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The Invisibles: Becoming and Being a Reader in a Fan-Dominated Community

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The Damaged Books Room (Fantagraphics, Seattle).
Jonas Seaman

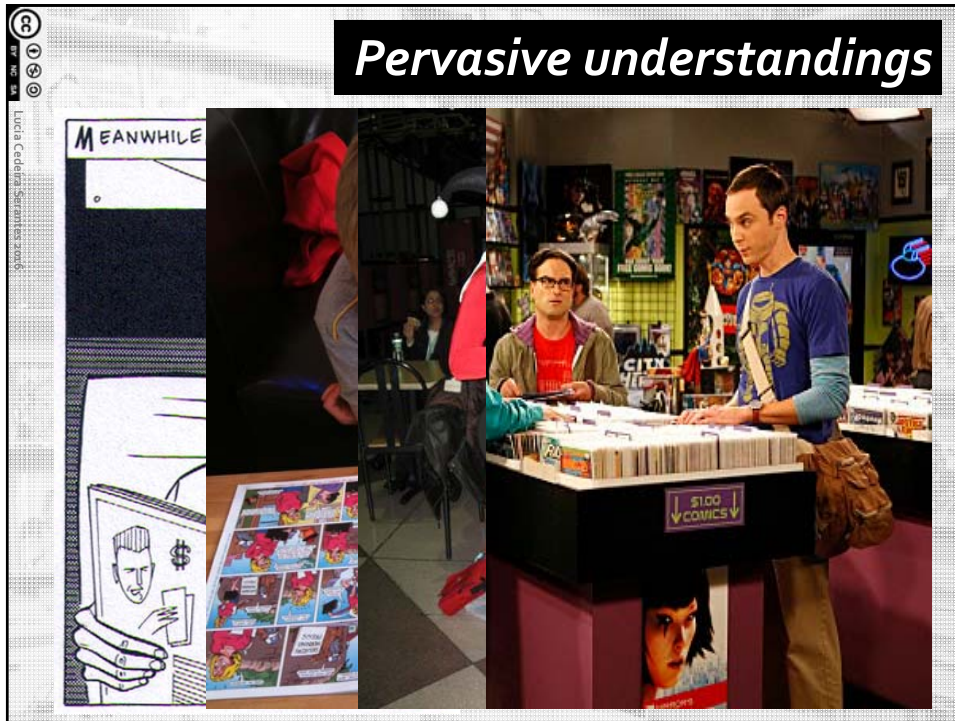
The Invisibles: Becoming and Being a Reader in a Fan- Dominated Community

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Alison

"Actually, I wasn't sure if I should sign up for this study because *I wasn't sure that I read enough* [...] I've read them fairly intermittently throughout my life like, *there's been times when I've read a lot of them and times where I haven't*...like in middle school I don't think I touched a single graphic novel [...] *I don't like getting anything from Heroes and I'm not familiar or superfamiliar with the Marvel and DC universes*...there's always people out there who read more than you."

Pervasive understandings



Why comics readers?

If you are committed to reading comics, inevitably you are, will become, or are expected to be, a fan.

Barker (1989), Brown (2001), Gabilliet (2010), Parsons (1991), and Pustz (1999) point at the presence and need for more research about what they labelled as "casual readers," or the bulk of the comics readership.

"The actual [comics] readership is an informal community in which a **silent majority** [readers] coexists with a **vocal minority** [fans], whose ideas and preferences are not necessarily in line with those of the majority of the purchasers of a given title."

(Gabilliet 2010, 257)

Searching for the reader

Audience Studies/Fan Studies literature:

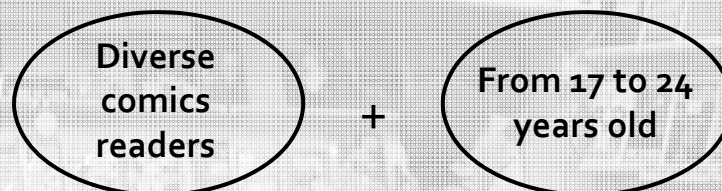
- The fan is a privileged type of reader
- Existence of a spectrum: from casual reader to fan
- A recognizable identity as a comics reader is momentary and visible only in passing.

LIS & Education literature: "Comics and education is usually synonymous with low literacy level, reluctant readers and a predominantly male audience" (Sabeti 2011, 137)

- Perception of comics evolving from "unworthy" to "legitimate"
- The comics reader is stereotyped as one who lacks
- Utilitarian research: comics connected to literacies or reading improvement.

Who and where

How do comics readers construct and understand their experience with comics as a reading material?



17 participants: 9 female – 8 male

Recruitment sites: Public library branch, a large university, local comics bookstores

Data collection methods: Semi-structured interviews and think-aloud activities.

Pseudonym	Age	Comics titles
Alison	23	<i>Black Hole</i> by Charles Burns, <i>Scott Pilgrim</i> series by Bryan Lee O'Malley, and <i>Lucky</i> by Gabrielle Bell
Devi	18	<i>Squee</i> and <i>I feel sick</i> by Jhonen Vasquez, and <i>Hellsing</i> by Kouta Hirano
Kalo	24	<i>Filth</i> by Grant Morrison; <i>Ex-Machina</i> by Brian K. Vaughan; <i>Skim</i> by Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki
Lorraine	19	Fifth volume of the <i>Wet Moon</i> series by Ross Campbell; the first volume of <i>Akira</i> by Katsuhiro Otomo; first trade paperback of the new <i>Tank Girl</i> by Jamie Hewlett
Marian	24	<i>Unwritten</i> by Mike Carey and Peter Gross; <i>Beast</i> by Marian Churchland
Oracle	23	<i>Power Girl</i> with Amanda Conner as the artist; <i>Batgirl</i> by Gail Simone; <i>The Muppets</i> , <i>the King Arthur</i> by Roger Langridge.
Promethea	21	Second volume of <i>Promethea</i> by Alan Moore and J. H. Williams III; <i>The Swamp Thing</i> by Alan Moore
Selina	24	<i>Ex-Machina</i> by Brian K. Vaughan and Tony Harris; <i>Street Angel</i> by Jim Rugg and Brian Maruca; volume one of <i>Strangers in Paradise</i> by Terry Moore.
Templesmith	20	Omnibus for <i>Silent Hill</i> by Scott Ciencin; a manga based on the television series <i>Battlestar Galactica</i> ; <i>Maus</i> by Art Spiegelman.

Pseudonym	Age	Comics titles
Baa	17	<i>Watchmen</i> by Alan Moore; <i>Daytripper</i> by Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá; and <i>Phonogram</i> by Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie
Daniel	23	<i>Mome anthology</i> (Fantagraphics); an omnibus <i>Captain American</i> by Ed Brubaker; <i>Shortcomings</i> by Adrian Tomine; and <i>Torpedo</i> by Enrique Sánchez Abulí et al
HunterS	19	<i>The Sandman</i> series by Neil Gaiman; <i>Transmetropolitan</i> by Warren Ellis and a collection of <i>Dr. Who</i> stories in comics
Jacob	17	<i>The Wonderful Wizard of Oz</i> by Eric Shanower & Skottie Young, an adaptation of <i>Frankenstein</i> by Jason Coble, and a comic in French about the history of rock & roll.
Preacher	18	<i>Maus</i> by Art Spiegelman, <i>Preacher</i> by Garth Ennis, and <i>Y: The Last Man</i> by Brian K. Vaughan
Shade	24	<i>The Changing Man</i> by Peter Milligan & Brendon McCarthy, <i>Sweet Tooth</i> by Jeff Lemire, and <i>Flash</i> by Geoff Johns
Shalmanaser	20	Richard Wagner's the <i>Ring of the Nibelung</i> adapted by Roy Thomas, <i>Maus</i> by Art Spiegelman, and a collection of short stories based on <i>H.P. Lovecraft works</i>
Walker	23	<i>V for Vendetta</i> , the graphic novel adaptation of <i>altz with Bashir</i> by Ari Folman and David Polonsky, and a Frank Miller comic.



Readers and fans: a tense balance

Insider/outsider (Fiske 1992): What is the experience of a reader who does not want to become a normative insider—fan—but who already is something different than an outsider?

“We ought to **replace the ideal reader** (usually just the fan) [...] **with a more realistic** –which is to say, theoretically and empirically adequate – account of individuals as socially embedded agents, **some of whom may not identify as part of the audience for comics and graphic novels**” (Woo, 2011 133).



Readers and fans: a tense balance

Positioning:

- “I’m not causal, but I’m not super, super intense.” (Kalo)
- “I am enthusiast in some aspects but there is a lot that I don’t know in superheroes ...” (Baa)

Considerations:

- Devi and the “comic book snobs”
- Number and exclusiveness: “they (new readers) don’t like it for the right reasons.” (Oracle)
- Comics and other reading interest (Jacob, Shade, HunterS & Walker)
- Terminology – graphic novel: “...for BBC to quote.” (Baa)
- CBs vs GNs: Qualitative differences – aesthetic differences

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Solitary and social

"A reader is going to keep reading, it doesn't matter if it's uncool or a lot of people aren't doing it. That's their interest and they're confident in that way. A fan is someone sort of like me, that like that companionship, that sense of community."

(Lorraine)

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Solitary and social

Reading solitary? Fandom social?

A complex, evolving process. Individual and social practices coincide in time, evolve and adapt to readers' lives:

- **Daniel and Marian:** Social aspect of reading as part of their adolescent experience.
- **Alison:** Solitary beginner reader; developed supporting social group later on.
- **Lorraine:** Always social, from family to radio show host.
- **Selina:** Mostly solitary except for her sister.
- **Preacher:** Both solitary ("therapeutic") and social (instructive). "The social aspect is a great part of it but not necessary."

Knowledge and the reader-self

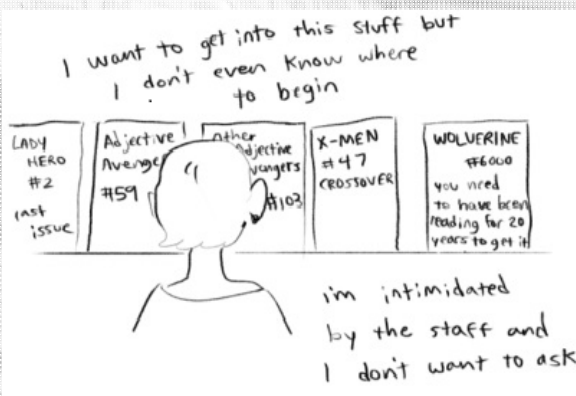
This constant comparison/struggle creates a sense of progression towards the ideal reader (fan). Knowledge plays a distinctive role in this process.

- **Daniel:** You do not “grow out of” comics readings
- **Preacher** and choosing “culturally relevant” readings
- **Baa** and finding quality comics
- **Alison** and the “informed” reader

“I’m sitting here criticizing what I think is maybe **the access point to a medium** as being extraordinary inaccessible [...] But then I’m going on about **how I really have to be precise** [...] which is all I think evidence of the fact I have this unbelievable **impulse to fit into that thing.**”

(Selina)

A case study: Female readers



Noelle Stevenson
Comics creator

<http://gingerhaze.tumblr.com/post/76241121783/oh-i-know-i-have-it-better-than-a-lot-of-would-be>

Female readers search for a balance:

- Be part of the culture to diversify comics readership
- Change the culture to carve their own space

Beyond the fan experience

"I just like comic books, like most of people like books."
(Jacob)

Expanding on Woo, as researchers we should diversify the identities / voices / possibilities we create / represent among these communities or about these experiences. Especially what this richness might bring to teens/YAs who are part of them.

Thank you!

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