as time passes, it is often a more conservative use of time to devote the night and early morning hours to securing entry into a single room rather than attempting to move around the convention during the day.

Scholarship on everyday life suggests that seemingly banal practices, daily rituals, and routines are particularly powerful for the very reason that they are so familiar that they easily become invisible.³⁶ “Investigating the quotidian,” Joe Moran writes, “involves unlearning the obvious, looking again at what we think we have noticed already.”³⁷

Waiting is one such practice, which we experience everyday but that, upon closer examination, can be a tremendously complex and powerful procedure.³⁸ However, the experience of waiting in line at Comic-Con is somewhat unique in that it transplants a banal, everyday practice into an exceptional spatial and temporal experience, in effect defamiliarizing the queuing process.³⁹ As I discuss at length in Chapter Four, the

³⁵ It should be noted that not all the rooms at Comic-Con are plagued with such significant lines. Typically the longest lines are reserved for programming related to high profile film and television properties. Hall H, a space that I discuss at length in my next chapter, is a key space around which such lines form.

³⁶ Joe Moran, *Queuing for Beginners: The Story of Daily Life from Breakfast to Bedtime* (London: Profile, 2007), 4-5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁸ A section of scholarship of everyday life is devoted specifically to the examination of waiting. See, for example: Harold Schweitzer, *On Waiting, Thinking in Action* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008); G. Hage, *Waiting* (Melbourne University Publishing, 2009); Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren, *The Secret World of Doing Nothing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

³⁹ Breaking with the banality of the everyday experience of queuing, this experience of Comic-Con as an extraordinary event shares something with Dayan and Katz's theorization of the transformative function of televised media events: “Taking place in a liminal context... their publics exit the everyday world and experience a shattering of perceptions and certainties. Even if the situations in which they are immersed are short-lived and do not institutionalize new norms, at least they provoke critical awareness of the taken-for-

exclusivity that accompanies Comic-Con's status as a popular annual event with limited admission means that attendees must readjust their expectations in order to participate. For example, most people would not expect to arrive early and line up for several hours for admission to a film like *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) on opening night at their local multiplex (especially with the availability of online ticketing), or wait for hours in front of their television to see an episode of *Doctor Who* (BBC, 2005-present). But the demand for certain panels, programming, and products at Comic-Con combined with the liveness of the experience and spatial limitations of the convention center means that attendees expect to wait for hours to see special previews of films and television shows, catch a glimpse of their favorite celebrity, and collect free swag or purchase exclusive items in the Exhibit Hall. Thus, the exclusivity and scarcity of the experience and content shapes expectations and informs attendees' willingness to wait. In this way, we can rethink waiting, a relatively thoughtless practice that has been made invisible through repetition in our everyday lives, as a process that is highly visible and deliberate at Comic-Con. In this way, Comic-Con allows us not only to examine the implications of the queue in the space and time of the event, but also to consider how waiting in line is reflected—spatially, virtually, and ideologically—in the ways in which media consumers are invited to situate themselves in relation to media industries.⁴⁰

At the core of the economy of waiting in line at Comic-Con is the question of value. How do attendees value their limited time at the event? How does the length of the

granted and mental appraisal of alternative possibilities.” Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 20.

⁴⁰ In this way, my arguments here supplement and build upon my discussion of the discursive production of exclusivity in Chapter Two.

wait add value? And how do attendees determine if an experience is valuable enough to be worth waiting for? How do the industry presenters create a sense of value for the products they advertise at Comic-Con? How is attendees' willingness to wait a valuable commodity for the industry? Finally, how do Comic-Con organizers contribute to this construction of value through the process of waiting? One way to think about how fans, industry, and Comic-Con organizers negotiate these questions of value is by considering how waiting in line functions as a form of labor. It is important to acknowledge at the outset, however, that time spent waiting has a significant connection to the value of time itself.⁴¹ In a commentary piece in *Forbes*, Peter Huber points out that while industries have all kinds of mechanisms in place to measure the statistical value of time and time-saving measures, "from the consumer's side of things, the waiting-in-line economy operates outside the public records."⁴² This assertion, that consumers do not have the same economic tools with which to measure and valorize their time, harkens back to Fiske's description of fan culture as a "shadow cultural economy" and Meehan's assessment of fandom's "grey market."⁴³ Rather than naturally operating according to a different set of rules, fan cultures, and audiences more generally, are often simply excluded from the capitalist paradigms that empower media industries.

Thus, the valuation of time operates very differently for fans at Comic-Con, where time spent lining up at the event is an investment that is compensated using

⁴¹ As Marx has noted, all economy can be reduced to the "economy of time." Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 172-73; Nicholas Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication: Global Culture and the Economics of Information* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1990), 23.

⁴² Peter Huber, "The Economics of Waiting," *Forbes*, December 30, 1996.

⁴³ Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," 30; Meehan, "Commodity Audience, Actual Audience: The Blindspot Debate," 391.

paradigms associated with the accumulation of cultural capital.⁴⁴ Fans are compensated for their wait time through the experience that awaits them at the end of the line. For some, this means simply getting into the room and being among the first to see exclusive footage or hear surprise announcements, but the longer one waits, the better the seat, which also means a better view of the action on stage, a closer encounter with the celebrities in attendance and, presumably, a better overall experience. For the largest programming rooms, Hall H and Ballroom 20, this can mean the difference between watching the action unfold on stage or relying on the mediation of the massive screens positioned around the room.⁴⁵ Waiting can also lead to personal encounters with celebrities through autograph sessions and photo ops, or free swag and the purchase of collectibles in the Exhibit Hall.⁴⁶

Rather than viewing such fan practices as existing outside of capitalist paradigms, as Fiske suggests, this accumulation of cultural capital actually operates, for the media industries, as a way to repurpose their advertising and products at Comic-Con as a reward or compensation for the dedicated fans in attendance.⁴⁷ Thus, media industries at Comic-Con profit economically from this exchange (and have, to a degree, the tools to measure

⁴⁴ This represents an extension of the model I described in Chapter Two, wherein Harry Knowles and his readers were compensated with cultural capital for their contributions to industry marketing.

⁴⁵ Attendees who are farther back in the room and unable to get a good view of the stage will frequently snap photos of the celebrities on screen. Presumably, the excitement of just being in the room makes it worth documenting (even through the mediation of the screen) as a unique, individual, and personal experience.

⁴⁶ Perhaps the only explicitly (if indirect) economic compensation for waiting occurs in the lines for the purchase of exclusive collectibles, many of which are sold at a profit immediately after Comic-Con. I discuss this collectors market at greater length in Chapter Five's discussion of the Exhibit Hall.

⁴⁷ Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom."

these profits) in a way that fans do not.⁴⁸ The fact that attendees at Comic-Con are willing to do the work of waiting in line ultimately adds value to the products being promoted at Comic-Con. In this way, “geek chic” takes material form at Comic-Con, where the crowd is mobilized as a signifier of exclusivity and excitement. Increasingly, Comic-Con is being covered in the mainstream media, as well as by more niche outlets online and on television, and the crowds and lines make up a significant part of this discourse. By highlighting the spectacle of the crowds alongside the spectacle of Hollywood PR at the event, the two have become increasingly interconnected in the media at large. Thus, standing in line acts as free labor that produces publicity for the event, which, in turn, becomes publicity for the media industries and their products.⁴⁹ Even if, for many mainstream consumers, fans’ willingness to commit to standing in line for hours is viewed as an excess or oddity, the fact that they are willing to do so (and pay to do so) suggests an inherent endorsement of the products they will ultimately see and purchase at Comic-Con.

Much in the same way that the system of capital transforms labor into surplus value, the economy of waiting at Comic-Con transforms attendees’ time standing in line, a wholly mundane exercise, into something valuable for media industries, and essential for Comic-Con attendees.⁵⁰ While the promotional content presented at Comic-Con may hold a fixed economic value, its cultural capital increases exponentially along with the

⁴⁸ Meehan, "Commodity Audience, Actual Audience: The Blindspot Debate," 292-93.

⁴⁹ I will delve more deeply into the way exclusivity, excitement, and spectacle is deployed for and by the media industries in the next chapter.

⁵⁰ As Dallas Smythe asserts, “there is no free time devoid of audience activity which is not pre-empted by other activities which are market related.” In this way, even this passive expenditure of time spent waiting in line is part of the maintenance of this audience’s labor power. Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*, 47.

time and length of the line. Thus, the output of the labor of waiting in line is the production of surplus value in the form of cultural capital (fig. 19). The longer the wait, the more valuable and worthwhile the experience becomes. This, by extension, produces increased value and excitement around the film or television product being promoted, not only for those in attendance, but also for audiences who follow the event from the outside.

How Lines ‘Work’

Thinking about waiting as both an indicator and producer of value has implications for how we think about this practice in relation to different kinds of labor as well as how waiting produces certain kinds of power relations. In an article in the *American Journal of Sociology*, psychologist Barry Schwartz describes the relationship between waiting and the distribution of power through the production of scarcity. Waiting time, he suggests, is extended when the demand exceeds the supply and in these instances, many are willing to line up in advance and wait longer for something they have no guarantee of actually getting.⁵¹ Those who own the means of production ultimately control how and how much of a product is supplied, but as Schwartz suggests, those who control the delivery of a product also wield a degree of power over those who wait.⁵² A kind of hierarchy emerges in this economy of waiting, with those who wait at the bottom, those who are employed to expedite the delivery of the product in the middle, and those who produce and own the product at the top.⁵³ In the case of Comic-Con, we might imagine attendees at the bottom of this hierarchy, Comic-Con staff and organizers in the

⁵¹ Barry Schwartz, "Waiting, Exchange, and Power: The Distribution of Time in Social Systems," *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 4 (1974): 843.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 844.

⁵³ Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, 88-89.

middle, and media industries, whose products and promotions attendees wait for, at the top (fig. 20). Each of these groups also performs a different kind of labor in order to create an experience of Comic-Con in which the media industries and audiences have access to one another. As I have outlined, attendees labor in the economy of waiting to produce value. While unconventional, this labor shares qualities with what Dallas Smythe describes as the work of the audience commodity: “learning to buy goods and spend their income” and “creat[ing] the demand for advertised goods.”⁵⁴ While such work is frequently disguised as media consumption during leisure time,⁵⁵ the liminal time and space of waiting in line makes the labor of being a media consumer significantly more pronounced.

Comic-Con staff, security, and organizers work to structure and control the wait, ultimately delivering attendees to media industry promotion and vice versa. Comic-Con itself holds a somewhat problematic position in this economy as a non-profit organization. Though Comic-Con has experienced significant criticism since the explosion of media publicity at the event in recent years, the organization was officially incorporated as a non-profit in 1975 and has functioned in this capacity, unofficially, since its founding in 1970.⁵⁶ As a non-profit organization, Comic-Con International Incorporated describes its mission as, “dedicated to creating awareness of, and appreciation for, comics and related popular art forms, primarily through the presentation of conventions and events that

⁵⁴ Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*, 39-40.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁶ Comic-Con founder, Shel Dorf recounted how he convinced Ray Bradbury to waive his usual \$5000 speaking engagement fee and attend the very first Comic-Con free of charge by telling him that Comic-Con was “a non-profit group to advance the art form.” Dorf, “Things I Like to Remember,” 27; San Diego Comic Convention Inc., “Articles of Incorporation of San Diego Comic Convention.”

celebrate the historic and ongoing contribution of comics to art and culture.”⁵⁷ While the organization itself does not seek to profit from its conventions and Comic-Con does provide a forum for independent artists in the comic and film industries, it is the presence of “Hollywood,” and the general mainstreaming of geek culture that has raised concern for many critics.⁵⁸ Because Comic-Con’s non-profit status makes it exempt from state and federal taxes, critics suggest that with almost ten million dollars in the bank in 2012, the influx of money to this non-profit is now primarily expended to produce a convention in support of publicity for massive corporate entities in the media industries.⁵⁹ In addition to questioning the integrity of Comic-Con’s non-profit status, these critiques draw attention to how, as the event has grown and expanded over the years, its status as an intermediary between media audiences and media industries has become increasingly problematic. The implication of these critiques, of course, is that like the fans that frequent the event, Comic-Con’s non-profit status should place it outside, or even above a capitalist economic paradigm. Instead, the labor and profits of this organization are being absorbed by the ultimate capitalist machine: Hollywood. As laborers, Comic-Con organizers, along with its significant body of temporary staff, security, and volunteers, represent a somewhat complicated group. Some are paid, some work for free, but all work towards shaping the event and providing a space where, as David Glanzer puts it,

⁵⁷ Comic-Con International, "About Comic-Con International".

⁵⁸ As I discussed in Chapter Two, there has been a tremendous amount of anxiety about the significance of fan cultures to Hollywood and Comic-Con has become a key site around which these discourses are constructed. Industry publications such as *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter* as well as the popular press provide a number of ongoing analyses of this topic dating back to the early 2000s.

⁵⁹ John Wilkens, "Comic-Con's Charity Status Draws Questions," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 25, 2007; Ken Stone, "Nonprofit Comic-Con Reports Nearly \$10 Million Cash in the Bank," *LemonGrovePatch*, last modified March 26, 2012, <http://lemongrove.patch.com/articles/comic-con-with-net-assets-of-7-million-pays-city-no-business-license-fees>

“the public can meet the actual creators in those fields [comics, film, television and gaming] and interact with them to further their understanding of this industry that has a historic and ongoing contribution to arts and culture.”⁶⁰ In doing so, Comic-Con organizers and staff work to facilitate the industry’s presence at the event by delivering audiences to advertisers.

Finally, the work of media industries at Comic-Con is to sell content to audiences, much in the same way they do everyday, beyond the halls of the San Diego Convention Center. What is different at Comic-Con, however, is that content that would normally be categorized as advertising and publicity, is repackaged as entertainment in and of itself.⁶¹ Waiting in line becomes one way in which this transformation occurs, the way advertising, a cultural object that is often viewed (particularly by savvy media consumers) with a degree of cynicism, becomes a valuable cultural commodity. This feat is accomplished through a hierarchy recognizable to anyone familiar with the distribution of labor in the media industries. By highlighting above-the-line, creative labor, Hollywood simultaneously disavows the “invisible labor” of those working below the line in order to “construct the industry’s narratives about itself.”⁶² In order for this hierarchy of labor to function, an imbalance of power must exist. Schwartz makes two observations key to this understanding how power is distributed in this economy of

⁶⁰ qtd. in Wilkens, "Comic-Con's Charity Status Draws Questions." Glanzer’s quote bears a striking similarity to Shel Dorf’s goals in founding Comic-Con, which I discuss in my introduction. While this could be a coincidence, it is equally possible that maintaining this consistency with the past allows for an erasure of the more problematic idea that Comic-Con *has* changed.

⁶¹ As Jonathan Gray asserts, such advertisements are paratexts that act as “filters through which we must pass on the way to the film or program, our first and formative encounters with the text.” From an economic standpoint, Dallas Smythe argues that the text itself amounts to what he calls the “free lunch” that brings audiences to advertising. Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, 3; Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*, 37-8.

⁶² Mayer, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*, 2.

waiting at Comic-Con: “To be able to make a person wait is, above all, to possess the capacity to modify his conduct in a manner congruent with one’s own interests.”⁶³ To a certain degree, attendees at Comic-Con are at the mercy of those who organize and structure the event. However, in order to ensure that popular television and film content make it to Comic-Con, organizers must, in turn, satisfy the interests and demands of these studios. While all three groups perform distinct kinds of labor, all work towards a common goal, getting the products and publicity to the Comic-Con attendees. Schwartz’s second observation that, “while having to wait may under certain conditions be negative and harmful to the interests of particular individuals, it often furthers the interests of those who keep them waiting,”⁶⁴ allows us consider how waiting at Comic-Con functions as a non-traditional labor economy, where certain kinds of labor are excluded from standard economic models of compensation.⁶⁵ While Comic-Con organizers and attendees are instrumental in producing a sense of value around the event and the products promoted there, it is ultimately the media industries that attempt to exchange this cultural capital for real profit.

Keeping Fans “In Line”

If the process of waiting in line yields a hierarchical power structure based on deploying unconventional forms of labor in order to ensure the success of Comic-Con, one of the prime locations where this happens is in the space of the line itself. The very nature of the phrase “in line” has dual meanings. The first refers to the literal act of

⁶³ Schwartz, "Waiting, Exchange, and Power: The Distribution of Time in Social Systems," 844.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy."

waiting in the line, while the second meaning evokes the more symbolic purpose of the line, to keep attendees orderly, calm, and compliant, transforming them into what Michel Foucault calls “docile bodies.”⁶⁶ Keeping attendees “in line,” is one way in which the space of Comic-Con is used to control the bodies of attendees. The longer they wait, the more their bodies are contained, controlled, and managed within the space of the line. As I have established, the duration of the line-up operates as a producer and signifier of value and the longer the wait, the greater one’s investment in the final outcome. The result is that the longest lines at Comic-Con, those for programming by popular film and television studios, are the sites of the most significant attention from security and the most pronounced self-policing by attendees.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault argues that the meticulous organization and structuring of space works to exercise control upon the body, making individuals subject to and complicit in relationships of power.⁶⁷ However, as Foucault points out in his discussion of Bentham’s Panopticon, specific spaces and individuals do not necessarily have innate power. It is the mechanics of a space that invites subjects to be complicit in their own domination and discipline. He describes the Panopticon as “polyvalent in its applications...It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition of centers and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention

⁶⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 136.

⁶⁷ In “The Means of Correct Training,” Foucault describes how “disciplinary institutions” such as military camps, hospitals, schools are organized as “an architecture that is not longer built simply to be seen... or to observe the external space... but to permit internal, articulated and detailed control—to render visible those who are inside it; in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them.” *Ibid.*, 172-3.

of power...”⁶⁸ Although Comic-Con seems very distant from the kind of institutionalized hubs of power that Foucault examines—prisons, hospitals, schools, workhouses—its superficial distance from these ideologically and politically loaded locals makes it an ideal place in which to seek out and critique the functioning of power. Indeed, this is precisely Foucault’s point; that power can and does operate *everywhere*, often in the name of efficiency.⁶⁹

The efficiency of a line is that it produces an instantaneous hierarchy based on the order in which individuals join. Not only that, but the bodies of those in line produce a visual representation of this hierarchy. In fact, the line’s very existence relies on the corporeal presence of those who wait, simultaneously producing and being subjected to the hierarchy and order of the line. In addition to the numerous barriers, tents, and even colored tape running along the floor of the convention center to mark off specific areas, the bodies of attendees themselves are significant tools in the production of the line.

While waiting to gain entry into Comic-Con’s Hall H in 2012, I was one of several attendees directed by line security to reposition ourselves in the middle of a rather large and high-traffic jogging and cycling path in order to mark the snaking trajectory of the line up and down the San Diego marina. Effectively sitting in the middle of the street, our bodies were not just in the line, but also of the line, and the power dynamics were such that in order to keep our place, we dared not directly defy the guard’s logic in using us as human roadblocks. Instead, approximately thirty minutes later, the security supervisor arrived, described our placement as being in violation of the Fire Marshal’s rules and directed us back to our original positions. Again, we complied. Not only are

⁶⁸ Ibid., 205.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 206.

hierarchies produced within the line, but those who control the line are also subject to and enforce their own hierarchies of labor and control. With our bodies no longer positioned to physically mark the trajectory of the line in space, our placement at a break in the line in a high-traffic area meant that, instead, we were frequently misinterpreted as the line's endpoint. Our roles began to change and we became de facto traffic controllers, re-directing people to the end of the line (much farther away), and even answering questions that might be otherwise be directed to Comic-Con staff and security.

The maintenance of the line, then, requires a mutual desire on the part of attendees and security staff, and a willingness to work collaboratively to keep the order. As one member of Comic-Con security told me, maintaining this kind control is achieved primarily through keeping everyone in the line calm, comfortable and happy. Having observed lines at Comic-Con for several years, I believe that this is frequently accomplished by making attendees allies in the maintenance of the line; including them in the procedures, explaining how the line is being organized, and instilling in them a sense of trust and confidence in the actions of security and staff.⁷⁰ These strategies include periodic announcements regarding the scheduled movement of the line, willingness to answer attendees' questions, and in some cases, a good sense of humor and upbeat attitude about the process.⁷¹ Each morning, one guard told me, the staff met with their supervisors in order to get their instructions for the day. As he shared this information with me, I noticed a red binder marked "line control" clutched at his side.

⁷⁰ The sharing of select details also demonstrates the power associated with controlling and disseminating insider information.

⁷¹ At the best of times, announcements and updates by staff can be met with laughs, cheers, or even a round of applause.

When I inquired about the binder, he became slightly uncomfortable and was unwilling to show or tell me exactly what the contents were (fig. 21). It is easy to imagine what documents this binder might have contained: maps of lines and line placement around the convention center, security policies, Comic-Con policies, Fire Marshall rules, etc.; however, his response to my inquiry betrays much more. Security's mandate of maintaining control of the line by keeping crowds calm, comfortable, and happy, requires a strict control of information as well as space.⁷² Attendees must know just enough to trust security's actions and in order to achieve this trust, security must have access to information that attendees do not, such as wait times or the length of the line. They must also be able to make frequent conjectures about the odds of gaining entry into any given programming room. Attendees at Comic-Con are effectively at the mercy of such staff. While there have been numerous complaints about the aggressiveness of some of the security with altercations inevitably arising between these two groups, attendees ultimately defer to the power of Comic-Con's temporary security and staff, who not only enforce rules and control crowds, but also control and disseminate information about the event.⁷³ Comic-Con's overarching (if somewhat broad) policy prevails: "Attendees must respect common sense rules for public behavior, personal interaction, common courtesy, and respect for private property. Harassing or offensive behavior will not be tolerated. Comic-Con reserves the right to revoke, without refund, the membership and pass of any

⁷² This was not the first or last time my questions to security staff at Comic-Con provoked slightly suspicious or confused responses.

⁷³ The question of fair and appropriate behavior by staff and security is a recurring topic at the Comic-Con Talk Back panels of the past two years. As the criticism of staff and security at these panels demonstrate, in moments of conflict, when attendees perceive their treatment by staff as unfair, they often seem to have very little recourse other than reporting it much later (and with much frustration), at the talk back session. Rogers, *Comic-Con Talk Back 2012*; *Comic-Con Talk Back 2011*.

attendee not in compliance with this policy.”⁷⁴ All of these factors—the unusually long wait times, the hierarchy produced by lining up, the placement of bodies as markers of the line itself, the integration of attendees into the labor of keeping the order of the line, and the overarching rules and policies about the maintenance of order at Comic-Con—interpellate attendees into a power relationship in which they are subject to control and management from officials regulating the line, while also shouldering the majority of the responsibility when it comes to maintaining order.

In some cases, the desire to form a line at Comic-Con (or in advance of Comic-Con) is so strong that attendees are willing to make the rules at the same time as they break them. Take, for example, the recent influx of *Twilight* fans to Comic-Con.⁷⁵ Since the film adaptation of Stephanie Meyer’s popular *Twilight* Saga was first introduced at Comic-Con 2008, a large contingent of *Twilight* fans have attended the event each year to follow the promotion of these films. While their presence at the event has been fraught and subject to problematic, gendered attacks, *Twilight* fans make up a large contingent of

⁷⁴ Estrada, *2012 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*, 2.

⁷⁵ While a number of recent works have considered the problematic, often gendered attacks on *Twilight* fans, I examine this particular line formation not to discuss the particularities of their fandom at Comic-Con, but because as a conspicuous and high profile collection of attendees, *Twilight* fans’ visibility and their particular investment in waiting in line as a kind of community effort makes this a rich, but contained case study. However, arriving early to wait overnight or longer is not a practice restricted to *Twilight* fans. In 2012 the line for Saturday’s Hall H programming was already well underway on Friday evening. While the highest profile presentation of the day was Warner Brothers’ preview of *The Hobbit* (Peter Jackson, 2012), a number of other popular film panels were held, including: *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012), *Pacific Rim* (Guillermo Del Toro, 2013), *Man of Steel* (Zach Snyder, 2013), and *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013). These offerings led a large and diverse collection of attendees to form a massive advance line. I discuss these panels further in the next chapter.

For more on the undercurrent of “TwiHate” at Comic-Con, see: Scott, “Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and the Politics of Incorporation.” A number of discussions of *Twilight* fans and questions of gender can be found in the following anthologies: Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey, and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, & the Vampire Franchise* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); Anne Morey, *Genre, Reception, and Adaptation in the Twilight Series*, Ashgate Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present (Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).

comic-con attendees and certainly represent the kind of vocal media fan base that has come to define the event.⁷⁶

On Monday, July 18th, three days before the official opening of the 2011 San Diego Comic-Con, a small line began to form next to the outside entrance of the largest programming space at the convention, Hall H. This event hall, which seats 6,500 people, is where high-profile Hollywood films are promoted through panels of celebrity guests and advance screenings of trailers and special footage before they are available to a mass audience.⁷⁷ The group of thirty female fans were eager to have the best seats for the *Breaking Dawn Part 1* (Bill Condon, 2011) panel—the second last to last film in the *Twilight* series—on Thursday, July 21st, at 11:15 a.m.⁷⁸ A small subset of this group had initially arrived at the San Diego Convention Center to form their line on Sunday evening, but were told by Comic-Con officials that they would have to leave and return the following day.⁷⁹ When the group returned and a line began to form on Monday, they were then told of a new Comic-Con policy that starting this year, fans would not be permitted to form a line for any panels until they had obtained their Comic-Con badges.⁸⁰ For attendees lucky enough to have passes to preview night, those badges could be

⁷⁶ Comic-Con president John Rogers addressed the criticisms of *Twilight* by offering a sincere, if tongue in cheek, endorsement of their presence at Comic-Con, suggesting, “I like the *Twilight* people. We were all young fans of something that probably wasn’t particularly good.” Rogers, *Comic-Con Talk Back 2012*.

⁷⁷ I will discuss Hall H and its significance for Comic-Con in much greater length in the next chapter.

⁷⁸ Michael Gehlken, "It Begins: Line Forms for Comic-Con," *NBC San Diego*, last modified July 19, 2011, <http://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/It-Begins-Line-Forms-for-Comic-Con-125781473.html>

⁷⁹ The six women who were the first in line were friends and fellow *Twilight* lovers who had planned their line strategy several months in advance. Darren Franich, "'Twilight' at Comic-Con 2011: Talking to the Fans at Camp Breaking Dawn," *PopWatch*, last modified July 20, 2011, <http://popwatch.ew.com/2011/07/20/twilight-comic-con-fans-breaking-dawn/>

⁸⁰ Gehlken, "It Begins: Line Forms for Comic-Con".

picked up at the convention center on Wednesday afternoon. Everyone else would have to cross the city to Mission Valley to retrieve their badges on Wednesday, or wait until Thursday morning when the convention officially began.

The group of early arrivals stood their ground, but faced continual reminders from Comic-Con staff who told them, “You are not a line. You are not official.”⁸¹ At one point, line member Arianna Ruiz reported that she was even told: “You don’t exist.”⁸² In addition to these kinds of threats, there was a general sense of disorganization, confusion, and mixed messages. Although fans were told they could not stand in line, no officials ultimately intervened to stop them, exposing the tenuous nature of security’s power, particularly outside the temporal parameters of event, before they, too, become “official” in the eyes of *Twilight* fans. Further, the badge policy described to fans in line was not published on Comic-Con’s website and was nowhere to be found in the 2011 Comic-Con Events Guide, which has a clearly marked section called “Convention Policies.”⁸³ As one fan suggested, this confusion was actually a motivating factor for her and others to join the line earlier than usual:

They were told that they couldn’t line up, then they were told that they could line up, so everything was kind of up in the air. So I think everybody kinda thought well, we should just get down there and get in line in case, because we don’t want to miss out, you know, on the chance

⁸¹ Franich, "'Twilight' at Comic-Con 2011: Talking to the Fans at Camp Breaking Dawn".

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Jackie Estrada, ed. *Comic-Con International 2011 Events Guide* (San Diego: Comic-Con International Inc., 2011), 2.

that we wouldn't get in or we wouldn't be up where we wanted to be, maybe.⁸⁴

So, in absence of any official acknowledgement or regulation by Comic-Con, the members of the line that became known as “Camp Breaking Dawn” reportedly began “self-regulating.”⁸⁵ Rather than subscribe to these particular rules and risk losing their place, fans ignored Comic-Con staff and remained in line, enforcing the hierarchy of the line unofficially instead.

This inattention to the Comic-Con rules might initially be read as an act of fan resistance, which some scholars have cited as demonstrative of the power of organized and active audiences.⁸⁶ Drawing on the work of Michel DeCerteau, which sought to theorize practices of resistance in everyday life, such scholarship also resituates such practices within a paradigm of productivity, attempting to reclaim practices associated with consumption as resistant and transform banality into creativity.⁸⁷ Joe Moran argues that such practices produce “a limiting notion of the everyday that values the creative and recreational over the banal and boring.”⁸⁸ However, the banality of the line paired with

⁸⁴ "Tales from the Twilight Comic Con Line: Tuesday Version," *Twilight Lexicon*, last modified July 20, 2011, <http://www.twilightlexicon.com/2011/07/20/tales-from-the-twilight-comic-con-line-tuesday-version/>

⁸⁵ Franich, "'Twilight' at Comic-Con 2011: Talking to the Fans at Camp Breaking Dawn".

⁸⁶ In their introduction to *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (2007), Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington describe this as the “fandom is beautiful” stage of fan studies comprised of scholarship that attempts to recuperate fan practices by highlighting their empowering potential Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 1-4; See, for example: Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*; John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

⁸⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Moran, *Reading the Everyday*, 10-13.

⁸⁸ *Reading the Everyday*, 11.

the wholly exceptional context that surrounds its formation at Comic-Con presents another opportunity to unpack exactly what it means for fans to self-regulate in this way.

By coming together to peacefully maintain the integrity and fairness of the line, days before it was officially policed by Comic-Con volunteers or security, fans demonstrated a willingness to enforce the rules of Comic-Con, and by extension, obey the wider cultural rules associated with standing in line and waiting one's turn. In the absence of any reliable, organized authority, these *Twilight* fans turned to self-discipline to maintain the order and hierarchy of the line, demonstrating just how internalized these rules can become. I would argue that the true act of resistance would be to disregard the rules of the line altogether, arrive minutes, not days, early, and simply ignore security and enter en masse. While this scenario is admittedly neither fair, nor realistic, it does suggest that the seemingly transgressive aspects of Camp Breaking Dawn's unofficial line actually function within the wider parameters of institutionalized discipline and even reinforce cultural rules and expectations.

In many cases, in fact, extreme or transgressive behavior is directed, not towards dismantling the enforcement of rules at Comic-Con, but at other attendees. There are numerous cases of people sneaking into rooms, stealing seats, and cutting in line; in instances where such transgressions are observed, these individuals are almost always confronted, shamed loudly or publicly, and reported to security by other attendees. A year before Camp Breaking Dawn formed its line, a highly publicized conflict erupted between two fans in Hall H, when one attendee stabbed another in the eye with a pen over a seating dispute.⁸⁹ Inexcusable, but undeniably transgressive, what is perhaps most

⁸⁹ Reports stated that the stabbing grew out of an argument over whether one attendee was seated too close to the other. CNN Wire Staff, "Police: Man Stabbed with Pen at Comic-Con," *CNN.com*, last modified July

shocking about this incident is that this kind of violence almost never occurs at Comic-Con. Not surprisingly, the incident (which ultimately resulted in one minor injury and one arrest) soon became a kind of comical meme during the event and was even referenced in jest by Robert Downey Jr. during the *Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) panel several hours later, when he asked attendees to refrain from stabbing each other until he was finished speaking.

This occurrence also demonstrates, in the extreme, how the hierarchy produced through waiting in line can persist in shaping one's sense of entitlement to occupy a particular space, even after the line has been dispersed. The longer the line and the longer one occupies the space, the more deeply entrenched this entitlement becomes. To ignore the rules or disrupt these hierarchies is to risk being caught and missing out on the payoff that awaits attendees at the end of the line. It also demonstrates how infallible the system of waiting in line can be in maintaining power from afar. Because waiting in line, particularly for seats in a room at Comic-Con, produces a hierarchy of space, it is virtually impossible to resist those rules in such a way that defies the overarching power structure without directly harming or offending others in line. Any threat to the literal order of the line becomes a threat to the metaphorical order achieved by the powerful structure of the line itself.⁹⁰

25, 2010, http://articles.cnn.com/2010-07-25/justice/comic.con.pen.stabbing_1_comic-con-fanboys-and-fangirls-pen?_s=PM:CRIME

⁹⁰ The death of a *Twilight* fan, who was struck by a car at Comic-Con in 2012, further suggests the power embedded in the hierarchies of the line. The tragic accident occurred when Comic-Con staff announced a reconfiguring of the line and Gisela Gagliardi ignored a traffic signal and attempted to run across a busy street in order to keep her original place in line. Christie D'Zurilla, "'Twilight' Fan Killed by Car While Awaiting Comic-Con Panel," *Los Angeles Times*, last modified July 10, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jul/10/entertainment/la-et-mg-twilight-fan-killed-comic-con-riptwifang>

By the time I joined the *Breaking Dawn* line at 8:00 a.m. on Thursday morning, there were over 1000 people in line—well under the room’s capacity of 6,500. I waited approximately three hours to enter Hall H and secured a seat halfway up the room, positioned in clear view of one of the many enormous screens displaying the video feed of the panel. The figures on stage were visible, though from a distance, but any missing nuances in the panelists’ facial expressions were evident in the medium shots displayed onscreen. Despite the long wait time leading up to the panel, hundreds of seats sat empty, even as the stars of the film were being introduced on stage.⁹¹ As my experience demonstrates, waiting in line for days was not necessary to ensure entry into Hall H, or even to ensure a reasonable view of the stage.⁹² That so many fans were willing to wait for so long to gain entry into a room they could have simply walked into minutes before the panel began demonstrates how significant the line is, not only to producing a sense of value around the event, but also in providing a way for attendees to demonstrate their level of investment in attending a particular panel. The greater the challenge, the more personally significant the panel experience becomes. This is how the work of waiting in line helps to transform the process of publicity, something that could feel quite cold and mechanical, especially in room full of thousands of people, into a seemingly intimate and fulfilling experience.

Subjecting oneself to hours or days in line has proven, in recent years, to be a very real requirement in order to experience certain programming at Comic-Con. However, as

⁹¹ This was documented on video and posted on bucketreviews.com: Danny Baldwin, "SDCC 2011: The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn--Part 1 (Hall H)," *Bucket Reviews*, last modified July 21, 2011, <http://bucketreviews.com/2011/07/21/sdcc-2011-twilight-breaking-dawn-part-1-hall-h/>

⁹² I have been unable to uncover any record of attendance numbers for the specific panels at Comic-Con. However, my research suggests that this may be the result of studios’ desire to keep this information confidential for fear of failing to fill the larger rooms at Comic-Con. I will discuss the role of studios in dictating the conditions of panel events in the next chapter. Rogers, *Comic-Con Talk Back 2011*.

the rows of empty seats at the *Breaking Dawn* panel demonstrate, this requirement is frequently a fiction brought to life through the practices of attendees and the publicity and hype of media industries. Although Comic-Con's attendance numbers have leveled out for the past five years, the lines have become longer as the value of time spent in line has, to borrow an economic term, undergone massive inflation. The result has been the gradual reconfiguration of this practice as essential and necessary in the minds of attendees, thereby creating what should be a paradox: a highly controlled mass panic of individuals all lining up to wait for hours.

I will return to the particulars of the *Breaking Dawn* line in the final section of this chapter in order to examine how waiting in line situates fans in a subordinate position in relation to media industries. But first, it is helpful to think about the ways in which an understanding of what it means to wait in line can transition from a lived experience in a particular space to an interaction in a digital environment. This abstraction of the real into a virtual space also suggests that lived experience has the potential to inform how attendees understand their roles in relation to the media and media industries both inside and outside of the San Diego Convention Center.

Virtual Lines

Scott Bukatman's description of cyberspace as "a *produced* space that defines the subjects relation to culture and politics" that "does not simply exist to be inhabited" but "implies position and negotiation" (original emphasis)⁹³ also provides an apt description of the functioning of the space of the line at Comic-Con. While scholars have considered

⁹³ Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 155.

the relationship between real and virtual experiences of space, it has become increasingly clear that as Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy assert in their introduction to *Mediaspace* (2004), “electronic media, and the social processes that shape our perception and use of space are allied phenomena.”⁹⁴ Digitally mediated experiences are not necessarily separate from the ways in which we experience space in the ‘real world.’ Such material experiences, in fact, frequently shape experiences in digital space.⁹⁵ I have suggested that the space of the line at Comic-Con is a key and very material way in which power operates at the event. However, Comic-Con is an event that is not only founded on the celebration of and appreciation of popular media forms, but, as with any contemporary event of this scale, it is also increasingly reliant on digital media in order to function at all. It is not surprising, then, that the complexities and hierarchies of the lines at Comic-Con now follow fans into cyberspace.

In 2007, Comic-Con sold out in advance for the first time.⁹⁶ In previous years, attendees wishing to purchase single day tickets could do so at the door and for four subsequent years, those purchasing tickets had two options: qualified badge holders could pre-register for the following year in person at Comic-Con (as I described in the preface to this chapter); or, by purchasing tickets online during the general public sale. Finally, in 2012, Comic-Con organizers discontinued all onsite sales and, for the first time ever,

⁹⁴ Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy, *Mediaspace: Place, Scale, and Culture in a Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

⁹⁵ Lisa Parks, for example, has suggested that certain ways in which movement through networked space have been visualized convey or elide a sense of the user’s mobility in time and space. Such visualizations, however, rely on our own embodied experiences of time and space in the real world. Lisa Parks, “Kinetic Screens: Epistemologies of Movement at the Interface,” in *Mediaspace: Place, Scale and Culture in the Media Age*, ed. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁹⁶ Dave Trumbore, “San Diego Comic-Con 2011 Badges Sell out in Less Than a Day,” *Collider.com*, last modified February 6, 2011, <http://collider.com/san-diego-comic-con-2011-badges-sell-out/74799/>

offered pre-registration for 2013 online, three weeks after that year's event. These sweeping changes to how Comic-Con attendees experience the ticketing process were the result of a host of technological revamps, failures, and false starts.

During the on-site pre-registration at Comic-Con 2010, all 15,000 of the highly coveted four day passes, including access to Preview Night, sold out completely, hours before the end of convention on Sunday.⁹⁷ Given this rapid advance sale, a "frenzy" to purchase the remaining tickets in the fall put a tremendous strain on the online ticketing system.⁹⁸ Between November 2010 and February 2011, Comic-Con organizers made four separate attempts to open registration and sell tickets to Comic-Con 2011 through their online vendor, Epic Registration. The first two occurred on November 1st and 22nd; both times, buyers treated the online sale with the same level of urgency and preparedness afforded real lines at Comic-Con, waiting and refreshing the Comic-Con site until sales began. The massive virtual queue that formed online caused the Epic website to exceed capacity and crash. On both occasions, the volume of demand created so many problems that the registration process was halted and cancelled after several hours. The demand was so high, in fact, that Epic, a vendor with ten years of experience in convention pre-registration sales, could not adapt on the fly and instead had to overhaul their system in order to find a solution to the Comic-Con problem.⁹⁹ The

⁹⁷ Eric Wolff, "Region: Comic-Con Sells out 2011 Preview Night before Con Ends," *North Country Times*, last modified July 26, 2010, http://www.nctimes.com/business/article_0dd24a8a-a75d-53ae-a16e-3c0c244d5e0c.html

⁹⁸ Jeremy Rutz, "The Controversy of the 2012 Comic-Con Pre-Registration," *San Diego Comic-Con Unofficial Blog*, last modified July 23, 2011, <http://sdccblogger.com/2011/07/the-controversy-of-the-2012-comic-con-pre-registration/>

⁹⁹ Matt Goldberg, "Comic-Con to Attempt to New System for Seeling Badges on December 15th [Sic]," *Collider.com*, last modified December 14, 2010, <http://collider.com/san-diego-comic-con-selling-badges-system/65039/>

temporary solution was to enlist another vendor, TicketLeap, to assist in handling the volume of ticket requests.

On December 15th, Comic-Con held a “live test” of the new system through a limited sale of 1000 four-day passes. Buyers would be taken first through Ticket Leap, which, acting as a gatekeeper, would slow the flow of traffic by taking the initial order and sending out an email directing buyers to the Epic registration site.¹⁰⁰ The passes went on sale at 8:00 a.m. pacific time and sold out in two minutes.¹⁰¹ After this successful test of the convoluted new system, Comic-Con held their fourth attempt at ticket sales on February 5th at 9 a.m. Again, as prospective attendees descended on the TicketLeap site, it reached capacity and repeatedly displayed error messages to buyers. Reports began to surface on Twitter just under an hour later: some of those who had waited patiently, continually refreshing their page, had finally purchased tickets.¹⁰² Seven hours and an array of glitches, slow-downs, and technical problems later, Comic-Con was completely sold out. In a blog entry addressing Comic-Con customers, TicketLeap apologized for the slow and frustrating sales:

In 2009, it sold out after 6 months. In 2010, it sold out in 2 months. On Saturday, Comic-Con International 2011 sold out in 7 HOURS (200x faster than last year if you’re keeping track). Needless to say, the demand was unbelievable, reaching a peak of 403,000 page requests per minute

¹⁰⁰ Comic-Con International Inc., "Registration Test Wed., Dec. 15 at 8:00am: 1000 Badges to Go on Sale in Live Test," *Comic-Con International*, last modified December 14, 2010, http://web.archive.org/web/20101214194236/http://comic-con.org/cci/cci_reg_1000test.php

¹⁰¹ Beth Accomando, "News: Comic-Con Doing Registration Test," *KBPS News*, last modified December 15, 2010, <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2010/dec/15/news-comic-con-doing-registration-test/>

¹⁰² Joseph M.D. Young, "Virtual Ticket Lines Bring Down Comic-Con Site," *7 San Diego*, last modified February 6, 2011, <http://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/Comc-Con-Ticket-Sales-115373469.html>

and a total of more than 35 million total page requests throughout the day. But while the event sold out in record time and the system never actually went down, things didn't go as smoothly as we hoped. We are sorry for the frustration our system issues caused on Saturday and we are working hard to answer all of your inquiries. (original emphasis)¹⁰³

It is worth noting that in the absence of these innumerable outages and slowdowns on TicketLeap's site, Comic-Con tickets may have sold out even faster. As TicketLeap's numbers suggest, the demand for tickets to the event in recent years far exceeds availability. At 35 million total page requests, even accounting for individuals repeatedly refreshing the page and using multiple computers, the demand is staggering. So much so that even in the seemingly infinite realm of virtual space, prospective attendees become unwieldy and unmanageable, forcing organizers to develop new strategies, not only to manage the massive demand for tickets, but also to control the actual process by which tickets are purchased. Such strategies demand the implementation of new coding and software as well as techniques to control consumers' actions and interactions with the site. Not surprisingly, these techniques draw on the same kinds of disciplinary and behavioral controls that keep crowds orderly and manageable at Comic-Con itself.

After TicketLeap's brief and unsuccessful collaboration with Comic-Con and Epic ended, a new system was needed to deal with ticket demand in the long term. The solution, developed by Comic-Con and Epic Registration, was to model the buying process on the standard Comic-Con practice: waiting in line. Now, when the registration goes online, a large green button appears on Comic-Con's ticket sales page, which sends

¹⁰³ Emaleigh, "Dear Comic-Con International Fans," *TicketLeap Blog*, last modified February 7, 2011, <http://blog.ticketleap.com/2011/02/07/comic-con-faq/>

buyers to a virtual waiting room, where customers are placed in a queue that refreshes every one hundred and twenty seconds and displays periodic updates as to the status of ticket sales. In this virtual queue, customers are given their number in line, a number that they can watch decrease every time the page refreshes. They are also kept informed with periodic updates as to when certain ticket selections are getting low and, eventually, sold out.

Appropriately enough, a graphic in the upper right hand corner of the waiting room page displays an image of a ‘real’ queue, composed of male bodies in suits. One carries a newspaper at his side, the other a brief case, and one is captured in the act of checking his watch; while none of these individuals look like the typical Comic-Con attendee, all three model behaviors and strategies associated with orderly and patient waiting (fig. 22). The image and organization of the site, which connects the virtual queue formed by prospective attendees to a kind of platonic ‘real line,’ has a particular kind of resonance for anyone who participated in the 2012 pre-sale during Comic-Con 2011, which eerily echoed, in real space, the new online ticketing process.

During the four days of Comic-Con 2011, organizers made a percentage of 2012 tickets available for pre-registration.¹⁰⁴ Each day, customers formed a long line outside the Manchester Hyatt Hotel, adjacent to the convention center. Some even waited overnight to ensure a chance at purchasing the most popular ticket, a four-day pass to Comic-Con and entry to Preview Night. Tickets were sold from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. each day and when the doors opened, the massive line was slowly filed into a large waiting

¹⁰⁴ As I have indicated, the specific number of tickets sold each day is unclear. However, unlike the previous year, when all the preview night tickets sold out during presale, this year Comic-Con made only a percentage of all varieties of tickets available for sale, reserving the rest for the general public online sale later in the year.

room staged in the ballroom of the hotel (fig. 23). There, a very orderly and tight line was formed, wrapping back and forth through the room. Several screens positioned around the room displayed thermometer graphs that tracked ticket sales (fig. 24), so that attendees could gauge their odds of success in purchasing tickets. Much in the same way as buyers are now moved from the virtual waiting room to the sales site in Epic's new online system, buyers at the live presale were sent to unmanned, individual sales kiosks to complete their transaction on a computer screen.¹⁰⁵

This on-site pre-registration system was an attempt to keep the sales contained to a four-hour period, allowing attendees time to enjoy the rest of their day at Comic-Con. However, it did not account for the fact that attendees would have to line up many hours in advance to feel comfortable that they would be able to compete with the massive demand and secure their tickets—thus negating their chance to stand in the many other early morning lines. One attendee, in an interview with G4, described just how intense this process could be: “I had to wait in line from approximately 5:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. this morning. There were forty people ahead of me, even when I started, and they had been there since that morning just for pre-registration for next year.”¹⁰⁶ In an interview in the *San Diego Reader*, another attendee reported, “I got into line at 5:45 a.m. and was number 741 in line. It took me four hours to go through to get my ticket for next year,

¹⁰⁵ Members of Comic-Con staff were positioned around the computers to provide assistance as needed, but the entire transaction was completed online by the attendee. Another small line was formed at a single cashier for the few attendees who needed to pay in cash; one of the only benefits in-person sales offered over online registration.

¹⁰⁶ G4, "The Long, Winding Lines Experience of Comic-Con," *G4 Comic-Con Live 2011*, last modified July 23, 2011, <http://www.g4tv.com/videos/54372/the-long-winding-lines-experience-of-comic-con-2011/>

and as I was leaving there was a handful of people getting in line for tomorrow.”¹⁰⁷

Needless to say, Comic-Con organizers faced a tremendous barrage of criticism from attendees who felt the system was unreasonable and unfair, but lined up for tickets nonetheless.¹⁰⁸

Despite that criticism, however, the live pre-registration experience appears to have been informed by, if not modeled upon, this online system, demonstrating that while individuals have different expectations of online and in-the-flesh experiences, these expectations are often shaped by and rely on experiences in the real world. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Comic-Con President John Rogers’ response to the backlash over the 2012 pre-registration process. During the 2011 Talk Back, one fan told him, “I think the people who come here year after year are the ones who make this convention. It’s what has made it so popular. And I feel that you are really biting the hand that feeds you by making the registration process for next year so hard.” Emboldened by the raucous applause, she continued, “I’ve been giving you my money for a decade, I shouldn’t have to sleep on the sidewalk for the privilege of coming [to Comic-Con].”¹⁰⁹ Rogers’s response was to explain,

If we had been left to our own devices, we would have gone with a system that would have been online only. It wouldn’t have been at the show, it would have been restricted to people who had badges for this year and online. But it’s also not a secret to anyone in this room that our online

¹⁰⁷ Peter C. Salisbury, "Will Sleep on Floor for Comic-Con 2012 Tickets," *San Diego Reader*, last modified July 26, 2011, <http://www.sandiegoreader.com/news/2011/jul/26/stringers-will-sleep-floor-comic-con-2012-tickets/>

¹⁰⁸ Rogers, *Comic-Con Talk Back 2011*.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

system last year had a lot of challenges... So our first instinct was to do something online, but we also felt that no one would believe that would ever come off. I think that the sales we did of four days and one days shortly before the convention went fairly well.¹¹⁰ People had a number and a place in the queue for the waiting room and it would have worked. But we weren't convinced that anybody in this room would believe this and that if we didn't have some mechanism for onsite sales, there'd be even more dissatisfaction and anger.¹¹¹

Rogers' assertion, that organizers were concerned that attendees would not believe in the reliability of the new online system, appeared increasingly valid as the discussion unfolded. One attendee stated, "Frankly I didn't have a problem with the line. Everything is a line here. That's the way it is... What I have a problem with is I have been able to buy the same pass every year, but I couldn't this year."¹¹² Again and again, complaints about the pre-registration returned to anecdotal experiences of attendees, who were unable to get what they personally wanted out of the Comic-Con experience. It became increasingly clear that in order for the implementation of any new system of queuing to work at Comic-Con, attendees had to trust in its efficacy. In this way, developing and implementing a new online system was as much about finding ways to make this experience familiar and seemingly more efficient. One way of solving the problem presented by Rogers—how to get attendees to trust and accept the new

¹¹⁰ This is a reference to the sale of a small pool of tickets that had been returned and refunded shortly before the event.

¹¹¹ Rogers, *Comic-Con Talk Back 2011*.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

computerized system after a year of technical setbacks—was to duplicate, in real space, the new online system. In easing the transition away from onsite sales, organizers provided a real space in which to purchase tickets, while producing an experience closely tied to the online registration process. It is not surprising then, that in 2012, organizers announced their intention to do away with onsite registration altogether.

While it is increasingly difficult to tease out an experience of any environment, particularly an event for and about popular culture, that exists outside of mediation, this overlap and integration of the virtual and real queuing experiences at Comic-Con demonstrates how material realities of the Comic-Con space and the people in it can be mobilized beyond the space and time of the convention itself. That the lived reality of Comic-Con lines can be translatable, even essential, to the virtual activity of queuing for event passes, demonstrates the power of the line as an experience that attendees carry with them as a way of understanding other similar experiences as they are abstracted in online space. In this way, how we understand the line becomes something that is mobilized and can exist not just as a practice, but also as a conceptual and ideological mode. In discussing real and virtual lines, I have focused primarily on the implementation, management, and control of lines in the relationship between attendees and Comic-Con organizers. In my final section, I begin to unpack this ideological mode in order to understand the implications of the economy of waiting and hierarchies of power produced by and in the line and how this informs the relationships between media industries and attendees at Comic-Con. This section, building on my discussion of the functioning of lines at Comic-Con, lays the groundwork for thinking about how attendees are primed to function as laborers for media industries.

Above, Below and In the Line

I have described how waiting in line produces a sense of value, how the organization of real lines at Comic-Con function to hierarchize attendees, and how these power relations can grow out of the specificities of a lived, spatial experience to inform how digital space is designed and used to run the event. Given the mobility of this concept of ‘the line,’ what remains is a consideration of the ideological space opened up by these practices. Having discussed how the wait is staged, controlled, and orchestrated by Comic-Con officials, I now return to the economy of waiting and the relationship forged between media industries and attendees. I do so in order to consider how this seemingly innocuous practice of waiting in line actually situates attendees in a liminal ideological space where they are displaced as consumers, while simultaneously, if unofficially, deployed as laborers who aid in the production of media publicity.

In *Production Cultures: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (2008), John Caldwell writes about the distinctions between above-the-line and below-the-line labor. While above-the-line laborers are composed of “the upper levels of the ‘creative’ sector, which are highly paid via individual negotiation and contract,” below-the-line labor is defined as “the oversupply of hourly employees in the craft or manual sectors whose wages and extensive proliferation of job descriptions are set by union contract or nonunion negotiation.”¹¹³ In this division between above and below-the-line workers, we can already see a distinction drawn between labor localized

¹¹³ Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 377n.

in the mind and labor localized in the body.¹¹⁴ This mental labor is simultaneously associated with creative, or even business practices, while below the line workers seem to toil if not more laboriously, at the very least, more thanklessly.

In *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* (2011), Vicky Mayer draws a similar distinction between media producers and those who labor “beyond the nomenclature of media production and outside the hierarchies assigned to Hollywood industries and their personnel.”¹¹⁵ Mayer suggests that the notion of media production is a discursive construct, circulated by media industries in order to highlight creative workers and render the labor of below-the-line workers invisible.¹¹⁶ This move towards increased attention on more marginalized forms of labor in media industry studies suggests that it is necessary to think even more broadly about what kinds of labor get recognized, how, and why. Expanding our conception of what constitutes productivity and labor, will, in turn, allow for a better understand of the increasingly complex and wide reaching impact of the political economy of media industries. For this reason, I suggest a reconsideration of the productivity of media audiences as part of this important, invisible, below-the-line labor, what I referred to in Chapter Two as below-below-the-line. After all, studies of fandom, in particular, hinge upon the notion of fan audiences as productive.

In *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (1992), a book that has provided a continued and influential framework for considering the role of fan

¹¹⁴ Vicky Mayer notes the way in which the concept of creativity is often used to differentiate between intellectual labor and manual labor. Mayer, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*, 4.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

cultures, Henry Jenkins argues for fandom's inherent productivity. He suggests that fans' ability to "make texts real" through affective readings and re-readings as well as productive practices like fan fiction, art and filking, is what makes this particular segment of culture worth considering and even celebrating.¹¹⁷ Jenkins' significant contribution was to identify that fans do not simply consume media texts; they use such texts to synthesize and produce something new. Focusing, as Jenkins does, on how fans "make texts real" such pleasures are not necessarily associated with the productive work fans do, but with the desired goal and ultimate output. As such, I wish to make a distinction between productivity and labor: while productivity places value on creation of a final product, considering labor requires an emphasis on the conditions under which productivity happens. Thus, many studies of fans as active or productive audiences do not necessarily reflect the material conditions of their labor. Instead, the emphasis on the pleasures of active engagement with media texts serves to neutralize the labor behind productivity.

The outcome of this approach can be seen most clearly in Jenkins recent book, *Convergence Culture*. As I have discussed, Jenkins' concept of convergence culture suggests a new paradigm by which to consider fan and audience practices and how they are incorporated into the industrial and textual work of the media industries. The recent move in industry studies, to expand upon the kinds of labor we imagine as part of the production of film or television, may serve as an important tool to moderate the more utopian implications that accompany Jenkins' work. While Jenkins' book makes the important suggestion that we re-imagine how media industries and audiences co-exist,

¹¹⁷ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, 50-86. Filking refers to the practice of fans writing songs about particular characters, texts, etc.

and even co-operate to impact and expand the kinds of texts and paratexts produced, industry studies that focus on the material conditions of below-the-line labor suggest that audience productivity functions as labor that serves the interests of media industries.¹¹⁸ When taken in conjunction with scholars like Smythe, Terranova, and Meehan, whose work allows us to see how audiences constitute an important and unpaid source of labor for the media industries, both fan and media industry studies could allow for a more critical assessment of the role of fan labor within the political economy of the media industries.¹¹⁹ As Mayer suggests, “Scholars’ most damning critique might be one recognizing that indeed, everyone is a producer in the new television economy, but that the television industry comes away as the primary benefactor of these labors.”¹²⁰

The above and below-the-line terminology used in media industries to distinguish different kinds of labor also circulates, with different implications, in the advertising world. In marketing terms, above-the-line “refers to marketing practices making use of the mass media... including television, newspapers, billboards, radio, magazines, and cinema.”¹²¹ In contrast, below-the-line marketing is defined as, “marketing practices making use of forms of promotion that do not involve the mass media... In a marketplace filled with advertising clutter... below-the-line marketing efforts may be potentially more cost effective and provide the marketer with opportunities to use more sophisticated

¹¹⁸ Mayer, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*; Caldwell, *Production Culture*.

¹¹⁹ Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism; Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*; Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy; Meehan, "Why We Don't Count: The Commodity Audience; "Commodity Audience, Actual Audience: The Blindspot Debate."

¹²⁰ Mayer, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*, 3.

¹²¹ Scott G. Dacko, *The Advanced Dictionary of Marketing: Putting Theory to Use* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

marketing approaches in comparison to mass media based approaches.”¹²² Significantly, these terms also reference the ways in which marketing firms have been traditionally compensated for such services, with above-the-line marketing earning commission for the firm while the payment for below-the-line marketing is fee-based. A term also exists to describe increasingly common marketing practices that integrate both above and below-the-line strategies: *Through-the-line*.¹²³ Through-the-line marketing seems an apt description for the kinds of promotion happening at Comic-Con, which frequently balances marketing strategies designed to be dispersed throughout the media and reach a mass audience with those targeting more specific niche groups or demographics. This notion of through-the-line advertising suggests a desire to produce, through a direct appeal to the attention and labor of attendees at Comic-Con, the kind of publicity that can be mobilized beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the event, suggesting further implications for the concept of the line, which simultaneously divides and multiplies, at Comic-Con.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of *Convergence Culture* is that Jenkins suggests a potential for a new subjectivity beyond the binary of producers and consumers. In dismantling this binary, however, new complications emerge. As active producers *and* consumers of culture, “media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kind of entertainment experiences they want” are increasingly mobilized, but they are also operating from a position that is not fixed and is constantly being defined and

¹²² Ibid., 51.

¹²³ Ibid., 3, 51.

redefined.¹²⁴ This is especially evident in Chapter Two's examination of the discourse about Harry Knowles, which struggled to identify and accept him as entirely inside or outside of the industry. Examining Comic-Con and its spaces as part of a larger context of media audiences allows for the practices of attendees and media industries to be considered in a fixed time and space, even as their identities as producers and consumers are in flux. If media industries and marketers rely on the existence of a conceptual dividing line designating people and practices as above or below-the-line, we might, as I have suggested, see fans as operating below-below-the-line. However, in reconciling this conceptual blurring of the lines between producer and consumer, we might also think of attendees at Comic-Con as laboring and occupying that liminal space, *in-the-line*.

Locating Comic-Con attendees in this way allows for a consideration of the very real power dynamics at play at the event and how these dynamics operate in the relationship between media producers and consumers. As I have argued, waiting in line is an unconventional form of labor, which has the potential to produce valuable opportunities for studios both through the production of surplus value in the form of cultural capital, and in the more concrete production of hype, buzz and general excitement that can be circulated around a product. Summit Entertainment, the distributor of the *Twilight* franchise, recognized this opportunity and seized upon it when the fan contingent known as Camp Breaking Dawn formed their line before Comic-Con. Even though, as I describe above, Comic-Con would not recognize the line as "official," Summit Entertainment recognized and took full advantage of the early fan presence.

¹²⁴ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 2.

The first images of the Comic-Con line to be heavily circulated and cited online were photographs sourced from fans but posted on Summit Entertainment's official *Twilight Saga* Twitter account and Facebook page on Monday, July 18th (fig. 25).¹²⁵ This first post announced that the line had begun to form, while subsequent tweets recruited fans to share their pictures and provided updates about the status of the line.¹²⁶ On July 20th, the twitter feed re-tweeted information from the fan page *Twilight Lexicon*, informing readers that more than 250 people had already joined the line, adding to the urgency and excitement around attending the panel.¹²⁷ In effect, Summit's official *Twilight* twitter feed acted as an aggregator of images and information about waiting in line for fans wishing to follow the action. More importantly, these updates drew upon fan produced content to promote the event and used the growing line to create increased buzz and excitement. In fact, as one fan noted, the photos and information about the camp-out that began to circulate on Twitter and Facebook motivated more and more fans to join the line early, rather than risk a poor seat or no seat at all for Thursday's panel.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ @Twilight, "The Twilight Saga: 6:56 Pm 18 Jul 11," *Twitter*, last modified July 18, 2011, <https://twitter.com/Twilight/status/9309189173373747>; Jobs Tester, "The Line Has Begun for Breaking Dawn Comic-Con Panel," *TwilightStars-in*, last modified July 19, 2011, <http://twilightstars-in.blogspot.com/2011/07/line-has-begun-for-breaking-dawn-comic.htm>; Amanda31, "Line for the Breaking Dawn Panel at Comic-Con Has Started!," *TwilightMoms.com*, last modified July 18, 2011, <http://www.twilightmoms.com/2011/07/line-for-the-breaking-dawn-panel-at-comic-con-has-started/>; Amanda Bell, "'Twilight' Fans Already Lining up for Thursday's 'Breaking Dawn' Comic-Con Panel," *examiner.com*, last modified July 18, 2011, <http://www.examiner.com/twilight-in-national/twilight-fans-already-lining-up-for-thursday-s-breaking-dawn-comic-con-panel>; Hollywood Life Staff, "'Breaking Dawn' at Comic-Con--the Fans Are Already Lining Up!," *Hollywood Life*, last modified July 19, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodlife.com/2011/07/19/breaking-dawn-comic-con-panel-robert-pattinson-kristen-stewart/>

¹²⁶ @Twilight, "The Twilight Saga: 12:05 Pm - 19 Jul 11," *Twitter*, last modified July 19, 2011, <https://twitter.com/#!/Twilight/status/93350664234733568>

¹²⁷ "The Twilight Saga: 3:24 Pm - 20 Jul 11," last modified July 20, 2011, <https://twitter.com/#!/Twilight/status/93763292681605120>

¹²⁸ One such fan describes her reaction to the twitter reports on the line in an interview for the website *Twilightlexicon.com*. "Tales from the Twilight Comic Con Line: Tuesday Version".

Summit took further advantage of the Camp Breaking Dawn line by staging an ‘impromptu’ meet and greet on Thursday morning. At around 6:30 a.m., five of the film’s second string cast members appeared with a small entourage, serving muffins and coffee in *Twilight* coffee mugs, and signing autographs for the fans who had waited patiently in line—some for hours, some for days.¹²⁹ While this came as a surprise to excited fans, Summit Entertainment had already notified media outlets about this publicity stunt and several cameras followed the actors, documenting the genuine excitement of fans and ‘generosity’ of the performers.¹³⁰ In filmed interviews, some fans gushed about the celebrity presence, one woman commented that, “It was unbelievable that they would be here at 6:30 in the morning, I mean that’s really dedication to their fans.”¹³¹ Given this enthusiasm, it seems clear that the goodwill gesture of this meet-and-greet had the desired effect on the *Twilight* fan base. That fans were shocked and flattered by the stars appearance on Thursday morning, however, is indicative of a massive disjuncture in what is expected of fans and what is expected of paid Hollywood labor. The fan’s comment, that the stars’ early arrival is demonstrative of their dedication to their fan base illustrates very clearly the uneven power relations and hierarchies between media industry creatives and fans in line; where a twenty minute appearance at 6:30 a.m. displays a level of dedication commensurate with, or even greater than, the dedication of fans who stood in line for as many as four days. Further, the juxtaposition of the bodies

¹²⁹ Nicole Sperling, "Comic-Con 2011: 'Twilight' Cast Surprises Fans with Breakfast," *Los Angeles Times Hero Complex*, last modified July 21, 2011, <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/2011/07/21/comic-con-2011-twilight-cast-surprises-fans-with-breakfast/>

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Iostinreviews, "Twilight Breaking Dawn Comic Con Line and Panel," *YouTube*, last modified July 21, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InJ1EBeKWYg>

of fans who had been sleeping outside for days and the bodies of Hollywood celebrities (however minor), who had been made-up and styled in anticipation of their photo-op, is an uncomfortable reminder of the class and cultural inequalities that make such power relationships all the more pronounced.¹³²

This public relations stunt elucidates Schwartz's assertion that "Waiting, is patterned by the distribution of power in a social system... power is directly associated with an individual's scarcity as a social resource and, thereby, with his value as a member of a social unit."¹³³ This class division is even more pronounced in light of the fact that fans were visited not by the film's biggest stars, Robert Pattinson, Kristen Stewart, and Tayler Lautner, but by secondary character actors Nikki Reed, Ashley Greene, Boo Boo Stewart, Elizabeth Reaser, and Julia Jones. This photo-op not only provided additional publicity for the event and the film itself, but it also invited fans into an ideological position in which their own time was significantly less valuable than the time of industry professionals. Occupying such an ideological position also allowed fans to be rewarded, somewhat paradoxically, with the very value they worked to produce by forming a line and supporting the product.¹³⁴ Instead of remaining with the fans, this value was instantly displaced onto the film's stars as the official industry presence at the event. The work that went into this production of value through waiting was erased by the spectacle of publicity and the naturalization of a hierarchy of labor that places creatives above-the-line

¹³² This is not the only instance of stars visiting fans in line. This stunt was repeated on the morning of the 2012 *Breaking Dawn 2* panel and actor Ian McKellen also stopped by the Hall H line in 2012 to visit fans waiting overnight for *The Hobbit* panel.

¹³³ Schwartz, "Waiting, Exchange, and Power: The Distribution of Time in Social Systems," 844.

¹³⁴ Smythe similarly argues that, "while people do their work as audience members, they are simultaneously reproducing their own labor power." Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*, 40.

and the labor of fans so far below-the-line as to become virtually invisible. Marketing and public relations does not simply serve the function of promoting a product, but also helps to build a relationship with fans in which they are invited occupy a space of proximity to the industry, while also being kept at a distance.

Queues at Comic-Con manifest in both real and virtual spaces, functioning along ideological lines that position Comic-Con attendees as subordinate to the media industries represented there. The economy of waiting, produced by the many lines at Comic-Con, sets a value on time and space, requiring that attendees be complicit, even active, in the maintenance of this division of power and labor. As I have discussed, these lines manifest in real space, but are also reproduced in virtual environments in the form of online ticket sales. Digital media also allows images and information about these lines to be reproduced rapidly, as hype and publicity online and in the press. Given the increased mediation of Comic-Con lines, the material presence of lines at the event takes on an even greater significance. Space is currently at a premium at and around the San Diego Convention Center. Comic-Con has long since outgrown the venue, with programming now being held in adjacent hotels and promotional events and publicity appearing throughout the Gaslamp area of downtown San Diego.

In 2012, as Comic-Con organizers entertained the possibility of leaving San Diego to find a larger venue for the event, the city and the convention center signed a contract with organizers to keep Comic-Con through 2015 by promising a \$520 million expansion project that would add 220,150 square feet of space to the exhibit hall and a combined 179,970 square feet of rooms and ballrooms.¹³⁵ Why, then, when space is so

¹³⁵ Lori Weisberg, "Big Pitch to Keep Comic-Con Locals to Present Organizers Contract Proposal through 2016 Convention Center Expansion Is Key," *San Deigo Union Tribune* 2012, C1; Craig Gustafson,

critical and when technology has proven itself capable of freeing up space by transforming real lines into virtual queues, are thousands of square feet in and around the convention center devoted to housing lines of attendees all day long? My next chapter seeks to answer this question by returning to the importance of exclusivity, this time, as it relates to Comic-Con's function as a promotional venue. Not only do the hierarchies developed in the line situate attendees and fans as subordinate to the needs of the media industries, they also prime them to do promotional work that operates as a form of unpaid labor. Exclusivity is the cornerstone of this relationship; it is what the work of attendees helps to produce and it is how this work is rewarded.

"Candidates' Views on Convention Center Diverge Filner's, Demaio's Stances on Expansion Give Insight into How They Would Govern as Mayor," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, September 9, 2012, A6.

CHAPTER 4 Harnessing “Hall H Hysteria”

Surrounded by ardent fans, it's easy to get sucked into Comic-Con's vortex of enthusiasm, forgetting that even with 120,000 people descending on the convention center, that's still a very, very self-selected group.

-Brian Lowry, *Variety*, 2009¹

“You had to be there!”

-Comic-Con International, 2003²

Prologue

On July 14, 2012, I spent six hours sitting on hard concrete, then a damp swath of grass. I was waiting to get into Hall H, the massive, airplane-hangar of a programming room where I would spend the next eight hours watching (and doing significantly more waiting) as The Weinstein Company, Open Road Films, Warner Bros., Legendary Pictures, and Marvel Studios promoted their films with “exclusive” trailers, footage, star-studded panels, and an array of surprise guests, announcements, and technological spectacles. As if this was not enough, throughout the day we were repeatedly assured that the experience, the footage, the insider information, was particularly special. It was produced and staged ONLY for Comic-Con and could not be seen anywhere else. Director Guillermo Del Toro even declared that all marketing for his film, Pacific Rim (2013), would go into “radio silence” after Comic-Con. But what became evident as the

¹ Brian Lowry, "Beware the Comic-Con False Positive," *Daily Variety*, July 15, 2009, 2.

² "2003 Comic-Con Programming: You Had to Be There!," in *Comic-Con International Update 4* (San Diego: Comic-Con International, 2003), 16.

day progressed was that this purported “radio silence” was only restricted to official discourses by the film’s producers. The content on the screens was voraciously defended as property of the studios, both through publicity discourses and anti-piracy measures, but the hype and buzz produced about the content was not; it was for the fans and, more importantly, it was meant to go worldwide immediately.

Introduction

In the spring of 2004, the cover of Comic-Con’s *Update* magazine announced “A Mystery Solved.”³ That mystery was how Comic-Con, which had been gradually expanding to fill the entire San Diego Convention Center, would utilize the last of its large, unused halls, the 64,842 square foot Hall H.⁴ This immense space, bearing a closer resemblance to a warehouse or airplane hangar than a theatre, would be filled with 6,500 seats to make it Comic-Con’s largest programming room. Not surprisingly, Hall H was earmarked to fill the rising demand of and for Hollywood programming and, in 2004, every major studio—along with numerous independents—was represented at Comic-Con.⁵ The content presented in Hall H varies—in recent years, the hall has housed several

³ “The Mystery of Hall H,” in *Comic-Con International Update 2* (San Diego Comic-Con International, 2004), 26. Update is a magazine sent to Comic-Con members that provides information about upcoming Comic-Con International events: Comic-Con, Ape and WonderCon. Like many conventions, Comic-Con has always mailed such updates to their members. In the seventies and eighties, these were known as “Progress Reports.” In 1995, the name of the publication was changed to *Update*, and again to *Comic-Con Magazine* in 2008. In 2011, Comic-Con reduced the frequency of these serial publications to a single *Comic-Con Annual*. Finally, organizers suspended such publications completely in 2012 and replaced them with an official Comic-Con blog called, *Toucan*. “Introducing Toucan: The Official Blog of Comic-Con International, Wondercon Anaheim, and Ape, the Alternative Press Expo,” *Toucan: The Official SDCC Blog*, last modified December 10, 2012, <http://www.comic-con.org/toucan/toucan-official-blog-of-comic-con-international-wondercon-anaheim-and-ape-alternative-press>

⁴ “The Mystery of Hall H,” 26; San Diego Convention Center Corporation, “Ground Level Exhibit Hall Specifications,” last modified 2013, <http://www.visitsandiego.com/resources/floorplans-groundlevelspecs.pdf>

⁵ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 154; Glanzer, Sassaman, and Estrada, *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book*, 112. The slate of theatrical releases

panels devoted to popular television shows, as well as film—but always includes some combination of the following: a moderator (often a prominent blogger, journalist, or comedian);⁶ the film or television show's director, writer, and/or stars; trailers or clips;⁷ a question and answer session with the audience; free swag or vouchers to claim free swag at a later time; surprise announcements;⁸ and, of course, a captive audience of up to 6,500 Comic-Con attendees.

promoted at Comic-Con in 2004 included Warner Bros.' *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005) and *Constantine* (Francis Lawrence, 2005), Paramount's *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (Kerry Conran, 2004) and *Team America: World Police* (Trey Parker, 2004), Disney/Pixar's *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird, 2004), Sony's *The Grudge 2* (Takashi Shimizu, 2006), Sony/Screen Gems' *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (Alexander Witt, 2004), 20th Century Fox's *Alien vs. Predator* (Paul W.S. Anderson, 2004) and *Fantastic Four* (Tim Story, 2005) and Universal's *Serenity* (Joss Whedon, 2005). Independents included Rogue Pictures' *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004) and *Seed of Chucky* (Don Mancini, 2004), Dimension Films' *Sin City* (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005), Lions Gate's *Open Water* (Chris Kentis, 2004) and *Saw* (James Wan, 2003), and New Line Cinema's *Blade: Trinity* (David S. Goyer 2004) and *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (Danny Leiner, 2004). Horn, "Studios Take a Read on Comic Book Gathering; Hollywood Courts a Genre's Enthusiasts, Who Can Raise or Lower Movie's Fortunes," E1; Jackie Estrada, ed. *Comic-Con International Events Guide 2004* (San Diego, CA: Comic-Con International Inc., 2004).

⁶ Comedian Patton Oswalt moderated the Disney panels in Hall H in 2009 and 2010. Chris Hardwick, of Nerdist Network, whom I discussed briefly in Chapter Two, has become a recent favorite, hosting a growing number of panels in Hall H. Having made a lasting impression as an entertaining and upbeat moderator in 2012, Hardwick was an even more pronounced presence in Hall H in 2013, where he hosted panels for *Enders' Game* (Gavin Hood, 2013) and *Divergent* (Neil Burger, 2014), *World's End* (Edgar Wright, 2013), *Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-), the Warner Brothers/Legendary, Marvel, *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2009-), and *Community* (NBC, 2009-). Devin Faraci, "Comic-Con 2012: Chris Hardwick Wins Comic-Con," *Badass Digest*, last modified July 18, 2012, <http://badassdigest.com/2012/07/18/comic-con-2012-chris-hardwick-wins-comic-con>; Kyle Anderson, "Nerdist at Comic-Con International," *Nerdist*, last modified July 17, 2013, <http://www.nerdist.com/2013/07/nerdist-at-comic-con-international/>

⁷ This footage is sometimes assembled specifically for Comic-Con, but is always touted as a special, advance look at the film. For example, studios will premiere movie trailers or footage before they are released to the general public, as was the case when Warner Brothers premiered footage from *Watchmen* (Zach Snyder, 2009) at Comic-Con in July 2008 and released it on iTunes that December.

⁸ This could include news on a director, casting, or announcements about other films in production. All three of these strategies were present in a 2010 Marvel studios panel launching their film *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), an unannounced addition to what, according to the Comic-Con Events Guide, was to be a discussion of *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011) and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011). While *The Avengers* reveal was poorly kept secret, which may not have surprised too many in attendance who had read numerous speculations about the announcement, the studio presented this as a surprise, official announcement about the film. Gregory Ellwood, "Robert Downey, Jr. Introduces 'the Avengers' at San Diego Comic-Con," *HitFix*, last modified July 24, 2010, <http://www.hitfix.com/articles/robert-downey-jr-introduces-the-avengers-at-san-diego-comic-con>

With the opening of Comic-Con's Hall H, "geek chic" seemed to be manifesting, not only in discourses about fans and Comic-Con, but also materially, in the reconfiguring of Comic-Con's space to accommodate Hollywood as they addressed "a powerful demo that not only spends heavily on movie tickets and merchandise but influences other moviegoers through countless Web sites."⁹ Thus, the addition of Hall H in 2004 and the establishment of Comic-Con attendees as a powerful audience of tastemakers helped to fully realize the potentials of the convention as a marketing space. It also helped to produce and perpetuate a key, if intangible commodity within this space: exclusivity.

As I outlined in the introduction to this dissertation, an over forty-year trajectory brought Comic-Con from a fan organized event with 300 attendees to a massive media spectacular that, for the past six years, has drawn over 130,000 attendees and over \$163 million a year in revenue to the city of San Diego.¹⁰ A key, if contested, aspect of this growth is the film industry's presence at Comic-Con. As I have suggested, its status as an annual event that, in recent years, has been unable to accommodate the massive demand for tickets, both feeds upon and produces a sense of exclusivity. Hall H has become a key space where this exclusivity is actively courted and produced by Hollywood. As *Vanity Fair* put it in 2011, "If Comic-Con has evolved into a Circus Maximus since its modest beginnings, Hall H of the Convention Center is its big top."¹¹

⁹ Fritz and Graser, "Drawing H'w'd Interest," 19.

¹⁰ CBS8, "Comic-Con Revenue Reaches Superhero Status," *CBS8.com*, last modified 7 July, 2010, <http://www.cbs8.com/story/12713245/comic-con-revenue-reaches-superhero-statu>; Dixon and Lacey, "Infographics: How SDCC Compares to Other Conventions".

¹¹ James Wolcott, "Where the Fanboys Are," *Vanity Fair*, 2011, 168.

Much like the discourses about “geek chic” and Harry Knowles and the spatial configuration of the Comic-Con line, the promotion happening within Hall H hinges on exclusivity as a practice of applying limits. These limits shape and control the possibilities for fan and industry power and work to produce a sense of value around industry promotion. In the case of “geek chic,” the limits of exclusivity are conceptual, defined discursively and theoretically. In the Comic-Con lines, exclusivity is produced by material limits associated with time, space, and content. This chapter works to uncover what happens *after* attendees move from the liminal space of the line into the convention. Hall H, I argue, demonstrates how these discursive and material manifestations of exclusivity work together to provide an ideal context for industry promotion, extending far beyond the time and space of Comic-Con. In this way the industry repackages exclusivity as something that can be sold to a much larger audience.

Hall H and Exclusivity

Comic-Con’s Hall H provides an ideal promotional space where exclusivity is produced and deployed in a somewhat paradoxical way, so that marketing at the convention is presented as *exclusive* content for the *exclusive* collection of individuals in attendance, but is ultimately intended to reach a much wider audience. In this way, two notions of exclusivity are at work in and around Hall H, both of which hinge on the limits and limitations that I discussed in Chapter Two. The first kind of exclusivity is a product of the discursive construction of the Comic-Con audience as tastemakers, which creates a set of limits dividing fans from the rest of the movie going public. These limits are further reinforced by the space of Hall H, which not only helps to manifest an audience of

fans by assembling them in a single place, but also takes them out of the anonymous, virtual space of the Internet by making them visible and, seemingly, real.

While this audience becomes real through its materialization in Hall H, it is important to distinguish the material reality of bodies in space from the highly constructed identification of these individuals as fans. As I have suggested, assigning this identity to attendees at Comic-Con is a way to contain them ideologically, through a somewhat arbitrary designation.¹² The interpellative function of “geek chic” is made all the more powerful by the additional limits and controls of the space itself.¹³ While discourses at and about Comic-Con construct an image of attendees as powerful tastemakers, the material conditions through which these discourses circulate reveal the constant negotiation of this power by Hollywood, which encourages this kind of identity, but deploys it in the service of marketing in order to reconfigure and bolster its own power as an industry.

The second variety of exclusivity manifests as exclusive promotional content, which builds upon the insider, behind-the-scenes access to the film industry offered as a unique part of the Comic-Con experience. In his work on “trade rituals,” John Caldwell describes the way in which the industry attempts to cultivate excitement and present the image of a collaborative mode of labor by drawing insider information out into public or semi-public discourses.¹⁴ Such “staged self-disclosures” take place at conferences and trade shows, “halfway spaces,” where discourses geared towards those in attendance also

¹² This idea grows out of Bourdieu’s notion that taste is socially constructed Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 66-7.

¹³ Althusser, "Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus."

¹⁴ Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 96-7.

extend out into the larger community through the trade press.¹⁵ Comic-Con represents a similar context, what Caldwell refers to as a “semi-public space” where, “a place for access is extended to intermediaries for the public.”¹⁶ In permitting but controlling the press’ coverage of such spaces, the industry, Caldwell argues, “tend[s] to sanction audience consumption from a specific, regulated vantage point.”¹⁷ I argue that the industry employs similar tactics in Hall H. By deploying traditional press coverage alongside the buzz produced by attendees, studios seek not only to elevate the value of their products, but also to shape and control the discourses around this promotional content.

As I have discussed, the line represents a key time and space in which Comic-Con attendees are subjected to—or, more accurately, opt in to—the kinds of ideological and behavioral conditioning that situates them as compliant, even constructive, participants at the event. While a significant part of the Comic-Con experience, the line is also an important gateway to exclusivity. The economy of waiting that I described in Chapter Three adds value to the experiences offered at Comic-Con; but as a liminal, transitory space, the exclusivity produced by attendees who wait is transplanted from the line itself to what occurs after the waiting is over. Waiting, then, produces an aura of value that promises exclusivity *before* the experience has even happened. It does so by providing visual evidence, proof in the form of thousands of bodies in space, of the collective belief that the end of the line is worth waiting for. The line also provides a further visual reminder that the experience itself is limited to a fixed number of participants. In the case

¹⁵ Ibid., 97.

¹⁶ Ibid., 108.

¹⁷ Ibid.

of high-profile Hollywood promotion at Comic-Con, the demand, more often than not, far exceeds the supply. However, the line's promise of exclusivity is delivered and subsequently reproduced by the desire for payoff, which accompanies the experience itself. As one attendee succinctly described it, "Waiting five-and-a-half hours in line for that only made it more special."¹⁸ Thus, it is in-demand spectacles—the panels in large programming rooms, such as Hall H—where the industry and attendees are mutually invested in producing and experiencing exclusivity. In this way, we might think of the presentations and reception of Hall H panels as a performance of exclusivity that eclipses the host of machinations and discursive posturing—the labor—that produces the very same.

If the case of Harry Knowles' is instructive for understanding how the industry drew on discourses about the power of fans in order to respond to audiences' increased engagement in virtual spaces, my discussion of Comic-Con's lines and Hall H inserts real space back into the conversation. I argue that the space itself works to contain and make visible a demographic so often identified by and through their online practices.¹⁹ As such, Comic-Con provides a key moment where the industry can face its core audience and, in so doing, reassert its cultural and economic power by presenting them with exclusive experiences framed as rewards for their loyalty. Such experiences exist, not as a result of

¹⁸ This statement was witnessed by Eric Eisenberg and quoted in: CB's Comic Con Team, "The 6 Best Panels of Comic Con 2012," *CinemaBlend.com*, last modified 16 July, 2013, <http://www.cinemablend.com/new/6-Best-Panels-Comic-Con-2012-31960.html>

¹⁹ While other, more traditional demographic groups might bare the visual markers of race or gender, leading to the kinds of essentializing marketing practices so often employed by the industry, fans represent a more disparate group. Though fandom is often connected to a predominance of white masculinity, identifying as or being identified as a fan in and of itself does not tell marketing departments or advertisers much about the kinds of demographic details they most frequently rely upon, such as race or gender. Scott, "Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and the Politics of Incorporation," 35-6; Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy," 87.

the power of Comic-Con attendees as tastemakers, but as part of a larger effort on the part of the entertainment industry to construct, control, and exploit this power as a Trojan Horse through which to deliver marketing messages to the larger media public.

Discourses about the power and influence of geeks or fans identify and name a particular taste culture by assigning demographic significance to the collection of disparate individuals based on their desire and ability to attend Comic-Con. This group is then defined in relation to an equally disparate audience: the rest of the viewing public. Once identified, this captive Comic-Con audience is presented with exclusive marketing and publicity, which is infused with excitement and urgency because of its limited availability at Comic-Con. The paradox then, is that in order for this content to function successfully as marketing, the industry must overcome the very limitations that define exclusivity.²⁰ They need the fans, acting as “citizen marketers” or “evangelists,” to transform it into hype and buzz that reaches a viewing public beyond the walls of the convention center.²¹ Like the labor of waiting in line, this exclusivity benefits Hollywood economically, through the industry-controlled production of publicity discourses by Comic-Con attendees. These attendees, on the other hand, are compensated through cultural capital based on their exclusive experiences at Comic-Con and their recognition as an exclusive, insider taste culture by the media industries. Such cultural capital

²⁰ Barbara Wilinsky noted a similar bind in her study of the emergence of art house cinemas in the 1950s and 1960s, arguing that exhibitors sought “an air of exclusivity and prestige in order to attract as large an audience as possible.” Barbara Wilinsky, *Sure Seaters : The Emergence of Art House Cinema*, Commerce and Mass Culture Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 80.

²¹ Huba and McConnell, *Citizen Marketers*. Head of Marketing for Warner Brothers Television, Lisa Gregorian, uses the marketing term “evangelists” to refer to Comic-Con fans. Brooks Barnes and Michael Cieply, “Movie Studios Reassess Comic-Con,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2011, 7. In *Spreadable Media*, Jenkins, et al. suggest that Comic-Con fans act “as grassroots intermediaries” who “can become effective publicists.” Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, 146.

requires, if anything, an excessive *expenditure* of economic capital; and, unlike industry attendees, who profit economically on the production and sale of cultural capital, it is much more difficult for fans to convert their accumulated cultural capital back to economic capital.²²

Hall H as Exclusive Space

As Dick Hebdige has noted, it is useful to consider how conceptual, institutional structures extend their ideological power into “physical structure[s].”²³ By way of example, he considers the university:

The hierarchical relationship between the teacher and the taught is inscribed in the very lay-out of the lecture theater where the seating arrangements—benches rising in tiers before a raised lecturn—dictate the flow of information and serve to ‘naturalize’ professional authority. Thus a whole range of decisions about what is and what is not possible within education have been made, however, unconsciously, before the content of individual courses is even decided. These decisions help to set limits not only on what is taught but on *how* it is taught. Here the buildings literally *reproduce* in concrete terms prevailing (ideological) notions about what education *is* and it is through this process that educational structure, which can, of course, be altered, is placed beyond question and appears to us as a

²² I discuss collecting, one way of exchanging cultural capital for economic capital, in the next chapter.

²³ Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style*, 12.

‘given’ (i.e. as immutable). In this case, the frames of our thinking have been translated into actual bricks and mortar. (Original emphasis)²⁴

Hebdige’s description of how the institutional power of the education system is reproduced in the lecture hall provides a particularly apt template through which to consider Comic-Con’s Hall H, as this space serves not just to entertain fans, but to educate, part of an ongoing process of inculcating the audience with regards to where they fit in the hierarchy of media production and how they might best work as collaborators with the industry.

Hebdige’s assessment of ideological space grows out of Althusser’s assertion that “ideology is... a system of representations” imposed on the unconscious.²⁵ In describing how ideology “only appears as ‘*conscious*’ on the condition that it is *unconscious*,” Althusser suggests that ideology requires both “a real relation and an ‘*imaginary*’, ‘*lived*’ relation” and is a product of “the (overdetermined) unity of the real relation and the imaginary relation between [people] and their real conditions of existence.”²⁶ In this way, ideology hinges upon both an imaginary or discursive construction of reality and “real conditions of existence.”²⁷ This collusion of the imaginary and the real, however, colors the way that we understand our own lived reality. It is for this reason that my analysis of the ideological space of Comic-Con’s Hall H is informed by both by the discourses circulating about and within it and by the physical space and experience of attending panels there. Much in the same way that the spatial organization of the university “*sets*

²⁴ Ibid., 12-13.

²⁵ Ibid., 12.

²⁶ Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005), 233.

²⁷ Ibid.

limits not only on what is taught but on *how* it is taught” (first emphasis, mine),²⁸ the space of Hall H “sets limits” on who can gain access and provides the ideal and controlled conditions through which to deploy exclusivity as an industrial marketing strategy at Comic-Con.

Hall H is located on the ground floor of the San Diego Convention Center. The largest of the nineteen programming rooms open during Comic-Con, the hall differs from the other rooms in both location and appearance.²⁹ It is a 64,842 square foot space sectioned off from an interconnected network of nine other halls, the remaining eight of which make up the 460,859 square foot Exhibit Hall.³⁰ Because Hall H is a subset of the Exhibit Hall, separated by “sound absorptive panels,” and repurposed with seats, numerous large screens, and a stage, it has a somewhat dark, cavernous appearance as compared to the convention center’s carpeted and well-lit “meeting rooms” and “ballrooms” on the upper level (figs. 26-29).³¹ As the only programming room located on the ground floor, Hall H is also somewhat isolated. The Hall can only be accessed from the outside, at the southeast end of the convention center (fig. 15).³² In contrast, other

²⁸ Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style*, 12.

²⁹ The San Diego Convention Center has sixty-two rooms and eight Exhibit Halls, but these rooms are available in at least ninety-six different configurations and can be separated or merged according to the organizer’s needs. See: San Diego Convention Center Corporation, “Ground Level Exhibit Hall Specifications”; “Upper Level Room Specifications,” last modified 2013, <http://www.visitsandiego.com/resources/floorplans-upperlevelspecs.pdf>

³⁰ I will discuss the Exhibit Hall at greater length in Chapter Five. “Ground Level Exhibit Hall Specifications”.

³¹ *Ibid*; “Upper Level Room Specifications”.

³² The only other exception in this case is the Indigo Ballroom, located in the Hilton San Diego Bayfront, adjacent to the Convention Center. Because this programming room is technically off-site, the line forms behind the Hilton hotel, southeast of the convention center. This venue holds approximately 2,600 and has housed a number of popular television panels such as *Glee* (Fox, 2009-), *Wilfred* (FX, 2011-), and a number of Cartoon Network programs. Jackie Estrada, ed. *2009 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide* (San Diego: Comic-Con International Inc., 2009), 2; Tony B. Kim, “2013 Tip of the Day #23:

programming rooms require that attendees wait in a general line to enter the convention center in the morning, before making a mad dash up the escalator in order to form a line for their desired room.³³ This distinction facilitates the kind of highly visible queuing that I discuss in Chapter Three, making it much easier to form lines, specifically for Hall H panels, at any time of day or night.

The location and ways of accessing the hall, then, sets it apart from the convention as an attraction in and of itself. In order to access Hall H, one must physically exit the other portion of the convention hall and re-enter the building. Similarly, one cannot access the rest of the convention directly from Hall H. The location of the Hall, then, corresponds to its conceptual configuration as “the white-hot uranium core” to Comic-Con’s “nuclear reactor” of film buzz and publicity.³⁴ Its difference from other programming rooms in terms of location, appearance, accessibility, and content, makes Hall H a distinctive space instantly associated with, and exclusively for, industry marketing.

While this chapter focuses on Hall H, it is worth considering other programming rooms that house significant promotional panels and bolster Hall H’s own significance as an industry space: Ballroom 20, which holds approximately 4,900 attendees and Room 6BCF, which holds around 2,100.³⁵ While the majority of other panels and programming

How to Get into a Panel..." *Crazy 4 Comic Con*, last modified July 8, 2013, <http://crazy4comiccon.wordpress.com/2013/07/08/tip-of-the-day-23-more-panel-advice/>

³³ This larger admission line includes those attendees waiting to enter the Exhibit Hall, as well as attendees hoping to gain entry into any of the other programming rooms.

³⁴ William Booth, "At Comic-Con, Nerd Mentality Rules the Day; Hollywood Now Woos Once-Scorned Genre Fans," *The Washington Post*, July 19, 2005, C1.

³⁵ While the San Diego Convention Center website and several blogs report that Ballroom 20 seats around 4,900 people. Comic-Con lists its capacity as over 4,250 in their official history. Kim, "2013 Tip of the Day

feature content related to comic books, fan groups, or pop culture themed roundtables, panels held in these larger rooms are primarily devoted to events that will draw the largest number of attendees, which almost always means film and television promotion.³⁶ In fact, when Hall H was introduced in 2004, it replaced Ballroom 20 and various configurations of Room 6 as the primary space for film panels.³⁷ Until that point, these rooms housed a mix of panels for Hollywood films and television programs such as *X-Men 2* (Bryan Singer, 2000), *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993-2002) *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002), and *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003).³⁸ With the inclusion of Hall H, Ballroom 20's programming became increasingly television-heavy until it was almost exclusively devoted to such content, bolstering Hall H's identity as a hub of Hollywood film publicity.³⁹ Between 2007 and 2009, panels for three television programs, *Simpsons* (Fox 1989-) *Lost* (ABC 2004-2010), and *Heroes* (NBC 2006-2010), appeared in Hall H;

#23: How to Get into a Panel..."; Jeremy Rutz, "Dancing with the Stars: A Guide to Comic-Con's Ballroom 20," *San Diego Comic-Con Unofficial Blog*, last modified May 13, 2013, <http://sdccb.org/2013/05/dancing-with-the-stars-a-guide-to-comic-cons-ballroom-20>; San Diego Convention Center Corporation, "Upper Level Room Specifications"; San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 154.

³⁶ In room 6BCF, this mass appeal often extends to video games. While this industry has not been a significant topic of study in this dissertation, it certainly represents an increasingly prominent presence at Comic-Con and is worthy of closer examination in future work on the topic.

³⁷ Ballroom 20 was added in 2001, after the San Diego Convention Center had undergone its first expansion. San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 154.

³⁸ Panels for *X-Men 2* and *X-Files* were held at Comic-Con 2000 in Rooms 6A and 6CDEF, respectively. *Lord of the Rings* and *Hulk* were held in 2002 in Ballroom 20. Janet Tait, ed. *Comic-Con International Events Guide 2000* (San Diego: Comic-Con International Inc, 2000); Jackie Estrada, ed. *San Diego Comic-Con International Events Guide 2002* (San Diego: Comic-Con International, 2002).

³⁹ In 2004, Ballroom 20's content was completely devoted to television with the exception of a panel for *The Incredibles*. *Comic-Con International Events Guide 2004*. This trend continues to the present. *San Diego Comic-Con International 2005 Events Guide* (San Diego: Comic-Con International Inc., 2005).

but, in 2010, Hall H's programming was completely devoted to film content.⁴⁰ This split, between the larger, film-dominated Hall H and the slightly smaller, television-heavy Ballroom 20, is also a spatial manifestation of a familiar cultural hierarchy that places film above television.⁴¹

In addition to the spatial division of film and television at Comic-Con, these hierarchies have also manifested temporally. In 2011, Comic-Con began offering Hall H television programs on Sunday, the shortest and quietest (if that descriptor can ever be applied to Comic-Con) day of the event, and filled the schedule with television panels, a practice that continues to the present.⁴² Panels for popular television shows like *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-) and *Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-) moved into Hall H's Friday programming slots in 2012 and 2013, after several years of overcrowding in the Ballroom 20 lines.⁴³ Some have attributed this to the increasing prominence or domination of television over film at Comic-Con, even connecting it to the mistaken speculation that as film studios were beginning to withdraw from the convention, television was emerging as a key attraction in their absence.⁴⁴ However, it is also worth remarking that such basic

⁴⁰ *The Simpsons* panel was the only TV panel held in 2007, while *Lost* and *Heroes* both appeared in 2008 and 2009. *2007 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide* (San Diego: Comic-Con International Inc., 2007); *2008 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide* (San Diego: Comic-Con International, Inc., 2008); San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*; Jackie Estrada, ed. *2010 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide* (San Diego: Comic-Con International, Inc., 2010).

⁴¹ Sheila C. Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 8-9.

⁴² Estrada, *Comic-Con International 2011 Events Guide*.

⁴³ *2012 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*; *2013 Comic-Con International: Events Guide*.

⁴⁴ See, for example: Marc Graser and Josh L. Dickey, "Comic-Con 2012: Who's in and Who's Out," *Variety*, last modified June 12, 2012, <http://variety.com/2012/film/news/comic-con-2012-who-s-in-who-s-out-111805541>; Marc Graser and Erin Maxwell, "Geek Heat; TV Turns up Con Volume," *Daily Variety*, July 14, 2011, 1.

and premium cable shows are set apart from network television as examples of “quality TV,” which, as Robert J. Thompson argues, “is best defined by what it is not. It is not ‘regular’ TV.”⁴⁵ Thus, the appearance of television panels in the larger Hall H, a space traditionally associated with large-scale film promotion, played upon exclusivity in order to differentiate and elevate select television programs as more popular and of higher quality at a time when television programs of all kinds were exploiting Comic-Con’s exclusive promotional space.

Of course, such hierarchies rest also rest firmly in the ideological realm, particularly in the age of conglomerate Hollywood, where studios are financially intertwined with film and television production and distribution.⁴⁶ In fact, this dispersal of conglomerates across the convention reproduces the same kinds of benefits associated with horizontal integration; so much so that fans may find themselves choosing between two seemingly unrelated panels that ultimately benefit the same media conglomerate.⁴⁷ For example, in 2012, attendees could have chosen between the Warner Bros./Legendary Pictures panel in Hall H and the *Vampire Diaries* (CW, 2009-) panel in Ballroom 20.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 13. This is, perhaps, best elucidated by HBO’s famous slogan: “It’s not TV, it’s HBO.” Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO’s Original Programming: Producing Quality TV,” in *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, ed. Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (New York: Routledge, 2008), 83.

⁴⁶ Eileen Meehan, “Ancillary Markets--Television: From Challenge to Safe Haven,” in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

⁴⁷ Horizontal integration refers to diversification of company holdings along “the same level of the value chain” or by buying “a major interest in another media operation that is not directly related to the original business.” Amanda Lotz and Timothy Havens, *Understanding Media Industries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 22; Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), 15. I discuss horizontal integration and media conglomerates at Comic-Con in greater detail in the next chapter.

⁴⁸ The Warner Bros./Legendary panel was held from 2:30 to 5:00 p.m. in Hall H and *Vampire Diaries* panel ran from 3:30 to 4:15 p.m. in Ballroom 20. Estrada, *2012 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*, 30.

While the Hall H panel was geared towards a broad, arguably male dominated, audience of blockbuster genre film fans, the Ballroom 20 panel would attract a more niche audience of predominantly female fans of the teen vampire soap. Ultimately, both panels were promoting Warner Bros. products as *Vampire Diaries* is produced and distributed by Warner Bros. Television and aired on the company's CW network.⁴⁹ This split, particularly along the lines of genre and gender, ultimately benefits the media industries as this illusion of choice and even "hostility among affinity groups" helps to create more dedicated and loyal consumers across all of their product lines.⁵⁰ Much in the same way that fans have been defined in relation to the hegemonic power of the media industries, the film industry's longstanding presence and power over the space of Hall H shapes and defines the content presented there.⁵¹

"Hall H Hysteria": Overcoming the Limitations of Exclusivity

While Jenkins et al. have suggested that "a push for exclusivity" at Comic-Con "has given rise to a push for publicity," it might be more accurate to suggest that

⁴⁹ Given the purported autonomy of Comic-Con as a non-profit organization, it is surprising that there are not more scheduling overlaps between properties owned by media conglomerates. However, because long lines usually force attendees to select a single room full of panels to occupy for much of the day, all panels held in these larger rooms are essentially in competition, regardless of the time they are scheduled.

⁵⁰ Eileen Meehan suggests that, "the belief that one's preferred leisure is superior to that of others replicates the hegemonic practices that so effectively reinforce hostility among affinity groups in the interests of capitalism." Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy," 76. Adorno and Horkheimer's work on the culture industry, written before intensive media conglomeration occurred, suggests that such a critique could be extended to most Comic-Con programming. They argue, "What connoisseurs discuss as good or bad points serve only to perpetuate the semblance of competition and range of choice. The same applies to the Warner Brothers and Metro Goldwyn Mayer productions." Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," 123.

⁵¹ That the move of television from Ballroom 20 to Hall H is even remarked upon suggests that Hollywood's flag is firmly planted in the space, even as the distinctions between the film and television industry become increasingly blurred.

exclusivity is what fuels publicity at Comic-Con.⁵² Studios may have honed their approaches over the years, but any industry presence at Comic-Con is ultimately a form of publicity. It is the exclusive element that obfuscates this publicity by presenting it as something more, or at the very least, infusing it with additional value. In this way, the industry invites attendees, who consume and circulate this publicity, to feel like active participants and the beneficiaries of exclusive experiences, rather than simply on the receiving end of an advertisement.

In 2009, *Variety*'s Brian Lowry called this phenomenon "Hall H hysteria," a phrase which denotes not only the fan reaction to promotion in Hall H, but also the inflated value it produces: "it's easy to get sucked into Comic-Con's vortex of enthusiasm, forgetting that even with 120,000 people descending on the convention center, that's still a very, very, self-selected group."⁵³ The word hysteria is, of course, quite loaded. Historically, and as a medical term, it operated as a way to pathologize women in mind and body.⁵⁴ In its more general definition as "unhealthy emotion or excitement,"⁵⁵ hysteria has also been deployed to pathologize the behavior of large groups of fans.⁵⁶ In the context of "Hall H hysteria," the term seems to take on both

⁵² Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*, 145.

⁵³ Lowry, "Beware the Comic-Con False Positive," 2.

⁵⁴ For more on the history of this term, see: Elaine Showalter, "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender," in *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, ed. Sander L. Gilman, et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁵⁵ "Hysteria, N.," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2014), <http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/90638?redirectedFrom=hysteria#eid>.

⁵⁶ Jenson, "Fandom as Pathology: The Consequences of Categorization," 11; Barbara Ehrenreich, Elizabeth Hess, and Gloria Jacobs, "Beatlemania: Girls Just Wanna Have Fun," in *The Adoring Audience*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 89-90. While he applies "Hall H hysteria" to the Comic-Con audience as a whole, the fact that the term "hysteria" should emerge in 2009, a year after *Twilight* began attracting hoards of young, *female* fans to Hall H, is worthy of further exploration.

positive and negative connotations. The unabashed excitement that accompanies a “hysterical” response to promotion in Hall H represents a powerful source of publicity, while the potential unpredictability of this affective response makes it appear difficult to anticipate, interpret, and control.

Another way to think about “Hall H hysteria” is through what Henry Jenkins calls “affective economics.”⁵⁷ Growing out of the same bottom up perspective that informed cultural studies and fan studies’ emphasis on taste, Jenkins argues, “affective economics” differs in that it:

Seeks to mold those desires to shape purchasing decisions. While they are increasingly interested in the qualities of audience experience, the media and brand companies still struggle with the economic side of affective economics—the need to quantify desire, to measure connections, and to commodify commitments—and perhaps, most importantly of all, the need to transform all of the above into return on investment (ROI).⁵⁸

Skepticism about the viability of Comic-Con as a predictor of future behavior seems to support Jenkins’ assertion that the industry continues to struggle with how to monetize fan affect. Lowry’s larger point is that that Hollywood’s appeals to a “self-selected” group of fans at Comic-Con, leading to what he describes as “the Comic-Con false positive,” an inflated projection of a film’s future success.⁵⁹ In an article in the *Hollywood Reporter*, Steven Zeitchik similarly asks whether Hollywood’s new strategy

⁵⁷ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 62.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Lowry, “Beware the Comic-Con False Positive,” 2.

of “marketing to the grassroots” is truly delivering results.⁶⁰ “The nerd herd strategy,” he argues, may be overvaluing this niche audience as it is not large enough to significantly impact profits, nor are enthusiastic Comic-Con fans a reliable measure of a film’s future success.⁶¹

All of these assessments focus on the audience *in* Hall H, or, in Jenkins’ case, fans as a niche demographic with a higher “quality of audience engagement.”⁶² While, as I have argued, the elevation of this audience factors into industry promotion, such discourses overlook the fact that Comic-Con is a publicity machine in its own right. Eileen Meehan provides a necessary corrective in her analysis of *Star Trek* fans. Although it would appear that fans exert the most demand and therefore have a greater power to influence the market, it is actually the rest of media consumers that matter most to the media industries.⁶³ Meehan reasons that,

For a transindustrial conglomerate like Paramount, synergy and brand name consumption allow supply to subordinate demand as long as Trekkers buy indiscriminately. Given *Star Trek*’s reliability as a revenue generator, Paramount’s problem becomes revenue growth, which comes from impulse buyers purchasing a particular *Star Trek* product.”⁶⁴

“Hall H hysteria,” then, operates discursively to highlight fans and their enthusiasm as the center, even the spectacle, of media promotion in Hall H. Taken in the context of the

⁶⁰ Stephen Zelchick, “The Fan Fantasy,” *Hollywood Reporter*, August 1-3, 2008, 20.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶² Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 63.

⁶³ Meehan, “Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy,” 87.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

larger political economy of the media industries, however, this “hysteria” provides visible confirmation of what studios already know: fans are a reliable revenue stream. Rather than operating as a way of projecting a film’s success in a broader marketplace, the exclusive content and audience in Hall H is a small part of a much larger promotional project.

While the exclusivity of Comic-Con helps to draw fans, the excitement and spectacle it produces travels well beyond the confines of the convention hall. Exclusivity is structured into Comic-Con’s appeal; the limited duration and confines of the space means that many will attempt to buy tickets, but only a limited number will actually be successful. As I have discussed, the attendance limitations imposed by Comic-Con are a reflection of the limits produced by the space of the convention center, itself. So, while Comic-Con’s operation is shaped by these limitations, these same material conditions fuel the idea that Comic-Con is an exclusive experience. Those in attendance get to experience it firsthand, but everyone else must rely on mediated coverage in print, online, or on television.

Countering the limitations of exclusivity imposed on the event, the media coverage of Comic-Con has become increasingly mainstream and it is frequently named alongside massive industry events like the Cannes festival.⁶⁵ The industry’s promotional presence at Comic-Con, then, relies on the fact that what happens at Comic-Con *does not*

⁶⁵ See, for example: Geoff Boucher, "Comic-Con; Visitors Guide; Fanboys and Zombies Rub Elbows with a-Listers; Where to Start at Comic-Con International 2010? Good Question. Here's a Primer for This Year's Cannes for Capes," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 2010, D6; Tony Perry, "The Cannes of Comics; Hollywood* a San Diego Gathering for Makers and Consumers of the Illustrated Tales Becomes a Must-Stop for Stars and Directors Who Want to Shape the Pre-Release Buzz," *Los Angeles Times*, August 5, 2002, F1; Scott Bowles and Keveney Bill, "Comic-Con Will See Film Presence," *USA TODAY*, July 20, 2006, D11; Sarah Tippit, "Cannes for the Comic-Book Set; Fans, Filmmakers Flock to San Diego Convention," *Calgary Herald*, July 24, 2008, C6.

stay at Comic-Con.⁶⁶ As one Fox executive put it, “You are not speaking to a contained universe, because the attention it gets goes far beyond the people who are actually in the building.”⁶⁷ The explosion of successful blockbuster films promoted there during the past decade seems to suggest that, for the film industry, Comic-Con has become a viable place to address niche fan audiences, while simultaneously expanding that base to a larger portion of the movie-going public.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Samantha Shankman, "A Brief History of 'What Happens in Vegas Stays in Vegas'," *The Week*, last modified October 1, 2013, <http://theweek.com/article/index/250385/a-brief-history-of-what-happens-in-vegas-stays-in-vegas>

⁶⁷ Michael Learmonth, "H'wood Makes Annual Trio to the Geek Aisles," *Variety*, July 24, 2006, 2.

⁶⁸ According to the website *Box Office Mojo*, the top grossing films each year for the past ten years were: *Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith* (George Lucas, 2005), *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (Gore Verbinski, 2006), *Spider-Man 3* (Sam Raimi, 2007), *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008), *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), *Toy Story 3* (Lee Unkrich, 2010), *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2* (David Yates, 2011), *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), *Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (Francis Lawrence, 2013), and, as of March 14, 2014, *The Lego Movie* (Christopher Miller and Phil Lord, 2014). "Yearly Box Office," *Box Office Mojo*, last modified 2014, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/>. All but one of these films, *The Dark Knight*, were featured in a Hall H panel at Comic-Con. The MovieWeb Team, "The Official 'Star Wars: Episode III' Title Announced," *MovieWeb*, last modified July 24, 2004, <http://www.movieweb.com/news/the-official-star-wars-episode-iii-title-announce>; Eric Sunde, "Comic-Con 2006: Pirates 3 Spotted," last modified July 24, 2006, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2006/07/24/comic-con-2006-pirates-3-spotte>; Edward Douglas, "Spider-Man 3 Footage at Comic-Con Panel," *SuperHeroHype*, last modified July 22, 2006, <http://www.superherohype.com/features/91565-spider-man-3-footage-at-comic-con-panel>; Associated Press, "James Cameron Wows Comic-Con with 'Avatar'," *Today.com*, last modified July 24, 2009, http://www.today.com/id/32126753/ns/today-today_entertainment/t/james-cameron-wows-comic-con-avatar; David Chen, "Comic-Con Interview: Lee Unkrich, Director of Toy Story 3," *Slash Film*, last modified July 25, 2009, <http://www.slashfilm.com/comic-con-interview-lee-unkrich-director-of-toy-story-3>; Germain Lussier, "SDCC 2010: New Footage Description from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Panel," *Collider*, last modified July 24, 2010, <http://collider.com/comic-con-harry-potter-and-the-deathly-hallows-panel-footage-tom-felton>; Ellwood, "Robert Downey, Jr. Introduces 'the Avengers' at San Diego Comic-Con"; Adam Chitwood, "Comic-Con: The Lego Movie Panel Recap," *Collider*, last modified July 20, 2013, <http://collider.com/comic-con-the-lego-movie-panel-recap>; THR Staff, "Comic-Con: 'Hunger Games: Catching Fire' Trailer Debuts," *The Hollywood Reporter*, last modified July 20, 2013, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hunger-games-catching-fire-trailer-589542>

Dark Knight was not entirely absent from the event, however, which served as a launch pad for the film's "why so serious?" viral marketing campaign. IGN Staff, "SDCC 07: New Joker Image and Teaser Trailer!," *IGN*, last modified July 27, 2007, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2007/07/27/sdcc-07-new-joker-image-and-teaser-trailer>

The convention is covered extensively online, spanning social media, independent and corporately run blogs and websites.⁶⁹ In print, articles about Comic-Con are published in the industry trades, local and national newspapers, and magazines such as *Entertainment Weekly*, *TV Guide*, and *US Weekly*.⁷⁰ While *Entertainment Weekly* and *TV Guide* covers of the event as a source of entertainment and pop culture news, the tabloid *Us Weekly* represents a second way of covering the event, as a source of celebrity gossip, fashion, and images. For example, regular sections of the magazine such as “VIP Scene,” “Stars-They’re Just Like Us!” and “Who Wore it Best” include photos of celebrities attending Comic-Con, while the magazine also features Comic-Con in pictorials and articles about celebrity relationships.⁷¹ Similarly, on television, Comic-Con is covered on shows like *Access Hollywood*, *Entertainment Tonight* as well as in more niche cable environments such as G4’s *Attack of the Show* and special coverage on Spike TV, both of

⁶⁹ See, for example: "WB Comic-Con Schedule, Social, News, Photos and Videos," *Warner Bros! Comic-Con 2013*, last modified 2014, <http://comicon.thewb.co>; "San Diego Comic-Con Unofficial Blog," *SDCC Unofficial Blog*, last modified March 14, 2014, <http://sdccblogger.com>; "San Diego Comic-Con," *MTV Geek!*, last modified 2014, http://www.mtv.com/geek/event_coverage/san_diego_comic_con/main.jhtml. These websites and companies also maintain a significant social media presence with Twitter and Facebook pages.

⁷⁰ While *Entertainment Weekly* and *TV Guide* cover the event in their magazines, they are also active contributors to Comic-Con, sponsoring panels, such as “*Entertainment Weekly*: Powerful Women in Pop Culture (aka Women Who Kick Ass!)” and “*TV Guide Magazine Celebrates The X-Files’ 20th Anniversary*.” Estrada, *2012 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*, 56; *2013 Comic-Con International: Events Guide*, 32.

⁷¹ See, for example: Noelle Hancock, "VIP Scene," *Us Weekly*, August 8, 2011, 39; Rachel Paula Abrahamson and Jennifer O'Neill, "VIP Scene," *Us Weekly*, July 30, 2012, 39; Cinya Burton, "Who Wore It Best?," *Us Weekly*, August 31, 2009, 8, 10; Monique Meneses, "Who Wore It Best?," *Us Weekly*, August 17, 2009, 6, 8; Cinya Burton and Sasha Charnin Morrison, "Who Wore It Best?," *Us Weekly*, August 16, 2010, 6, 8, 10; Carolyn E. Davis, "Stars - They're Just Like Us!," *Us Weekly*, August 11, 2008, 32, 34; Alex Apatoff, "Stars Swarm Comic-Con!," *Us Weekly*, August 10, 2009, 20-21; Carolyn E. Davis, "Stars Hit San Diego's Comic-Con!," *Us Weekly*, July 30, 2012, 18-19; Beth Anne Macaluso, "Comic-Con Mania!," *Us Weekly*, August 8, 2011, 26; Monique Meneses and Sasha Charnin Morrison, "Classy at Comic-Con," *Us Weekly*, August 6, 2012, 2-3; Rachel Paula Abrahamson, Rebecca Bienstock, and Noelle Hancock, "Emma and Andrew: Their Hotel Hookup," *Us Weekly*, August 15, 2011, 46; Noelle Hancock, "Alexander & Kate: It's Over!," *Us Weekly*, August 8, 2011, 39.

which are branded primarily for male viewers.⁷² This split is similarly reflected in television network coverage online as both the E! Channel and Spike TV offer extensive video and news coverage of the event on their websites. The apparent gendered divide that emerges in the genres of media coverage, between celebrity gossip and entertainment news, lends credence to the idea that male and female fans are invited to engage with popular culture in different, problematic, and essentializing ways.⁷³ This distribution, however problematic, relocates an amorphous fan demographic back into the sphere of more traditional and identifiable consumer categories, making it easier to sell the audience commodity to advertisers along lines such as age and gender.⁷⁴ However, it also demonstrates the level of saturation, across various markets and demographics, achieved through Comic-Con's appeal to exclusivity. Whether geared towards insider knowledge about how the industry works or about the personal lives of those employed by the industry, both kinds of coverage rely on emphasizing the industry as an exclusive zone and offering viewers access inside this space.

In this way, two forms of exclusivity, an appeal to exclusive audiences and the promise of exclusive content, operate simultaneously. While situating coverage for

⁷² Further solidifying its male oriented programming, G4 was rebranded, in 2013, as Esquire, an “upscale Bravo for men.” In this capacity, the network, which was already implicitly and problematically geared towards male viewers through its emphasis on technology and gaming, joined Spike TV as a channel explicitly *for* men. James Poniewozik, “The Esquire Network: At Last, Another TV Channel for Men!,” *Time: Entertainment*, last modified February 12, 2013, <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/02/12/the-esquire-network-at-last-another-tv-channel-for-men/>

⁷³ For critiques of these gendered divides, see: Scott, “Revenge of the Fanboy: Convergence Culture and the Politics of Incorporation;” Derek Johnson, “Devaluering and Revaluering Seriality: The Gendered Discourses of Media Franchising,” *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 7 (2011).

⁷⁴ As Meehan points out, Nielson “gathers data on demographics, not subcultural affiliations... As long as advertisers of cars, tampons, or athletic shoes have no reason to target Trekkers, Neilson need not identify any who crop up in the sample.” Meehan, “Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy,” 87; Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*, 27.

particular gendered or generically constructed niches helps to delineate, assign, and identify a particular audience, the underlying appeal to exclusivity is wide reaching, capturing a large swath of mainstream consumers.⁷⁵ Whether presenting a view into the glamorous lives of celebrities or insider industry news, Comic-Con's status as an exclusive event becomes the glue that unites niche markets, meaning the event presents a much more significant marketing opportunity beyond the over 130,000 in attendance. By selling exclusivity, Hollywood, however temporarily, is able to reconnect the pieces of a previously fragmented market by combining old marketing models, which measure success through "the acquisition of as many 'eyeballs' as possible" with newer models based on "attract[ing] only the most desirable 'eyeballs.'"⁷⁶ Not only does this strategy apply to the media coverage of Comic-Con, but it also applies to the promotion happening at the event.

Promotional content at Comic-Con is presented to attendees, whose presence there identifies them as the key demographic, core audience, or, "the most desirable eyeballs."⁷⁷ Then, the industry, in conjunction with the fans at Comic-Con, circulates information, images, hype, and buzz about exclusive Comic-Con promotions in order to acquire "as many 'eyeballs' as possible."⁷⁸ Thus, Comic-Con represents a key model for how the media industries overcome the limitations of exclusivity by combining a strategy

⁷⁵ As Philip M. Napoli describes, the notion of audience fragmentation has been overstated: "While on the one level there is a tremendous amount of choice (in terms of the number of television channels, or the number of Web sites, or the number of radio stations), when we dig beneath the surface, the amount of content being distributed across all of these available choices is comparatively limited." *Audience Evolution: New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audiences*, 68.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

of spatiotemporal containment with mediated dissemination of information. In this way, exclusivity becomes not just a way of describing and hyping the Comic-Con experience, but also a strategy for marketing the industry content presented at Comic-Con.

In a somewhat symbiotic relationship, Comic-Con's exclusivity as a temporally and spatially specific experience fuels the promotion and sale of pop culture products of all kinds, thus presenting a seemingly irresistible opportunity for studios who wish to add value to their products by infusing them with the excitement and urgency of an exclusive experience. Studios reciprocate by appearing with high profile films, celebrities, previews, and giveaways, which further heightens the exclusivity of the convention. For this reason, Comic-Con has become important to Hollywood marketers, first and foremost, as a signifier of exclusivity. While studios promote films at Comic-Con in the guise of celebrating and providing one-of-a-kind, special experiences to their loyal and deserving fans, this sentiment is just another way to reinforce the exclusivity of the Comic-Con experience and repackage promotional material as a kind of reward and commodity in and of itself.

James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), a hotly anticipated Hall H panel during Comic-Con 2009, provides a key example of how studios have experimented with pushing this buzz from the confines of convention hall out into the world. At the panel, Cameron surprised attendees by screening twenty-five minutes of the film in 3-D, which was tremendously well received.⁷⁹ After the *Avatar* panel, the *Los Angeles Times* declared

⁷⁹ For examples of the online response, which range in scale from individual attendees to professional blogs to larger media outlets, see: Jackie, "Comic-Con 2009: Thursday Roundup," *The Lowdown Blog*, last modified July 27, 2009, <http://lowdownblog.com/2009/07/27/comic-con-2009-thursday-roundup>; Rob Keyes, "James Cameron's *Avatar* Is Epic--Comic-Con 2009," *ScreenRant.Com*, last modified July 23, 2009, <http://screenrant.com/james-camerons-avatar-comiccon-2009-rob-18351>; Associated Press, "James Cameron Wows Comic-Con with 'Avatar'". As a member of the audience during this presentation, I can also confirm the anticipation building up to the panel was significant that day. Even though it was rumored

that, “the approving Internet buzz was instantly deafening.”⁸⁰ Putting aside, for the moment, the positive response to the preview footage itself and qualitative judgments of the film, it is useful to ask how this response functions in the context of Comic-Con, as well as part of a broader marketing strategy. The buzz that *Avatar* received from fans via blogs and social networking served the purpose of extending niche and grassroots marketing. However, the coverage of this buzz in the mainstream media formed part of a campaign to build on fan reactions at Comic-Con in order to replicate them with a larger group of consumers.

At the end of the *Avatar* panel, Cameron made a special announcement:

I wanted to do something that was really special in unveiling the film and I think we managed to do that today. But it occurred to me that there’s a global audience out there and I wondered if there was a way to capture this kind of magic for people who couldn’t get to Comic-Con. And so we have kind of a big announcement here today. Which is we’re going to do something really unprecedented.⁸¹

Cameron went on to describe the plan for “*Avatar* day.” Several weeks later, on August 21st, Fox would release fifteen minutes of footage to IMAX theatres worldwide.

Consumers who went online and secured a ticket would be able to go to the theater and watch this 3-D footage of the film for free. This unconventional campaign would occur at

that Cameron would be screening footage from the film in 3-D, the crowd seemed genuinely surprised and audibly excited, perhaps due to the length of the clip. Will Perkins, "Exclusive: Avatar Footage to Debut at Comic Con," *Dork Shelf*, last modified July 6, 2009, <http://dorkshelf.com/2009/07/06/avatar-footage-to-debut-at-comic-con/>

⁸⁰ John Horn, "Comic-Con's Buzz-Makers," *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 2009, D1.

⁸¹ James Cameron, *20th Century Fox and James Cameron: Avatar*, Comic-Con Panel, *Comic-Con International 2009* (July 23, 2009).

the same time as other, more conventional marketing strategies such as the release of trailers to theatres and the launch of a toy line from Mattel, both building upon and bolstering the campaign as a whole. This announcement at Comic-Con was an advertisement within an advertisement, a marketing mise-en-abyme that sought to engage a larger audience through the excitement of a special event carrying similar spatiotemporal restrictions, while allowing for significantly greater access. Announcing “*Avatar Day*” at Comic-Con was a way to draw out the exclusivity of the Hall H panel, while also repackaging it as an experience that others could seek out closer to home. As a writer for *Cinema Blend* put it “This isn’t just some cool press event happening in New York or LA, it’ll play on that day in IMAX theaters all over the world.”⁸² While it is difficult to gauge the financial success of this strategy, or to determine the kinds of spectators that visited the theatre on *Avatar* day, the fact that the tickets to the IMAX screenings were completely sold out indicates that Fox and Cameron were successful in reaching a much larger audience.⁸³ Opening the screening with a special filmed message to viewers, Cameron also attempted to replicate the more intimate setting of Comic-Con with a mediated variation of the Hall H preview panel. With *Avatar Day*, then, the studio built on initial previews at Comic-Con and the growing buzz in the fan community, engaging an even larger group of spectators with a similar special, in-the-flesh event. Effectively, Fox and Cameron sought to extend “Hall H hysteria” across the globe.

⁸² Josh Tyler, "Comic Con: August 21 Is Avatar Day," *cinemablend.com*, last modified July 23, 2009, <http://www.cinemablend.com/new/Comic-Con-August-21-Is-Avatar-Day-14060.html>

⁸³ Julia Boorstin, "Fox's 'Avatar Day' and a 3-D Revolution," *CNBC*, last modified August 21, 2009, <http://www.cnbc.com/id/32510270>

A Day in Hall H

In June 2012, *Variety* reported on Hollywood's presence at Comic-Con, noting that Warner Bros. had reserved an unusually long three-hour block for Saturday in Hall H.⁸⁴ They were expected to present their Winter 2012 and Summer 2013 tentpoles, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (Peter Jackson, 2012) and *Man of Steel* (Zach Snyder, 2013) and unconfirmed reports suggested that co-producer, Legendary Pictures, would join Warner Bros. in presenting their upcoming film *Pacific Rim* (Guillermo del Toro, 2013).⁸⁵ When this panel began on Saturday, July 14th, at 2:30 p.m., attendees were already anticipating a spectacular series of presentations, but as the curtains at the front of Hall H pulled back to reveal two massive screens displaying the Warner Bros. logo, the air seemed to leave to room as the entire crowd joined in producing one collective gasp of surprise before breaking into effusive cheers and applause.⁸⁶ As a member of that crowd, I spent approximately six hours in line and eight hours in Hall H that day. The schedule of programs was as follows:

11:30-12:30: "Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*"

⁸⁴ Most Hall H panels run for an hour or an hour and a half. A month after this article was published, this panel appeared in the Comic-Con schedule as two and a half hours, the same length as their 2009 panel, which promoted: *Where the Wild Things Are* (Spike Jonze, 2009), *The Book of Eli* (The Hughes Brothers, 2010), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Samuel Bayer, 2010), *The Box* (Richard Kelly, 2009), *Jonah Hex* (Jimmy Hayward, 2010), and *Sherlock Holmes* (Guy Ritchie, 2009). While slightly shorter than the three hours originally reported, this remains an exceptionally long panel, especially given that Warner Bros. elected to skip Hall H completely during the previous year. Estrada, *2009 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*, 32; *2012 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*, 74; Barnes and Cieply, "Movie Studios Reassess Comic-Con," B1.

⁸⁵ Graser and Dickey, "Comic-Con 2012: Who's in and Who's Out"; Marc Graser and Rachel Abrams, "Legendary Pictures Eyes New Credit Line," last modified April 15, 2011, <http://variety.com/2011/film/news/legendary-pictures-eyes-new-credit-line-1118035532/>. A few days prior to Comic-Con, reports also emerged that Legendary would present a teaser of their upcoming film *Godzilla* (Gareth Edwards, 2014)

⁸⁶ For video of this reveal, see: Steve Younis, "Comic-Con 2012 - Hall H Intro #1," *YouTube*, last modified July 16, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRtOSwyZNFg>

12:45-1:45: “Open Road Films: *End of Watch* and *Silent Hill: Revelations 3D*”

2:00-2:30: “Trailer Park I”

2:30-5:15: “Warner Bros. Pictures and Legendary Pictures Preview Their Upcoming Lineups”

5:15-6:00: “Trailer Park II”

6:00-7:00: “Marvel Studios: *Iron Man 3*”

7:15-9:15: “Comi-Kev: Q&A With Kevin Smith”⁸⁷

In the subsections that follow, I discuss the daytime portion of this programming, from 11:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. in order to produce a sense of what it is like to attend a day of panels in Hall H. Through this description, I also elaborate on several ways that media industry promotion and coverage of the event harnesses “Hall H hysteria” in order to produce controlled discourses about their products and spread buzz and publicity outside of the convention center.

Sizzle

Quentin Tarantino was the main attraction of the first panel, whose title, “Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*” highlighted his branding as auteur.⁸⁸ Accordingly, he was framed as the genius behind the film and was a key participant on a panel of guests,

⁸⁷ Estrada, *2012 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*. In this section, I will focus on the promotional panels held during the day. Given the extremely long wait prior to the 11:30 a.m. start time (in my case, from approximately 5:30 a.m.), I, along with a large portion of the crowd, left after Marvel Studio’s panel and before the Kevin Smith event. This is also demonstrative of the kinds of panels that attract the most attention in Hall H as well as the scheduling of such panels. Kevin Smith’s panel is a regular and popular event at Comic-Con, but is usually staged to close out the day. Given the mass exodus that occurs before this panel, it is also, seemingly, bracketed off from the rest of the programming. Notably, while serving the purpose of self-promotion for Smith’s celebrity image, this was the only panel of the day that was not studio sponsored for the explicit purpose of promoting a film or selection of films. Having discussed Robert Downey Jr.’s appearance during the Marvel panel in my introduction, I will focus, here, on the panels that ran between the hours of 11:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

which also included Jamie Foxx, Christoph Waltz, Kerry Washington, and Don Johnson. In particular, Tarantino took ownership of decisions related to what and how much footage to screen at Comic-Con. In introducing the *Django* footage, he told the crowd that they would watch the same eight-minute industry “sizzle reel” that was screened at Cannes.⁸⁹

There was a whole talk about when we were coming down here about ‘well... we shouldn’t show them that much footage. It might get out. We don’t want that to happen. Let’s just do a four minute reel of this, that and the other.’ And I was like NO. The people at Comic-Con have been with us for a long time. They’re probably gonna have this hall jam-packed. They’ve been waiting in line for a long time. They should see...I’m cool with my footage. I’m cool with the footage. We have much more coming. But I decided that if this is good enough for the industry, its good enough for the fans.⁹⁰

Tarantino’s speech highlights the significance of both time and space as a producer of value by mentioning the time attendees spent in line and the limited space of the “jam-packed” hall. But this discourse produces a very simplistic view of those who Tarantino calls “the fans.” As the first of several high profile panels that day, Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* was guaranteed a “jam-packed” panel, as many of those who invested the night and early morning hours in line did so in order to attend panels in Hall H *all*

⁸⁹ In industry terms, a “sizzle reel” is much like a trailer, in that is an assembly of footage meant to promote a film. The difference is that a “sizzle reel” is usually associated with promoting or pitching a film or television show within the industry, rather than to consumers. Dan Abrams, "Sizzle Reels: Produce before You Pitch (Part 1)," *Producers Guild of America*, last modified <https://www.producersguild.org/?sizzle>

⁹⁰ Quentin Tarantino, *Quentin Tarantino's Django Unchained*, Comic-Con Panel, *Comic-Con International 2012* (July 14, 2012).

day; a detail that Tarantino either ignored or failed to recognize. The result was that in the context of this panel, everyone was a Tarantino fan.⁹¹

There is also the matter of the “sizzle reel” itself. Though the footage was not produced or assembled *for* Comic-Con, it was still framed as exclusive because of its original presentation at Cannes.⁹² Tarantino’s assertion that, “if this is good enough for the industry, its good enough for the fans” was met with raucous applause. This statement encapsulates the way the industry appeals to fans at Comic-Con, inviting them to feel like industry insiders, even as the material conditions of this relationship betray the power imbalances that actually exist. When the *Django* footage was screened at Cannes—which, unlike Comic-Con, is identified as an industry-centered event—Harvey Weinstein presented it to “a gathering of journalists.”⁹³ Thus, the suggestion that the footage at Cannes was “for the industry” was slightly misleading. Rather, it was presented for a subset of the media industries that produce a large quantity of publicity: critics, reporters, and bloggers.⁹⁴

⁹¹ This discourse extended to reports coming out of Comic-Con. As Anne Thompspon of *Thompson on Hollywood* suggested: “Hall H was packed with 6000 fans, many of whom stayed up all night to gain a seat, to get a gander at an eight-minute sizzle reel of clips from the first half of Quentin Tarantino's 'Django Unchained.'” Anne Thompson, "Tarantino and 'Django Unchained' Gang Hit Comic-Con: How Serious Is This Movie," *Thompson on Hollywood*, last modified July 16, 2012, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/thompsononhollywood/tarantino-and-django-unchained-gang-hit-comic-con>

⁹² Many of my assertions about exclusivity as a marketing tool could apply to Cannes, as well. As an event that is covered extensively in the press, but is extremely difficult and expensive to attend, Cannes also holds significant allure as an exclusive space with even more limitations than Comic-Con. The key difference is that as an industry event, the mode of address at Cannes is not necessarily aimed at fans, but instead targets members of the media industries, including the press.

⁹³ Gregg Kilday, "Cannes 2012: Quentin Tarantino's 'Django Unchained' Unveiled by Harvey Weinstein," *The Hollywood Reporter*, last modified May 21, 2012, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/cannes-2012-quentin-tarantinos-django-327358>

⁹⁴ *Variety* reported that “The Weinstein Co. invited about 50 journalists” to the presentation, which also included clips from *Silver Linings Playbook* (David O. Russell, 2012) and *The Master* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 2012). Dave McNary, "Weinsteins Preview 'Django,' 'Master' in Cannes," *Variety*, last modified

This Cannes footage was widely reported on and, notably, many of these reports emerged from the same outlets providing extensive coverage of Comic-Con.⁹⁵ The key difference, however, was that the journalists and bloggers in attendance at Cannes reported on and responded to the sizzle reel itself, while articles about the Comic-Con panel also reported on the responses of attendees in Hall H with headlines like, “Quentin Tarantino Wows Hall H,” “Tarantino’s Django Unchained Shocks, Awes” and “Comic-Con fans give ‘Django Unchained’ a Standing Ovation.”⁹⁶ In this case, the Comic-Con fans, who were seeing the footage for the first time, took on the same role as the critics at Cannes, whose positive responses helped to produce publicity by telling readers something about the potential quality of the film; but they were also part of the publicity itself, as their responses were incorporated into the critics reports. In this way, the exclusivity of the panel and “sizzle reel” helped to stir up excitement about the film, while the exclusivity of the audience of fans was similarly objectified and repositioned as part of the publicity. Given the overlaps, not only in the reportage, but also the function

May 21, 2012, <http://variety.com/2012/film/news/weinsteins-preview-django-master-in-cannes-1118054431/>

⁹⁵ For a compilation of this coverage, which included sites like *Ain't it Cool News*, *HitFix*, and *First Showing*, see: Matt Singer, "Critics React to 7 Minutes of 'Django Unchained' at Cannes," *IndieWire.Com*, last modified May 21, 2012, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/criticwire/critics-react-to-7-minutes-of-django-unchained-at-cannes>

⁹⁶ Jeff Otto, "Comic-Con '12: Quentin Tarantino Wows Hall H Faithful with Bombastic Footage from 'Django Unchained' & More from the Presentation," *IndieWire.Com*, last modified July 15, 2012, <http://blogs.indiewire.com/theplaylist/comic-con-quentin-tarantino-wows-hall-h-faithful-with-bombastic-footage-from-django-unchained-more-from-the-presentation-20120715>; Nicole Sperling, "Comic-Con 2012: Tarantino's 'Django Unchained' Shocks, Awes," *Los Angeles Times*, last modified July 14, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jul/14/entertainment/la-et-mn-comiccon-2012-quentin-tarantino-shocks-and-awes-with-new-django-unchained-footage-20120714>; "Comic-Con Fans Give 'Django Unchained' a Standing Ovation," *Starpulse.com*, last modified July 16, 2012, http://www.starpulse.com/news/index.php/2012/07/16/comiccon_fans_give_django_unchained_a_. Having been in the room at the time, I question the veracity of this last headline. I have no records in my notes and do not have any memory of a standing ovation after the sizzle reel. It is possible, however, that the ovation may have been centralized in the front section of Hall H, but did not spread to the middle/back section, where I was seated.

of these events, the contrast between Cannes and Comic-Con are glaring: At Cannes, “critics, bloggers and people in suits gathered in a large antechamber, sipping wine”⁹⁷ while they waited for Harvey Weinstein to arrive and present the footage, while Comic-Con fans camped out on the hard concrete or lined up for hours to gain access to the same “sizzle reel.”

The official title of this first panel, “Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*” suggests that even the naming of events in Hall H is contrived, a function of branding and marketing choices. While many other presenters that day—Warner Brothers, Legendary, and Marvel—were effectively presold to the Comic-Con audience as the producers of popular blockbuster and genre films, *Django*’s producer, The Weinstein Company, was less firmly affixed to fan tastes.⁹⁸ Thus, their panel followed with the company’s larger business model, which was “to lean heavily on the films and filmmakers on whom they had built Miramax in the 1990s.”⁹⁹ While the Cannes event featured Harvey Weinstein, the *Django* panel in Hall H relied on Tarantino to be the mouthpiece, as he was already a known and beloved brand to movie geeks and fanboys.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Peter Bradshaw, “Cannes Film Festival Gets Glimpse of Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*,” *The Guardian*, last modified May 21, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2012/may/21/cannes-film-festival-quentin-tarantino-django-unchained>

⁹⁸ The Weinstein Company was founded after the Weinstein Brothers left Miramax in 2005, a company that thrived by releasing niche and art house films and selling them to a larger audience. In forming The Weinstein Company, the brothers seemed to struggle initially with misguided attempts to broaden their business model. In recent years, however, The Weinstein Company seems to have settled back in to a production model that includes broadly appealing, prestige pictures. Justin Wyatt, “The Formation of the ‘Major Independent’: Miramax, New Line and the New Hollywood,” in *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith (New York: Routledge, 1998), 76; Alisa Perren, *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012), 232.

⁹⁹ *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s*, 232.

¹⁰⁰ Anne Thompson’s article on the Comic-Con panel supports this claim. She suggests that, “clearly the film’s marketers are reaching directly for the fans” and “demanding more than an art-house audience turnout” because it was not scheduled to be completed in time for the film festival circuit that fall. Thompson, “Tarantino and ‘Django Unchained’ Gang Hit Comic-Con: How Serious Is This Movie”. Sharon

Flow

Open Road Films hosted their panel in the 12:45 p.m. slot that followed *Django Unchained*. A little over a year old, the distribution company was launched by theatrical exhibitors AMC Entertainment and Regal Entertainment Group in 2011, who hoped to “fill a void left by studios now concentrating on tentpoles.”¹⁰¹ Open Road likely made their first appearance in Hall H in order to deliver their smaller films to Comic-Con’s niche audience. While the first film on their panel, David Ayer’s gritty police drama *End of Watch* (2012), was not conventional Comic-Con fare, it was paired with *Silent Hill: Revelations 3D*, a film more suited to the audience, though not a potential blockbuster.¹⁰² Ultimately, sandwiched between Quentin Tarantino and Warner Bros.’ massive panel, Open Road had an ideal position for a new company distributing smaller films for niche audiences. While the reaction to their panel was subdued in comparison to the other presentations that day, Open Road also had an audience that was almost literally captive. With the hall filled to capacity and a line outside that was reportedly 6,496 deep at 1:00 p.m., nearly everyone who was admitted to Hall H that day remained in the room during the Open Road panel in order to secure a their position for the rest of the programming

Willis observed that Tarantino has developed a significant fan following because, among other things, his films tend to act as fan texts in and of themselves, full of recycled content and homages. In this way, she argues that Tarantino is evidence of Timothy Corrigan’s assertion that authorship can function “as a commercial strategy for organizing audience reception, as a critical concept bound to distribution and marketing aims that identify and address the potential cult status of an auteur.” Sharon Willis, “Style, Posture, and Idiom: Tarantino’s Figures of Masculinity,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 284; Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 103.

¹⁰¹ Andrew Stewart, “Amc, Regal Hit Open Road,” *Variety*, last modified March 7, 2011, <http://variety.com/2011/film/news/amc-regal-hit-open-road-1118033459/>

¹⁰² Interestingly, the majority of the *End of Watch* footage screened at Comic-Con was shot using a first person POV, a common aesthetic in video games.

that day.¹⁰³ Unlike other programming rooms, Hall H is also equipped with bathrooms and a small concession area, which ensures that even if attendees are not actively watching a panel, they are at least able to stay within earshot. Had Open Roads been scheduled at the end of the day, they would likely have seen a mass exodus.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the strategic positioning of their panel early in the day made sure that their presentation was woven into a kind of Hall H flow that, like television flow, keeps attendees engaged with the marketing content.¹⁰⁵

Comic-Con's scheduling of the "Trailer Park" presentations before the Warner Bros. and Marvel Studios panels served this purpose even more explicitly, acting as a kind of commercial break in the midst of a slew of other, more grandiose advertisements. The event guide's description, which invited attendees to "see the latest in trailers from your upcoming soon-to-be favorite films," could just as easily be describing what many encounter at their local cineplex.¹⁰⁶ For this reason, little about this block of programming felt particularly exclusive or special. But even within the more mundane

¹⁰³ It is extremely difficult to get information regarding exact numbers in the various Comic-Con lines, so I am unsure if the information circulating about the Hall H line online, particularly on Twitter, is entirely accurate. However, as this *Storify* page demonstrates, the line was very long, stretching all around the waterfront. As I have argued, in many ways the discourse that circulates about the line helps to create increased urgency, making the sense of the line's size even more important than specific numbers. Inscaped, "Comic-Con 2012 Hall H Madness," *Storify*, last modified July 14, 2012, <http://storify.com/Inscaped/comic-con-2012-hall-h-madness>

¹⁰⁴ That day, most of the crowd left Hall H en masse after Marvel Studios' panel and before Kevin Smith's annual evening panel.

¹⁰⁵ Flow, as Raymond Williams describes it, is the organization of commercial television programming in order to create the sense of a larger, more unified sequence that keeps viewers tuned in for long stretches of time and through various advertising interruptions. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Routledge Classics (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 86-97. In the case of Hall H programming, attendees are already motivated to stay in the presence of the advertising, which is also the programming content. Instead, Hall H flow is orchestrated to best present this advertising and maximize audience engagement.

¹⁰⁶ Estrada, *2012 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*, 74.

format of a night out at the cinema, trailers are geared towards producing excitement by “announcing the wonders of the medium in general” and “bring[ing] to a head the joys of anticipation,” while “reinforce[ing] cinemagoing as a repetitive event.”¹⁰⁷ It is also worth noting that the Trailer Park dates back to at least 1997 and is the remnant of a time when movie trailers were somewhat harder to access and, by extension, more exclusive.¹⁰⁸ In November 1998, for example, it was widely reported that *Star Wars* fans bought tickets for *Meet Joe Black* (Martin Brest, 1998) in order to see the trailer for *Star Wars Episode IV: Phantom Menace* (George Lucas, 1999).¹⁰⁹

By 2012, Trailer Park was less remarkable as an event in and of itself and more like the repetitious interlude of a commercial break. In fact, Trailer Park was scheduled to run once on Thursday and twice on Saturday with the same content was repeated each time.¹¹⁰ For this reason, any exclusivity that might have been present in the first viewing was undone by the second.¹¹¹ Some bloggers reported on this content in the same way as

¹⁰⁷ Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, 50.

¹⁰⁸ The 1997 Events Guide lists “Trailer Park,” programmed from 5:00 to 6:30 p.m. Janet Tait, ed. *1997 Comic-Con International Events Guide* (San Diego: Comic-Con International, Inc., 1997). While I have been unable to locate the 1996 Events Guide, there is no mention of the trailer park in 1995. Larry Young, ed. *1995 San Diego Comic Book Convention Events Guide* (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention Inc., 1995). Shortly after this time, trailers began to circulate more widely (officially and unofficially) online. For more on the rise of online trailers, see: Keith M. Johnson, “The Coolest Way to Watch Movie Trailers in the World’: Trailers in the Digital Age,” *Convergence* 14, no. 2 (2008).

¹⁰⁹ Geoff Williams, “Star Wars: The Phantom Menace; Waiting for the Force,” *Cincinnati Post*, February 11, 1999, 1C; Marav Saar, “‘Star Wars’ Preview Becomes the Main Attraction // Movies: Fans Pay Full Price Just to See a Teaser to the Upcoming Prequel to the Hit Series,” *The Orange Country Register*, November 18, 1998, A01.

¹¹⁰ Based on descriptions of Thursday’s trailers and my own experience with the 2:00 and 5:15 p.m. presentations, the programing was identical. Travis Woods, “Comic-Con 2012: Trailer Park Showcases Ads for ‘Dredd’, ‘Finding Nemo 3D,’ and More,” last modified July 12, 2012, <http://screenrave.com/2012-07-12/comiccon-2012-trailer-park-showcases-ads-dredd-finding-nemo-3d/>

¹¹¹ Nonetheless, some expectation of exclusivity remained. At least one blogger complained that the trailer for *Dredd* (Pete Travis, 2012), screened during Trailer Park on July 12th, was previously released and simply presented in 3D on this occasion. *Ibid.*

they did other Comic-Con programming, which suggests that the space of Hall H and the time of Comic-Con even works to elevate movie trailers out of the realm of the everyday and make them part of the show.¹¹² Most, however, simply omitted descriptions of the Trailer Park programming altogether, demonstrating an implicit understanding of such content as de facto commercials and simultaneously elevating the other kinds of advertising in Hall H to more noteworthy and exclusive status. Further, the film trailers screened in 2012 were notable for their status as children's films and B-grade genre films that could hardly compete with the attention garnered by films promoted on studio panels, such as *The Hobbit* and *Iron Man 3*.¹¹³ Exclusivity, in this context, helps to produce a framework or hierarchy through which Comic-Con attendees, as well as those who simply read about Comic-Con online, understand advertising at the event. Providing a reminder of what it feels like to simply watch traditional movie trailers helps to establish, on the industry's terms, what exclusive content looks like.

Surprise

Technical problems and delays during the first Trailer Park segment on Saturday, July 14th, likely related to Warner Bros.' immanent multi-screen unveiling, only added to the anticipation surrounding the studio's panel. It is difficult to describe the excitement that filled the room when the Warner Bros./Legendary panel began, but judging from my own observations and the reports that emerged from the event, "Hall H hysteria" was in

¹¹² A 2012 post on comicbook.com, for example, reads "one of the main attractions for many fans is the annual Trailer Park, taking place in the hallowed ground referred to as Hall H." Nick Winstead, "Comic-Con Trailer Park Covers a Wide Spectrum of Films," *Comicbook.com*, last modified July 12, 2012, <http://comicbook.com/blog/2012/07/12/comic-con-trailer-park-covers-a-wide-spectrum-of-films/>

¹¹³ The trailers screened were for *Dredd*, *Finding Nemo 3D* (Lee Unkrich and Andrew Stanton, 2012), *Despicable Me 2* (Pierre Coffin and Chris Renaud, 2013) *Hotel Transylvania* (Genndy Tartakovsky, 2012), *Resident Evil: Retribution* (Paul W.S. Anderson, 2012), and *Rise of the Guardians* (Peter Ramsey, 2012). Woods, "Comic-Con 2012: Trailer Park Showcases Ads for 'Dredd', 'Finding Nemo 3D,' and More".

full effect.¹¹⁴ Alex Billington of *First Showing* described it as “one of the best hall H panels I have ever attended in my 7 year history at Comic-Con”¹¹⁵; MTV declared Warner Bros. the “ultimate winner” at Comic-Con suggesting that given their Hall H presentation, the competition “wasn’t even close”¹¹⁶; and, *Cinema Blend* simply called it “epic.”¹¹⁷ Producing an authentic surprise in Hall H yields a high return on exclusivity because gossip, speculation, and anticipation leading up to high profile panels often remove this element, as was the case in 2010, when Marvel’s introduction of Joss Whedon as the director of the *Avengers* was undermined by online reports leading up to the Hall H panel.¹¹⁸

Given the prevalence of online buzz leading up to Comic-Con, about who will appear there and what will be announced, it is difficult to completely surprise attendees in Hall H. For this reason, part of the pleasure of such surprise announcements or celebrity appearances is the anticipation, the ability to predict outcomes in advance, thereby increasing not only the exclusivity of the experience, but also the sense of exclusivity and insider, fan knowledge that surrounds Comic-Con attendees. These so-called surprises,

¹¹⁴ See my description at the beginning of this section.

¹¹⁵ Alex Billington, "Comic-Con 2012: 'Man of Steel' + 'Godzilla' + 'Pacific Rim' Video Blog," *FirstShowing.Net*, last modified July 15, 2012, <http://www.firstshowing.net/2012/comic-con-2012-man-of-steel-godzilla-pacific-rim-video-blog/>

¹¹⁶ Kevin P. Sullivan, "San Diego Comic-Con Winners and Losers," *MTV*, last modified July 16, 2012, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1689682/comic-con-2012-recap.jhtml>

¹¹⁷ CB's Comic Con Team, "The 6 Best Panels of Comic Con 2012".

¹¹⁸ For example, Drew McWeeny, a former *Ain't it Cool News* writer, anticipated almost exactly what would unfold at Comic-Con two weeks later, writing on *Hit Fix*: “How much of a reaction do you think there would be if Marvel introduced Joss Whedon as the official director of ‘The Avengers,’ something they’ve been refusing to confirm ever since the rumors first broke? And how much of a reaction would there be if he walked out onstage to personally introduce The Avengers?” Drew McWeeny, "Exclusive: Edward Norton in Not the Hulk in 'the Avengers'... but He'd Like to Be," *HitFix*, last modified July 9, 2010, <http://www.hitfix.com/blogs/motion-captured/posts/exclusive-edward-norton-is-not-the-hulk-in-the-avengers-but-he-d-like-to-be>.

then, are often more about delivering upon or exceeding a pre-existing set of expectations. For example, when Tim Burton introduced Johnny Depp to attendees in a 2009 panel promoting *Alice in Wonderland* (Tim Burton, 2009), Depp's brief appearance was met with raucous applause and screams from the audience, with news of this celebrity sighting traveling well beyond Hall H. As *E!* reported, "There had been murmurs" that Depp would stop by that day, but there was still a palpable excitement in the crowd.¹¹⁹ That MTV described Depp's very brief appearance onstage as a "shocking addition" to the panel is both a reflection of his star persona and the result of a careful control of information.¹²⁰ While most stars who appear at Comic-Con stay for the duration of the panel, Depp, who has cultivated the persona of a quirky but mysterious outsider, did the bare minimum in order to drum up excitement: He stepped on the Comic-Con stage and left minutes later, completely avoiding the Q&A portion of the panel. Disney's decision not to announce his appearance in the program and Depp's own elusive star persona made his arrival at Comic-Con somewhat unexpected, but also lowered the bar for attendees, who were predisposed to accept Depp's reticence to participate and engage as part of his particular set of celebrity quirks; just showing up was generous.¹²¹ Thus, a

¹¹⁹ I can attest to the surprise element, having been present and among a segment of attendees who had not heard any "murmurs" about Depp's appearance. Natasha Vargas-Cooper, "Johnny Depp Crashes Comic-Con--Then Splits!," *E!*, last modified July 23, 2009, <http://www.eonline.com/news/135572/johnny-depp-crashes-comic-con-then-splits>. At the time, the room was filled with a large number of female fans awaiting an upcoming panel for *Twilight: New Moon* (Chris Weitz, 2009), further amplifying the effect of Depp's unexpected appearance. The scheduling of *Alice in Wonderland* and Depp's appearance in this time and place may have been fortuitous, but was more likely a further demonstration of the orchestration of flow in Hall H.

¹²⁰ MTV News Staff, "Johnny Depp, Tim Burton Preview 'Alice in Wonderland' at Comic-Con," *MTV News*, last modified July 23, 2009, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1616846/johnny-depp-tim-burton-preview-alice-wonderland-at-comic-con.jhtml>

¹²¹ This was similarly the case when director Jon Favreau brought Harrison Ford on stage for the *Cowboys and Aliens* (Jon Favreau, 2011) panel in 2011. Adding to the comic effect (and commenting on his own reluctance), Ford was shackled in handcuffs. John Young, "Harrison Ford (in Handcuffs!) Makes His First

delicate (and somewhat counterintuitive) balance of anticipation, which builds the sense of exclusivity leading up to the event, and the unexpected, which produces authentic and infectious audience reactions, is what make surprises in Hall H, predictable or not, particularly effective.

While it is not uncommon for studios to surprise or, at least, tease at surprising attendees with celebrity appearances and special announcements, Warner Bros./Legendary's technological alteration of Hall H was far less common or expected and likely involved significantly more planning and economic investment. Though, in 2009, Hall H was equipped with 3D technology, facilitating a day of panels that culminated in James Cameron's unveiling of the *Avatar* footage, Warner Bros.' surprise technological upgrade was made highly visible through the addition of two massive screens. The result was "an immersive atmosphere in a room known for its airplane-hangar feel," a transformation of the Comic-Con space on a grandiose scale, paralleled only by the opening of Hall H itself.¹²²

In thinking about this transformation, it is worth pausing here to reconsider the space of Hall H. As I have described, the Hall is 64,842 square feet, very large, and very deep and cavernous. A number of aisles divide rows of seats into large horizontal and vertical sections towards the front, middle and back of the room. One large screen hangs

Appearance at Comic-Con for 'Cowboys & Aliens'," *Entertainment Weekly*, last modified July 24, 2010, <http://popwatch.ew.com/2010/07/24/comic-con-harrison-ford-cowboys-aliens/>

Much like my discussion of the *Twilight* meet and greet in Chapter Three, this set of expectations means that while fans were asked and expected to go above and beyond in their affective responses and investments, screening the *Alice in Wonderland* trailer three times in under an hour, above-the-line industry workers, like Depp, need only show up and leave almost immediately.

¹²² Josh L. Dickey, "Con Still on H'w'd High; 'Man of Steel,' 'Pacific Rim' Draw Fan Buzz WB, Legendary Tout Tentpoles," *Variety*, July 16, 2012, 5.

above the stage (in addition to the added Warner Bros. screens) and three other large screens hang towards the middle and back of the hall. These screens all display video feed of the panels, as well as any additional footage screened by the studios (fig. 27). The *Unofficial SDCC Blog* further describes the Hall's configuration and its inherent challenges for attendees:

You'll be able to see what's happening on stage from any seat in the house, but be prepared and get a set of portable binoculars or use your camera's zoom lens for a natural view of the panel. The seating arrangement inside Hall H isn't the most optimal. First, it's flat, so no auditorium or stadium seating. This means it can be difficult to see the stage when seated behind someone particularly tall. Second, it's wide, meaning if you're in the back and off to the side, you're more likely staring at a panel guest's side profile or looking off to one of the hanging projection screens. And third, about those hanging projection screens. If you have even a moderately decent seat in the middle of the Hall, chances are you'll be sitting directly under one of the screens, or close enough that you'd have to stare directly upward during the entire panel to see anything.¹²³

As this description suggests, while there are not technically any "bad" seats in Hall H, there is a hierarchy of seating quality, with the ideal position located in the front and

¹²³ It is interesting that Rutz refers to a camera's zoom lens as a "natural" view, given that it offers the same kind of mediation as the Comic-Con screens. That the camera's zoom function is controlled by the spectator, suggests a phenomenological difference between these screens that is worthy of future consideration. Jeremy Rutz, "I Am Hall H: A Guide to the Biggest Stage at Comic-Con," *SDCC Unofficial Blog*, last modified June 3, 2013, <http://sdccblogger.com/2013/06/i-am-hall-h-a-guide-to-the-biggest-stage-at-comic-con/>

center section of the hall. Any other location would require some degree of technological mediation in order to get a full impression of events happening on stage.¹²⁴

Given this emphasis on mediation during the live event, the appearance of two more large screens on either side of the stage represented a spectacle that could be enjoyed and easily viewed throughout the hall. Because these wraparound screens only stretched around the front portion of the hall, they provided a more immersive environment for those seated towards the front, while those in the middle and back portions got a better view of the overall spectacle (figs. 30-31). Not only did this reinforce the hierarchy that began as fans stood in line overnight to secure their seats, but it also positioned those farther back in the hall as spectators of an event that was happening to attendees in the front. Still, the screens were large (and unexpected) enough that those seated significantly farther back in the hall could still revel in this exclusive experience and content. While those in the last rows of the room surely wished they were seated closer as Warner Bros. unveiled their screens, the economy of waiting worked in concert with exclusivity to ensure that everyone was grateful to be in the hall at all, even if it was, effectively, to witness the excitement of others. Though everyone who gained access got to experience this grand technological reveal, one's specific location in the space produced, not just exclusivity, but degrees of exclusivity.

If we understand exclusivity as something that can be experienced vicariously and in degrees within the hall, it is possible to see how Comic-Con content travels outside the Hall in the form of publicity and buzz, while still maintaining that exclusive feeling.

Movie blog *Collider* was one of many to describe the unveiling:

¹²⁴ Over four visits to Comic-Con, I have been seated in various locations throughout Hall H, including the front, center section. My experiences echo this description, in that in all but the front and center location, I, too, relied on the screens and my camera's zoom lens to get a closer view of the stage.

The Warner Bros./Legendary panel kicked off in true epic fashion, as curtains to both sides of the main screen opened up to reveal two more gigantic screens. The crowd went wild. Moderator and Comic-Con 2012 MVP Chris Hardwick came out first and introduced the head of Legendary, Thomas Tull. He was in the middle of speaking when the lights went down and gigantic mechanized logos/computer screens came up signaling the entrance of Pacific Rim. Tull quipped, “Alright, so that’s how we do that.”¹²⁵

Other articles described how “fans screamed in excitement as the lights went black and the three screens started displaying graphics simultaneously to introduce the Warner Bros. and Legendary Pictures logos”¹²⁶ and suggested that “this feels like what Cinerama was always supposed to be.”¹²⁷ All of these descriptions attempt to capture the experience of being in Hall H that day by referencing the content, the crowd’s reaction, and the immersive environment. While those reading about the panel might not have experienced it first-hand, such descriptions offer the chance to imagine, vicariously, the excitement that *everyone* inside the Hall must have felt, without considering how the degrees of excitement and exclusivity might have varied according to one’s positioning in that space.

Unlike other Comic-Con “surprises,” Warner Brothers’ technological/spatial

¹²⁵ Adam Chitwood, "Comic-Con: Guillermo Del Toro Wows with Monster Vs. Robot Footage at Pacific Rim Panel," *Collider*, last modified July 15, 2012, <http://collider.com/comic-con-pacific-rim/>

¹²⁶ Derek Lee, "Comic-Con Recap: Warner Bros. And Legendary Pictures Panel," *Examiner.com*, last modified July 16, 2012, <http://www.examiner.com/article/comic-con-recap-warner-bros-and-legendary-pictures-panel>

¹²⁷ The Deadline Team, "'Pacific Rim', 'Man of Steel', 'the Hobbit', 'Godzilla': What Comic-Con Was Made For," *Deadline Hollywood*, last modified July 14, 2012, <http://www.deadline.com/2012/07/pacific-rim-godzilla-man-of-steel-the-hobbit-what-comic-con-was-made-for/>

expansion was slightly more difficult to anticipate, but it still played with and upon preexisting expectations that Warner Brothers had created in booking an unusually long time slot in Hall H.¹²⁸ Indeed, *Variety*, caught up in some “Hall H hysteria” of its own, suggesting that in spite of the ongoing questions about Comic-Con’s importance to the industry, Warner Brothers had demonstrated how effective the event could be: “In terms of creating that critical first impression—the likes of which can drive anticipation and the months long fan-sharing of online marketing assets that studios crave—it was Warner Brothers, who managed to leap over the Comic-Con bar in a single bound.”¹²⁹

Unfortunately for Warner Bros., the legitimate surprise that they achieved with this technological upgrade was a feat that could only be accomplished once. Everyone in the room was witnessing something for the first time and, for better or worse, this extended time slot and technological spectacular had set a high bar for future Comic-Con panels. It is not surprising then, that Warner Bros. repeated this spectacle again in 2013. Not only that, but Sony also added their own multi-screen reveal during an extended, two hour and ten minute panel, screening special footage of *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*

¹²⁸ Alex Billington, "Comic-Con 2012 Live: Wb's Panel on 'Hobbit,' 'Mos' + 'Pacific Rim'," *FirstShowing.Net*, last modified July 14, 2012, <http://www.firstshowing.net/2012/comic-con-2012-live-wbs-panel-on-hobbit-mos-pacific-rim>; Jacob Hall, "Comic-Con 2012 Saturday Schedule: 'Man of Steel,' 'Iron Man 3' and More," *Screen Crush*, last modified June 30, 2012, <http://screencrush.com/comic-con-2012-saturday>; Matt Patches, "Comic-Con 2012: The Web's Most Anticipated SDCC Panels," *Hollywood.com*, last modified July 6, 2012, <http://www.hollywood.com/news/movies/32970094/comic-con-2012-the-web-s-most-anticipated-sdcc-panels>

¹²⁹ Dickey, "Con Still on H'w'd High; 'Man of Steel,' 'Pacific Rim' Draw Fan Buzz WB, Legendary Tout Tentpoles." *Variety* was not the only publication to make this observation, *HitFix* declared Warner Bros. a Comic-Con “winner”: “No studio had a more talked about presentation than Warner Bros. and Legendary Pictures. Stunning the Hall H crowd and their studio peers, the two companies spent a pretty penny to expand the traditional Hall H screen with two side screens tripling the audio visual projection. It was a master display of showmanship and was assisted by the fact the studio partners' films ("The Hobbit," "Pacific Rim," "Man of Steel," "The Campaign," "Godzilla") delivered the goods during the panel.” Gregory Ellwood, "Comic-Con 2012 Winners and Losers: Robert Downey Jr., Stephenie Meyer, 'Pacific Rim'," *HitFix*, last modified July 18, 2012, <http://www.hitfix.com/news/comic-con-2012-winners-and-losers-robert-downey-jr-stephenie-meyer-pacific-rim>

(Marc Webb, 2014) in which Spider-Man traversed all three the screens at the front of the room.¹³⁰ This time, however, the “surprise,” like the celebrity appearances I described above, was framed by a pre-existing set of expectations that Warner Bros. had created. In this way, the industry, or those members of the industry willing to make a larger investment in their Comic-Con promotion, can reshape, not only the space, but also the expectations of audiences.

Control

Before the Warner Brothers panel began, a Comic-Con official appeared on stage to recite the same speech he had already made multiple times that day:

I'll bet some of you can even say this speech with me. Please don't record any of the footage that you see. Again, the studios have this *exclusively* for you guys who have been in here all day. And I know some of you have been camped out since yesterday waiting for this. So I want to make sure that the studios feel comfortable doing this and they'll keep bringing us this great footage. Let everyone know how cool it was, spread the word, but lets keep the footage in here. (My emphasis)¹³¹

I have witnessed speeches like this one since I began attending panels in Hall H in 2009.¹³² The content of these speeches has changed very little from year-to-year. They always remind attendees of the exclusive content they are about to consume and the significant effort that got them there. In this way, these speeches suggest that attendees

¹³⁰ Estrada, *2013 Comic-Con International: Events Guide*, 58.

¹³¹ Eddie Ibrahim, *Anti-Piracy Warning*, Comic-Con Panel, *Comic-Con International 2012* (San Diego: July 14, 2012).

¹³² This includes 2009, 2011, 2012, and 2013

should feel a sense of proprietary right to what they are about to experience, while simultaneously reminding them that the content of this experience belongs to the studios. Interestingly, however, in 2009, the speech was framed as a response to behavior that had been previously happening in the hall, rather than the preemptive strike against piracy, above:

It's really, really important that you guys work with us on this. Do not record any of the footage that's being shown. Honestly, the studios are kind of being generous and cutting stuff that's special for you guys and the crowd here. I mean, you can talk about it, blog about it all you want, but please, please do not record it because we don't want to, you know, scare them off and not want them to bring this kind of footage for us. So I just ask that we don't do that for the rest of the panels. Don't record the footage, okay?¹³³

While it is difficult to determine how long organizers have been making these announcements, the contrast between the 2012 and 2009 speeches suggest that they have evolved from a punitive to a preventative gesture. The threat of punishment is now recapitulated as a form of behavioral discipline; and the power to discipline, as Foucault reminds us, also means the “power to ‘train.’”¹³⁴ For this reason, these anti-piracy warnings work not only to deter fans from certain behaviors, but also to encourage others in their place.

¹³³ Eddie Ibrahim, *Anti-Piracy Warning*, Comic-Con Panel, *Comic-Con International 2012* (San Diego: July 23, 2009).

¹³⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 170.

As these warnings clearly illustrate, there is an anxiety on the part of the industry, and by extension, Comic-Con organizers, about the control of how fans approach the material screened at the event and what they do with it. On the one hand, fans are encouraged to be attentive to the panels and disseminate hype and buzz about the preview they have seen; but, on the other hand, the industry wants to control what kind of publicity gets circulated outside of the convention. This fear of piracy—of what are effectively advertisements—is even more baffling in light of the fact that many studios release trailers on the internet simultaneous to their launch at Comic-Con.¹³⁵ I would argue that this discourse about piracy at Comic-Con functions in two ways. First, it is an attempt to instill desirable audience practices. The piracy and circulation of promotional material may not necessarily threaten the success of the film, but it takes the control of marketing out of the hands of producers and puts it in the hands of fans.¹³⁶ This anti-piracy stand might also be a way to condition audiences to avoid such practices in the future, namely, pirating and downloading entire films and threatening studio profits. At stake for the industry, then, is not so much the circulation of their exclusive footage, rather it is how their marketing strategies are implemented and who, ultimately, retains control. The second outcome of such measures is that they amplify the excitement and exclusivity of the footage, maintaining the uniqueness of this event. This is especially important in light of the aforementioned circulation of these previews online. In this way, studios can continue to stir up excitement about the properties they are promoting, even before that content is presented. Much in the same way that the visibility of the line

¹³⁵ Marc Graser, "A Comic-Con Surprise: Twitter Tumbles," *Variety*, July 28 2009.

¹³⁶ See my discussion of the studios' initial response to Harry Knowles in Chapter Two.

produces a sense of value before the event, anti-piracy measures also helps to shape the perception that this footage is of significant value.

Ultimately, these speeches present attendees with examples of bad (piracy) and good (the circulation of publicity) fan behavior. Implicit in these two alternatives, however, is another warning: not only will bad behavior alienate the studios, but failure to conform to the good model of fandom, which works with the industry to produce publicity, might also drive Hollywood away. Thus, the statement “I want to make sure that the studios feel comfortable doing this and they’ll keep bringing us this great footage” is clarified in the last line of this speech “Let everyone know how cool it was, spread the word, but lets keep the footage in here.”

Synergy

The Warner Bros. and Legendary panels that followed over the next two and a half hours rode the wave of excitement produced when the curtains dropped to reveal the two screens. While the program listed three films, *Pacific Rim*, *Man of Steel*, and *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, the panel also included two surprise additions: *Godzilla* and *The Campaign* (Jay Roach, 2012). If the overall arrangement of panels in Hall H creates a kind of flow, it is also possible to see how films promoted within this particular two and a half hour period were strategically organized to build upon one another, working attendees into a flurry and building towards a crescendo with Peter Jackson’s presentation of twelve minutes of footage from *The Hobbit*. This panel was orchestrated, not only to promote individual films, but also to create a synergistic relationship between

Warner Bros. and their then partner Legendary Pictures, who had a longstanding co-financing and distribution deal at the time.¹³⁷

When Legendary Pictures' President Thomas Tull stepped on stage to introduce the first part of the program, he thanked Warner Bros., explicitly tying his company's ability to promote their films on this scale to the conglomerate's financial resources. He also reminded attendees of Legendary's highly successful fan-centered films, *Dark Knight* and *300* (Zach Snyder, 2006) and located their upcoming film, *Pacific Rim*, within this tradition by highlighting the subject matter ("giant monsters and giant robots") and connecting the film's director, Guillermo del Toro, to Legendary's other genre directors, Chris Nolan and Zach Snyder. While Warner Bros. may have been Legendary's collaborator, taking on the financial burden of staging the event, the two and a half hour panel emphasized films presented by Tull as Legendary productions, with the exception of *The Hobbit* and the surprise panel for the Will Ferrell and Zach Galifianakis comedy, *The Campaign*.¹³⁸ The *New York Times*, for example, observed that, "Superman was not nearly as super as the big Legendary logo that flashed behind Thomas Tull."¹³⁹ Thus, in

¹³⁷ Legendary Pictures and Warner Bros.' eight year co-financing and distribution deal came to an end in June 2013. I discuss this kind of corporate synergy in greater depth in the next chapter. Marc Graser, "Warner Bros. No Longer in Legendary's Future," *Variety*, last modified June 24, 2013, <http://variety.com/2013/biz/news/warner-bros-no-longer-in-legendarys-future-1200501572/>. Though Legendary ultimately signed a new deal with Universal, the companies were still entangled through distribution deals on films like *Godzilla* and *300: Rise of an Empire* (Noam Murro, 2014) and once again paired to present an extended Comic-Con panel in 2013. Andrew Wallenstein, "Kevin Tsujihara Breaks Silence on Why Legendary, WB Parted Ways," *Variety*, last modified October 5, 2013, <http://variety.com/2013/film/news/kevin-tsujihara-breaks-silence-on-why-legendary-wb-parted-ways-1200697794/>

¹³⁸ *The Campaign*, while offering an irreverent break from the rather intensely hyped previews, seemed somewhat out of place amongst the other high concept blockbusters. Justin Wyatt describes high concept films as pre-sold and easily summarized and pitched "through an emphasis on style within the films, and through an integration with marketing and merchandizing." Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 7.

¹³⁹ Brooks Barnes and Michael Cieply, "Hollywood Acts Warily at Comics Convention," *New York Times*, July 16 2012, B1.

addition to their shared financial interests through distribution deals with Legendary, Warner Bros. benefited from this pairing because it allowed them to fill a longer timeslot, elevate the spectacle, and present themselves, a large conglomerate, alongside the smaller studio, Legendary, as producers of fan-friendly content. In this way, both Warner Bros. and Legendary were able to carve out a powerful space in which to promote a brand identity built on a variety of genre films, but united by the enthusiasm and perceived tastes of the Comic-Con audience.

Scale

After the unveiling of the screens and Tull's introduction, Guillermo del Toro appeared on stage to promote his upcoming film *Pacific Rim*, a blockbuster that was also conveniently built around technological spectacle. As del Toro put it, "In a movie like this, when we say twenty-five story robots and twenty-five story monsters, if you don't have sense of awe and scale, everything is lost."¹⁴⁰ Though he was describing the film itself, del Toro could just as easily been describing that day's Comic-Con panel and its use of scale in attempt to evoke significant awe from the crowd.

This was not the first time del Toro appeared to promote this film at Comic-Con. The year prior, in 2011, Legendary Pictures held a small panel in room 6BCF.¹⁴¹ Unlike the Hall H spectacle, this panel was understated, revealing very little about the film other than its stars and del Toro's repeated description of the subject matter: "giant fucking

¹⁴⁰ Guillermo del Toro, *Warner Bros. Pictures and Legendary Pictures Preview Their Upcoming Lineups*, Comic-Con Panel, *Comic-Con International 2012* (San Diego: July 14, 2012).

¹⁴¹ This room seats just under 1,300. San Diego Convention Center Corporation, "Upper Level Room Specifications".

monsters and giant fucking robots.”¹⁴² With very little to *show*, Legendary opted to avoid the scale of Hall H and hold their event in a smaller room with less pomp and circumstance.¹⁴³ This confirms something that Comic-Con president, John Rogers, explained in a 2011 Talk-Back session: while it has become standard practice to seek out large Hollywood films in Hall H and television and smaller media panels in other rooms like Ballroom 20 and 6BCF, Rogers insisted, “that is not a convention that we have, it is what the studios are comfortable with.”¹⁴⁴ He went on to suggest that because studios often worry that their panel will not fill a large room or will be open to increased critique and exposure in these larger venues, they sometimes choose to host their panels in a slightly smaller space (or to skip Comic-Con all together), even if that means fewer attendees will be able to see their promotions. In another instance, Rogers described removing twenty rows of seats in Hall H in order to appease television studios that were fearful about moving from the smaller Ballroom 20 to the larger venue.¹⁴⁵

Ultimately, Rogers explained this logic, making an implicit statement about Comic-Con’s power relative to the studios: it is better that some people get to see the panels than to alienate studios and have no panels at all.¹⁴⁶ This demonstrates the degree to which Comic-Con’s organization is shaped by studios’ promotional choices, and how

¹⁴² Incidentally, his description of the film changed very little in the following year. Guillermo del Toro, *Legendary Pictures Preproduction Preview, Comic-Con International 2011* (San Diego: July 22, 2011).

¹⁴³ As *Hollywood Reporter* suggested, “Legendary Pictures doesn’t have a lick of footage to show but it’s got the talent to throw its first-ever Comic-Con panel.” Borys Kit, “Comic-Con 2011: Guillermo Del Toro and ‘Pacific Rim’ Cast Set Panel,” *Hollywood Reporter: Heat Vision*, last modified July 6, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/comic-con-2011-guillermo-del-208442>

¹⁴⁴ Rogers, *Comic-Con Talk Back 2011*.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Rogers has made these kinds of statements at various times during the annual Talk Back sessions, particularly when attendees complain about the lines or limited access to particular panels. *Ibid.*

these choices tend to diverge from the desires of a fan base that is habitually singled out for their importance as tastemakers and loyal consumers. If Comic-Con promotion were truly about the 130,000 people at the event, then it seems only logical that studios would try to reach as many of those individuals as possible. Instead, a small, exclusive audience guarantees not only a more predictable and controlled response, but also one that will make its way outside of the space in the form of heightened buzz about the film.

When del Toro screened footage of *Pacific Rim* in Hall H in 2012, he declared that all promotion for the film would go into “radio silence” until the end of the year.¹⁴⁷ This declaration not only made the footage feel more exclusive in the moment, but it was also mentioned numerous times in coverage of the panel, making it that much more newsworthy.¹⁴⁸ As it turned out, the time between Comic-Con and the end of 2012 was less silent and more accurately a slow, controlled stream of official information mixed with unofficial buzz, building up to the release of the trailer online in December. In August, *Collider* posted an interview in which del Toro talked about the film’s soundtrack and accompanying collectibles and *Empire Magazine* published location photos from the film, which subsequently made their way online.¹⁴⁹ In September,

¹⁴⁷ del Toro, *Warner Bros. Pictures and Legendary Pictures Preview Their Upcoming Lineups*.

¹⁴⁸ See, for example: Devin Faraci, "Comic-Con 2012: Pacific Rim Tears the Roof Off Hall H," *Badass Digest*, last modified July 15, 2012, <http://badassdigest.com/2012/07/15/comic-con-2012-pacific-rim-tears-the-roof-off-hall-h>; Jim Vejvoda, "Comic-Con: Pacific Rim Brings Giant Monsters and Robots," *IGN.com*, last modified July 14, 2012, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2012/07/14/comic-con-pacific-rim-brings-giant-monsters-and-robot>; Derrick Deanne, "Hall H: Surprises Galore from WB, Which Amazes with Scenes from 'Pacific Rim,' 'the Hobbit,' 'Man of Steel,' and More," *Fandango*, last modified July 15, 2012, <http://www.fandango.com/movieblog/hall-h-surprises-galore-from-wb-which-amazes-with-scenes-from-pacific-rim-hobbit-man-of-steel-and-more-718248.html>

¹⁴⁹ Steve 'Frosty' Weintraub, "Guillermo Del Toro Talks Pacific Rim Soundtrack and Collectables," *Collider*, last modified August 9, 2012, <http://collider.com/guillermo-del-toro-pacific-rim-soundtrack-collectables/187592>; Josh Wilding, "New Images from Guillermo Del Toro's Pacific Rim," *ComicBookMovie.Com*, last modified August 30, 2012, <http://www.comicbookmovie.com/fansites/JoshWildingNewsAndReviews/news/?a=66529>

Warner Bros. announced that they would convert *Pacific Rim* to 3-D, against del Toro's previously stated wishes.¹⁵⁰ Soon after, however, the director backtracked and said he was no longer opposed to the conversion explaining, "What happened was, in the weeks and months following Comic-Con, what I asked from the studio was to agree to four points that I wanted to do... Now I'm going to be involved in supervising it. What can I tell you? I changed my mind. I'm not running for office. I can do a Romney."¹⁵¹ Perhaps most interesting, was the film's panel during October's New York City Comic-Con, where del Toro undid his own vow of "radio silence," telling the crowd that although the *studio* did not want him to screen the San Diego Comic-Con footage, "the good news is that I don't give a fuck!"¹⁵² The panel also included the unveiling of a new poster and graphic novel prequel to the film.¹⁵³ In November, the movie blog *Latino Review* announced, "'Pacific Rim' Viral Marketing Has Begun!" and linked to a short video and a website with a not-so-mysterious clock counting down to what was quickly determined to be the premiere, not of the film, but its trailer.¹⁵⁴ Finally, on December 12th, Warner

¹⁵⁰ The reason for the conversion was, no doubt, economically motivated, as Warner Bros. sought to drive up ticket prices and open the door to the lucrative Chinese market. Simon Reynolds, "Guillermo Del Toro 'Strong-Armed' into 'Pacific Rim' 3D Conversion," *Digital Spy*, last modified September 13, 2012, <http://www.digitalspy.com/movies/news/a405796/guillermo-del-toro-strong-armed-into-pacific-rim-3d-conversion.html>

¹⁵¹ del Toro qtd. in Lesnick, "Guillermo Del Toro Talks the Strain and Pacific Rim's 3D Conversion," *Shock Till You Drop*, last modified September 22, 2012, <http://www.shocktilyoudrop.com/news/170043-guillermo-del-toro-talks-the-strain-and-pacific-rims-3d-conversion/>

¹⁵² del Toro qtd. in Matt Goldberg, "New York Comic-Con: Guillermo Del Toro Talks Pacific Rim and the Prequel Graphic Novel," *Collider*, last modified October 13, 2012, <http://collider.com/pacific-rim-recap-new-york-comic-con/>

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Kellvin Chavez, "'Pacific Rim' Viral Marketing Has Begun!," *Latino Review*, last modified November 28, 2012, http://latino-review.com/2012/11/pacific-rim-viral-marketing-begun/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=pacific-rim-viral-marketing-begun

Bros. released the trailer, followed in short succession by a director's commentary.¹⁵⁵

Ultimately, one must question whether "radio silence" around *Pacific Rim* was ever truly a goal. Instead, *IMDb* reports 918 separate online articles mentioning the film between July 14th, 2012, the date of the Comic-Con panel, and the end of the year, December 31st.¹⁵⁶ Thus, while Comic-Con represents, in its own space and time, a seemingly authentic and affective experience extended to fans by the studios, it is also highly staged, controlled and manipulated as part of a much larger ecosystem of promotional discourses.

Reframing

The *Pacific Rim* panel was immediately followed by the introduction of surprise guest Gareth Edwards who, along with Legendary Pictures' Thomas Tull, promoted his first feature film, *Godzilla*. It was at this point that moderator, Chris Hardwick, began to point out an excited fan in the front row and entertained the crowd with jokes that evoked both the positive and negative connotations of "Hall H hysteria." Hardwick's intermittent jokes, like, "Dude, you just filled your pants," and "I love watching grown men act like tweens at a Taylor Swift concert," both mocked the man's reaction as somewhat infantile (and gendered), but also used it to reinforce excitement about the film.¹⁵⁷ By the time Zach Snyder came onstage to promote *Man of Steel*, the attendee appeared to be beside himself, weeping when he approached the microphone during the Q&A. After gushing

¹⁵⁵ Brian Gallagher, "'Pacific Rim' Trailer," *MovieWeb*, last modified December 12, 2012, <http://www.movieweb.com/news/pacific-rim-trailer>; MTV, "Guillermo Del Toro Provides *Pacific Rim* Trailer Commentary," *Comingsoon.net*, last modified December 14, 2012, <http://www.comingsoon.net/news/movienews.php?id=98032>

¹⁵⁶ See: "News for *Pacific Rim* (2013)," *IMDb*, last modified <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1663662/news?year=2012;start=901>

¹⁵⁷ Chris Hardwick, *Warner Bros. Pictures and Legendary Pictures Preview Their Upcoming Lineups, Comic-Con Panel, Comic-Con International 2012* (San Diego: July 14, 2012).

about the trailer, he asked, very sincerely, if Snyder would reveal the villain of the film. The request was met with laughter from the crowd and an evasive non-answer from Snyder, further demonstrating the way in which promotional discourse in Hall H is tightly controlled, despite the air of spontaneity that studios try to produce. The mainstream media picked up on this lone fan's response to the preview and used it to promote the film more widely. Headlines read: "'Man of Steel' Footage so good it Makes Fans Cry," "The Man of Steel made fans cry with excitement," and "'Superman' trailer Makes Fans Cry."¹⁵⁸ While these headlines did not accurately reflect the reality of the event, they demonstrate that reality is not always what matters in such reports. What occurs in the space and time of Comic-Con is, instead, about the ideas and ideologies that grow outwards from the materiality of the event. Many of the discourses that are produced and reproduced have everything to do with studio promotion and very little to do with lived experience.

Warner Bros.' presentation for *The Hobbit* concluded the two and a half hour panel and was a huge draw in the room that day. However, the promotion of this film was already attached to some fairly significant discursive baggage. When Warner Bros. screened ten minutes of footage at CinemaCon, the official convention of the National Association of Theatre Owners, many reports cited a "lukewarm response"¹⁵⁹ to what

¹⁵⁸ Borys Kit, "'Man of Steel' Footage So Good It Makes Fans Cry," *The Hollywood Reporter: Heat Vision*, last modified July 14, 2012, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/comic-con-2012-man-steel-super-man-reboot-34932>; Oliver Franklin, "The Ten Biggest and Best Revelations from Comic-Con 2012," *British GQ*, last modified July 18, 2012; Ben Arnold, "'Superman' Trailer Makes Fans Cry," *Yahoo! Movies UK & Ireland*, last modified July 16, 2012, <http://uk.movies.yahoo.com/-superman--trailer-makes-fans-cry.html>

¹⁵⁹ Pete Hammond, "'The Hobbit' Footage in New Format Draws Lukewarm Response: Cinemacon," *Deadline Hollywood*, last modified April 24, 2012, <http://www.deadline.com/2012/04/the-hobbit-debuts-at-revolutionary-48-frames-during-warner-bros-exhib-presentation-cinemacon/>

was supposed to be a groundbreaking technological advance in film production and exhibition: high frame rate or 48fps.¹⁶⁰ Many compared the footage to a “made for TV movie,” a “soap opera” or called it altogether “non-cinematic.”¹⁶¹ Given this underwhelming response, the *Los Angeles Times*’ *Hero Complex* wondered if and how the film could recover from this negative publicity, asking: “Does ‘The Hobbit’ need a magic moment in Hall H?”¹⁶² Despite the investment in upgrading Comic-Con’s other screen technology, Warner Bros. and Peter Jackson decided not to show *The Hobbit* footage in 48fps. While the *New York Times* called this an “unexpectedly timid decision,”¹⁶³ Peter Jackson’s response was surprisingly nonchalant, especially regarding Comic-Con’s relative importance to *The Hobbit*’s ultimate success at the box office.

I think it’s more about protecting the downside, rather than helping the film in any significant way. There is a huge audience waiting to see “The Hobbit,” and any positive press from Comic-Con will truthfully have little impact on that. However, as we saw at CinemaCon earlier this year, with our 48 frames per second presentation, negative bloggers are the ones the

¹⁶⁰ This technology involves the filming of high-resolution digital video and its projection at double the usual speed in order to reduce blurring and create a more lifelike image. For more information, see: Jamie Lendino, “The Hobbit’ at 48fps: Frame Rates Explained,” *PC Mag*, last modified December 14, 2012, <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2403746,00.asp>

¹⁶¹ Amy Kaufman, “Cinemacon: Footage of ‘the Hobbit’ Draws Mixed Reaction,” *Los Angeles Times*, last modified April 24, 2012, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/movies/2012/04/cinemacon-hobbit-frame-rate-depp-gatsby.htm>; Mark Hanrahan, “The Hobbit’ 48fps Footage Divides Audiences at Cinemacon,” *Huff Post Entertainment*, last modified April 25, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/25/hobbit-48-fps-footage-divides-audiences_n_1452391.htm; Devin Faraci, “Cinemacon2012: The Hobbit Underwhelms at 48 Frames Per Second,” *Badass Digest*, last modified April 24, 2012, <http://badassdigest.com/2012/04/24/cinemacon-2012-the-hobbit-underwhelms-at-48-frames-per-second/>

¹⁶² Geoff Boucher, “The Hobbit’ at Comic-Con: Peter Jackson’s San Diego Plan,” *Los Angeles Times Hero Complex*, last modified July 11, 2012, <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/movies/the-hobbit-at-comic-con-peter-jacksons-san-diego-plan/>

¹⁶³ Barnes and Cieply, “Hollywood Acts Warily at Comics Convention,” B1.

mainstream press runs with and quotes from. I decided to screen the “Hobbit” reel at Comic-Con in 2-D and 24 frames per second, so the focus stays firmly with the content and not the technical stuff. If people want 3-D and 48fps, that choice will be there for them in December.¹⁶⁴

Jackson’s comments demonstrate several key points that I have discussed throughout this chapter. First, he acknowledges the “huge audience waiting to see ‘The Hobbit,’” suggesting that his visit to Comic-Con is more about mitigating any negative press rather than selling *The Hobbit* to those 6,500 individuals in Hall H. Second, he alludes to the way that extreme reactions, positive or negative, are most frequently those that are seized upon in mainstream coverage. In the case of CinemaCon, he argues, the negative reaction to the technology made for the most compelling story, much in the same way that reporters seized upon the *Django* “sizzle reel” or the tearful fan during the *Man of Steel* presentation. Finally, Jackson’s comments demonstrate how careful control of content leads to further exclusivity, which can also travel beyond the walls of Comic-Con. While he showed attendees twelve minutes of exclusive footage, he also left something more for opening day, encouraging audiences to pay extra for a special IMAX, 3-D and/or 48fps ticket.¹⁶⁵ As I have argued throughout this chapter, exclusivity works, in all of these promotional contexts, by using the confines of space and time to sell the industry’s products to a much broader audience.

¹⁶⁴ Jackson qtd. in Boucher, "'The Hobbit' at Comic-Con: Peter Jackson's San Diego Plan".

¹⁶⁵ It is worth mentioning that these technologies are similarly constructed around exclusivity, as they transform films into media events that can only be experienced in the theater. While outside the parameters of this dissertation, this exhibition technology represents one way in which my theories regarding exclusivity might be deployed beyond Comic-Con.

Jackson's comments and the larger discourse surrounding *The Hobbit's* Comic-Con preview raise one final question, which I will explore in depth in the next chapter. Why does this discourse draw such a strong connection between an industry trade show (CinemaCon) and a fan event (Comic-Con)? In many ways, Jackson's response, to emphasize content over technology at Comic-Con demonstrates two very different appeals to attendees at CinemaCon and Comic-Con. The trade show for theatrical exhibitors focused, rather logically, on the technology that would be used to exhibit the film. Jackson's comments, on the other hand, suggest that Comic-Con fans should be more attentive to content. While this discourse focuses on both events as important venues from which publicity and buzz emerge, it also demonstrates the way in which theater exhibitors and fans are *not* alike; nor does the industry approach these groups in identical ways. The final chapter of this dissertation returns to the historical trajectory that I began tracing in the introduction to this dissertation. I focus on the growth and development of the Exhibit Hall space in order to consider the ways in which Comic-Con has been compared to or functioned as an industry space. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, this kind of spatial and discursive overlap between audiences and industry help to reify structures of power through which the industry interpellates fans as audience commodity and free labor.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism; Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*; Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy."

CHAPTER 5

Showing the Business: The Exhibit Hall as Industry Space

“In our fascination with the highly visible show, let us not overlook the less visible business that ultimately shapes, constructs, recycles, breaks out, and distributes the show for a profit. No business means no show and doing business means constructing shows according to business needs. These are the ground rules, recoverable through critical analysis, from which we can safely approach the analysis of a commodified culture and the products of show business.”

-Eileen Meehan, 1991¹

The sprawling convention has become, in fact, an industrial trade show masking as a fan show.

Peter Bart, 2004²

Preface

No Comic-Con experience would be complete without a trip to the Exhibit Hall, a densely packed, over 460,000 square foot room filled with booths and tables representing producers, distributors, and dealers of popular culture commodities like films, television shows, comic books, toys, and games. The floor is extremely crowded, particularly in areas with a concentration of promotion for media companies, who offer autograph sessions, photo-ops, contests, and free giveaways (also known as swag). At one such booth, operated by Anchor Bay Entertainment (a home entertainment and production company owned by Starz Inc. and The Weinstein Company), I found myself swept up in a crush of people, pushing and scrambling wildly for a free bag that displayed an image of

¹ Eileen Meehan, "'Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!': The Political Economy of a Commercial Intertext," in *The Many Lives of Batman*, ed. Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio (New York: Routledge, 1991), 62.

² Bart, "Geek Chic: Hollywood Corrals Nerd Herd..." 1.

The Walking Dead (AMC, 2010-) on one side and Spartacus: Vengeance (Starz 2012) on the other. This piece of swag promoted a confusing confluence of two seemingly separate texts on two competing cable networks, both of whom supplement their schedule of Hollywood films with high-quality original programming. Connecting these two networks was Anchor Bay Entertainment, the company distributing both shows on Blu-Ray and DVD. In this instance, the more popular program, The Walking Dead, was a vehicle for promoting Spartacus, while both worked to promote Anchor Bay's home entertainment releases.

Having happened upon the booth by being at the right place at the right time, I managed to slip in and position myself near the front of the crowd. When the booth's employees pulled out the boxes containing the free bags, I was surrounded, pushed, and crushed. For a brief moment, I was actually frightened as the crowd closed in around me. Abandoning my usual commitment to good manners, I, too, grabbed wildly for a bag, not because I was deeply invested in this free item, but because, briefly, it seemed like the only way out. An hour later, as I walked back to my hotel, a man stopped me in the street to admire my bag; one he had tried to procure, but missed out on for several days. I told him I was nearly crushed in the process of obtaining it and he replied, extending his hand to shake mine, "but you got it!"

Introduction

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that the various forms of exclusivity deployed at Comic-Con produce an uneven power relationship that allows Hollywood to invite attendees to feel like insiders, while also placing limits on when, what, where, and how they access exclusive experiences and information. While the conceptual lines

between insider and outsider are blurred at the event, the control of the space and the kinds of activities and experiences offered at Comic-Con situate attendees in a liminal position between media producer and consumer. The result is that attendees are invited both to identify as industry insiders by consuming and circulating exclusive promotions and to indulge in the pleasure of consumerism all at the same time. While this occurs throughout the time and space of Comic-Con, this tension is particularly pronounced in the Exhibit Hall, a massive space that functions both as an industrial forum and a pleasurable consumer experience, somewhere between a trade show and a shopping mall.

Much like the lines and Hall H, the Exhibit Hall is a high-profile component of the Comic-Con experience, one that is inextricably bound to the space itself. The modern day Comic-Con Exhibit Hall is both sprawling and cramped; a frenetic environment constrained by the sheer volume of people attempting to move in and around it (fig. 32). At 460,859 square feet, the Exhibit Hall covers Halls A-G, almost the entire ground floor of the San Diego Convention Center, and is more than a quarter mile from end to end.³ Every bit of this space (with the exception of a few concession areas) is filled with promotional booths for television, film, comic, publishing, and game companies; large toy, collectible, and comic companies selling directly to consumers; writers and artists selling and signing their work; and a range of smaller dealers selling games, comics, toys, clothes, collectibles, and memorabilia. Tables and booths are arranged in approximately fifty aisles, forming vague, conceptual sections based upon the size and popularity of the

³ "Aisles of Smiles! Comic-Con's Massive Exhibit Hall Rocks!," in *Comic-Con International Update 3*, ed. Dan Vado (San Diego: Comic-Con International, 2005), 24. As I discussed in Chapter Four, the remaining ground floor space, Hall H, is reserved for panel presentations.

display, the kinds of product being promoted or sold, and the person or companies doing the selling.⁴

One end of the hall houses the “Artists’ Alley,” a term commonly assigned to spaces at fan conventions where individual artists can reserve small tables (usually at reduced rates) in order to sell sketches and showcase their work.⁵ Although, as the name suggests, Artists’ Alley has long been relegated to the outlying areas of the exhibition space, the 2013 map offers a striking visualization of how this space is dwarfed by the expansive hall (fig. 33).⁶ Covering approximately 1/12th of the map, the diminutive Artists’ Alley lives up to its name. This marginal space is clearly delineated on the map and is easily identifiable in person, but set apart at the far end of the hall. As such, it is also easy to neglect or miss for those who do not make it a destination. While the map similarly identifies areas in the first quarter of the hall devoted to “vinyl and collectible toys,” “fantasy illustrators,” and “illustrators,” attendees encounter the space primarily as aisles of generic convention tables, making the physical borders of these categories significantly more difficult to identify in person and harder to distinguish from the other

⁴ The aisles are counted by hundreds, starting at one hundred and ending at around five thousand. While a 2005 issue of *Update* cites fifty-three aisles, the 2013 *Events Guide* map numbering ends at five thousand (fifty aisles), but does not count two more aisles in and around Artists’ Alley at the end of the hall. Estrada, *2013 Comic-Con International: Events Guide*, map insert; “Aisles of Smiles! Comic-Con’s Massive Exhibit Hall Rocks!,” 24. Standard, uniformly sized tables are typically used by artists, small companies, and dealers while booths denote the larger and atypical blocks of space occupied by more high profile exhibitors. I will discuss these distinctions at greater length below.

⁵ Brad J. Guigar, *The Everything Cartooning Book: Create Unique and Inspired Cartoons for Fun* (Avon, MA: F+W Publications Inc., 2005), 292; Nat Gertler and Steve Lieber, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Creating a Graphic Novel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 2009), 283. Artist’s Alley was first introduced in at the 1986 Comic-Con. Holly Carroll and Ruby Graves. “1986 Progress Report #2.” San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State University Library Comic Art Collection.

⁶ Estrada, *2013 Comic-Con International: Events Guide*, map insert.

small vendors throughout this same area of the hall (fig. 33).⁷ Moving deeper into the hall, these smaller displays and sellers give way to the large (often two-story) promotional booths for media companies such as Warner Bros., CBS, 20th Century Fox, and AMC (figs. 34-35). The already dense crowds become so concentrated at times that it is difficult to move; but, in these high-traffic areas, the flow of bodies and the sometimes aggressive coaxing of event security to “keep moving” also make it difficult to *stop* moving. For this reason, it is nearly impossible to take everything in during a single visit, particularly when surrounded by such a relentlessly stimulating promotional environment, filled with elaborate booths, prop displays, autograph sessions, and giveaways—all potential photo-ops, orchestrated to attract attention. The highly visible spectacle and the somewhat unbalanced distribution of crowds around the largest industry booths is further evidence of what I have argued throughout this dissertation, that media industry promotions work to shape the Comic-Con experience, despite attendees individual and varied investments.

This concentration of film and television studios’ gradually gives way to large producers of toys and collectibles such as Hasbro, Mattel, Gentle Giant Ltd., and Lego and, finally, massive exhibits for comic companies such as Marvel, DC Entertainment, and Dark Horse (figs. 36-37). However, these exhibits are not just promoting comic

⁷ A random sampling of vendors in the first third of the hall, but outside the officially mapped categories of “Artists Alley,” “Illustrators,” “Fantasy Illustrators,” and Vinyl and Collectibles,” include: Crystal Caste, a manufacturer and seller of polyhedral gaming dice; Mostly Signs, a company that makes and sells reproductions of old signs; Sanrio, a boutique and official seller of Hello Kitty merchandise; and Woolbuddy, a company specializing in handcrafted felt stuffed animals. “Crystal Caste,” *Crystal Caste*, last modified 2014, http://crystalcaste.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Session_ID=7b92398b3089b69ac9278b217fcb9633&Screen=SFNT&Store_Code=C; “Nostalgic Reproductions: Home: Mostly Signs,” *Mostly Signs*, last modified 2014, <http://www.mostlysigns.co>; “Home of Hello Kitty and Friends,” *Sanrio.com*, last modified 2014, <http://www.sanrio.co>; “About Us,” *Woolbuddy*, last modified 2014, <http://woolbuddy.com/pages/about-u>; *2013 Comic-Con International: Events Guide*, map insert.

books, but all the products associated with their media brand. In recent years, for example, Marvel has displayed props from their various films (such as Iron Man's suits and Captain America's shield) and featured appearances from actors like Robert Downey Jr., who served as the judge of a children's Iron Man costume contest in 2012.⁸ Finally, further along the hall, away from the large, corporately operated booths, smaller companies, artists, and dealers increase and foot traffic decreases, however slightly. In 2013, organizers altered this configuration slightly, moving video game companies to the far end of the hall. In dispersing the promotional presence of the media industries throughout the hall, organizers were attempting mitigate "crowding issues encountered in the past."⁹ Mirroring the discourses about Hollywood's increased presence at Comic-Con, one commentator observed that this spatial designation was evidence that a growing number of video game companies were recognizing Comic-Con as a viable promotional space.¹⁰ In addition to the specific implications of this move for the video game industry, it also made media industry promotion, as a whole, a more felt presence throughout the hall. Most importantly, however, this allocation of space demonstrates how the event is continually reconfiguring to accommodate industry promotion. As I will argue in this

⁸ "SDCC 2012: Iron Man's New Armor Unveiled," *Marvel.com*, last modified July 14, 2012, http://marvel.com/news/movies/2012/7/14/19058/sdcc_2012_iron_mans_new_armor_unveile; "San Diego Comic-Con 2010: See Cap's Shield and More," *Marvel.com*, last modified July 28, 2010, http://marvel.com/news/movies/2010/7/23/13391/san_diego_comic-con_2010_see_caps_shield_and_mor; "Join the Iron Man 3 Kids' Costume Event at SDCC," *Marvel.com*, last modified July 10, 2012, http://marvel.com/news/movies/2012/7/10/19047/join_the_iron_man_3_kids_costume_event_at_sdcc

⁹ In the past, this section was located at the opposite end of the hall, adjacent to other media industry booths. In this current configuration, fifteen aisles of smaller tables separate the video games companies from the rest of the corporately sponsored booths. *2013 Comic-Con International: Events Guide*, 2, map insert.

¹⁰ Tony Weidinger, "Comic-Con: Video Gaming Continues to Grow," *KPBS*, last modified July 23, 2013, <http://www.kpbs.org/news/2013/jul/23/comic-con-video-gaming-continues-grow/>. The video game industry's strong Comic-Con presence is not always emphasized in media coverage, likely because this industry is more heavily invested in its own gaming centered fan conventions, E3 and Pax.

chapter, such adaptations are not new at Comic-Con, rather, it has been shaped and reshaped by and for the industry throughout its history.

While there is enough content spread across this 460,859 square foot space to appeal to a broad array of tastes and interests, the sheer volume of the crowds paired with the spectacle of industry promotion means that even fans of comic art, trying to move from the Artist's Alley at one end of the hall to the Gold and Silver Pavilion (housing collectible comics and art) at the other end, must at least contend with and plan around the massive industry promotion that dominates the center of the hall. At the very least, it is impossible to avoid and it is even more impossible to ignore. This dominating industrial presence is what prompted *Variety*'s Peter Bart to describe Comic-Con "as an industrial trade show masking as a fan show."¹¹ Bart was not the only member of the press to make this observation. In the popular and trade press, numerous references to Comic-Con identify it, without a hint of Bart's incredulous tone, as an annual trade show.¹² Given its over forty-year history as a grassroots fan event and the organization's non-profit status (since 1975), how did Comic-Con arrive at a place and time in which it

¹¹ This description was published in 2004, also the same year that Comic-Con opened Hall H for the first time. Bart, "Geek Chic: Hollywood Corrals Nerd Herd..."

¹² A sampling of such publications include: Tanya Rodrigues, "San Diego's Reworked Covention Center Set to Debut," *Orange County Business Journal* 24, no. 34 (2001): 31; Graser and Bing, "Genre Pix Cultivate Geek Chic," 8; Bart, "Geek Chic: Hollywood Corrals Nerd Herd..." 3; Tony Perry, "It's a Bird. It's Plain: It's Super," *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 2005, E4; Heidi MacDonald, "Hollywood Cruises Nerd Prom," *Publishers Weekly*, June 20, 2005, 26-7; Tom Carsom, "The Big Shill," *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 2005, 127; Scott Collins, "Oh, Boy! WB Leap a Super Success; Idea to Move 'Smallville' to Thursday Nights Paying Off," *Chicago Tribune*, January 6, 2006, 3; Jerry Johnston, "Comic Book Fans Have a Blast," *Deseret News*, August 5, 2007, E16; Rory Carroll, "Joss Whedon at Comic-Con: Director Returns Home a God among Geeks," *The Guardian*, last modified July 15, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/jul/15/joss-whedon-comic-con-go>; Brooks Barnes, "Seeking Silver-Screen Success of Marvel Proportions; Comics Companies Hope to Turn Obscure Heroes into Hollywood Hits," *International Herald Tribune*, July 10, 2012, 16; Salkowitz, *Comic-Con and the Business of Popular Culture*.

would not only be accused of operating as a covert trade show, but also widely identified as one?

This aspect of Comic-Con's history can be traced through the growth of its shopping and exhibit space, which has been present since 1970, in its previous iteration as the Dealers' Room. This historical trajectory, from Dealers' Room to Exhibit Hall, demonstrates how Comic-Con functions as a commerce-driven space, constructed around industry interests and consumer experiences. In this chapter, I chart historical changes and examine case studies with the help of Comic-Con ephemera such as programs, flyers, progress reports, event guides, and maps. Such materials work, in conjunction with press discourses and my own observations and experiences at Comic-Con, to reconstruct the space of the Exhibit Hall and demonstrate that it is a product of both discursive and material conditions. As such, my examination of the Exhibit Hall as a retail and trade show environment suggests a set of practices connecting consumerism (spending money) and industrial logic (making money) to the pleasure of being a popular culture fan. Studying these practices over time suggests that they have been somewhat transient, taking shape in different spatial and historical contexts, but remaining closely tied to the event all the same.

Much in the same way that the industry's investment in fans did not happen overnight, with the so-called democratizing technology of the Internet or a fundamental change in the practices of media consumers, Comic-Con did not become a media spectacle overnight. Thus, examining examples of consumerism and industrial logic at play over the history of this event is a way to complicate such practices, which appear to operate naturally and seamlessly in its more contemporary iterations; as a kind of

ideological muscle memory. Ultimately, the space of the Exhibit Hall reinforces an ideology around the merging of industrial interests with the consumerism of fans, interpellating attendees as consumers by, somewhat paradoxically, inviting them to feel like visitors to an industry trade show. In examining the Exhibit Hall in both its historical and contemporary iterations, I wish to expand upon an argument I made in the introduction to this dissertation, that the historical continuity of the event, which has always sought to engage fans and professionals together in one space and time, also allows for the establishment of a set of conventions about the space that make it an ideal zone in which to engage fans as both consumers and laborers.

“A Shopper’s Paradise”: From Dealers’ Room to Exhibit Hall, Part 1

In print and online, writers have compared Comic-Con’s Exhibit Hall to a flea market,¹³ a bazaar,¹⁴ a mall,¹⁵ and a garage sale.¹⁶ Painting a more detailed description of the space, writer Todd VanDerWerff traverses these analogies and adds a few more:

The basic setup is that of a flea market, with numerous retailers and other companies setting up booths where attendees can buy stuff or get free crap,

¹³ Liam Burke, "The Pop Culture Petri Dish of Comic-Con," *The Irish Times*, July 26, 2011, 12; Tom Spurgeon, "Tom Spurgeon's Tips for Attending Comic-Con, Part 2," *Toucan: The Official Blog of Comic-Con International, Wondercon & Ape*, last modified June 20, 2013, <http://www.comic-con.org/toucan/tom-spurgeons-tips-attending-comic-con-part-2>

¹⁴ Boucher, "Comic-Con 2009; Geek Out," D1; Glenn Whipp, "Action Is Buzz Word at Comic Convention," *Daily News*, July 20, 2008, L1; Glenn Gaslin, "Superheroes Escape the Page: Comic Book Sales Are Tailing Off, Even as Their Characters Triumph in Other Media," *The Vancouver Sun*, July 27, 2002, E3.

¹⁵ Eric Tompkins, *The Non-Geeks Guide to Comic-Con* (Lexington, KY: Eric Tompkins, 2012); hringerug, "Comic-Con 2012: Inspiration and Creativity at Every Turn," *Nomadic Blog (An Agency Scrapbook)*, last modified August 6, 2012, <http://blog.nomadicagency.com/uncategorized/comic-con-2012-inspiration-and-creativity-at-every-turn/>

¹⁶ Tom Spurgeon, "Nerd Vegas; a Guide to Visiting and Enjoying Cci in San Diego, 2008! (Final Version)," *Comics Reporter*, last modified May 27, 2008, <http://www.comicsreporter.com/index.php/briefings/commentary/14163/>

but numerous booths are set up more like tiny stores, as with a rare books dealer, who's managed to make his booth really feel as if you've stepped into a little store off a busy side-street in a major city. The floor contains sections for comics, toys, gaming, film and TV, and assorted other things, but they're not always as organized as they could be... but things are organized just enough to offer the occasional feel that the attendee is wandering through a particularly jumbled department store, except for in the aisles that specialize in clothing, which are tight and crowded and offer some of the feel of an open-air bazaar.¹⁷

Capturing the consumerist drive and the innumerable retailers that now fill the space, these descriptions all echo Comic-Con International's own branding of the Exhibit Hall as a "shoppers' paradise."¹⁸ Such descriptions build upon the groundwork laid by the Exhibit Hall's previous iteration as a space dominated almost exclusively by shopping and selling: the Dealers' Room. Even as the small number of industry exhibitors grew, joining the room and setting up booths alongside retailers beginning the late 1970s, the space remains, to this day, one that is constructed around the pleasures of shopping and consumption, more broadly. In this way, the historical development of the Dealers' room laid out a significant roadmap for how the Exhibit Hall would be used in the future. Contemporary descriptions enhance this discourse, providing a set of parameters that suggest how attendees should navigate and understand this space. Thus, as I argue

¹⁷ Todd VanDerWerff, "How the Con's Show Floor Is Like Finding a Mystic Portal into a British Children's Novel," *A.V. Club*, last modified July 15, 2012, <http://www.avclub.com/article/how-the-cons-show-floor-is-like-finding-a-mystic-p-82481>

¹⁸ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 45.

throughout this chapter, both the history of the Exhibit Hall and the discourses about it inform not only our understanding of the space and its configuration, but also the practices happening within it.

The earliest iteration of the San Diego Comic-Con was the March 21, 1970 “Minicon,” a one-day event that functioned as a fundraiser for the first official Comic-Con that summer.¹⁹ This early event included “dealer’s tables” that could be rented out for five dollars each and were open throughout the day.²⁰ The designation of special spaces for the sale of comics and memorabilia at Comic-Con began that same summer, and the program playfully referred to these spaces as the “Hucksters rooms.”²¹ An early flyer for the August event encouraged attendees to “come prepared for countless bargains you’ll find at the dealers tables... Comics of every description! Artwork! Sci-Fi magazines and pulps! Posters, fanzines, what the heck!... But—be sure to bring plenty of money, because at a convention, you’ll want a lot of it” (original emphasis).²² While this

¹⁹ The full title of the event was: San Diego’s Golden State Comic-Minicon. “San Diego’s Golden State Comic-Minicon Flyer.” Series IV: Comic-Con Advertising, Folder 1, Box 3, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center. The first Comic-Con was held from August 1-3, 1970. *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 22.

²⁰ “San Diego’s Golden State Comic-Minicon Flyer.”

²¹ Because the Minicon was held in a single room at the U.S. Grand Hotel, it appears that dealers’ tables shared the space with other convention events. The original program suggests that dealers’ tables opened from 9-10 a.m., then suspended sales for talks and film screenings from 10-12 a.m. The program notes the opening of dealers’ tables again during lunch (12-1 p.m.) and again after the afternoon events, from 4-6 p.m. *Ibid.* While I have been unable to verify exactly how this space was organized during the first Comic-Con in August 1970, the reference to “Hucksters rooms,” plural, suggests that dealers were positioned in a number of locations at the venue, the U.S. Grant Hotel. Comic-Con’s official history, however, describes a single “dealers’ room’... where a ‘deal’—or trade—could be made.” The next year, 1971, when the convention was held on the University of California, San Diego campus, the program referenced a single “Dealers’ Room.” “San Diego’s Golden State Comic-Con Program Book 1970; *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 20; “San Diego’s Golden State Comic-Con Program Book 1971.” 1971, Series I: Programs & Souvenir Books, Folder 2, Box 1, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center.

²² “San Diego’s Golden State Comic-Con Flyer, 1970.” Series IV: Comic-Con Advertising, Folder 1, Box 3, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center.

flyer outlines the kinds of materials one might have found at the very first Comic-Con, it also explicitly acknowledges the importance of economic capital at the event, encouraging attendees to seek out “bargains” and “bring plenty of money.” As it turned out, shopping in the Dealers’ Room was such a popular activity at the first Comic-Con that it threatened to eclipse the rest of the convention. The *San Diego Union* reported that “The ‘hustlers rooms’ where the dealers tables were set up were so popular they had to be closed during the speeches and lectures”²³ and Shel Dorf added, “We couldn’t get the people out of there to listen... they just wanted to keep on dealing and buying.”²⁴ Closing down the room during certain portions of the event represents one of the ways in which organizers, even at that early stage, helped to define the space by encouraging certain kinds of behaviors and practices within the confines of particular times and places. Such strategies work in much the same way as the rules and regulations of the line that I discussed in Chapter Three. In order to redirect traffic to the convention’s various other programs, organizers simply restricted access to the Dealers’ Room. Not only would this move help to guide attendees through the event, but it also produced limitations and restrictions that made shopping in the Dealers’ Room that much more exclusive. At the first Comic-Con, then, shopping was highlighted and encouraged, but only at specific times, and not at the expense of the event’s professional presenters, who included author Ray Bradbury and comic legend Jack Kirby.

²³ While it may be an appropriate epithet for the Dealers’ Room, given the bargaining and trading happening all day, “hustlers’ rooms” was likely a misprint of the aforementioned “Hucksters’ Room.” Andrew Makarushka, “Comics Connoisseurs Here for Golden State Convention,” *San Diego Union*, August 2, 1970, B11.

²⁴ Shel Dorf qtd. in *ibid.*

This tension between the capitalist impulse of the Dealers' Room and the educational aspect of Comic-Con's mission is one that has existed and been negotiated through its history. In recent years, it emerged most clearly in debates about the validity of Comic-Con's non-profit status. For example, when Comic-Con organizers were criticized for receiving public subsidies and tax exemptions in 2007, Comic-Con's director of marketing and public relations, David Glanzer, argued for the educational value of the event:

We strive to inform the public that comics are as viable an art form as other art you may find in a museum, or in a gallery, or a bookstore or even a film festival... In addition, as the medium has branched out to film, television, and interactive multimedia, we offer a venue where the public can meet the actual creators in those fields and interact with them to further their understanding of this industry that has a historic and ongoing contribution to arts and culture.²⁵

Glanzer's assertions recall Shel Dorf's description of Comic-Con's founding ideals, which I discussed in Chapter One. However, with the increased industry presence and the event's multi-million dollar operating budget, these educational aims have become a defense mechanism used to support the industry's presence at Comic-Con.

In 1973, problems with overcrowding in the Dealers' Room would prompt organizers to once again reconfigure the event; this time prioritizing the capitalist aims of that space, instead of the entertainment or educational offerings of the convention's

²⁵ David Glanzer qtd. in Wilkens, "Comic-Con's Charity Status Draws Questions," A-1. I will discuss this tension in relation to the Comic Book Expo later in this chapter.

various programs and screenings. The 1973 Wrap-up/1974 Progress Report, provides a detailed explanation of events:

We're really grateful for the support our many fine dealers gave us this year. They had to put up with a lot, but we're sure they think it was worth it, considering the business they did! Our original set-up for the dealers' room was fine for Wednesday, but quickly proved infeasible on Thursday as more and more people arrived and crowded in; the fire marshal became very upset. We finally had to expand the dealers' room moving it into what was formerly the speakers-films room and reserving one corner of the former dealers' room for speakers and films! The expanded room was filled to capacity with both dealers and buyers throughout the convention, and, needless to say, a lot of deals were made. (original emphasis)²⁶

This excerpt reveals the centrality of the Dealers' Room to the Comic-Con experience as it became more established; so much so that organizers were willing to make significant changes and reconfigure the space, mid-way through the event (fig. 38). Their direct address to dealers in the report, along with their willingness to compromise other programming tracks in favor of facilitating shopping and sales, lays further groundwork for how the Dealers' Room (and subsequently, the Exhibit Hall) would function in the future. As I have argued, at Comic-Con, the line between professional dealer and fan has always been uneven and unclear. Even in first several years of the event, the demands of commerce literally altered the way organizers prioritized the space and the way attendees navigated it.

²⁶ Graham and Alfonso, "San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No.1 and 1973 Wrap-up Report."

Exclusivity and Collecting

Key to understanding the Dealers' Room and the Exhibit Hall is the notion that shopping has long been considered a viable and popular form of entertainment and an acceptable way to spend one's leisure time.²⁷ Anne Friedberg describes shopping as "a leisurely examination of... goods" and an activity whose "behaviors are more directly determined by desire than need."²⁸ The Comic-Con Dealers' Room relied heavily upon the "examination of goods" and the workings of desire, as it was geared, first and foremost, towards those who would "brouse thru the Dealers Room and be able to buy comics to fill those gaps in [their] collection" [sic].²⁹ As I describe in the introduction to this dissertation, Comic-Con was built by and for avid fans and collectors who had already come together based on these shared interests.³⁰ Even the Minicon's special guest, Forrest J. Ackerman, the writer and editor of the fanzine *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, was a notorious collector, with a treasure trove of science fiction and horror memorabilia.³¹ It is not surprising that the Dealers' Room was such a key space at

²⁷ Mark Moss, *Shopping as an Entertainment Experience* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2007); Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 107. Ann Friedberg similarly argues that the shopping mall is a site of "cultural activity," linking it to a postmodern sensibility. Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 109, 15.

²⁸ *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, 57.

²⁹ "San Diego Golden State Comic-Con 1971 Flyer." Series IV: Comic Con Advertising, Folder 2, Box 3, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center.

³⁰ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 22.

³¹ Forrest J Ackerman was an important and fascinating figure, who, like Harry Knowles, managed to professionalize his fan status. Said to have popularized the term "sci-fi," he was an early member of the science fiction fan community and later invented the comic book character Vampirella. His magazine, *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, has been cited by directors like Joe Dante, John Landis, Steven Spielberg, and Guillermo Del Toro as an early influence. Sadly, what was the worlds' largest collection of horror and science fiction memorabilia (approximately 300,000 items) is now dispersed among private collectors and museums, having been gradually auctioned off leading up to and after his death in 2008. Ibid; Dennis McLellan, "Forrest J Ackerman, Writer-Editor Who Coined 'Sci-Fi,' Dies at 92," *Los Angeles Times*, last

Comic-Con, because it provided a marketplace for fan-collectors to buy and sell their goods. While the prevalence of online auction sites such as eBay have significantly changed the contemporary collectors market, for much of Comic-Con's existence, the Dealers' Room and Exhibit Hall provided a space for collectors that could only exist in the flesh.³² Indeed, the late sixties and early seventies saw a boom in the "nostalgia industry"³³ and a number of articles written at the time marveled at the collectability of old comic books, validating this practice in economic terms and connecting it directly to the rise in popularity of comic conventions. As early as 1965, *Newsweek* opened their article on "comic cultists" by highlighting the \$100 value of the June 1938 issue of *Action Comics*, which featured Superman's first appearance.³⁴ Later, in 1968, a *New York Times* article noted that, "comics that once sold for 10 cents each...are now selling for up to \$150 at the first International Convention of Comic Art."³⁵

modified December 6, 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/news/obituaries/la-me-ackerman6-2008dec06,0,7179199.story#axzz2rnq0XzZ>; Jennifer Day, "Visual Detective: 'Cabinet of Curiosities' by Guillermo Del Toro," *Chicago Tribune*, last modified October 17, 2013, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-10-17/entertainment/ct-prj-1020-cabinet-of-curiosities-guillermo-del-t-20131017_1_printers-row-journal-del-toro-guillerm; Brock DeShane, "The Fall of the House of Ackerman," *Criterion Collection*, last modified April 28, 2009, <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1117-the-fall-of-the-house-of-ackerman>

³² At the time, collectors mainly shopped and traded at conventions, garage sales, flea markets, and through mail-order. Paul Douglas Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 94-6; Matthew Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*, Studies in Popular Culture (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 103-4. Rob Salkowitz describes the impact of online auctions on the collectors market. *Comic-Con and the Business of Popular Culture*, 159-60.

³³ Leonard Sloane, "Nostalgia for Extinct Pop Culture Creates Industry," *New York Times*, March 22, 1970, 171.

³⁴ "Superfans and Batmaniacs," *Newsweek*, February 15, 1965, 89.

³⁵ Deirdre Carmody, "Comic Books Get Sar Billing at Convention Here," *New York Times*, July 6, 1968, 18. Another similar piece was published in 1969, highlighting the next year's International Convention of Comic Art. "Old Comic Book Art Is on Display Here," *New York Times*, July 5, 1969, 16. Sloane comments on the Detroit Triple Fan Fair convention, which Comic-Con founder, Shel Dorf, helped to organize before moving to San Diego. Sloane, "Nostalgia for Extinct Pop Culture Creates Industry," 171.

Though fandom and collecting are frequently conflated in relation to comic books, the significance of collecting is often overlooked academic work on media fans, which instead highlights media consumption, more generally.³⁶ Perhaps this is because examining the consumption of media texts makes it easier to dispel negative stereotypes by drawing out the nuances and complexities in the relationship between fans and consumer culture³⁷ and highlighting how fans also function as producers of culture.³⁸ In fact, several media scholars reinforce the negative connotations of collecting by disavowing it as a consumerist activity that does not accurately reflect the complexities of fan practices.³⁹ John Fiske briefly engages with the notion of fans and collecting, suggesting that while most fans place an emphasis on quantity over quality of item, there are a few exceptions, citing a study in which “comic book fans were eager to comment upon both the economic values of their collections, and their investment potential” based

Other articles detailing the increased value of comics and the popularity of collecting include: Dan Carlinsky, "Comic Books Can Prove Super Investment," *New York Times*, January 1, 1973, 22-3; Michael D Davis, "Cartoon Heroes Bring out Fans," *San Diego Union*, July 31, 1975, B3. See also: Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*, 46-7; Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book*, 94-96.

³⁶ Examples of work that studies comic fans and collecting include: Jonathan David Tankel and Keith Murphy, "Collecting Comic Books: A Study of the Fan and Curatorial Consumption," in *Theorizing Fandom*, ed. Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 1998); Jeffery A. Brown, "Comic Book Fandom and Cultural Capital," *Journal of Popular Culture* 30, no. 4 (1997); Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*.

³⁷ Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 27-45; Sandvoss, *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, 7-8.

³⁸ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*.

³⁹ In an interview included in the new edition of *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins and Suzanne Scott reference the negative stereotypes around fandom and collecting in *40 Year Old Virgin* (Judd Apatow, 2005) and *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-). "Textual Poachers, Twenty Years Later: A Conversation between Henry Jenkins and Suzanne Scott," in *Textual Poachers* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2013), xv. Similarly, Roberta Pearson asserts that “Consumption in the form of collecting is a key element of the popular stereotype of the nerdy, needs-to-get-a-life fan” and, not surprisingly, cites *The Simpsons’* Comic Book Guy character as a prime example. Roberta E. Pearson, "Bachies, Bardies, Trekkies, and Sherlockians," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Johnathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 104-5.

on exclusive factors like “authenticity, originality, and rarity...giv[ing] them high cultural capital which is, in turn, readily convertible into high economic capital.”⁴⁰ Much in the same way that Comic-Con was built upon comic book fandom, but was inclusive of an array of other kinds of popular culture industries and fandoms, we might see the economic impetus for comic book collecting, often under analyzed in fan studies, as a template for industries seeking to profit on fans as consumers at the event.

Shopping, as Friedberg points out, produces “empowerment in the relation between looking and having” in which “the act of buying [is] a willful choice”⁴¹ Such choices and desires, however, are largely illusory in that they are constructs of marketing.⁴² Similarly the notion of shopping as a leisure activity is a capitalist construct. As Eileen Meehan explains, capitalist logic dictates that laborers’ necessary “recovery time” can be optimized as “consumption time” by “reform[ing] the worker into consumer and recovery into leisure.”⁴³ While theorists have argued for the possibility of resistance, even while operating within the confines of these capitalist structures,⁴⁴ it is also worth considering that choosing to shop and choosing what to buy do not exist in isolation from the industrial forces that produce these products. One might think of the function of shopping at Comic-Con, then, as a way to encourage the autonomy of the consumer within the larger, controlling structures of industry promotion. Much like Hall H, which

⁴⁰ Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," 44.

⁴¹ Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, 57.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴³ Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy," 76.

⁴⁴ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*; Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*.

provides so-called entertainment in the form of industry promotion, the Dealer's Room and the Exhibit Hall repackages the everyday leisure activity of shopping as collecting; a more unique, personalized, and exclusive experience—a hobby.

This process is captured in Morgan Spurlock's 2011 documentary, *Comic-Con Episode IV: A Fan's Hope*. Among the six subjects profiled in the film "The Collector" receives the least screen time, as his mission at Comic-Con is relatively simple and straightforward: to purchase the eighteen-inch Galactus figure, one of Hasbro's 2010 Comic-Con Exclusives.⁴⁵ Exclusives are items traditionally sold in limited quantities and only available at Comic-Con.⁴⁶ While some companies have expanded upon this concept by selling exclusives online during or after the event, the most popular and sought after items remain those that are only sold in the Exhibit Hall. If the lines and the panels in Hall H use exclusivity to produce a kind of cultural capital for which attendees pay with significant investment of time and effort, then Comic-Con Exclusives demand a similar investment alongside an additional financial one. Collectors stand in long lines outside the convention center for hours in order to be among the first on the floor to line up at the booth and make their purchase. Because the number of exclusives sold each day is often capped, much like the number of seats in Hall H, there is a similar urgency about getting in line and getting in as soon as possible.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Retailing at fifty dollars, this toy was particularly unique as it was "Hasbro's largest single-carded figure ever" Lewis Wallace, "Giant Galactus Is Hasbro's Biggest Comic-Con Exclusive," *Wired*, last modified July 13, 2010, <http://www.wired.com/underwire/2010/07/hasbro-comic-con/>

⁴⁶ The practice of selling exclusives is not confined to Comic-Con and such items are commonly offered for sale at larger comic and pop culture conventions across North America.

⁴⁷ The *Unauthorized San Diego Comic-Con Survival Guide* (2010) suggests that "Getting in line for these items can be even more bloodthirsty than the lines to get up front in Hall H or Ballroom 20." Doug Kline, *The Unauthorized San Diego Comic-Con Survival Guide* (minibük.com, 2010), 119.

The Collector is introduced about thirty minutes into the film, with the camera following him into what he calls his “room of doom,” an average home office made significantly more claustrophobic by the rows and rows of toy boxes covering every wall. As the camera pans across the boxes, a striking uniformity emerges; the boxes are meticulously arranged according to brand, toy line, and character (fig. 39). The aesthetic of the collector’s room does not reflect the stereotypically messy and chaotic accumulation of overconsumption criticized by fan studies scholars and represented on reality television programs like *Hoarders* (A&E, 2009-) or SyFy’s lighter equivalent *Collection Intervention* (2012-). Rather, The Collector’s highly organized display more closely resembles that of a retail outlet. This store shelf aesthetic is not entirely surprising given the subsequent scene, in which The Collector opens a large gun safe to reveal what he calls, “the money pile.” He pulls out a prototype for a toy version of Marvel’s Annihilus, explaining “I sold one of ‘em recently for \$750” and holds up a boxed action figure of DC’s Lobo, bragging, “this was released at the con about two, three years ago. I paid twenty bucks for it now it’s worth five times that amount.” Showing us his prized Juggernaut figure, The Collector asserts, “I love this figure, you could offer me a couple of thousand and I won’t sell it.”⁴⁸ The collector’s large black gun safe, emblazoned with gold lettering and a gold handle, is employed to protect both monetary and affective value. Jonathan David Tankel and Keith Murphy have argued that by producing such value through the act of collecting, or what they call “curatorial consumption,” fans are

⁴⁸ He does not describe the figure’s origins or its value, so it is unclear whether his love is rooted in sentimental or economic investment. However, one of his YouTube videos indicates that this is a rare figure (one of only five in existence), a prototype from ToyBiz that was displayed at Comic-Con, but never released. Solid, "Marvel Legends Juggernaut Variant Unreleased Prototype," *YouTube*, last modified January 15, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uetxYf9e66s>

able to “participate in and embody the contradictions of consumer capitalism by... bring[ing] pleasure and possibly financial reward to the consumer rather than the producer.”⁴⁹ But, even as fans collect and resell items according to a notion of value outside of the industry’s “traditional criteria such as production and distribution costs,” there are other ways in which the producers of collectible products benefit from fan-collectors and sellers.⁵⁰

Each year, small dealers gather up items from their stores and warehouses and set up in the Exhibit Hall with the hope of clearing out as much stock as possible by Sunday.⁵¹ However, in this space, retailers also find themselves in direct competition with producers and distributors, be it of comics, collectibles, toys, games, books, or DVDs and Blu-Rays, many of which are sold directly to attendees as exclusives. While this is a challenging position for smaller retailers, whose tables encircle a core of industry booths promoting or selling their own products, these sellers and their customers are also key players in an industrial strategy that encourages collecting and resale as an enjoyable (and profitable) hobby.⁵² As Eileen Meehan argues, this strategy involves creating false

⁴⁹ Tanel and Murphy, "Collecting Comic Books: A Study of the Fan and Curatorial Consumption," 58.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁵¹ It is common practice for attendees to wait until the final day of the convention to buy an item from an independent retailer, as the prices often drop significantly on the last day. However, if an item is popular or in demand, the odds of finding it again on the last day of the convention are slim. Such deals are hard to come by as dealers need to earn enough money to pay for their significant expenses at the convention and most “only bother bringing what they believe they can sell so they don’t have to worry about shipping it or trucing it back to a storage facility half way across the country come Monday morning.” Kline, *The Unauthorized San Diego Comic-Con Survival Guide*, 123-5.

⁵² Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy," 83.

scarcity by limiting the production or sales of collectibles, which, in turn, “fuels purchases by dealers and fans, often multiple purchases of a single item.”⁵³

The sale of exclusives at Comic-Con represent a draw for both attendees and dealers looking to make a quick profit by buying up inventory and selling the particularly hard to find items in their own Comic-Con booth, or auctioning them off to the highest bidder on eBay.⁵⁴ Some dealers, who gain early access to the show floor using their exhibitor badges, even pay employees to line up and buy as many exclusives as possible. While this kind of line jumping is frowned upon by organizers, it is difficult to regulate. Dealers are discouraged from lining up early, but there are no rules forbidding them from purchasing the maximum allotted number of an item and reselling them at inflated prices. Instead, it is up to the companies selling these items to regulate such practices, as Hasbro and Mattel did in 2013 by restricting sales to other exhibitors.⁵⁵ In this way, Comic-Con’s Exhibit Hall differs from a traditional shopping environment in that it provides a venue for large producers and distributors to cut out the middleman and sell directly to their customers or fan base. By restricting access for independent dealers, companies send the message that they are aligned with the interests of the consumer or fan, while the exclusivity of the product and its limited circulation guarantees demand from dealers and customers, alike.⁵⁶ Thus large companies selling exclusives reinforce their power to

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Kline, *The Unauthorized San Diego Comic-Con Survival Guide*, 119.

⁵⁵ Rich Johnston, "Hasbro and Mattel Stamp Down on Professional Scalpers at San Diego Comic Con," *Bleeding Cool*, last modified July 17, 2013, <http://www.bleedingcool.com/2013/07/17/hasbro-and-mattel-stamp-down-on-professional-scalpers-at-san-diego-comic-con/>

⁵⁶ Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy," 83-4.

control production, distribution *and* sales. Once these sales are made, the exclusives move to a secondary market, where their value is inflated, thus producing greater demand for subsequent exclusives.

When we join The Collector at Comic-Con, he proudly proclaims that he has waited in line for two days to gain early access and purchase his exclusive toy. He also identifies the problem I discuss above, suggesting that many dealers will be selling the item for two times the price, but his commitment is unwavering: “If that’s what it runs to, then I’ll buy it at twice the price.” He declares, “I will not leave that con. You can pull me out kicking and screaming. I’m not gonna leave until I have those figures.” When the line finally begins the slow process of filing into the Exhibit Hall, the Collector seems to brace himself as he says, “Here we go.” But he is frustrated and dismayed when he sees a flood of attendees coming from another direction, moving him from seventh to thirtieth in line. When he crosses the threshold into the Exhibit Hall, a dramatic score plays, building tension as The Collector runs—for a brief time, in slow motion—towards the Hasbro booth. Upon reaching the booth, he buys his toy and the score swells, marking his victory as he proudly presents Galactus to the camera. He declares, “This is what I came for and I’m done. I’m done! We’re gonna go have a good time now.” This moment, which occurs thirty-eight minutes into the eighty-six minute film, is the last time we see the Collector.

This brief scene reproduces the thrill associated with the process of collecting by narrativizing it using well-worn cinematic tropes. The collector’s journey becomes a conquest; he overcomes obstacles, exhibits determination, and ultimately emerges victorious. Not only does this elevate collecting as more exciting and rewarding pursuit than the mundane, consumerism associated with shopping, but it also encapsulates the

system of exchange that exists around exclusivity at Comic-Con; something attendees must *work* to obtain or achieve. This notion of collecting as labor is crystalized when the Collector proclaims, “We’re gonna go have a good time now,” and subsequently disappears from the film, having completed his work and served his narrative purpose.

In many ways, collecting meant something very different to attendees at the first Comic-Con; they were shopping for used or resold products, whose value was produced through a complex calculation related to scarcity and taste.⁵⁷ However, the overlapping practices of shopping and collecting in the Dealers’ Room and in fan culture, more broadly, are also very good for business, especially when they are incorporated into “the economic logic for a conglomerate’s cultivation of fans.”⁵⁸ Collecting and shopping, like Comic-Con itself, is seemingly the product of decisions made by groups of fans because of their particular investment in popular culture, whether for profit, pleasure, or both. But more recent developments at Comic-Con demonstrate how seamlessly the industry can use these same formative cultural practices to shape and control the conditions in which fans consume and collect popular culture.

“The Magical Secret of How it’s Done”: From Dealers’ Room to Exhibit Hall, Part 2

The industry’s influence was present in the early days of Comic-Con; evident in both a promotional capacity and through the gradual transition from the Dealers’ Room to the Exhibit Hall. As I described in the introduction, Comic-Con was founded, in part, upon the desire to bring fans and professionals together in a single space. In a 1970 interview, Shel Dorf described Comic-Con as an opportunity for “the amateur fan and the

⁵⁷ Salkowitz, *Comic-Con and the Business of Popular Culture*, 158.

⁵⁸ Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy," 84.

amateur writer to really meet with the professionals and find the magical secret of how it's done."⁵⁹ In 1970, such exchanges took place in the form of chalk talks, lectures, and discussions led by professional writers and artists.⁶⁰ These kinds of presentations represent the seeds of the large variety of panels offered at Comic-Con today, many of which feature special guests who are there to promote the film, television, comic, or video game industries. If these early presentations represented chances for fans to encounter individual artists and professionals, the Dealers' Room was a space where businesses could similarly reach out to potential consumers.

The March 1970 Minicon and the first convention that summer both advertised a "Marvelmania booth by Marvelmania International as advertised in Marvel Comics" where, fans could "acquire... posters, decals, membership to the Marvelmania club, and many of their various other products" [sic].⁶¹ Despite a dispatch in Marvel's regular column "Marvel Bullpen Bulletins," vaguely claiming the organization as "our own" and describing its magazine as "possibly the greatest fan mag of all," Marvelmania was neither owned by Marvel, nor bankrolled by fans.⁶² Instead, the company was run by a fly-by-night businessman, Don Wallace, who had bought the rights to produce and sell Marvel merchandise through the mail.⁶³ Writer and comic fan Mark Evanier worked

⁵⁹ "Channel 39 Pre-Con Interview of Shel Dorf".

⁶⁰ Chalk talks are presentations in which artists create live sketches while lecturing about their work in front of an audience.

⁶¹ "San Diego's Golden State Comic-Minicon Flyer; "San Diego's Golden State Comic-Con Flyer, 1970."

⁶² Stan Lee, "Marvel Bullpen Bulletins," *Fantastic Four* 1, no. 106 (1971).

⁶³ Mark Evanier and his coworkers at Marvelmania International gave Don Wallace the ironic nickname "Uncle Don." According to Evanier, he had a long history of bad business practices: "He had no capital so he'd buy everything on credit, sweet-talking people into aiding him and using his expertise to stall payments. He figured that the cash would start rolling in from the business in sufficient quantities to

there briefly as a teenager, having been hired as editor of the Marvelmania magazine and expert on all things Marvel, something the company desperately needed.⁶⁴ He described the company's operations: "The mail order firm, which was disguised as a fan club, was taking orders... and cashing the checks, and once in a rare while, they'd actually produce an item and ship it out. But a lot of kids were shamelessly ripped-off."⁶⁵ Marvelmania International's ties to Marvel and to fandom were purely economic: the company's association with Marvel was a business agreement (one that Wallace never fully honored) and its claims to fandom were achieved by hiring fans to work for the company.⁶⁶ The "fan mag" published through Marvelmania International demonstrates how this business played upon these purely economic ties to Marvel and Marvel fans by aligning itself with both groups:

In the past, comic book fan clubs have been little more than vehicles for marketing membership kits... We feel that you Marvelites deserve the best. Your letters to the Bullpen have constantly expressed the feeling that more posters were wanted... more stationary... and more items along those

appease all the creditors. Well, it never did." qtd. in Ken Jones, "This Business of Comics," *The Comics Journal*, no. 112 (1986): 71-2.

⁶⁴ Michael Dean, Milo George, and Anne Elizabeth Moore, "Marv Wolfman Trial: Creators' Rights on Trial: Marv Vs. Marvel, Part 2," *Comics Journal*, no. 239 (2001): 79; Jones, "This Business of Comics," 72.

⁶⁵ Mark Evanier, "How I Became a Young, Zingy, with-It Guy," *News From Me*, last modified October 31, 2003, <http://www.newsfromme.com/2003/10/31/how-i-became-a-young-zingy-with-it-guy-2/>

⁶⁶ Don Wallace offered Marvel \$10,000 for the mail-order rights, but only paid \$5000, the company folded before paying the balance. When Evanier left the company, he was owed several thousands in back pay. Comic book artist Jack Kirby had also been working with Marvelmania, supplying original artwork, which was subsequently distributed to the young fans employed by the operation "as payment for rolling posers, filling envelopes, and licking stamps." When he discovered this, Kirby went to Marvelmania offices to salvage as much of the artwork as he could. Ronin Ro, *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and the American Comic Book Revolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004), 136-7; Jones, "This Business of Comics," 72.

lines. After months of secret planning in New York and Los Angeles, we burst forward with what shall soon prove to be only the beginning of the greatest comic book club in the history of mankind!⁶⁷

Even Comic-Con's publicity materials seemed to attribute an undue level of legitimacy to Marvelmania's operation, advertising the booth belonging to "Representatives of the Official Marvelmania International" as "a special feature" and highlighting the company's appearance in the pages of Marvel Comics as a way to further entice fans.⁶⁸ Then again, a "special display in the huckster room" seems wholly appropriate for a company that had been misrepresented as both a Marvel-run organization and a fan based organization, haphazardly concocted to profit on what its founder thought was a massive untapped market of fans.⁶⁹

The presence of Marvelmania International during the first two Comic-Cons suggests an already problematic tension between the interests of industry and those of fans. Be it in the Dealers' Room or in the pages of Marvel Comics, Marvelmania demonstrates how a space established to celebrate fans' love of comics and popular culture and of the artists and industries that produce them, can also be populated with those who seek to capitalize on this passion. Comic-Con organizers provided a rather

⁶⁷ Don Wallace, "Welcome to Marvelmania," *Marvelmania Magazine*, October 1969, 1.

⁶⁸ "San Diego's Golden State Comic-Minicon Flyer."

⁶⁹ While huckster can simply mean "a retailer of small goods, in a petty shop or booth, or at a stall" it can also specify "a person to make his profit of anything in a mean or petty way." "Huckster, *N.*," *Oxford English Dictionary*, last modified 2014, <http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/89101?rskey=7Z7CTa&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. According to Evanier, Don Wallace's inexperience with comic books and poor business sense led him to mistake Marvel's circulation numbers of six million a month to mean that there were six million individual readers. In actual fact, readers purchased some or all of their approximately twenty-five different titles (sometimes in multiple copies), making the consumer base significantly smaller. Jones, "This Business of Comics," 72.

utopian vision of the space in its early years, where “all social differences which normally can divide people are forgotten; everyone is just a fan.”⁷⁰ While validating and celebrating marginalized tastes has been frequently and necessarily taken up by fans and scholars, alike, forgetting the differences and divisions that do exist, particularly between fans and business interests also makes it easier to ignore the operations of economic and cultural power.

By the late 1970s, a more institutionalized industry presence was manifesting in the Dealers’ Room. This presence, however, was more informal and experimental than the elaborate and intricately planned booths and events offered today. Most famously, in 1976, publicist Charles Lippincott brought *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) to Comic-Con with a preview slide show and a table in the Dealers’ Room, where he promoted the film and sold posters featuring Howard Chaykin’s art for Marvel’s *Star Wars* comics.⁷¹ According to Lippincott, “No-one had done a film presentation at San Diego before. It was a real breakthrough and generated a lot of interest. I had a lot of guys coming to the booth interested in merchandise, so I questioned them about things like what was the best model manufacturing company.”⁷² While such fan outreach is commonly incorporated into industrial practices today—Lucasfilm even employs its own “fan-relations advisor,”

⁷⁰ Graham and Alfonso, "San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No.1 and 1973 Wrap-up Report." This sentiment carried on throughout Comic-Con’s history. In 1994, Comic-Con attendee, Carry Williams-Shannon Coatney, reflected, “Whether you are a pro, a fan, a retailer, it doesn’t matter—you’re all on equal ground here.” Carry Williams-Shannon, "Comic-Con Reminiscences," in *25th Annual San Diego Comic Convention 1994*, ed. Jackie Estrada (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention, Inc., 1994), 78.

⁷¹ Howard Chaykin is a comic artist who drew the original Marvel run of *Star Wars* comics. "'Star Wars': Celebrating 35 Years at Comic-Con," *Entertainment Weekly*, last modified July 15, 2011, http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20566981_20511331,00.htm; Robb, "The Man Who Sold Star Wars," 29.

⁷² "The Man Who Sold Star Wars," 29.

Steve Sansweet⁷³ —the intimate environment of the Comic-Con Dealers’ Room in the seventies allowed for plenty of interaction between fans, professionals, and dealers. In a description of the 1971 Comic-Con, dealer Lee Roberts reminisces that “the co-mingling of pros and fans was much more common back then... the celebrity guests could comfortably browse and bargain, just like the rest of us.”⁷⁴ This made such casual discourse between fans and studio representatives also seem somewhat natural. Friendly conversation with fans about their tastes, even specific details like their preferences in model manufacturers, fit easily into the informal atmosphere of the 1970s Dealers’ Room, where market research and promotion could be seamlessly integrated into the social atmosphere of the space.⁷⁵

While this 1976 *Star Wars* promotion represents a prototype for the film industry’s prominent presence at Comic-Con in the 2000s and a prescient approach in the marketing of genre films to niche audiences, it also suggestive of a gradual shift towards the opening of Comic-Con to *industry*, as opposed to individual artists.⁷⁶ This shift is most clearly articulated through the increased presence of the comic industry during the late seventies and early eighties, culminating in the establishment of Comic-Con’s own

⁷³ Sansweet has been employed by Lucasfilm since 1996 as Director of Specialty Marketing, then Director of Content Management and head of Fan Relations. Though he left Lucasfilm in 2011 to found his non-profit *Star Wars* museum, Rancho Obi-Wan, he continues to do consulting work under the title “Fan Relations Advisor.” “Steve Sansweet, President & Ceo,” *Rancho Obi-Wan*, last modified 2011, <http://www.ranchoobiwan.org/about/steve-sansweet/>

⁷⁴ Glanzer, Sassaman, and Estrada, *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book*, 63-4.

⁷⁵ Built around a strong sense of community, attendees from the seventies often reflect on the bonds and friendships they built at the convention. See, for example: “Comic-Con Memories: The 70s,” in *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book*, ed. David Glanzer, Gary Sassaman, and Jackie Estrada (San Diego: San Diego Comic-Con International, 2009), 73-6.

⁷⁶ Cullum, “‘Star Wars’ 30th Anniversary: How Lucas, ILM Redefined Business-as-Usual”.

trade show: the Comic Book Expo. Marvel editor, Rick Marschall, describes how, in 1979, he approached the company about establishing a presence at Comic-Con for their comic anthology magazine, *Epic Illustrated* (1980-1986):

I realized in 1979 that the European comic conventions were all, to some extent at least, trade shows, too. And I realized that no American comics-con I had been to had publishers displaying materials in that trade show sense. I contacted Shel Dorf who said that to his recollection comic book publishers had never set up at San Diego; pros had attended, but tables were largely fans and collectors and shop owners. My idea was to set up a goodwill table announcing *Epic's* imminent debut, to showcase some of the art in huge reproductions, and to offer promotional materials and solicit opinions.⁷⁷

Marschall's anecdote suggests that the addition of promotional booths to the Dealers' Room at a time when "comics publishers just didn't do things like set up at comic-cons—and especially without selling products!" marked an early step in broadening and even redefining the purpose of the space.⁷⁸

“Cash Register Receipts and Ledger Columns!”: From Dealers Room to Exhibit Hall, Part 3

In 1982, Comic-Con permanently left the El Cortez Hotel, its home through the majority of the seventies, and moved to the Convention and Performing Arts Center

⁷⁷ Marschall, "Remembrances of Cons Past."

⁷⁸ Ibid.

(CPAC).⁷⁹ It remained there until 1991, when the event made a permanent move to the newly constructed San Diego convention center. During this period, the comic industry became an increasingly strong presence, building upon the trade show model described by Marschall. Comic-Con's attendance was holding strong at five thousand and it had become an important stop for professionals as well as fans. As a 1982 Progress Report reminded members, "The San Diego Comic-Con is also a place where the pros can catch up with each other and talk shop in a relaxed, fun environment"⁸⁰ In 1983, organizers announced: "An exciting new part of the dealers' room this year will be special hospitality suites available for rent to comics companies and other interested parties."⁸¹ That year, at least thirteen comics companies attended Comic-Con, including the publishers Marvel and DC and representatives from World Color Press, a company that specialized in comic printing.⁸² San Diego based publisher and distributor, Pacific Comics, rented one of the advertised suites and offered the "Pacific Comics Showcase Room," where attendees could meet their stable of artists.⁸³ Despite these new

⁷⁹ The convention had been previously held at the CPAC in 1979 and 1980. Comic-con returned to the El Cortez for a final year in 1981. Glanzer, Sassaman, and Estrada, *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book*, 72, 78-87, 94-5.

⁸⁰ Similarly, writer Mark Evanier said of the event "Professionals are simply afraid to *not* show for a San Diego Convention because *this* is where it's happening." Jackie Estrada. "1983 San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No. 2." May 1983, San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State University Library Comic Art Collection; Mark Evanier, "Comics: Ny2la," in *1982 San Deigo Comic-Con Inc. Souvenir Book*, ed. Shel Dorf (San Diego: San Diego Comic-Con Inc., 1982).

⁸¹ While I have been unable to locate a map of the Dealers' Room for 1983, a 1986 map of the San Diego Convention and Performing Arts Center shows six rooms within the Plaza Hall Dealers' Room, which were likely where these hospitality suites were housed. Estrada, "1983 San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No. 2; Carroll and Graves, "1986 Progress Report #2."

⁸² Jackie Estrada. "1984 San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No. 1." December 1983, San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State University Library Comic Art Collection.

⁸³ Also a popular attraction in the Dealers' Room was "the Don Bluth Productions table, where fans lined up to play the animated video game Dragon's Lair." Ibid.

approaches, the dealer's room retained its name and primary function as a consumer space. For example, a 1984 ad for the convention highlighted a familiar, if somewhat expanded selection of items available in the Dealers' Room: "rare old comic books, movie stills and posters, cels, original art, science fiction D&D games, video, t-shirts, buttons, super hero items, new books and magazines, imported toys, etc."⁸⁴ Not surprisingly, however, the increased industry presence at the convention also coincided with a larger shift in the comic industry, towards specialty shops and direct market sales.⁸⁵ In addition to reaching out to their readers, comic publishers also needed a way to reach retailers. Since large numbers of both groups were already attending the convention each summer, Comic-Con seemed like an ideal venue.⁸⁶

Beginning in 1984, the Comic Book Expo was held two days before Comic-Con and offered "a retailer-based schedule of programs including everything from company presentations about new products to detailed information on how to help run a small business, including personal time management, employee and tax advice, technology, marketing, and much more."⁸⁷ This trade show arm of Comic-Con engaged far more explicitly with the capitalist goals of the event, claiming to help "strengthen the direct

⁸⁴ "Comic-Con Poster, 1984." San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State University Library Comic Art Collection.

⁸⁵ For more on this industrial shift, see: Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book*, 91-103. The 1986 Comic-Con program also details the industrial conditions that gave rise to direct market sales and created a need for an industrial trade show. Dave Scroggy, "1986 Comic Book Expo: The Business of Comics," in *1986 San Diego Comic Con Program Book*, ed. Bob Chapman and John Koukoutsakis (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention, Inc., 1986), 10-11.

⁸⁶ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 86.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

sales marketplace where it counts, the cash register receipts and the ledger columns!”⁸⁸

Comic-Con even justified these goals within the parameters of their non-profit mission:

Comic-Con and Comic-Book Expo are non-profit entities dedicated to furthering appreciation of popular culture in America. We recognize the specialty retailer as the means by which this exciting and important entertainment will reach a significant portion of the American public. We want to work with the comic book industry to provide an annual event that will strengthen and expand the marketplace, thus furthering our greater goals.⁸⁹

However, keeping the trade show separate from Comic-Con and “open to bonafide retailers and those affiliated with the industry,” but “not the general public,” created a spatial and temporal division that allowed the two events to work symbiotically, while maintaining an ideological gap between them.⁹⁰ Fans and collectors were invited to mingle and engage with representatives from the comic industry during Comic-Con—dealers, artists, writers, and publishers, all of whom offered tables and booths in the Dealers’ Room—but the Comic Expo was “not geared for the general fan” (original emphasis), and would allow business to be conducted “without the interruptions of a large fan convention.”⁹¹ Thus, the establishment of the Comic Book Expo represented a

⁸⁸ "Comic Book Expo Flyer, 1986." San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State University Library Comic Art Collection.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ "Comic Book Expo Flyer, 1987." San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State University Library Comic Art Collection.

⁹¹ Mike Pasqua. "Con-Tact #2." San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State University Library Comic Art Collection; Fay Gates. "Comic Book Expo 84 Letter." March 21, 1984, San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State University Library Comic Art Collection.

well-defined spatial, temporal, and ideological barrier between fans, as consumers of culture, and the economic interests of retailers and industry professionals; the producers and distributors who profit upon the activities of the fans. In this way, the early and informal intermingling of professionals and fans at Comic-Con, the emphasis on the appreciation of popular culture, the support for artists and writers, and the pleasures of collecting, defined the Dealers' Room as a space *for* fans, but open to the industry. At the same time as fans were explicitly excluded from the industry trade show, the retail tables in the Dealers' Room were joined by a steady influx of industry booths, many of whom came for the Expo and stayed for Comic-Con, where they could reach out to consumers as well as retailers.⁹²

This shift towards a greater industry presence manifested spatially in the convention's move during the 1980s to the Convention and Performing Arts Center (CPAC). Accompanying this change in location was a discursive shift, as the Dealers' Room eventually became known as the Exhibit Hall. The move to the CPAC meant that the event was now housed in a convention center venue, geared towards meeting the needs of a more professional, industry-oriented trade show.⁹³ Not only were the facilities able to house Comic-Con's growing schedule of programs, the CPAC also offered extensive exhibiting space, accommodating dealers and industry representatives, alike.⁹⁴ As the trade show began to bleed into Comic-Con, the number of dealers and exhibitors

⁹² San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 60.

⁹³ Although the CPAC was host to high profile conventions (American Architects Association in 1977) and performers (Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones in 1965) in its earlier years, by the 1990s it had fallen into significant disrepair, replaced by the newer, larger San Diego Convention Center. Terry Rodgers, "City's Old Convention Center Has New Owner," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sunday, August 1 1993, B1.

⁹⁴ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 60.

grew, gradually redefining the Dealers' Room space. By 1987, the over 250 tables of the 41,000 square foot Dealers' Room housed in CPAC's "giant exhibition hall"⁹⁵ were all reserved almost a year in advance.⁹⁶ In June of 1988, organizers announced a "second dealers room" in CPAC's Golden Hall. However, this multipurpose space would serve as a lounge, house an art show and a "50th anniversary Superman exhibit," and be "filled with booths, primarily representing publishing companies."⁹⁷ When Comic-Con arrived in August, the room was referred to as a "Display Room" and, as promised, it was filled with fifty-six exhibitors from the comics and game industries.⁹⁸ In 1989, this second space was described as an "exhibitor area," but was still subsumed under the title "Dealers' Rooms."⁹⁹ Finally, in 1990, this second room was renamed the "Exhibitors' Room."¹⁰⁰ For these three years, the convention seemed to be grappling, not only with its significant growth in attendance—as numbers grew from 8000 to almost 13000—but also with a redefinition of the function of the Dealers' Room. With the growing industry presence, there was still plenty of selling happening during Comic-Con, but not all of it involved a direct exchange of money.

⁹⁵ Estrada, "1984 San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No. 1."

⁹⁶ Mark Stadler. "San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No. 1." February, 1987, San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State University Library Comic Art Collection.

⁹⁷ *San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No. 2* (San Diego: San Deigo Comic Convention, Inc., 1988).

⁹⁸ Janet Tait, ed. *1988 San Diego Comic-Con Events Guide* (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention, Inc., 1988), 14. While the Events Guide listed only fifty-six, the next year's Progress Report counted "80+ convention-style booths" in the hall. Jackie Estrada, ed. *Progress Report No. 2* (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention, Inc., 1989), 13.

⁹⁹ *Progress Report No. 2*.

¹⁰⁰ Bill Stoddard, ed. *1990 San Diego Comic-Con Events Guide* (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention, Inc., 1990), 2.

The trade show and industry influence was so significant, in fact, that when Comic-Con moved to the San Diego Convention Center in 1991, the Dealers' Room title had almost disappeared completely, replaced by the "Exhibit Hall," a 92,000 square foot space filled with "exhibitors booths and dealers tables."¹⁰¹ Comic-Con's new home furthered the spatial and semantic shifts already underway, broadening the definition of the fan event. The new and expansive San Diego Convention Center facilitated a continued and more complete spatial convergence of dealers and industry exhibitors, with its sprawling and connected halls able to accommodate endless rows of retail tables and trade show-style booths. The convention center, which was constructed to house large industry and trade-show events, had also given Comic-Con the impetus to reimagine the Dealers' Room discursively. The new title, Exhibit Hall, indicated an expanded space for consumption, not just in the form of retail sales, but also industry promotion. It is not surprising then, that ten years later, as the convention's attendance numbers and square footage continued to grow, Comic-Con stopped holding its annual trade show. It had become somewhat redundant as "much of the business that had been taking place at the Expo began to shift to the larger event."¹⁰² This over thirty year transition, from Dealers' Room to Exhibit Hall, represents a marked change in how this combined retail and exhibition space was conceptualized and captured in the discourses and ephemera that Comic-Con has left behind. But its also suggestive of a consistency over time; just as the Marvelmania booth seemed like a perfect fit in the Dealers' Room of 1970, so did the

¹⁰¹ While the "What's Changed" section of the *Events Guide* refers to "the Dealer's Room," the space was labeled as the "Exhibit Hall" throughout the remainder of the guide. Bill Stoddard and Janet Tait, eds., *1991 San Diego Comic-Con Convention Events Guide* (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention, Inc., 1991), 4.

¹⁰² San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 87.

hundreds of publishers, film, television, game, and toy companies that filled the Exhibit Hall since 1991. In addition to advertising or selling their products, they also sold the very notion of fandom back to their customers by encouraging and cultivating the connection between fandom, pleasure, and consumerism.

Synergy and Space: The Exhibit Hall in the Twenty-First Century

Although the film and television industries have been a presence at Comic-Con throughout its history, for much of the seventies and eighties this industry promotion usually took the form of events like film screenings and preview panels.¹⁰³ For this reason, moving through the eighties and into the early nineties, the most pronounced industry presence in the Comic-Con Dealers' Room and Exhibit Hall was that of the publishing industry; primarily that segment of the industry devoted to the publication and distribution of comic books. As the nineties progressed, however, a number of trade

¹⁰³ In addition to the *Star Wars* franchise's continued presence in the form of preview panels, a number of films were similarly promoted at Comic-Con in the 1980s, including: *Creepshow* (George A. Romero, 1982), *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982), *The Right Stuff* (Philip Kaufman, 1983), *Never Say Never Again* (Irvin Kershner, 1983), *Dune* (David Lynch, 1984), *Neverending Story* (Wolfgang Peterson, 1984), *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (George Miller and George Ogilvie, 1985), *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985), Jackie Estrada. "San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report 2 1982." Series III: Progress Reports and Newsletters, Folder 44, Box 1, Shel Dorf Collection, San Diego History Center; "1983 San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No. 2; David Spielwak. "1985 San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No. 1." January 1985, San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State University Library Comic Art Collection; "1985 San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No. 2." May 1985, San Diego Comic-Con, Michigan State University Library Comic Art Collection.

Despite these preview panels, extant Comic-Con materials show very little evidence of a significant promotional presence for film and television in the Dealers' Room during the 1970s and 1980s. Notable exceptions include the previously discussed *Star Wars* booth in 1977 and a 1973 *Star Trek* "exhibit," staged by the local chapter of S.T.A.R. (Star Trek Association for Revival). While it is likely that this exhibit was fan initiated and organized, it was accompanied by programming that included "a sneak preview of the introductory credits for the Star Trek animated series" and the presence of associate producer and script consultant (for the original and animated series), D.C. Fontana. Regardless of whether this exhibit and these appearances were staged in collaboration with the show's producers, it was part of a broader promotional strategy on the part of *Star Trek* fans, aimed at reviving the series. The program for that year's event also featured an appeal to fans to participate in a writing campaign and to convince Paramount "that even one movie would be profitable." Graham and Alfonso, "San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No.1 and 1973 Wrap-up Report; Dorf, "San Diego Comic-Con Program Book 1973."

show-style booths associated with other types of media companies also began to appear, growing in number and prominence over the next two decades.

Though the Exhibit Hall has undergone minor alterations from year-to-year, the layout has been configured in much the same way since 1994, when Comic-Con's Exhibit Hall covered a significantly smaller space—249,338 square feet (Halls A-C)—of The San Diego Convention Center.¹⁰⁴ While Comic-Con had already been held in the newly constructed convention center for three years, the 1994 Events Guide map marked a noticeable shift in the representation of the Exhibit Hall. This was the first guide to highlight the centrality of corporate exhibitors by labeling them directly on the map, a practice that has remained in place since that time.¹⁰⁵ The following year, Comic-Con boasted an Exhibit Hall containing “the most comics, games, card, and game companies of any major convention,” and the Events Guide map reflected this statement with large, corporately operated booths situated in the center-right of the room, flanked on either side by tables belonging to smaller distributors, retailers, publishers and artists.¹⁰⁶ In visualizing this corporate presence, the map depicted them as large blocks of space bearing names such as D.C. Comics, Marvel, Dark Horse, and MCA/Universal, surrounded by comparatively tiny and uniformly sized, numbered squares, referring the reader to an index of exhibitors and retailers towards the back of the Events Guide (fig.

¹⁰⁴ San Diego Convention Center Corporation, "Ground Level Exhibit Hall Specifications".

¹⁰⁵ Janet Tait, ed. *1994 San Diego Comic-Con Events Guide* (San Diego: Comic-Con International, 1994).

¹⁰⁶ Exhibitors included: “DC Comics, Marvel Comics, Dark Horse Comics, Tekno*Comix, Wizards of the Coast, Motown, Image Comics, Skybox, Fleer, and many other companies.” *Comic-Con International Update 1* (San Diego: San Diego Comic Convention, 1995), 4; Young, *1995 San Diego Comic Book Convention Events Guide*, 5.

40).¹⁰⁷ When the San Diego Convention Center completed its expansion in the fall of 2001, Comic-Con's Exhibit Hall also expanded to fill this new space over the next two years, a response to a significant growth in attendance in the 2000s.¹⁰⁸ By 2003, the Exhibit Hall had more than doubled in size and covered 460,859 square feet of the convention center (Halls A-G).¹⁰⁹ In the 2005 Events Guide, the map of the Exhibit Hall featured large areas of space marked off and branded not just with names, but with familiar corporate logos such as Activision (video games), SciFi (television network), Paramount Pictures, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Dreamworks, Mattel (toys), Hasbro, Inc. (toys), Disney (featuring segments of the conglomerate: Disney Consumer Products, Disney Publishing Worldwide, and Disneyland), Dark Horse Comics, and DC Comics (fig. 41).¹¹⁰ The 2013 Exhibit Hall map—now a splashy, four-page color insert in the Events Guide—retained this general configuration, but reflected an even more

¹⁰⁷ Tait, *1994 San Diego Comic-Con Events Guide*, 37; Young, *1995 San Diego Comic Book Convention Events Guide*, 5, 53-6.

¹⁰⁸ Between 2001 and 2004, attendance grew from 53,000 to 95,000. San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 154; Glanzer, Sassaman, and Estrada, *Comic-Con 40 Souvenir Book*, 109-12.

¹⁰⁹ "Comic-Con International Celebrates Its 35th Incredible Year!," in *Comic-Con International Update 1* (San Diego: Comic-Con International, 2004), 11; San Diego Convention Center Corporation, "Ground Level Exhibit Hall Specifications".

¹¹⁰ Marvel Comics is notably absent from this collection of corporate logos. In fact, according to the index of exhibitors, the company, which was known at that time as Marvel Enterprises, was stationed at the Activision booth, one of their video game licensees. Estrada, *San Diego Comic-Con International 2005 Events Guide*, map insert; "Activision and Marvel Entertainment Expand Alliance and Extend Interactive Rights for Spider-Man and X-Men Franchises," *Marvel.com*, last modified November 11, 2005, http://marvel.com/news/story/187/activision_and_marvel_entertainment_expand_alliance_and_extend_interactive_rights_for_spider-man_and_x-men_franchises

pronounced corporate presence, with significantly more space on the map devoted to larger corporate booths, emblazoned with easily recognizable brand logos (fig. 33).¹¹¹

The diversification of the Exhibit Hall, from 1990 to the present, coincides with a period of significant conglomeration and horizontal and vertical integration in the media industries.¹¹² The increased emphasis on “‘synergy’ or ‘tight diversification’” was an attempt on the part of film studios to “‘become more efficient multi-faceted media corporations, focusing on their filmed entertainment divisions while taking full advantage of new delivery systems and revenue streams.’”¹¹³ Such strategies culminated, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with a number of high profile mergers and acquisitions, a product of increasing deregulation of the media industries in the US.¹¹⁴

This shift towards media conglomeration affected not only film and television studios, but also comic book publishers. In fact, this wave of conglomeration suggests a significant change, not only in the political economy of the media industries, but also in the increasing convergence of these different media into a single industrial product: the franchise.¹¹⁵ In 1989, Time Inc., owner of DC Comics Inc., merged with Warner

¹¹¹ Comic-Con introduced color map inserts in 2007. *San Diego Comic-Con International 2005 Events Guide*; *2007 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*; *2013 Comic-Con International: Events Guide*, map insert.

¹¹² Horizontal integration refers to the industrial practice of diversifying ownership in various media and non-media companies across the same chain of production, distribution or exhibition, while vertical integration refers to diversification through ownership at multiple levels. Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, 15; Lotz and Havens, *Understanding Media Industries*, 22.

¹¹³ Tom Schatz, "The Studio System and Conglomerate Hollywood," in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 22.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹⁵ Derek Johnson suggests that franchises express “no fewer than three axes of corporate power,” which he describes as “intellectual property monopoly, horizontal integration, and the synergy ideal.” Johnson, *Media Franchising*, 67-68. Johnson’s detailed analysis of franchising as a kind of production culture, with numerous institutional actors at various levels, provides a much-needed intervention into the complexities

Communications, making the comic book company part of what was at that time “the world's largest multimedia company and a model of synergy, with holdings in movies, TV production, cable, records, and book and magazine publishing.”¹¹⁶ Rather than being swallowed up by a large media conglomerate like its main competitor, DC Comics, Marvel attempted to diversify its own holdings by purchasing trading card, toy, and collectible companies and establishing its own in-house operation, Marvel Studios, to oversee television and film production.¹¹⁷ At the same time, Marvel was also licensing its characters out “through Marvel television cartoons, video games, amusement parks, and theme restaurants,” which had become their predominant source of revenue by 1996.¹¹⁸ The fact that by 1996 only fifteen percent of Marvel’s revenue came from publishing is indicative of the larger industrial move towards the production of synergy through media conglomeration in the 1990s.¹¹⁹ If, as Comic-Con chairman Richard Butner suggested in 1975, a diversity of fan interests helped to ensure that fields like comics, film, television, science fiction, and animation were “interconnected with others beyond disentanglement,” then the industrial emphasis on synergy and conglomeration over the next three decades manifested this interconnectivity, not just in the minds of Comic-Con fans, but also in the

of franchising. However, his desire to move way from economic interpretations and towards highlighting “franchising not just as industry and business, but as shared and iterative culture” by drawing on “research in business and organizational communication” represents an approach to media industries that, as Meehan and Wasko have argued, moves away from the the critical stance that I employ in this dissertation. *Ibid.*, 8; Wasko and Meehan, "Critical Crossroads or Parallel Routes?."

¹¹⁶ Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 30.

¹¹⁷ Matthew P. McAllister, "Ownership Concentration in the U.S. Comic Book Industry," in *Comics and Ideology*, ed. Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell Jr., and Ian Gordon (New York Peter Lang, 2001), 28.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29. Marvel’s industrial history in the nineties, which included filing and recovering from bankruptcy, is detailed extensively by Dan Raviv. *Comic Wars* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002).

economic logic through which the media industries operate.¹²⁰

While the 1995 Exhibit Hall featured mostly comic publishers in its largest booths, the 2000s gave way to an influx of film and television studios and their licensees, as well as an increased visibility for toy and collectibles companies.¹²¹ Not only that, but comic companies were also restructuring in order to join (DC) or replicate (Marvel) the kind of corporate synergy being implemented by large media conglomerates. Lotz and Havens define synergy as a “kind of conglomerate cross-promotion, in which each new version of a text in a different medium not only makes money, but also drives sales of all other versions of the text.”¹²² Such a description conjures up a smoothly functioning industrial strategy in which profit is produced and reproduced. Indeed, such industrial logic was and is on display in Comic-Con’s Exhibit Hall. In the past, the Dealers’ Room was curated around consumer opportunities that appealed to the interests and investments of collectors and sellers, suggesting a kind of unified goal of encouraging the consumption of comics and popular culture, more generally. While these features remain present in the Exhibit Hall, the newer trade show-style booths, representing the production and distribution arms of the media industries (as opposed to solely small independent retailers), promote consumption by spatializing corporate synergy and translating it to the show floor.

¹²⁰ I discuss this quote and its relation to Comic-Con history at greater depth in the introduction to this dissertation. Dorf, *San Diego Comic-Con Souvenir Book (1975)*.

¹²¹ According to the 1997 Events Guide, HBO, Miramax Films, Playstation, and Sony Computer Entertainment were the only film, television, and video game companies with booths on the show floor. Marvel Entertainment was also a prominent presence and, as I discuss above, by this time the company’s principal interests rested outside of the publishing industry and were more intensely focused on branching out and producing synergy through other media and outlets. Tait, *1997 Comic-Con International Events Guide*, 45-8.

¹²² Lotz and Havens, *Understanding Media Industries*, 21.

The spatialization of synergy is neatly encapsulated in the preface to this chapter: the Anchor Bay booth promoted two television programs on competing cable networks, but both *The Walking Dead* and *Spartacus: Vengeance* were distributed on DVD/Blu-ray by Anchor Bay. For this reason, promoting these two competing shows also meant promoting a single company's products: Anchor Bay. An attendee who picked up the swag at that particular booth—the much sought after *Walking Dead/Spartacus* vinyl bag—might only be a fan of one of these two shows, but would invariably be advertising both as they carried it with them at and outside of Comic-Con. Thus, the beneficiaries of this promotion, staged at a single booth, included Anchor Bay Entertainment, its co-owners Starz, Inc. and the Weinstein Company, and AMC Networks. What, on its surface, was a single giveaway at a single booth, actually grew out of a more complex system of interconnected economic interests and partnerships. This synergy is also present on a larger scale, demonstrating how the complexities of media licensing and ownership, and the innumerable ways the media industries profit on fandom, are smoothed over by the apparent synergy of media franchises in the Comic-Con event space. The remainder of this section considers one such example in the Exhibit Hall.

In 2002, a *Lord of the Rings* Pavilion was erected in the very center of the hall. The pavilion included booths for Sideshow Collectibles, New Line Home Entertainment, Electronic Arts, Houghton Mifflin Company, Games Workshop, and Decipher.¹²³ In trade show parlance, pavilions are not necessarily structures unto themselves, rather, they

¹²³ Estrada, *San Diego Comic-Con International Events Guide 2002*, map insert, 57-61. Sideshow Collectibles is a company specializing in high end collectibles such as busts, figures, and prop replicas, New Line Home Entertainment was the branch of New Line Cinema devoted to home entertainment distribution, Electronic Arts is a producer and distributor of video games, Houghton Mifflin Company is a book publisher, and Games Workshop and Decipher are both manufactures and distributors of board games, card and role playing games.

might be better understood as a pre-constituted area of the space that brings different exhibitors together around shared content.¹²⁴ Pavilions emphasize uniformity and connectivity, and partnering with one or more companies can allow for more cost-effective trade show marketing. However, pavilions are often sponsored, meaning that exhibitors must “only show products that complement [the] sponsor’s products and services.”¹²⁵ In the case of the *Lord of the Rings* pavilion in 2002, this meant producing a synergistic relationship on the show floor, with participating companies clustering around the film franchise, as opposed to a more broadly, fan-defined notion of Tolkien’s fictional universe. This particular configuration supports Eileen Meehan’s assertion that “separating reader from text/intertext, is the complex structure of interpenetrating cultural industries and the corporate interests of media conglomerates.”¹²⁶ While, as Meehan argues, “this complex structure is generally invisible to us,” the *Lord of the Rings* pavilion, featuring displays clustered around a particular set of interconnected texts, also puts on display the industrial logic behind this enormously popular franchise.¹²⁷

By early 2002, the *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Peter Jackson, 2001) had earned over \$500 million at the box office and spawned a massive amount of merchandise, including Sideshow Collectibles’ high-end models and busts and Decipher’s trading card game (TCG) and role playing game (RPG) based on the film.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Convention Industry Council, "Apex Industry Glossary - 2011 Edition," *Pavilion*, last modified 2011, <http://www.conventionindustry.org/StandardsPractices/APEX/glossary.aspx>

¹²⁵ Linda Musgrove, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Trade Shows* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 60.

¹²⁶ Meehan, "'Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!': The Political Economy of a Commercial Intertext," 61.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ "New Line Cinema's 'Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring' Ignites Marketplace," *PR Newswire*, January 15, 2002, www.lexisnexis.com/hotttopics/lnacademic.

Both of these companies had a licensing deal with the producer of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, New Line Cinema, itself a subsidiary of the massive media conglomerate, AOL Time Warner.¹²⁹ Games Workshop signed a similar licensing deal with New Line to manufacture table-top games based on the films. As a result, the company saw a marked increase in their overall business, as the popularity of their *Lord of the Rings* game tie-ins raised the profile of the company's full line of games.¹³⁰ Sideshow Collectibles, Decipher, and Games Workshop were all part of a "two-tiered system" of licensing, "aimed at different age-groups and tastes."¹³¹ While Marvel's Toy Biz would produce action figures and Giant would manufacture clothing for sale in large retail chains, aimed at children and a mass-market, companies like Sideshow, Decipher, and Games Workshop produced high-end, collectible products clearly aimed at adult fans of the franchise and "sold in bookstores and similarly dignified outlets."¹³² Not only did this concept appeal to fan collectors as an exclusive group with more distinguished tastes, it also enhanced the exclusivity of the products by limiting their circulation, rather than making them easily accessible at large chain stores. The aesthetic of the Sideshow Comic-Con booth matched this "dignified" approach, with its selection of collectibles on an elaborate display roped

¹²⁹ New Line was originally an independent film distributor and producer, but was acquired by Turner Broadcasting System in 1994, which subsequently merged with Time Warner in 1996. AOL purchased Time Warner in 2000 and the two companies merged in January 2001. In 2003, after the dotcom bubble burst, the company dropped AOL from the title and became Time Warner. New Line Cinema operated separately the conglomerate's major film studio, Warner Brothers, until 2008.

¹³⁰ Jonathon Guthrie, "Bilbo Baggins Enters Games Workshop Land Leisure," *Financial Times*, January 31, 2001, 28; "Games Workshop Runs Rings around Its Rivals," *Financial Times*, July 31, 2002, 20.

¹³¹ Kristin Thompson, *Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 194.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 194-7.

off behind museum-style barriers (fig. 42).¹³³ Not coincidentally, this more exclusive tier of merchandise was aimed at the similarly exclusive group of *Lord of the Rings* fans, the kind who would likely peruse the pavilion at Comic-Con.¹³⁴

The pavilion also featured a literary presence, but one that was specifically linked to New Line's film franchise. Houghton Mifflin, having published J.R.R. Tolkien's books in the U.S. since 1954, also acquired the publishing rights to the *Lord of the Rings* films in 2001, releasing new editions of the books as well as film tie-ins such as, *The Fellowship of the Ring Visual Companion* (Jude Fisher, 2001) and *The Art of the Fellowship of the Ring* (Gary Russell, 2002).¹³⁵ Houghton Mifflin's presence both acknowledged the significance of the source material to fans at Comic-Con and reinforced the film franchise as a natural extension of Tolkien's literary legacy through the publisher's collaboration with New Line.

Behind the scenes, the rights and licensing associated with the original novels made the franchising of the New Line films significantly more complicated than it appeared at Comic-Con. For example, Electronic Arts (EA) had a contract with New Line to produce video games based on the film franchise, but rival company, Vivendi

¹³³ "2002 San Diego Comic Con International: Lord of the Rings Sideshow," *Raving Toy Maniac*, last modified 2002, <http://www.toymania.com/toyshows/sdcc02/sdcc02sideshow1.shtml>

¹³⁴ Confirming the adult-fan orientation of the *Lord of the Rings* pavilion, New Line Cinema announced a "Become an Orc" contest on fan site, theonering.net, in which attendees "age 18 and older" could win a session with Weta make up artists, who would "transform them into an Orc" in front of a crowd of spectators at the *Lord of the Rings* pavilion. New Line Cinema, "Middle-Earth Invades Comic Con," [theonering.net](http://archives.theonering.net/perl/newsview/8/1028206742), last modified August 1, 2002, <http://archives.theonering.net/perl/newsview/8/1028206742>

¹³⁵ Houghton Mifflin's deal stipulated two tie-ins for each film. Business/Entertainment Editors, "Houghton Mifflin Acquires U.S. Book Rights to New Line Cinema's 'Lord of the Rings' Movie Trilogy," *Business Wire*, January 16, 2001, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/docview/446066424?accountid=14667>; Karen Raugust, "Lord of Licensing," *Publishers Weekly*, July 2, 2001, 28; Jude Fisher, *Fellowship of the Rings Visual Companion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001); Gary Russel, *The Art of the Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

Universal Games, owned the rights to the novels and had plans to develop multiple games around the same time.¹³⁶ Further confusing this situation was the fact that EA's first installment was a game based on the second film, *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002), while Vivendi almost simultaneously released a game based on the first book: *The Fellowship of the Ring* (J.R.R. Tolkien, 1954).¹³⁷ Not only that, but Vivendi Universal, the parent company of Vivendi Universal Games, also owned *Lord of the Rings* publisher, Houghton Mifflin, having bought the company in 2001.¹³⁸ So, while one of Vivendi's subsidiaries (Vivendi Universal Games) held the licensing rights for games based on the original Tolkien novels, the other (Houghton Mifflin) had obtained the publishing rights based on the New Line film franchise. These kinds of overlaps and complexities in the licensing of the franchise extended far beyond video games and were due to "a quirk in the licensing program" for the film series; some of the rights were sold through New Line, while Tolkien Enterprises retained others.¹³⁹ Tolkien Enterprises was a relic of the 1970s, when producer Saul Zaentz acquired the film rights to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* books from United Artists, simultaneously securing "the trademarks for the names of all of the characters, places, and objects in the novels" from the Tolkien Estate.¹⁴⁰ Zaentz produced an animated adaptation of the first half of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, but never produced the second

¹³⁶ John Gaudiosi, "'Lord of the Rings' Gets Games Deal," *Hollywood Reporter*, July 31, 2001.

¹³⁷ Thompson, *Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, 234.

¹³⁸ Business Editors, "Vivendi Universal Agrees to Acquire Houghton Mifflin in Transaction Valued at \$2.2 Billion," *Business Wire*, June 1, 2001, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/docview/446035440?accountid=14667>.

¹³⁹ Anna Wilde Mathews, "Lord of the Things--Separate Companies Hold Rights to the Products from 'Rings' Books, Films," *Wall Street Journal*, December 17, 2001, B1.

¹⁴⁰ Thompson, *Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, 19.

half, so he founded Tolkien Enterprises in 1978 to capitalize on the licensing rights for the original novels.¹⁴¹ The long and circuitous journey to produce the *Lord of the Rings* franchise is outlined in excellent detail by Kristen Thompson, who describes the resulting and unwieldy licensing arrangement between Zaentz and New Line in *The Frodo Franchise* (2007):

[Zaentz] retained the hundreds of Tolkien related trademarks that he had acquired in the 1970s and simply licensed New Line to license other companies to manufacture merchandise. Every item and advertisement for these products carries some variant of this cumbersome message: ‘© 2002 New Line Production, Inc. The Lord of the Rings and the characters, names and places therein, ™ The Saul Zaentz Company d/b/a Tolkien Enterprises under license to New Line Productions, Inc. All rights reserved.’¹⁴²

While the licensing of *Lord of the Rings* was extremely convoluted and complex, that messiness was somewhat undone when the franchise was reconstituted in the form of a Comic-Con pavilion. Notably excluded from the pavilion were those licensees, like Vivendi Universal, who had purchased the rights to the novels rather than New Line’s Film franchise.¹⁴³ The curation of the *Lord of the Rings* pavilion, then, was based upon a

¹⁴¹ Mathews, "Lord of the Things--Separate Companies Hold Rights to the Products from 'Rings' Books, Films," B1; Thompson, *Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, 19-20.

¹⁴² *Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, 193.

¹⁴³ Despite their exclusion from New Line’s pavilion, Universal Interactive, a subsidiary of Vivendi Universal Games and the studio responsible for publishing the competing *Lord of the Rings* games, was situated directly across the aisle. Estrada, *San Diego Comic-Con International Events Guide 2002*, map insert, 61. In absence of evidence in the form of images or firsthand reports from the Exhibit Hall floor, it is impossible to say with certainty that the company had traveled to Comic-Con to promote their *Fellowship of the Ring* game. However, given that Universal Interactive only published six games in 2002, it is

corporate strategy, assembling a group of licensees together to promote New Line's specific investment in the franchise. This assemblage also included the presence of a *Lord of the Rings* fan club, with a table set aside for fan site, theonering.net. Another exhibitor, Decipher, was licensed to run the "official" *LOTR* fan club doing double duty as manufacturer of TCGs and RPGs for *Lord of the Rings* and publishers of *The Lord of the Rings Fan Club Official Movie Magazine*.¹⁴⁴ While not the fly-by-night operation that Marvelmania represented in 1970, Decipher similarly obtained the licensing rights for the fan club from New Line and "as a licensee of New Line, the Fan Club was able to run a sanctioned website" and a magazine that featured regular updates from director Peter Jackson.¹⁴⁵ The inclusion of fans in this pavilion, both in official and unofficial capacities, represents not only the importance of Tolkien fandom to the franchise, but also the importance of fandom to the visibility of the franchise.

As Elana Shefrin notes, this investment in fan culture was similarly fostered

reasonable to believe that *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Rings* were among those games promoted in this booth adjacent to, but not a part of, the pavilion. "Universal Interactive, Inc.," *Giant Bomb*, last modified 2014, <http://www.giantbomb.com/universal-interactive-inc/3010-124/published/> Unraveling the operations of Universal Interactive is yet another example of the complexities of media conglomerates. In 2002, Universal Interactive Studios was one of a number of video game studios owned by parent company and game publisher, Vivendi Universal Games. "Vivendi Universal Games and Kovel/Fuller Announce an Expanded Advertising and Services Partnership," *PR Newswire*, December 10, 2001, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/docview/447808258?accountid=14667>. The studio tasked with the production of the *Lord of the Rings* games was Black Label Games, announced in August 2002. While billed as a separate studio, Black Label seemed to be tied directly to Universal Interactive as the general manager and former vice president of marketing for Universal Interactive, Torrie Dorrell was said to be working for the president of Universal Interactive, Jim Wilson. IGN Staff, "Vu Creates Black Label Games," *IGN*, last modified August 13, 2002, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2002/08/13/vu-creates-black-label-games>. Confirming this connection, video game website *Giant Bomb* describes Black Label Games as "the short-lived rebranding of Universal Interactive before the company would later rename itself 'Vivendi Universal Games.'" "Black Label Games," *Giant Bomb*, last modified 2014, <http://www.giantbomb.com/black-label-games/3010-652/>

¹⁴⁴ Thompson, *Frodo Franchise: The Lord of the Rings and Modern Hollywood*, 143.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

online throughout the production of New Line's *Lord of the Rings* franchise.¹⁴⁶ While she ultimately argues for a more "utopian" approach that suggests that New Line and Peter Jackson's ongoing attention to *Lord of the Rings* fans "can be seen as mapping new articulations of participatory democracy,"¹⁴⁷ Shefrin also admits to a more critical possibility, that these maneuvers "can be seen as a strategic move to co-opt the overall import of fan opinion."¹⁴⁸ As this examination of the *LOTR* pavilion at Comic-Con indicates, this particular space was structured by and around the specific interests of New Line and its licensees. Ultimately, this reveals something that is more difficult to distinguish in online space; the overlaps between fans and the industry at the *LOTR* pavilion were less about making fans active and democratic participants in the formation of the franchise and, more accurately, an attempt at incorporating fandom into the industrial logic of the franchise itself. By inviting fans to participate in this pavilion populated by industry licensees, New Line was able to both service and acknowledge the fans, while also situating them, spatially and ideologically, as any other licensee; integrated into a mutually beneficial promotional arrangement that reasserted New Line's position (along with its parent company, Warner Bros.) at the top of the organizational hierarchy.

Just as these distinctions are easily lost online, it is possible to forget these complexities on the show floor, where companies seem to be unified by the content they produce and promote—*Lord of the Rings* merchandise—rather than by their roles as New

¹⁴⁶ Notably, Peter Jackson participated in two extensive interviews with Harry Knowles in 1998 and 1999. Shefrin, "Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, and Participatory Fandom: Mapping New Congruencies between the Internet and Media Entertainment Culture," 266-7.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 267.

Line licensees seeking to profit on the film franchise. Fan clubs, whether licensed or simply acknowledged by the films' producers, take their place in this pavilion as another arm of industry promotion. But, as Meehan has observed, "the commodification of the text, the commodity fetishism of the intertext, and the management of consumption are obscured behind the 'soft and fuzzies' feeling of experience."¹⁴⁹ In other words, despite its outward appearance, the *Lord of the Rings* pavilion did not represent a cluster of booths curated around and unified by a particular kind of fandom, rather, it was assembled according to the industrial logic of the franchise.

Exhibits like the *LoTR* pavilion became increasingly common at Comic-Con as it entered the twenty-first century and the busy Exhibit Hall floor rapidly integrated media industry interests such as New Line's franchise.¹⁵⁰ This additional media content and its corporate exhibitors can be historically situated as byproduct of the concentration of media ownership around the turn of the twenty-first century. Though all manner of popular culture had been present at Comic-Con throughout its history, the Exhibit Hall was no longer narrowly focused on any one media form, like comic books.

Conglomeration, franchising, and the quest for synergy had rendered such a distinction

¹⁴⁹ Meehan, "'Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!': The Political Economy of a Commercial Intertext," 61.

¹⁵⁰ In addition to numerous booths belonging to media conglomerates, Lucasfilm also stages a pavilion each year to promote the vast array of *Star Wars* merchandise. When the pavilion was first introduced in 2004, it featured a number of attractions: fans could pose for pictures with "a 'real sized' X-Wing starfighter and watch *Star Wars* themed footage on the gigantic screen," audition for "the company's upcoming Trivial Pursuit DVD: *Star Wars Edition*," and attend scheduled autograph sessions with stars from the franchise. Estrada, *Comic-Con International Events Guide 2004*, 5. Accompanying these activities were a variety of opportunities for consumption, described at length in the Comic-Con Events Guide: "Comic-Con specials from a host of Lucasfilm licensees, such as Hasbro's 2004 limited-edition silver-painted sandtrooper action figure, making its debut at Comic-Con. Among the other licensees you'll find in the pavilion with convention-exclusive *Star Wars* merchandise, giveaways, or special events are Gentle Giant, LucasArts, Master Replicas, Code 3 Collectibles, LEGO, CDM LEGO, Pens, Topps, MBNA, *Star Wars Insider* magazine and Hyperspace: The Official *Star Wars* Fan club, and Anthony Grandio. In addition, the official *Star Wars* shop will stock a variety of *Star Wars Collectibles*." Ibid.

industrially obsolete, as various media products were meant to work together to encourage increased consumption and earn even more profits. Ultimately, the Exhibit Hall space is tailored, not towards fan tastes, but industrial logic. With this in mind, Comic-Con suggests an entirely different perspective on corporate synergy, one that can be studied as an embodied experience.

The Exhibit Hall and “Industrial Geography Lessons”

A lot of business is on display at Comic-Con. Much of it happens as large amounts of money changes hands between dealers and attendees. But, with the influx of industry exhibitors, the establishment of a comics trade show, and the gradual incorporation of both into the Exhibit Hall, it is clear that this is not just a “shoppers’ paradise,” where collectors can spend their hard earned money;¹⁵¹ the industry also operates there in a promotional capacity, trying to attract consumers who may not spend money on the spot, but will invest in their products and brands in the long term. As Eileen Meehan argues, fans are a viable stream of revenue “if the conglomerate can cultivate them as reliable and indiscriminating purchasers of a product line.”¹⁵² Fans, then, represent a more long-term and predictable part of the supply chain and companies at Comic-Con are trying to keep the ones that they have and create new ones. This kind of outreach matches up well with the trade show model, which allows for “person-to-person information exchange and selling.”¹⁵³ Industrially, “a trade show represents an opportunity to test the market... learn about the latest designs and trends... strengthen

¹⁵¹ San Diego Comic Convention Inc., *Comic-Con: 40 Years of Artists, Writers, Fans & Friends*, 45.

¹⁵² Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy," 84.

¹⁵³ Klaus Solberg Søilen, *Exhibit Marketing and Trade Show Intelligence: Successful Boothmanship and Booth Design* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), xiii.

[their] brand” and create “great deal of potential publicity.”¹⁵⁴ Companies at Comic-Con set up elaborate promotional booths, offer contests, schedule celebrity appearances, and give away free swag to do just that.

In 2013, for example, such promotions included: a re-creation of AMC’s *Walking Dead* prison yard, where attendees could have their picture taken with a swarm of zombies (fig. 43); scheduled giveaways of a lanyard and pass card for Legendary Pictures’ offsite attraction, the “*Godzilla Experience*”; free poster tubes and collectible posters from Fox television; thirty-one different autograph sessions across Warner Brothers’ range of print, video game, television, and film products; and a Marvel booth featuring scheduled giveaways of swag and tickets to a screening of *Agent Carter* (Louis D’Esposito, 2013),¹⁵⁵ autograph sessions, costume contests, photo-ops, and a live game show. All of these promotions were staged in crowded and spectacular booths, creating an exciting and high-paced atmosphere. If, as Anne Friedberg has argued, environments like the shopping mall “become[s] a realm for consumption, effectively exiling the realm of production from sight,”¹⁵⁶ then this industry presence seeks to restore visibility to the “realm of production” by injecting a trade show atmosphere into the retail space of the Exhibit Hall.

Indeed, these promotions and displays share much with Tim Havens’ description of the NATPE Market & Conference, the trade show for the National Association of Television Program Executives:

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., xiii-xiv.

¹⁵⁵ *Agent Carter* was a short film, referred to as a “Marvel One-Shot,” released as part of the *Iron Man 3* (Black, 2013) Blu-ray and digital download.

¹⁵⁶ Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, 113.

Everywhere on the sales floor loom mammoth billboards advertising new series, while lavish sales “stands” reach to the ceiling... As one ventures further onto the sales floor, one glimpses a vast array of perquisites, or ‘perks.’ Several stands feature free, non-stop food or drink, while other giveaways and celebrity photo sessions lure participants to vendors’ stands... When a particularly attractive giveaway or photo opportunity begins, word spreads across the sales floor like wildfire.¹⁵⁷

Havens’ description suggests similarities that span form and content, highlighting the size and scale of the “stands” or booths, as well as the kinds of activities happening within them. There remains, however, the question of target audience.

Trade shows tend to emphasize business transactions within a particular industry, like the aforementioned Comic Book Expo, which brought the comic book industry together with retailers, or NATPE, an international marketplace where the television industry goes to buy and sell programs and syndication rights.¹⁵⁸ Trade shows are “business-to-business events” where attendees can “find new suppliers and form closer relationships with existing agents in our industry (suppliers, people of influence, trade organizations).”¹⁵⁹ Comic-Con is more accurately a consumer show: “business-to-consumer and open to the general public.”¹⁶⁰ As organizers emphasized in the 1980s, Comic-Con, unlike the Comic Book Expo, was not a trade show, but an event *for fans*.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Havens, *Global Television Marketplace*, 69-70.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁵⁹ Søilen, *Exhibit Marketing and Trade Show Intelligence*, xiv, xviii.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xviii.

¹⁶¹ Pasqua, "Con-Tact #2."

Despite these semantic distinctions, Comic-Con is frequently described as a trade show in the press, highlighting the convention's appeal to the media industries. In 2005, the *Los Angeles Times* called Comic-Con "the largest, most energetic and most innovative trade show of its kind" and cautioned, "if you've got a comic book, movie, card game, action figure, video game or other entertainment item you hope to sell to the youth market, you'd better be here."¹⁶² That same year, an article in *Publisher's Weekly* referred to Comic-Con as an "annual trade show and fan festival," "Cannes for fans," and "ShoWest, E3 and Toy Fair combined."¹⁶³ However, when it comes to publicity, *Variety's* suggestion that "the fan centered Comic-Con is as important a marketing event for effects-driven titles as industry confabs Toy Fair or ShoWest" is, quite simply, a self-fulfilling prophesy.¹⁶⁴ The question, then, is not: Is Comic-Con a trade show? But, why is it being treated like one?

The answer is complex, one that is, in many ways, at the heart of this dissertation. As Tim Havens, John Caldwell, and Avi Santo have argued, trade shows are unique spaces in which scholars can observe and interpret the industry's cultural practices.¹⁶⁵ John Caldwell observes that the industry is continually laying out rules, guidelines, and sanctioning cultural practices that teach newcomers how to navigate and understand Hollywood's literal and conceptual spaces. These "institutional geography lessons" can

¹⁶² Perry, "It's a Bird. It's Plain: It's Super," E4.

¹⁶³ MacDonald, "Hollywood Cruises Nerd Prom," 24.

¹⁶⁴ Graser and Bing, "Genre Pix Cultivate Geek Chic," 8.

¹⁶⁵ Santo, "Hangin' out in Mickey's Joint: The Cultural Geography of Licensing Trade Shows and Cultivating Investment in Licensable IP"; Havens, "Exhibiting Global Television: On the Business and Cultural Functions of Global Television Fairs; Havens, *Global Television Marketplace*; Caldwell, *Production Culture*; Caldwell, "Industrial Geography Lessons: Socio-Professional Rituals and the Boarderlands of Production Culture."

take the form of workspaces that encourage high levels of labor and productivity for a low cost, or communal gatherings, where the industry seeks to create boundaries that help to manage and define the production culture and how it operates.¹⁶⁶ Similarly, Havens' argues that trade shows create a sense of "a global... business community," while also reinforcing the differences among the businesses that populate this community.¹⁶⁷ As this dissertation has demonstrated, this operation is remarkably similar at Comic-Con; industry promotions invite fans to feel like insiders in order to encourage an increased affective and economic investment in media companies and conglomerates. The industry also frames these promotions as special and exclusive experiences in order to elevate and differentiate their product. Through appeals to community and difference, studios attend Comic-Con in order to develop a fan-friendly brand that is also interesting and appealing to a broad swath of consumers outside of the event. Unlike Havens' study of global television trade shows, which is confined to attendees and events associated with a particular industry, Comic-Con is less insular, an event that is geared towards anyone, industry or fan, invested in what the organization refers to as "the popular arts."¹⁶⁸ Thus, at Comic-Con, the interweaving of business and culture happen through the convergence of industry and consumers in a single space.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 69-109.

¹⁶⁷ In particular, Havens signals "differences of prestige, scarcity and corporate identity." Havens, *Global Television Marketplace*, 71.

¹⁶⁸ See Comic-Con's mission statement: "Toucan: The Official Blog of Comic-Con International, Wondercon Anaheim, and Ape, the Alternative Press Expo".

¹⁶⁹ I use the word convergence here in its literal sense, to describe how both groups come together in a single time and space, as opposed to Jenkins' use of the term to describe a set of cultural and industrial practices that create the sense or, I would argue, illusion, that these two groups are increasingly aligned in the culture at large. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

Eileen Meehan suggests that the reframing of consumption as entertainment—at malls, movie theaters, or theme parks, for example—has led to an odd conflation of leisure and work in which “time away from one’s workplace was spend increasingly in the workplace of others”¹⁷⁰ Pared with Dallas Smythe’s assertion that capitalism ensures that we are *always* working, even in our leisure time, one might imagine that the media is always teaching us to be better workers, better consumers.¹⁷¹ Because “no single entity can commandeer our leisure in the same way that an employer commandeers our labor,” Meehan suggests, “we must be persuaded—enculturated—to prefer one activity over others.”¹⁷² One might imagine Comic-Con acting upon the audience commodity in the same way that a trade show seeks to encluturate employees of the media industries through “industrial geography lessons” that teach them how to conduct themselves as members of the extremely hierarchical media industries.¹⁷³

Take, for example, AMC’s Exhibit Hall promotion for its remake of *The Prisoner* in 2009. The large, striking booth featured a massive pair of eyes, belonging to Ian McKellen, one of the show’s stars. Super-imposed upon his eyes were large letters spelling out “O-B-E-Y” (fig. 44). The dual meaning of such a command is quite glaring. On the surface, it is clearly a reference to something in the text of the show—only, this was promotion for a show that attendees had yet to see. The centerpiece of the booth was a round white registration desk, reproducing the rather cold, clinical aesthetic of the

¹⁷⁰ Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy," 77.

¹⁷¹ Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," 3.

¹⁷² Meehan, "Leisure or Labor?: Fan Ethnography and Political Economy," 78.

¹⁷³ Caldwell, "Industrial Geography Lessons: Socio-Professional Rituals and the Borderlands of Production Culture; Caldwell, *Production Culture*.

series' mysterious "village." Booth employees were positioned all around, outfitted in the familiar white trimmed, black blazers of the original series (fig. 44). They invited attendees to line up and join The Village by giving their name, email address, and posing for a headshot. In return attendees were given official "village identification cards" and could win a Palm Pre by announcing their identification number on Twitter. Attendees also received an "exclusive sneak peak" of the series in the form of a Marvel comic book.¹⁷⁴ The final page of the book featured an image of the main character holding up his Palm Pre, while an image of the phone and the text "sponsored by Palm Pre" appeared in the lower right hand corner (fig. 45). The entire concept of the booth—giving out one's personal information in order to be counted, as two foreboding eyes loomed above—ran counter to both versions of the series, which told cautionary tales about surveillance and the loss of individual autonomy. In the original series, the title character famously raged: "I will not be pushed, filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed, or numbered!" and "I am not a number! I am a free man!" Buried in the subtext of the letters, O-B-E-Y, is a winking recognition of the uneven distribution of power and authority at Comic-Con and, by extension, a tacit acknowledgement of attendees' willingness to accept power, particularly when it seems to be exercised in the service of leisure, entertainment, and genuine pleasure. How else can one explain this promotion's reframing of the show's narrative into an ironically pleasurable experience that recreates exactly how it feels to be just a number?

Despite their high-concept marketing at Comic-Con, which sought out fans of the original series as well as new viewers, AMC's mini-series was a critical and ratings

¹⁷⁴ Nathan Cosby, "The Prisoner Exclusive Sneak Peak," (New York: Marvel Publishing, Inc., 2009).

failure.¹⁷⁵ The booth, however, was not. In fact, AMC has recycled this concept every year since—simply substituting a photo op featuring its hit series, *The Walking Dead*, in place of the failed *Prisoner* reboot. The malleability of this kind of promotion suggests that what AMC was selling was a lot more than just a television show. *The Prisoner* booth encouraged consumer behavior that media industries value: the spreading of promotion on social media, the disclosure of personal information, the consumption and collection of texts across a franchise, and attentiveness to cross-promotions and product placement.

In an interview about the value of Comic-Con attendees, president of CBS marketing George Schweitzer said, “These people are multipliers once they go online or on social media.”¹⁷⁶ CMO of Warner Bros. Television Group, Lisa Gregorian confirmed that studios have something concrete to gain by attending Comic-Con and that these gains can be tracked and monetized,

we have a lot of monitoring and sentiment systems that we use. We preplan everything that we are going to be tracking, and then after Comic-Con is over we look at the return on investment across all of the amplification that we’ve received due to being in San Diego... Everything goes in so many different directions, none of it necessarily based on traditional media, but in places you wouldn’t expect to get value.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Erin Hanna, "Be Selling You: The Prisoner as Cult and Commodity," *Television & New Media* (2013).

¹⁷⁶ George Schweitzer qtd. in Paige Albiniak, "Comic-Con 2013: Why TV Marketers Brave the Crowds," *Promaxbda: International Association for Entertainment Marketing Professionals*, last modified July 17, 2013, <http://brief.promaxbda.org/content/comic-con-2013-why-tv-marketers-brave-the-crowds>

¹⁷⁷ Lisa Gregorian qtd. in *ibid.*

The industry has much to gain by treating Comic-Con like an industry trade show, while simultaneously selling its products to consumers. But it is important to remember that media scholars, whether they study audiences or industry, can similarly benefit by critiquing these orchestrated overlaps. Whether we are considering how audiences act as productive consumers, promoting *and* purchasing products across an array of media forms and industries, or how the industry seeks out teaching moments, where they can encourage and reward particular modes of production and consumption, Comic-Con, and events like it are important. Not only because it is a space where the industry can access and interpellate its audience as a kind of commodified labor force, but also because Comic-Con makes power and its operations material and clearly observable: in the lines, the halls, and in the discourses that fill and surround these spaces.

EPILOGUE
Scott Pilgrim vs. the “Comic-Con False Positive”

On July 14, 2010, a week before the 2010 San Diego Comic-Con, director Edgar Wright tweeted a photograph teasing his upcoming film, *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (2010). The image documented the construction of a massive advertisement, which was draped over the Hilton Bayfront, adjacent to the San Diego convention center (fig. 46).¹ Though the ad came at a cost of \$70,000, it was still only a small but symbolic gesture that marked the massive investment Universal would make in ensuring that the film was a palpable presence at Comic-Con that year.² Even though, as movie blog *Cinematical* put it, *Pilgrim* walked away a clear winner of the “‘Look at me, Remember Me, Tell All Your Friends About Me’ prize,”³ the *New York Times* published an article the following year declaring that Comic-Con had “turned into a treacherous place” where even the best efforts at publicizing a film could produce unexpected or negative results.⁴ *Scott Pilgrim*, with its massive Comic-Con publicity campaign, ultimately failed to perform at the box office and was the film credited with sounding “the big alarm.”⁵

¹ Edgar Wright, "Holy Shit! What Is That?," *Twitpic*, last modified July 14, 2010, <http://twitpic.com/2582pv>

² Lori Weisberg, "Hollywood's Big Spenders Enjoy Comic-Con in Style," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 21, 2011, A-1.

³ Erik Davis, "SDCC Party Scene: Lucasfilm, G4, Tron and Scott Pilgrim," *Cinematical*, last modified July 23, 2010, <http://blog.moviefone.com/2010/07/23/sdcc-party-scene-lucasfilm-g4-tron-and-scott-pilgrim/>

⁴ Barnes and Cieply, "Movie Studios Reassess Comic-Con," 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*

I bring this dissertation to a close by examining *Scott Pilgrim*'s significant presence at Comic-Con in 2010. Unlike many examples I have discussed, *Scott Pilgrim* is frequently cited in arguments that Comic-Con and its fans *do not* always work for the studios, because both have the potential to produce unreliable and unpredictable results at the box office. Countering these simplistic assessments, I suggest that this final case study demonstrates, once more, how promotion at Comic-Con relies on finding ways to predict and control fans' actions and reactions, while simultaneously effacing the power imbalances in the relationships between media industries and consumers. Such strategies, I argue, deploy various forms of exclusivity in order to enact a complex ideological structure around productive fan practices, one in which fans are invited to be unpaid laborers for the media industries who are rewarded and celebrated for Hollywood's successes and, in this case, blamed for its failures. This ultimately amounts to the perception, that fans, whether a help or a hindrance to the success of a film like *Scott Pilgrim*, wield far more power in our contemporary media landscape than is actually the case.

In promoting *Scott Pilgrim*, Universal put forth a concerted effort to provide rewarding and exclusive fan experiences at Comic-Con. In exchange, they hoped that fans, bloggers, and the media at large would do their respective jobs and circulate buzz and publicity beyond the confines of the four day event. The massive hotel poster, which loomed large next to the convention center, utilized the space and exclusivity of the event, simultaneously branding the film as a significant (and unavoidable) part of the Comic-Con experience and branding Comic-Con as inextricably linked to the kind of quirky fan

or geek culture represented in the film. *Scott Pilgrim*, this massive advertisement declared, belonged at Comic-Con.

Universal held their Hall H panel for *Scott Pilgrim* at 6:00 p.m. on Thursday, July 22nd, the first evening of Comic-Con.⁶ The presentation included an unusually large panel composed of twelve of the film's stars, the creator of the original comic series, Bryan Lee O'Malley, and moderator and director, Edgar Wright. The panel included such "surprise" moments as a guest appearance from Wright's frequent collaborators and fan favorites Simon Pegg and Nick Frost and the arrival of the film's star, Michael Cera, in a ill-fitting Captain America costume—a nod to one of the only actors missing from the panel, Chris Evans, who, ironically, was unable to attend Comic-Con due to the filming of the comic book film *Captain America* (Joe Johnston, 2011).⁷

Though this panel occurred on the first evening of Comic-Con, Universal ensured that *Scott Pilgrim* had a significant presence throughout the four days of the event. While it is standard practice for studios hold a panel at Comic-Con and pair it with a marketing presence in the Exhibit Hall, studios are increasingly offering this same kind of promotional presence outside the cramped and restrictive confines of the convention center. Instead of, or in addition to, paying premiums for space in the Exhibit Hall, many studios rent space in the city, allowing for a larger and more expansive marketing blitz. While the *Scott Pilgrim* comic book had a significant promotional presence *inside* Comic-Con at Oni Press, Universal promoted the film with a large interactive exhibit they called "The *Scott Pilgrim* Experience" at the Hilton Gaslamp Quarter Hotel, a few

⁶ Estrada, *2010 Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*, 32.

⁷ Nicole Sperling, "Comic-Con: 'Scott Pilgrim' Rules Hall H," *Entertainment Weekly*, last modified July 22, 2010, <http://insidemovies.ew.com/2010/07/22/comic-con-scott-pilgrim-rules-hall-h/>

blocks away from the convention center.⁸ The exhibit included a wide variety of “experiences”: autograph sessions; custom screen printed t-shirts (some of which were made to order for fans by various stars of the film); demos of the *Scott Pilgrim* video game; an area where fans could create and star in their own souvenir flipbooks; video postcards that could be immediately uploaded and emailed with, as the press released described it “a personal video message to your friends about how awesome you are for being at Comic-Con”⁹; listening stations where fans could preview the soundtrack; live performances by some of the film’s musical contributors; free gift bags; and, upon exiting the “experience,” a free garlic bread food truck, a nod to the main character’s favorite food (figs. 47-48).

Functioning as a self-contained event, “The *Scott Pilgrim* Experience” was a free, interactive, promotional venue, which illustrates the increasingly permeable boundaries of the Comic-Con experience itself. Expanding onto the streets of San Diego, creating an immersive spectacle, and offering tangible goods like t-shirts and photos that both mark the exclusivity of the event and allow attendees to share it with the rest of the world, “The *Scott Pilgrim* Experience” was a microcosm of Comic-Con itself. Like Comic-Con, it functioned as way to maintain a sense of exclusivity, while ensuring that the promotion was not contained but expansive. Comic-Con, in addition to offering a space and time for such promotion to take place, has also clearly created a model for *how* to construct exclusivity, commodify it, and deploy it as promotion.

⁸ Peter Ha, "Behind the Scenes: The Scott Pilgrim Experience," *Time*, last modified July 22, 2010, <http://techland.time.com/2010/07/22/behind-the-scenes-the-scott-pilgrim-experience/>

⁹ Erik Davis, "SDCC Gallery: The Scott Pilgrim Experience," *Moviefone*, last modified July 22, 2010, <http://news.moviefone.com/2010/07/22/sdcc-gallery-the-scott-pilgrim-experience/>

Ultimately, all this promotion hinges on the exclusivity and scarcity of the experience offered at Comic-Con once a year, but also requires a level of compliance on the part of Comic-Con attendees. They have their own job to do, acting as vehicles that carry this promotion out into the wider world. By selling the exclusivity of the experience at Comic-Con, this kind of promotional labor gets reframed as a privilege that fans are implicitly asked to earn by demonstrating enthusiasm for the product above and beyond simply purchasing tickets to the event. As I have argued, one way that the industry invites this promotional labor is by extending exclusivity to define, not simply the experience of attending Comic-Con, but the attendees themselves. Director Zach Snyder, for example, declared that “one Comic-Con fan is worth 100 moviegoers,”¹⁰ a sentiment that is repeatedly echoed in industry and popular discourses at and about Comic-Con. However, the perception that, as *LA Times* critic Betsy Sharkey put it, “actors, directors, producers and marketers [are] expected to show up in person and kiss the ring”¹¹ is not evidence of the power of fan cultures, but rather evidence of the industry’s strategy for negotiating such audiences: Encouraging a heightened consumption of media products associated with fandom, while also fostering productive fan practices that benefit the circulation of hype and buzz about those products. As I will discuss, the scheduling of preview screenings of *Scott Pilgrim* during Comic-Con demonstrates most clearly the ways in which Universal’s promotional strategies attempted to create an exclusive experience where those in attendance would feel like insiders and parlay that excitement into hype about the film leading up to its release a few weeks later.

¹⁰ Zach Snyder qtd. in Marc Graser, "Studios Blitz Comic-Con," *Variety*, last modified July 19, 2010, <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118021897?refcatid=4076&printerfriendly=true>

¹¹ Betsy Sharkey, "Have the Geeks Ceded Control?," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 2010, D4.

At the end of the *Scott Pilgrim* panel in Hall H, Edgar Wright announced that all fans who were handed a special button would gain entrance into an exclusive screening of the film in forty-five minutes. Those who were not among the lucky hundreds of fans who received a button that Thursday evening were told repeatedly that they could line up for free screenings of the film on Friday and Saturday instead. Wright then invited the button-holders to join him as he led them to the theater. Despite some confusion, as the director reportedly made an impromptu stop at his own hotel, eventually, fans made their way to the theatre and were treated to what many fans, bloggers, and news outlets (including the BBC) incorrectly identified as “world premiere” of *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*.¹² In actual fact, this was neither the world premiere, nor was it the first time the film played in theaters. An “official” world premiere was held in more typical Hollywood fashion on July 27th at Grauman’s Chinese Theater in Los Angeles, and Universal had been holding test screenings around the country since January 20th of that year.¹³ Wright’s introduction may have perpetuated this myth of the exclusive, world premiere, as he told the audience, “The movie was just finished like a week ago so you really are

¹² The premiere was followed by a performance by the band Metric, who was featured in the film as fictional band The Clash at Demonhead. Josh Dickey, "Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World' Is Deeply Rad," *The Wrap*, last modified July 22, 2010, <http://www.thewrap.com/movies/blog-post/review-scott-pilgrim-vs-world-1949>; Jami Philbrick, "Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World' World Premiere!," *MovieWeb*, last modified July 23, 2010, <http://www.movieweb.com/comic-con/2010/news/sdcc-2010-scott-pilgrim-vs-the-world-world-premier>; "Scott Pilgrim Vs the World Has Its Premiere at Comiccon," *BBC*, last modified July 26, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-1076500>; Bryan Young, "Review: *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*," *Huffington Post*, last modified July 23, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bryan-young/review-emscott-pilgrim-vs_b_656737.html

¹³ *Access Hollywood*'s coverage, for example, called the star-studded Los Angeles screening the “world premiere.” “Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World' Premiere, Los Angeles,” *Access Hollywood*, last modified July 28, 2010, http://www.accesshollywood.com/scott-pilgrim-vs-the-world-premiere-los-angeles_video_1241248. *Ain't it Cool News* published a reader's review of the January test screening in Las Vegas. Harry Knowles, "In Las Vegas, This Chick Was Lucky Enough to See Edgar Wright's Scott Pilgrim Vs the World before All of Us!," *Ain't it Cool News*, last modified January 20, 2010, <http://www.aintitcool.com/node/43693>

the first audience to see *Scott Pilgrim Vs. the World*.”¹⁴ While the film screened that evening had a different ending than the earlier test screenings, Wright’s assertion that Comic-Con attendees were the first to see this cut of the film was incorrect. On the other side of the country, in New York city, members of a movietickets.com email list received an email inviting them to attend a preview screening of *Scott Pilgrim* at 2 p.m. eastern time, a full two and a half hours before the Comic-Con screening, held at 7:30 p.m. pacific time (fig. 49). Because the New York screening was not publicized, the Comic-Con screening was read as special, unexpected and exclusive.¹⁵ Neither Universal nor Wright had to do much to produce that hype. Rather, it was fans, bloggers, and the media that did all the work.

Demonstrating that the frenzy surrounding exclusive content like the *Pilgrim* “world premiere” extends beyond Comic-Con itself, a controversy erupted in the community of online movie bloggers. Many popular blogs and press outlets were notified of the screening in advance and given invitations to attend in exchange for keeping it a secret and, of course, reviewing the film after the fact. When Alex Billington of firstshowing.net found out that unlike some of his colleagues, he had not received an advance invitation to the “secret” screening of the film, he contacted Universal thirty-six hours before the screening and threatened to release the details of the event if they did not include him in this special group of invitees. Universal capitulated and sent him a ticket. His colleagues, however, were outraged by his actions, which they described as blackmail, and twenty bloggers from high profile sites, most notably, Harry Knowles of

¹⁴ Edgar Wright qtd. in Philbrick, "'Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World' World Premiere!".

¹⁵ In fact, this screening would have been impossible to uncover had it not been for my colleague, Ben Strassfeld, who had received an invitation to this event.

Ain't it Cool News, sent a letter to Universal condemning Billington and suggesting that company sever ties with him and his website.¹⁶ Whether this reaction was an attempt to foster greater respectability for this particular blogging community, who are frequently viewed as fanboys rather than credible journalists, or an attempt to maintain good relations with Universal so that bloggers would continue to receive such exclusive invites and other perks, it demonstrates the ways in which these bloggers view themselves as working for or at the very least with studios, rather than as an independent body. Exclusive access, or at least the perception of exclusivity, fuels their own production and this power dynamic, I argue, ties the labor of these bloggers to the film industry in such a way as to situate them as a subset of this institution, rather than as an independent body. These bloggers' reaction to Billington's attempt to regain power by demanding tickets, in a way that identified this insider access as direct compensation for his labor, demonstrates just how pervasive this uneven power dynamic between the media industries and bloggers can be.

In an interview with the G4 network two days after the screening, Wright described himself, leading the fans from Hall H to the Balboa Theater, as the "Pied Piper."¹⁷ This analogy, which unwittingly characterizes his fans as either rodents or small children, represents a moment of slippage, which, like the Billington scandal, exposes the

¹⁶ John Campea, "Entitlement, Squables and We Wonder Why People Don't Take Web Writers Seriously," *John Campea's Screen*, last modified August 5, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111227060624/http://johncampea.net/2010/08/entitlement-squables-and-we-wonder-why-people-dont-take-web-writers-seriously/>; "What I Think Should Have Been Done About the Alex Billington Situation," *John Campea's Screen*, last modified August 6, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110819214641/http://johncampea.net/2010/08/what-i-think-should-have-been-done-about-the-alex-billington-situation/>; Josh Dickey, "Movie Bloggers Accuse Colleague of 'Blackmailing' Universal at Comic-Con," *The Wrap*, last modified August 4, 2010, <http://www.thewrap.com/movies/article/movie-bloggers-accuse-fellow-site-blackmail-comic-con-19879?page=0,0>

¹⁷ These comments are taken from an interview aired on G4's "Comic-Con Live" television coverage.

kinds of hierarchies that Hollywood seeks to conceal at such events. Indeed, Wright's next move in the retelling of the evening's events was to describe how he stood outside the theatre for forty-five minutes, "like an usher," to make sure fans got in. In a slightly more oblique manner, this assertion draws again on such hierarchies as Wright seeks to demonstrate commitment to the fans of his film through his willingness to do work below his pay grade. These comments exemplify the way in which Hollywood relies on, and simultaneously effaces, the ideology that fans exist lower on the hierarchical ladder of power, influence, and affluence than who produce and sell the media that they consume. In this way, fans are more easily interpellated as workers for the industry, whose job is both to reproduce promotional discourses and consume media.

This idealized, "good fandom," that Hollywood seeks out and encourages at Comic-Con, is encapsulated in a quote from Marvel comic creator and perpetual mascot Stan Lee, who discussed the promotion of Marvel films: "If fans go to Comic Con and they see something about the new Marvel movies... and they suddenly start texting or Twittering about it, before you know it it's like a prairie fire. It's all over the country and eventually all over the world."¹⁸ Such a description of the significance of fans to the circulation of publicity and hype builds on the ethos of audience power elucidated in

¹⁸ Stan Lee qtd. in John Gaudiosi, "'Fan Boys' and Hollywood Gearing up for Comic Con," *The Calgary Herald*, July 20 2010. *Grantland* describes Stan Lee's current role (and compensation) at Marvel: "When Disney (which, full disclosure, is also the parent company of ESPN, which owns the website you're now reading) bought Marvel for \$4 billion in 2009, part of the deal involved a Disney subsidiary buying a small piece of POW! Entertainment, a content-farm company Stan co-founded; another Disney-affiliated company currently pays POW! \$1.25 million a year to loan out Stan as a consultant 'on the exploitation of the assets of Marvel Entertainment.'" Alex Pappademas, "The Inquisition of Mr. Marvel," *Grantland*, last modified May 11, 2012, <http://grantland.com/features/the-surprisingly-complicated-legacy-marvel-comics-legend-stan-lee/>

Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* (2006) and *Spreadable Media* (2013).¹⁹ This powerful and productive audience that Jenkins describes, however, is increasingly deployed as part of Hollywood's shadow labor economy. I describe this economy as such not because it operates out of plain sight, but because it functions in a gray area produced discursively, through repeated claims that niche audiences, like fans, are powerful, important, and valuable to the entertainment industry. This ethos exists not only in academic disciplines built around fan cultures, convergence, and transmedia storytelling, but also in discourses by media industries about fans and consumers, more generally. It has even become part of popular discourse, as evidenced by *Time Magazine's* 2006 assertion that: "for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, TIME's Person of the Year for 2006 is you."²⁰ If the activities that *Time* described were ever truly empowered or empowering, they have since been increasingly absorbed into the industry PR and marketing practices as a form of free labor.²¹

The final outcome of Universal's promotional campaign at Comic-Con best illustrates the industry's relentless drive to maintain such power relations. When the film was released on August 13th, it made only \$10.6 million during its opening weekend and went on to gross \$47 million worldwide, failing to recover its \$60 million production

¹⁹ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*.

²⁰ Lev Grossman, "You--Yes, You--Are Time's Person of the Year," *Time*, last modified December 25, 2006, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570810,00.html>. One year earlier, Grossman also proclaimed "The Geek Shall Inherit the Earth." "The Geek Shall Inherit the Earth".

²¹ Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy."

budget, let alone the substantial, but unverifiable marketing budget.²² It is for this reason that, as some critics have noted, enthusiastic fans cannot always be understood barometer of a film's financial success. *Scott Pilgrim*, a film that was heavily promoted to fans and potential fans at Comic-Con and beyond, but failed to perform at the box office, provides a key example of what has been referred to as the "Comic-Con false positive."²³

Although, as I argued in Chapter Four, capturing mainstream audiences, not fans, was necessary to *Pilgrim's* success, discourses that situate fans as accountable to the film industry continue. In the early reactions to the film's failure at the box office, numerous articles were published speculating about what went wrong.²⁴ Universal president Ron Meyer's response was to scold *Pilgrim* enthusiasts, saying, "None of you guys went! And you didn't tell your friends to go!"²⁵ And when, in 2011, several studios including Disney, Warner Bros., and The Weinstein Company did not bring any films to Comic-Con, the fickle nature of fans was a significant part of the discourse. As the *New York Times* summarized the situation, fans at Comic-Con could destroy a film by being either too harsh or too enthusiastic.²⁶

²² "Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World," *Box Office Mojo*, last modified <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=scottpilgrim.htm>

²³ Lowry, "Beware the Comic-Con False Positive."

²⁴ See, for example: Brian Salisbury, "Scott Pilgrim Vs. Total Failure," *Hollywood.com*, last modified November 10, 2010, <http://www.hollywood.com/news/movies/7728329/scott-pilgrim-vs-total-failur>; Ben Fritz and John Horn, "'Scott Pilgrim' Versus the Box Office," *Los Angeles Times*, last modified August 17, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/aug/17/entertainment/la-et-scott-pilgrim-2010081>; Damon Wise, "Not Great, Scott," *The Times*, August 21 2010.

²⁵ Matt Goldberg, "Universal Pictures President Ron Meyer Talks Candidly About the Studio's Recent Flops, 3D, Prestige Movies, and More," *Collider*, last modified November 3, 2011, <http://collider.com/universal-ron-meyer-flops-cowboys-aliens-scott-pilgrim-wolfman/124397/>

²⁶ Barnes and Cieply, "Movie Studios Reassess Comic-Con."

This discursive response, which was to simultaneously credit fans with the power to destroy a film and to threaten that the result of such failures would be the loss of exclusive, Hollywood content at Comic-Con, demonstrates that these underlying and uneven power dynamics persist, even in the context of the industry's economic failure. Connecting this economic failure to failed consumption and fan labor, Hollywood's threat of divesting in the fan market demonstrates that not only does a significant power relationship exist between fans and media industries, but that it is constantly being negotiated and reimagined in order to maximize profitability. One fan, reflecting on the failure of *Scott Pilgrim* said, "who cares how much money the movie made? I'm just happy it exists."²⁷ Surely a statement that would haunt industry executives, this sentiment suggests that perhaps the most powerful position from which fans might approach the media is a place of proximity to the text, but distance from the industry.

²⁷ Fritz and Horn, "'Scott Pilgrim' Versus the Box Office".

FIGURES



Figure 1: 9 Rickshaw, Comic-Con 2009
(photo by author)



Figure 2: Dexter Rickshaw Comic-Con 2009
(photo by author)



Figure 3: Institute for Human Continuity, Comic-Con 2009
(photo by author)



Figure 4: District 9 Promotion, Comic-Con 2009
(photo by author)



Figure 5: *Heroes Carnival, Comic-Con 2009*
(photo by author)



Figure 6: *Comic-Con Crowds, Comic-Con 2009*
(photo by author)



Figure 7: Triple Fan Fair Logo, 1965¹



Figure 8: San Diego Golden State Comic-Con Logo, 1970²

¹ "Detroit Triple Fan Fair," *Wikipedia*, last modified December 3, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Detroit_Triple_Fan_Fair

² "Friday Flashback 006: The History of Comic-Con (and Then-Some!) through Logos".



Figure 9: "When San Diego Fans Talk, Marvel Listens," 1980³

³ Stadler, *San Diego Comic-Con Souvenir Book 1980*.



Figure 10: *Cowboys and Aliens* Poster, Comic-Con 2011
(photo by author)



Figure 11: *Escape Plan* Street Team, Comic-Con 2013
(photo by author)

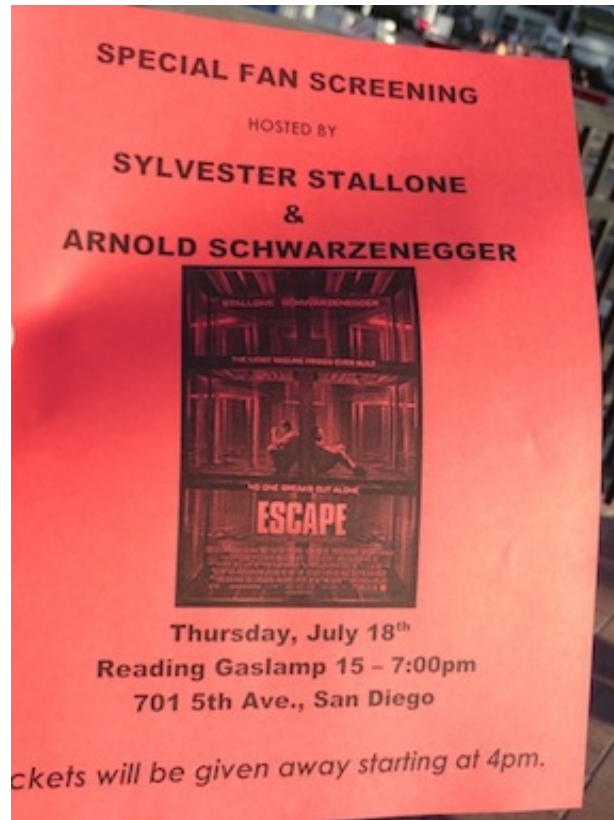


Figure 12: *Escape Plan* Flyer, Comic-Con 2013
(photo by author)



Figure 13: *Escape Plan* Red Carpet, Comic-Con 2013
(photo by author)

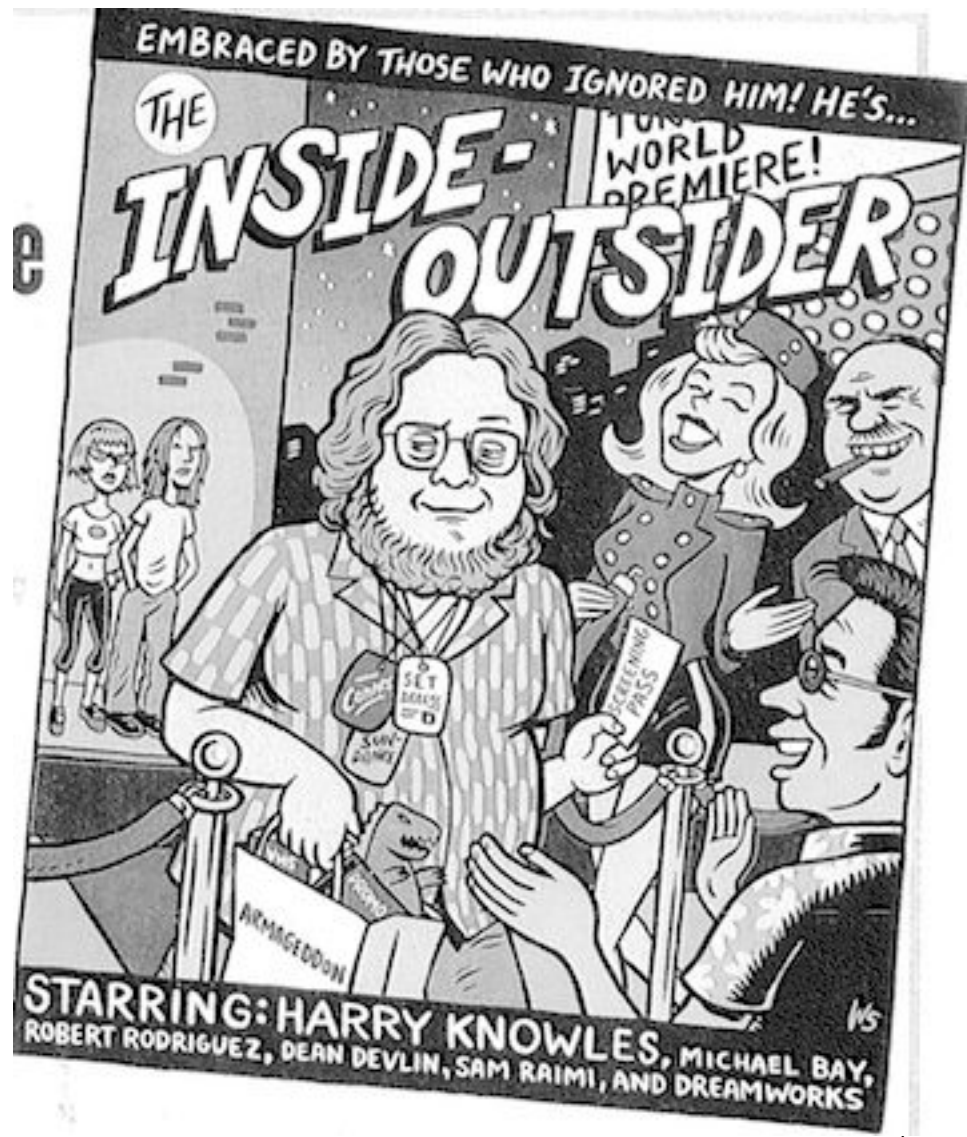


Figure 14: "The Inside-Outsider," *Premiere Magazine*, 1998⁴

⁴ Kilday, "Has Harry Knowles Gone Hollywood?."

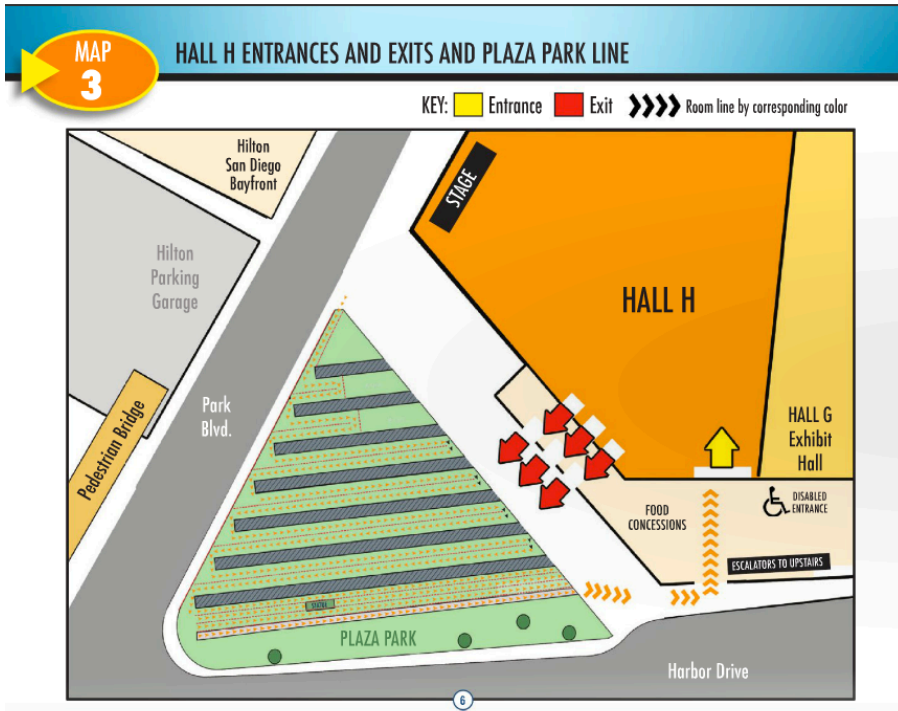


Figure 15: Hall H Entrances and Exits and Plaza Park Line⁵

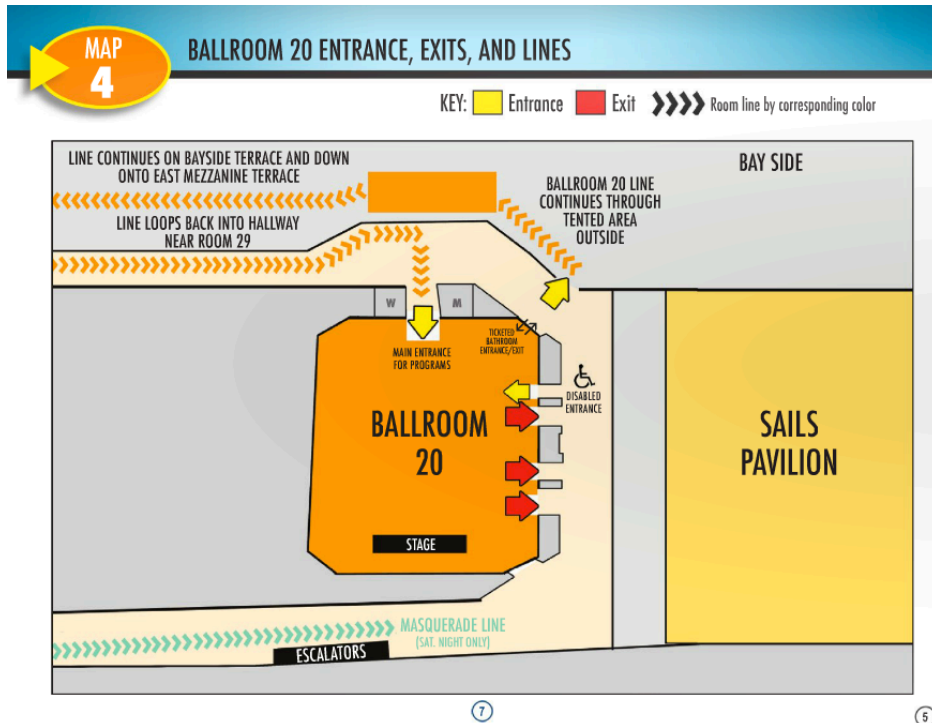


Figure 16: Ballroom 20 Entrance, Exits, and Lines⁶

⁵ Estrada, 2012 *Comic-Con International: San Diego Events Guide*.

⁶ Ibid.

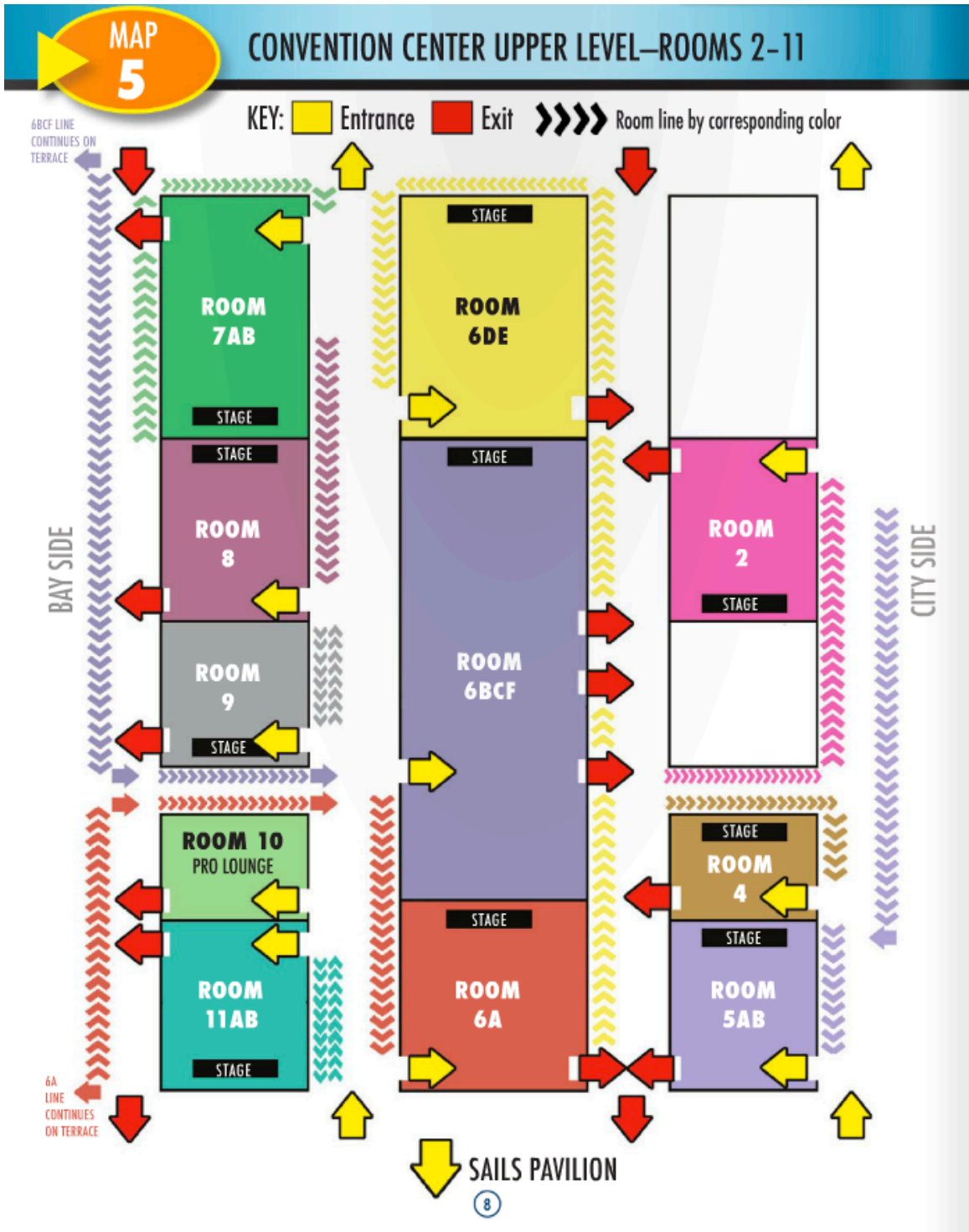


Figure 17: Convention Center Upper Level—Rooms 2-11⁷

⁷ Ibid.



Figure 18: Comic-Con Badge, 2012
(photo by author)

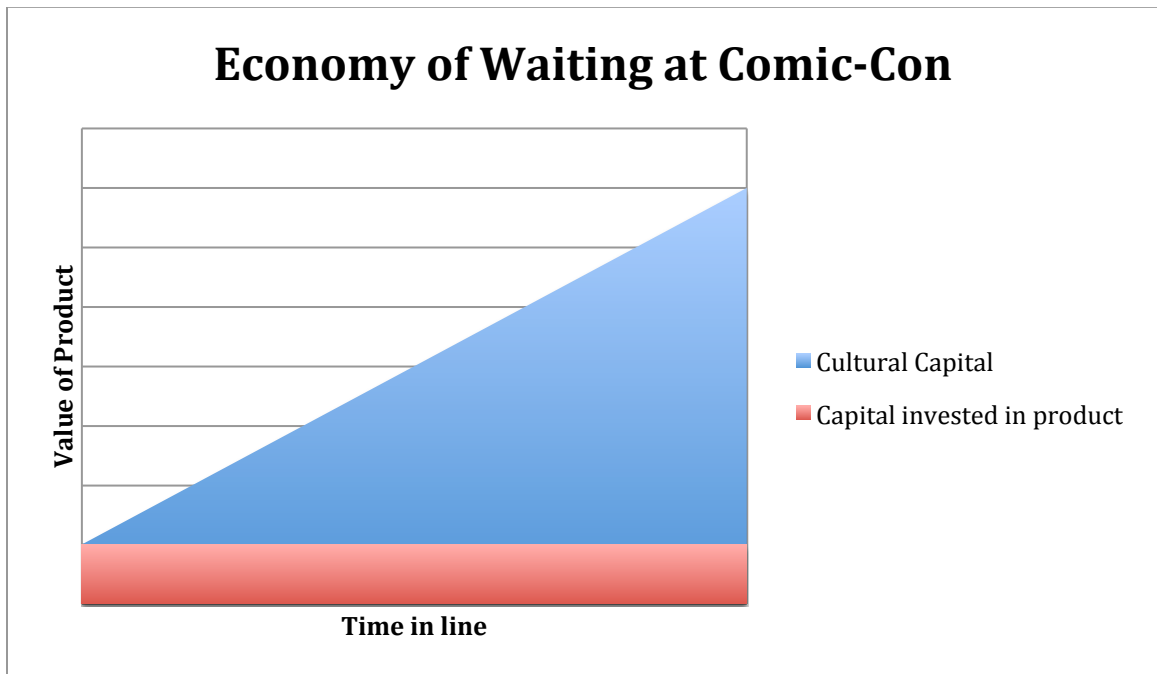


Figure 19: The Economy of Waiting at Comic-Con

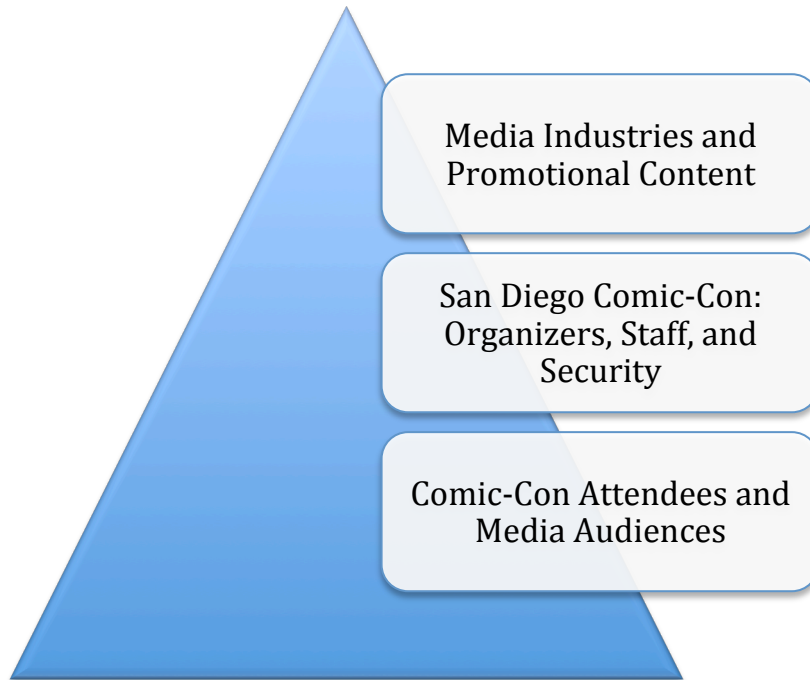


Figure 20: Hierarchies of Waiting



Figure 21: Line Control Binder
(photo by author)

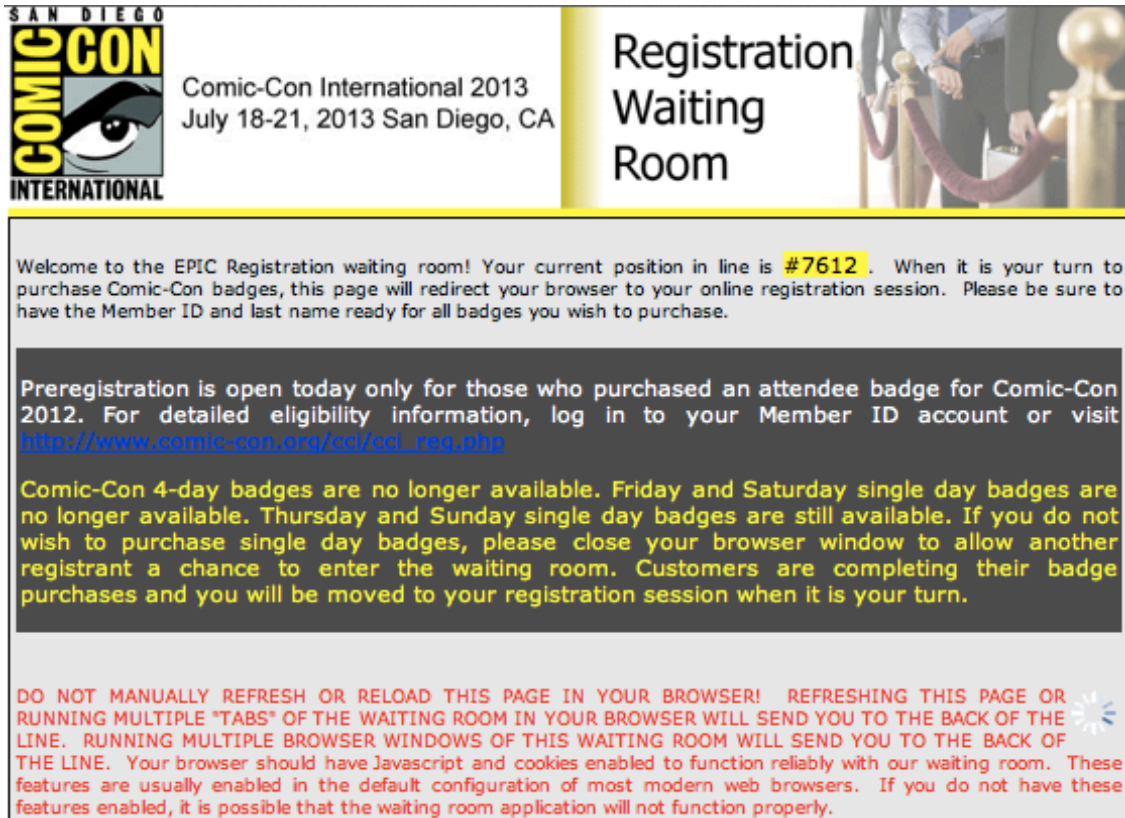


Figure 22: Image of Epic Online Waiting Room for 2013 Pre-Registration
(screen capture by author)



Figure 23: Hyatt Waiting Room for 2012 Pre-Registration, Comic-Con 2011
(photo by author)



Figure 24: Ticket Sales Screen in Hyatt Ballroom⁸



Figure 25: Twilight Line Image Circulated by Summit Entertainment⁹

⁸ JR Cajigas, "SDCC 2011--the Onsite Pre-Registration Fiasco for 2012 Passes," *Nerd Reactor*, last modified July 22, 2011, <http://nerdreactor.com/2011/07/22/comic-con-the-onsite-pre-registration-fiasco-for-2012-passes/>

⁹ @Twilight, "The Twilight Saga: 6:56 Pm 18 Jul 11".



Figure 26: Empty Exhibit Hall¹⁰



Figure 27: Hall H Rear View
(photo by author)

¹⁰ "Room Tours: Exhibit Hall," *San Diego Convention Center*, last modified 2013, <http://www.visitsandiego.com/facilityinformation/roomtours.cfm>



Figure 28: Hall H Side View
(photo by author)



Figure 29: Ballroom 20
(photo by author)



Figure 30: Warner Bros. Screens, View From Middle of Hall
(photo by author)

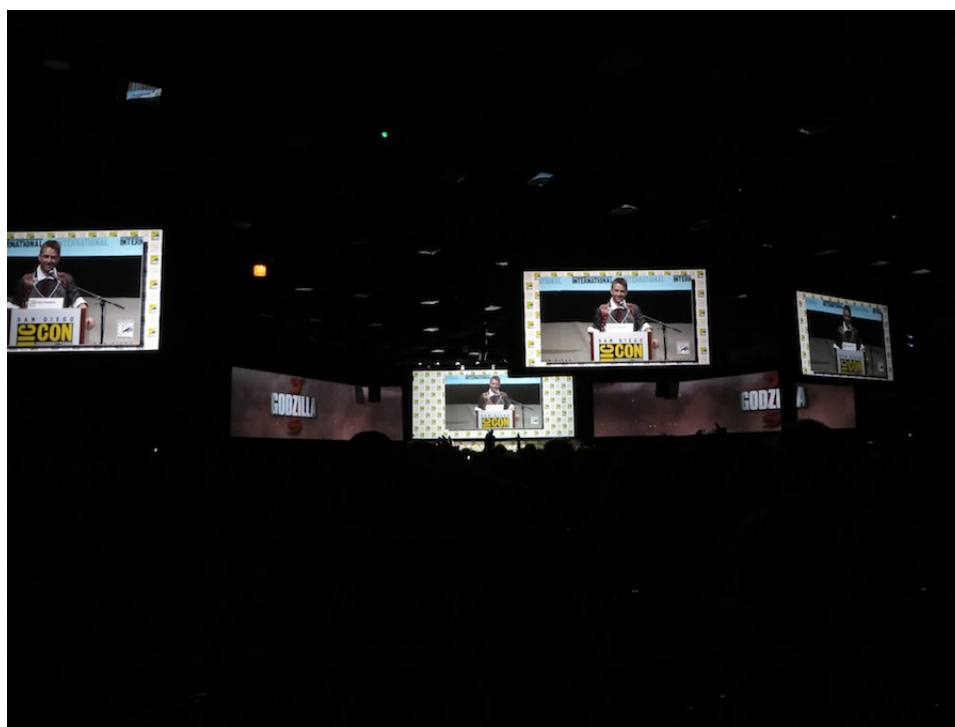


Figure 31: Warner Bros. Screens, View From Back of Hall
(photo by author)



Figure 32: Exhibit Hall Crowds, Comic-Con 2013
(photo by author)

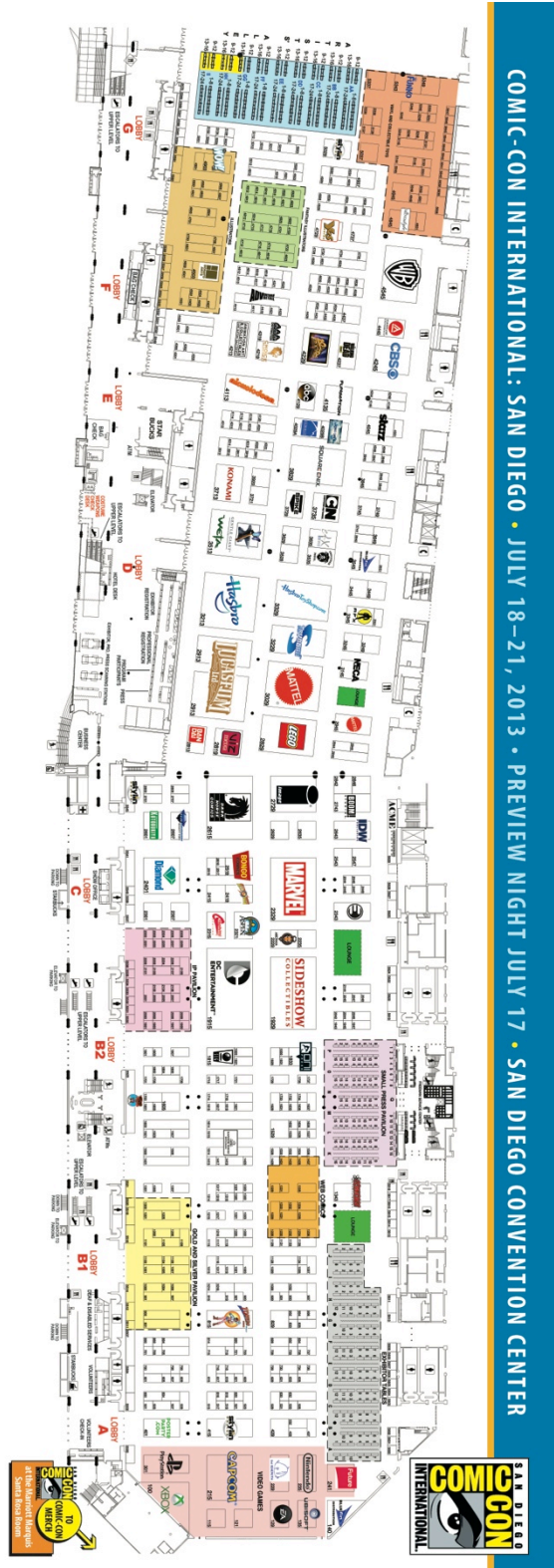


Figure 33: Exhibit Hall Map, Comic-Con 2013¹¹

¹¹ "Comic-Con 2013 Exhibitors," *Comic-Con International: San Diego*, last modified 2014, <http://www.comic-con.org/cci/2013/exhibitors>



Figure 34: Fox Booth, Comic-Con 2013
(photo by author)

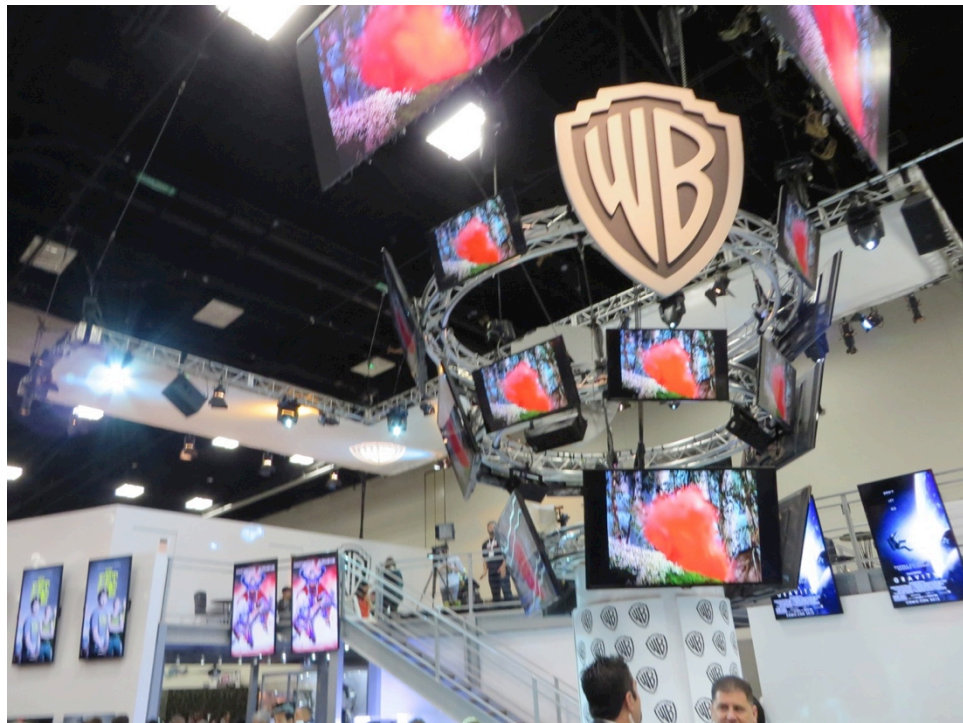


Figure 35: Warner Bros. Booth, Comic-Con 2013
(photo by author)



Figure 36: Mattel Booth, Comic-Con 2012
(photo by author)



Figure 37: Marvel Booth, Comic-Con 2012
(photo by author)

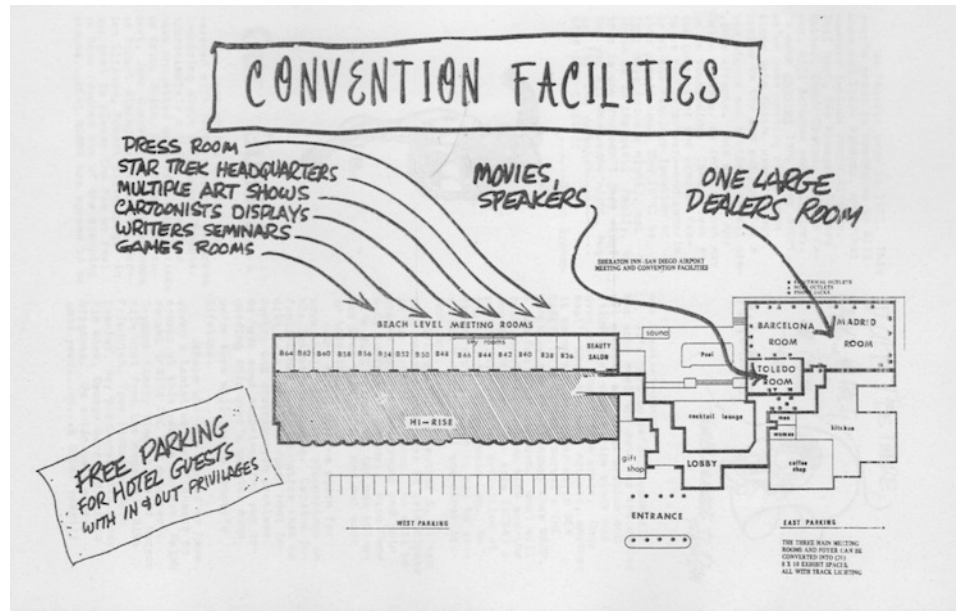


Figure 38: Comic-Con Map, 1973¹²



Figure 39: Collector's Room, *Comic-Con Episode IV: A Fan's Hope*, 2011

¹² "San Diego Comic-Con Progress Report No. 1 1973."

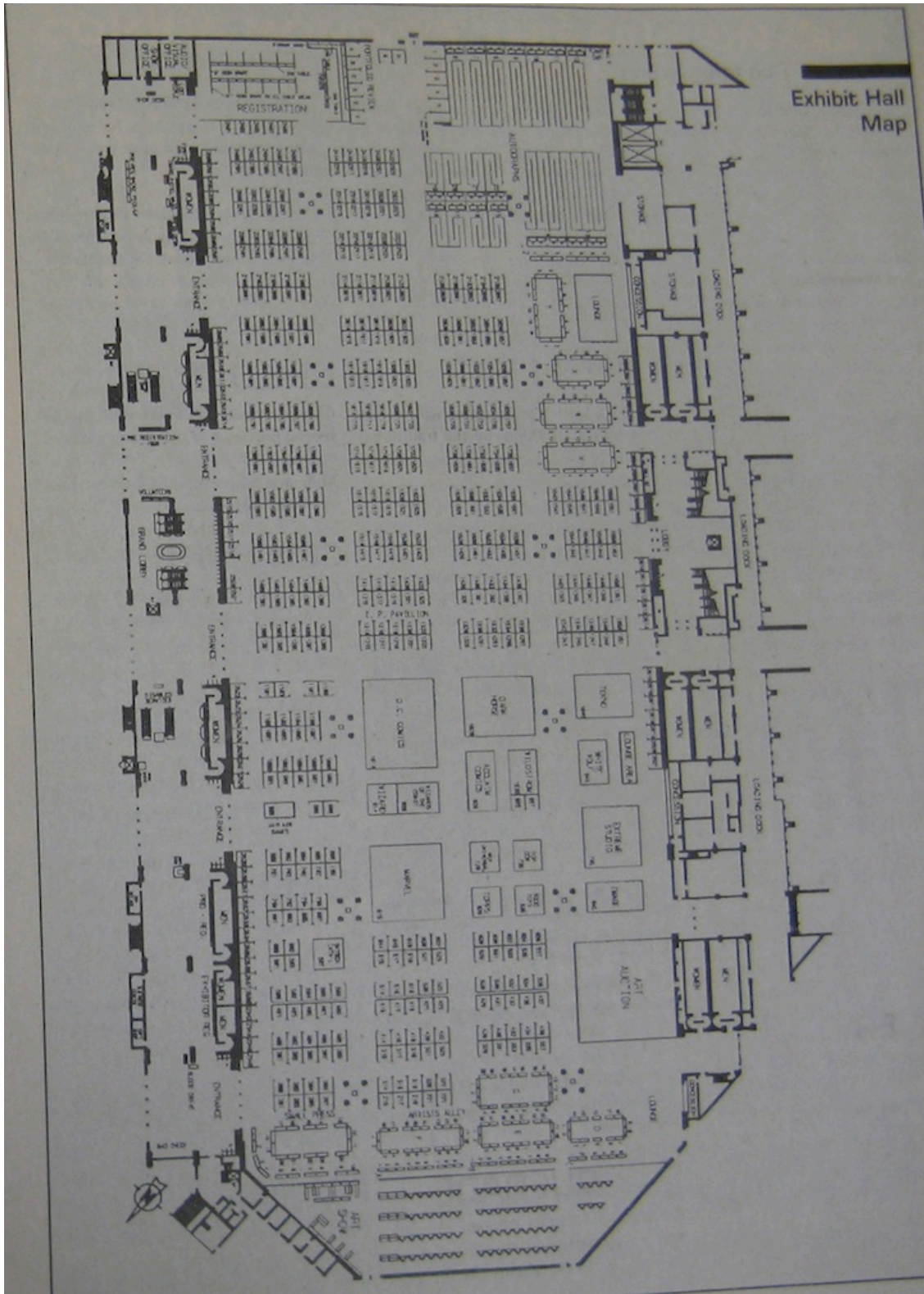


Figure 40: Exhibit Hall Map, Comic-Con 1995¹³

¹³ Young, *1995 San Diego Comic Book Convention Events Guide*, 3.

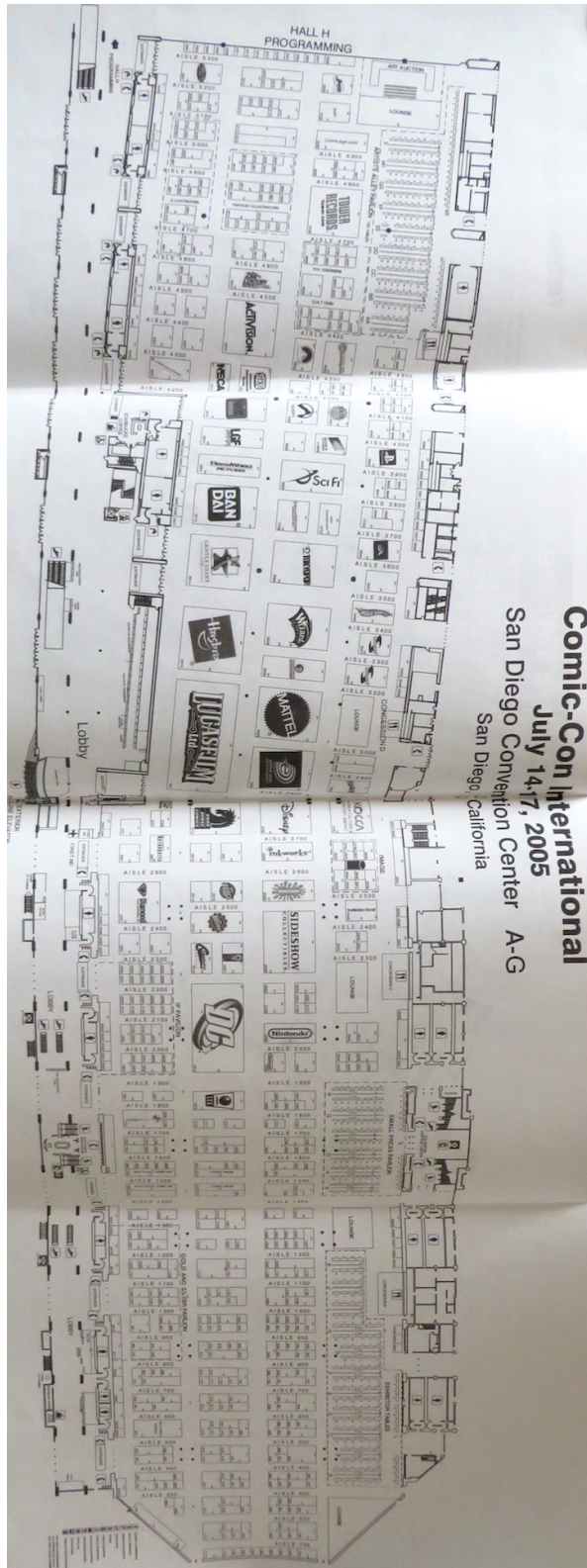


Figure 41: Exhibit Hall, Comic-Con 2005¹⁴

¹⁴ Estrada, *San Diego Comic-Con International 2005 Events Guide*, map insert.



Figure 42: Sideshow Collectibles Display, Comic-Con 2002¹⁵



**Figure 43: AMC/Walking Dead, Comic-Con 2013
(photo by author)**

¹⁵ "2002 San Diego Comic Con International: Lord of the Rings Sideshow".



Figure 44: *Prisoner* Booth, Comic-Con 2009
(photo by author)

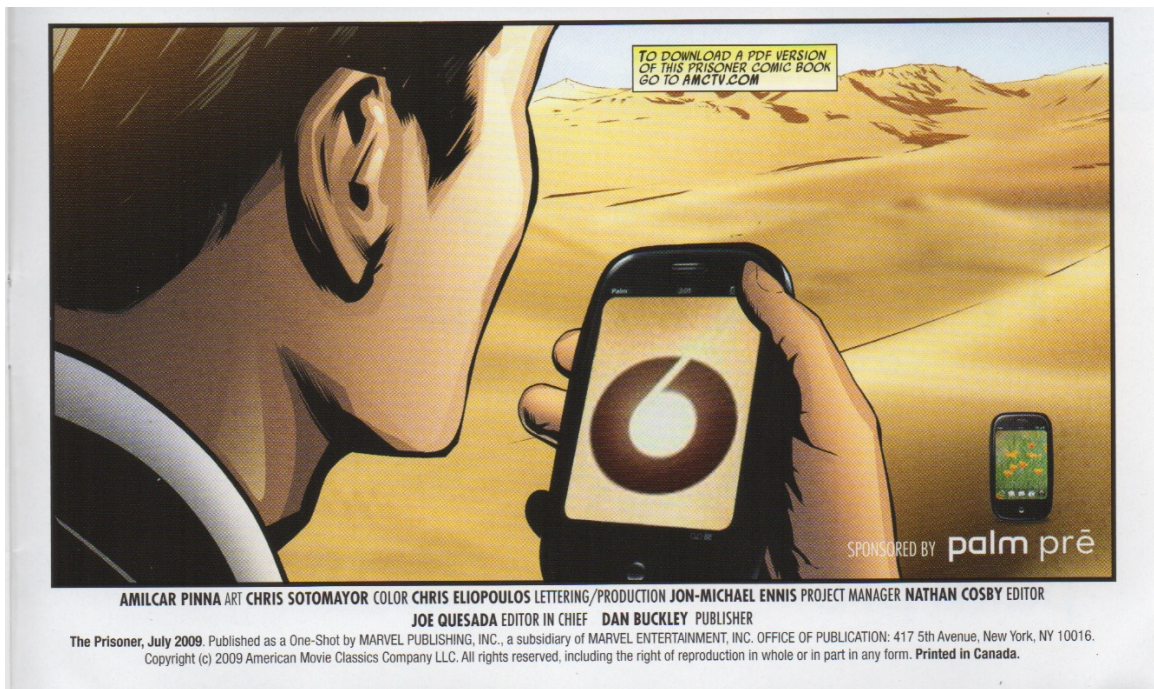


Figure 45: *The Prisoner* Promotional Comic¹⁶

¹⁶ Cosby, "The Prisoner Exclusive Sneak Peak."



Figure 46: Edgar Wright's Tweet, July 14, 2010¹⁷



Figure 47: Scott Pilgrim Experience Stage and Photo Stations¹⁸

¹⁷ Wright, "Holy Shit! What Is That?".

¹⁸ Eric Eisenberg, "Comic-Con: Photos from Scott Pilgrim Vs. Comic Con," *Cinema Blend*, last modified July 22, 2010, <http://www.cinemablend.com/new/Comic-Con-Photos-From-Scott-Pilgrim-Vs-Comic-Con-19757.html>



Figure 48: Scott Pilgrim Experience T-Shirt Stations¹⁹

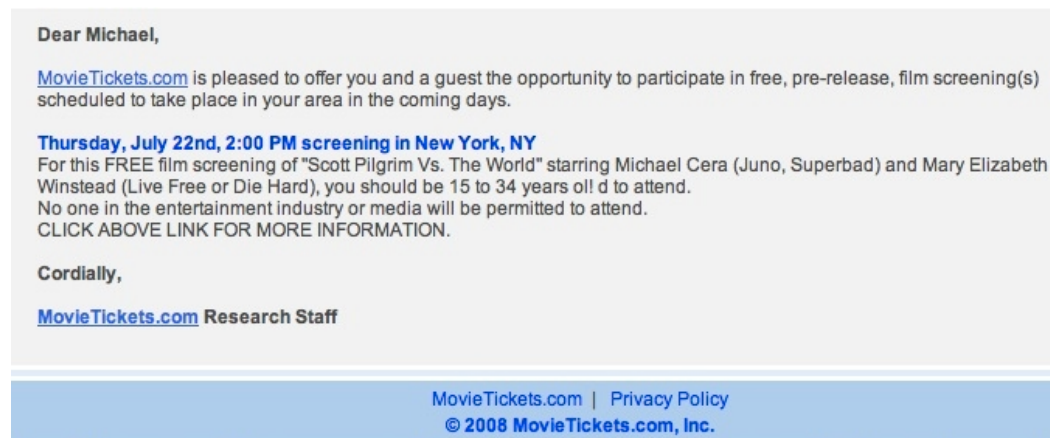


Figure 49: MovieTickets.com Email, July 22, 2010
(copy of email courtesy of Ben Strassfeld)

¹⁹ Ibid.

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