We the Fans: How Our Powers Can Change the World

by ShawnTaylor1

Summary

With the world in such disarray, I truly believe that fans and Fandom can move the world in a more just, equitable, and pluralistic direction. These principles have worked for me. Your mileage may vary.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.

Dear Fellow Fans,

Our Spidey senses are tingling. There is a giant bat symbol in the night sky....

We have the power to answer these calls. It’s time for us to assemble!

Who am I to make this call? That’s a particular kind of origin story.

I grew up in a violent household, where there was little interest in child-raising. My mother routinely left me alone, living her separate life. By kindergarten, I could cook for myself, iron my clothes, and survive with minimal supervision.

Comics gave me my superpower. Despite having dyslexia, I was a dogged and early reader, combating loneliness by forcing myself to read Jet, Ebony, and Reader’s Digest magazines stuffed into the cabinets of our end tables. I set all these aside, though, the week before my kindergarten Christmas vacation, when my mom gave me two enormous boxes of comic books.

“I’ll see you,” she said, then left for a week. In her absence, I read every single comic, some of them multiple times. Challengers of the Unknown. Mr. Miracle. The Fantastic Four. The X-Men. But it was Spider-Man that changed my life.

I read and reread the dozen or so Spider-Man books. While I knew his alter ego, Peter Parker, was white, Spidey was one of the only heroes I read whose face was fully covered. In the Spider-Man
outfit, anyone could be under that mask, including a little Black boy, fending for himself in the projects. And maybe that boy could do amazing things, meet amazing people, and make positive changes in his neighborhood.

I brought some of my coveted comic collection to school, but most of the kids I knew were more interested in athletics or other playground games. However, I bonded with a few like-minded kids—Black, Asian, Arab, white, and Jewish—over the adventures of righteous heroes doing battle against dastardly villains.

We formed a crew, trading our comics and developing a shorthand of symbols and tropes from the books to map out our lives. As we got older, our crew got larger, and we started on role-playing games, science fiction/fantasy/horror on the page and screen, and rudimentary cosplay.

I am still a fan. A passionate one. I am also someone who is freaked out by the state of our shared world. Things feel bleak and I have been asking myself if fandom, and everything that goes with it, still has a place in my life. The world is on fire, what good is my love for science fiction and comic books? Surprisingly, a whole lot of good.

Let me be fully transparent. I have spent the last year and more as a Pop Culture Collaborative Senior Fellow exploring pop culture fandoms, studying how fandoms have changed and challenged
storytelling and the entertainment industry through fans’ creativity and organizing. Originally I was going to explore how fandoms could ally with social justice movements *(a whole lot to say about this, but we’ll have to get to it another time)* but I found myself drawn more to the ideas of operational fandom, tactical fandom, that is, fandom as social practice for social good as opposed to escapist or self-care. I wanted to explore how fandom can and should be aspirational. I also wanted to investigate how the fandom impulse is currently being weaponized and how we can defend against this.

If this information inspires you to act, I commit to you that I will be with you every step of the way.

**Villainous Fandom**

“You don’t get that tattoo because you are a fan of something in the book [...] You get that tattoo because that book is a fan of something in you.”

—As *told to comic book writer Kelly Sue DeConnick*

Fandom is not an act of blind consumption, but rather an invitation to act in a righteous or dastardly fashion.

Today, the dastardly have figured out how to weaponize their fandom. This is—at least in part—how Trump was elected. He was the mythologized uncompromising voice that was missing in social and political discourse; more shoot-from-the-hip than George W. Bush, more boorishly fallible than Barack Obama. He blasted his way through situations, damn the nuance or his own faux pas.

In his article “Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide”, fandom and media scholar Henry Jenkins (2008) frames fandom as a form of “participatory culture [that] shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement.” The “Trump Moment” is a perfect example of Jenkins’ “participatory culture,” which he describes as “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.”

Trump supporters rallied around the myth that white people’s given and guaranteed social positions were being attacked. Old guard white supremacist organizers recruited and taught newbies their strategies and tactics and gave them a unifying focus: us versus them. Our divine way or multicultural barbarism.

This is a familiar refrain for those of us who have constantly contended with toxic fandoms. This toxicity erects strict but unprincipled boundaries, usually to keep people of color, women, LGBT, and disabled people from participating in what have traditionally been white and male spaces. These boundaries also attempt to keep out progressive values: representation of different genders, sexualities, people of color in heroic positions or positions of power. #Gamergate and #comicsgate and a few other anti-pluralism movements are prime examples.
“Blood and soil,” “We will not be replaced,” and #MAGA are all akin to the battle cries of toxic fandoms. They’re doing what the best genre fandom properties do: build a realistic fictional world that many want to inhabit, write fanfic about, and cosplay. They have taken their fandom of Trump and the false-narrative of white superiority out of the theoretical and into our shared world. And, frankly, they’re doing it more successfully than those who are opposed to these harmful ideas and actions.

When I was interviewing people as part of my fellowship, I talked to Cayden Mak, Executive Director of the social change group 18 Million Rising, who has also worked with fandoms on campaigns like advocating for the Marvel character Iron Fist to be cast as an Asian American (#AAIronFist) in the Netflix program of the same name. And Cayden told me “… Nationalism is a form of fandom. The point of both [fandom and nationalism] is the human need for belonging. Now that the nation-state appears to be broken, what takes its place? What replaces it? Tribalism, cultural insularity, and blind allegiance to something that gives meaning, clarity, and purpose.”

Why shouldn’t those of us who are opposed to white supremacy and the terror it instills utilize the same fandom impulse—but as an antidote to that poison? Why shouldn’t fans take fandom’s (sometimes explicit) invitation and act in a righteous manner, for the wellbeing of us all? We have
the numbers, we have the tools, many of us have the experience. Now, we just have to assemble like Voltron and take action—to exercise our power.

**Our Power, Our Opportunity**

We know that fans and fandom properties that were once on the periphery are now at the cultural center. We have been imbued with power and we have become part of a cultural—and political—war.

The 2018 #RallyForRose campaign is an example of what that means. Launched by Keith Chow, co-founder and editor-in-chief of The Nerds of Color (of which I am also a founding author), the campaign was in support of Rose Tico (played by Kelly Marie Tran), a character introduced in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. 
Some *Star Wars* fans objected to an Asian-American woman in the *Star Wars* universe. Tran was bombarded by sexist and misogynist social media messages. Chow organized a supportive action with justice- and equity-minded *Star Wars* fans participating online and at San Diego Comic-Con. They sent her words of encouragement and wore “Rally for Rose” t-shirts. This action made one message very clear: we have the numbers and power to drown out your racism and misogyny. *(You can read more about the history and success of the campaign [here](#).)*

But now that we’re in this position and know that we have this power, *what do we do with it?* We already know what we can do for the stories and characters we love: #BlackHeroesMatter, the
aforementioned #RallyForRose, *Sense8* fans fought for a conclusion to one of the most queer and diverse SciFi TV shows ever, and were rewarded with a two-hour film. Equity-minded fandom action can be an effective counter to the toxic forces that would make the fan space an exclusive country club rather than a national park.

What does it mean to apply our power to promote our values? It means that we can have an impact on our shared political and cultural life. It means that we can support and care for each other. It means we can stand up, individually and together, and say “no” against the injustices in the world. It means that we have the ability to initiate the change needed for a pluralistic world that is beneficial for everyone, not just for those who promote hate and division. We just have to do it.

In December of 2018, I worked with the Pop Culture Collaborative to develop a “genius bank” from across the spectrum of fandom and invited the participants to think about the relationship between fandom and power. Together, we asked how fandoms can be used for meaningful social change.

Eleanor Morison, a narrative strategist and the genius bank facilitator, offered the idea that fandoms are a site of social-change power *because* of the “convergence of community and culture.”

Fans organize themselves. We are leaderless communities that have mastered technology to engage more deeply with the things we love, and with each other. *(While there are fan community leaders for certain properties, paid for by the company that created the property, I’m referencing fandom in a general sense.)* We have turned pop culture into a dialogue, highlighting our displeasure or appreciation in the blink of an eye. The online space is a natural communal ground for fandom for precisely this reason. Digital citizenship erases geography, history, and social baggage, allowing us to world build.
Fandom can be a tool for social change by engendering change at multiple levels: the individual, the group/institution, and society. It is also organic, with individual fans creating ideas and content that are rapidly adopted by others. This combination of speaking truth to power, filtered through a pop culture affection, produced by large and disparate groups of people, makes fandom a mechanism for an entirely reimagined form of social power.

Take what happened to Lexa in The CW show *The 100* and DreamWorks/Paramount’s doomed live-action version of the manga and anime *Ghost in the Shell*. In the former, activated fans held the show to account for killing off a prominent and three-dimensional queer character in the most clichéd way possible: after having sex. *The 100* fans were so articulate and pointed in their disgust and hurt that executive producer Jason Rothenberg issued a formal apology. In *Ghost in the Shell*, Scarlett Johansson was cast as a character who was Japanese in the original property. The Nerds of Color launched #whitewashedout to highlight how Asians and Asian Americans are routinely omitted from Hollywood films. Other fans of the original anime and manga commandeered the meme generator that was part of the film’s marketing efforts. Led by film critic Valerie Complex, the repurposing of the meme generator to highlight how passively racist the casting was, was instrumental in tanking the film’s box office.

This wasn’t done in a vacuum. These were accomplished by a few concerned fans who decided to
take action and then others took up their call and contributed their time, energy, creativity, and attention to joyfully fight back against things they felt were oppressive or delimiting. We fought back against a multibillion-dollar industry and scored victories. The fan power to affect our favorite stories and the story-industry is undeniable. So what kind of impact could we make if we turned all this time, energy, attention, creativity, and joy towards addressing our real-world problems?

**Our Fandom Is Our Superpower**

Fandom and social change might seem to be at odds. How can a culture so heavily intertwined with capitalism be used to change conditions that have been created, in large part, by capitalism? In “Fandom meets activism: Rethinking civic and political participation” Melissa Brough and Sangita Shresthova explain that fandom is neither complicit with or resistant to capitalism; rather power is dynamic and relationships to and with power are constantly in flux.

There are a number of reasons why fandom is ripe to become a tool for positive social change. *Fans spend their time developing, experiencing, and advocating for alternative worlds.* Who better to initiate change for a better society than those who spend a great deal of time reimagining worlds?

**Our Superpowers:**

- **Fans Use Headcanon to Give Voice to the (Sometimes) Voiceless.** This is how we explore the unexplored or unmentioned; filling plot holes and eliminating narrative ambiguity. We give background characters names and backstories, we *ship* characters who we believe should be together, and we create alternative POVs for events in our favorite fan things. We share these and sometimes our fan-generated content becomes part of established canon. Headcanon can also provide a window into the story universe for some audience members, e.g. Black Hermione in the *Harry Potter* world.

- **Fans Participate in Intricate World-Building.** Most sci-fi and story-based role-playing games (RPG), fans are creators of some kind. Along with headcanon, we are active world-builders. This impulse/energy can be tapped to plan actions, campaigns, and storytelling with both those in social justice movements and with values-aligned artists in Hollywood, video gaming, comics, and more.

- **Fandom is Implicitly Political.** How we choose to spend our time, how we deploy our resources, and to what and whom we give our attention are political acts.

- **Fans Deploy Rapid Communications Strategies.** Fans are tech-savvy. From UseNET to Tumblr, Twitter, and other forms of social media, fans can get the word out quickly and creatively. This communication can lead to very quick organizing, e.g., Black Heroes Matter and Rally For Rose, both of which were put together in a matter of days. We can initiate action via digital #RapidDeployment. There are clear political and cultural moments—when the Nazis marched on Charlottesville, for example, when we could ally with social justice movements and organizations to deploy our collective power by sharing knowledge, content, and distribution opportunities.
Fans Use Their Fandom as an Educational Tool. For example, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* has been used to engage high school students in discussions about military occupation, colonization, provisional governments, and resistance. Rutger University's Candice Benbow’s Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* syllabus provided fans with an in-depth excavation of Beyoncé’s influences and citations for that album.

Fandom is Deeply Personal. Fandom lets us communicate on a deeper level with other fans. My shared fandom with my grandfather was directly responsible for me being able to teach him to read.

Fans are Radically Empathic. Fans voluntarily expose ourselves to unfamiliar fictional worlds and narratives. We immerse ourselves in the stories that may share our values, but may be alien in presentation. If we can invest in a teenaged scientist who swings acrobatically through New York on scientifically impossible webbing, what can’t we believe in? I believe that our radical empathy can transcend our pop culture passions to fight for the values of love, connection and belonging—and make those ideas more powerful than division and hate being sowed on the other side.

Fans have Immense Power. Fan orgs like The Harry Potter Alliance, The 501st Legion, and #FanActivistCon, as well as loose affiliations like Nerdfighters, have run letter-writing campaigns, engineered boycotts, and bought out film screenings to allow budding fans to see what they love on the big screen. We have resurrected television shows, affected casting decisions, brought awareness to inequities in representation, and driven decisions with our dollars.

Fans Have a Diverse and Active Community that have the Numbers to Make Real and Lasting Change. Fandoms consist of dozens to millions of people who share a common love and common language (shorthand, slang, word/phrases with in-world meanings). This promotes radical interconnectivity and empathy.

What happens when we apply our numbers to the changes we seek, and need, in our mundane world? Imagine what can happen when we step out of our familiar fan community silos and join together in the visioning, storytelling, and organizing that can change our world.

We can push fandom towards justice. There are more fans than we may think who want to make our world more equitable and inclusive, but have no idea how to go about it. They, and maybe even you, have never been invited.

You might say, “I’m just a *Star Wars* fan, how can I make the world a better place?” I counter, “What is it about *Star Wars* that draws you to it? What connects you to other fans of it? Which of your values does it exemplify? If you removed the spectacle of the films and toys and books, would you and the other fans still want to connect?”

Fandom community manager, game designer, and *Star Wars* aficionado Catrina Dennis
emphasizes the idea that *Star Wars* has been so enduring because it showed that anyone could be a hero. A farm boy can transform into a warrior priest. A scoundrel could be redeemed. A princess became a general. “Anyone can be a hero, as long as they have the courage to do so.”

By emphasizing that pursuing justice and equity is, in fact, part of the *Star Wars* ethos, we can make doing the work of equity and justice feel accessible.

Many of us become involved with fandom because it addresses a need our mundane world can’t meet. If we identify what this missing piece is, explore how and why our chosen fandom/s fill what is missing, and then map this onto our larger world, we can illuminate social change concerns, and then develop action plans to address them. Fans can highlight how our favorite story worlds have approached similar problems and we can use their example as an invitation to act in the real world.

**What’s Next?**

Fan used to be a dirty word. It connoted someone who was awkward, socially inept, marginal, undesirable. But the margins are now dead center. And now that we’re in this place of prominence, I feel we should be doing something from this new and powerful vantage point.

And I’m not just talking. Being sheltered-in-place has given me the freedom to reevaluate and recommit to the world I want to live in—a just and equitable world. A world where the table is never full, we just add more chairs, or trash the table and sit on the floor. But there is no way I can do this alone. I want us to do this together. What excites you about what I’ve been exploring? Does any of this make you afraid or gives you pause? If so, let’s talk about it. And when we’re done talking, let’s act. We only have this one shared world and I believe in our collective power to make it a more loving and inviting place.

A beautiful example of this is how K-pop fans have been *[gleefully bombarding */#MAGA and #BlueLivesMatter* with all kinds of hilarious memes and fancam footage. The K-pop fans power was so overwhelming that the Dallas PD had to remove their snitch-app.

Systemic change doesn’t have to be drudgery. By taking the energy found in fandom and redirecting it towards the creative problem solving of systemic issues, a joyful rebellion can be created. Joy can act as both motivation for and protection against the intense work of systemic social change. As with the things we love, joy will inspire action, and action will make change. We *can do this, together.*

—Shawn Taylor

End Notes

All artwork by Roy Miles Jr. aka Ghetto Geppetto

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