



JOURNEY PLANET



M/S
2012

Journey Planet 12

James Bacon - Editors - Christopher J Garcia
Emma King - Guest Editors - Helen Montgomery

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- Carla H (<http://sweeter-than-reality.deviantart.com/>) - Pages 10, 16, 21, 22, 23, 42, 67, 78, 79 & 90
- Eszenyi Gábor Ádám (<http://raskolnikov0610.deviantart.com/>) - Pages 32, 46, 49, 52, 75
- Page 6 - Cadel L by Saskia Latendresse 2012, white gouache on black cotton rag paper
- Page 7 - Kanest (<http://kamiuzg.deviantart.com>)
- Page 9 - Anna Stiffler (<http://findchaos.deviantart.com/>)
- Pages 11 & 13 - Catherine Hennessey (www.PEHDTSCCKJMBA.deviantart.com)
- Page 14 - Toma (<http://toma.timehill.org/>)
- Pages 17 & 19 - <http://www.facebook.com/simanionart> (<http://www.simanion.deviantart.com/>)
- Page 24 & 25 - Megan Clark (megannclark@hotmail.com)
- Pages 26 & 28 - Travis Friess (<http://uncleguts.deviantart.com/>)
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- Page 77 - Samantha Haney Press / SamHain Press Fine Art & Illustration
- Page 80 & 81 - Loonaki (<http://loonaki.deviantart.com/>)
- Page 88 - Israel Junior (<http://tintanaveia.deviantart.com/>)
- Pages 92 - Maurine Mo Starkey (colmahouse.deviantart.com)



Chris

This issue of Journey Planet is very different from any other that we've done so far. It's got a fair amount of political content, both Big Picture and Fannish. It's a bit like what we've called the Hard issue, where a portion of it was dedicated to the matter of Cons as Safe Space and so on. In this one, we're looking at Privilege and Gender Parity and Women in Comics. It's a bit of a melange, but I LOVE varied issues. It makes me happy, keeps me guessing.

And we've got two Guest Editors - Emma King and Helen Montgomery. Emma's a bunch of fun, and I really should get out to the UK and spend some time chatting with her. Helen Montgomery is one of the Flying Monkeys for Chicon this year, plus she's just plain awesome! And Claire, our wonderful Letters Editor, is back, though we've only got a few letters, they're good ones!

We're also featuring some wonderful art with a special spotlight on three folks - Ditmar, the star of Australia, the only guy I know with an award named after him, and Carla H, <http://sweeter-than-reality.deviantart.com/>, who is a wonderful artist whose combination of text and art really turned my head while I searched for items. There's also Eszenyi Gábor Ádám, whose models are absolutely amazing! I highly recommend seeking out their stuff!

I often have a strange relationship with questions of race. I'm a Mexican, that's what my Generation of my Family ALWAYS refers to ourselves as, not Latino or Hispanic, but I look like J. Average White Guy. Comparing me to my cousins, I'm the one who is The White One. Grandma differentiates between the groups of cousins by calling all but me and my cousins Clare and Samantha "The Brown Kids" and the three of us "The White Kids", despite the fact that with the exception of my cousin Maria, we're all the product of Anglo-Chicano (as my Father's generation in the family always referred to themselves) relationships. The three of us just happen to physically look

a lot more like the Anglo side than the Mexican side. It's odd, and it's something that my family understands and deals with like we deal with everything - through inappropriate humor. When someone took the keys to Grandpa's car and ended up hitting a tree and running away, Grandma's first words were "Round up the Brown Kids."

Turns out it was my uncle, but that's neither here nor there...

We're also a largely Republican family of Mexicans, so maybe we're completely skewed...

On the matter of Gender Parity, I have to say that I completely think that it is the exact right thing to aim for, but in a programme, there are so many moving parts, and I'll never whine about a con that couldn't make it work. It's a hard one.

As for women in comics, I've had various favorites. When I was a kid, I loved Jonni Thunder. She was the 1980s revamp of Johnny Thunder, a private eye with a lightning spirit living inside. She was awesome, and though a reread of the comic in the late 1990s revealed it to be a less-than-ideal comic mini-series, the art and the styling almost made up for it!

So, this issue is jam-packed with folks ranging from John Picacio to John Scalzi, Jim C. Hines to Alisha Krasnostein, Lynda Rucker to Farah Mendelsohn, Carrie Vaughn to Gail Carriger. It's got a lot of great stuff and I'm quite happy that we get to put it in here. This might be the heaviest issue we've done yet.

And here we go!



James

MANY MANY MANY MANY MANY MANY THANKS!

Look, when I heard that Journey Planet had been nominated for a HUGO, it was a terrific moment. As both Chris and myself got three other nominations each, it was heady. We work really hard, we are far from perfect, but we love reading and presenting fans writings in zines, and I have fre-

About The Cover

quently felt that the work we do in JP is good despite occasional doubt, made brilliant by the various people we ask to help edit, is good. To all our guest editors since issue 1, I am equally as grateful, as I am to the many many contributors and of course those of you readers who voted for us.

Thanks to you all, you are awesome.

This issue has been incredible in its coming together, I am very pleased to have worked with Helen and Emma (and grateful for their hard work) on this issue which sees a real variety of opinions and writings, some from unexpected quarters. And that's what I love about this issue. Reading what people think, in a forum that allows thought and calmness. All these pieces in one place, so that one has the spectrum to consider, and then where on that graph of opinions to pin yourself. Feel free to let us know through the letters page.

There is a lot of politics in this issue, and I think sometimes a little politics is no harm, although I do worry about politicising conventions or fanzines, we should be forums for all opinions, while remembering that our focus isn't about changing the world but enjoying science fiction, which is the commonality that brings us together.

Of course, for some there is already a decision, and there was a sad moment for me. If attempts to be inclusive, we push intelligent fans away, what is being achieved. A friend of mine, who has made her opinion clear to Eight Squared, for a variety of reasons, all personal, is now not going. That is not so good.

This issue, we still have a lot about comics, which pleases me, and creates an interest break from the political elements, by looking at the actual source, although in a particular and occasionally political way. I love comics.

The privilege discussion had started in the home for wayward bachelors on the 12th of May, at a party here, and so the series of articles that with a cosmical twist turned up the immediate week afterwards all tied in somehow.

Next issue sees us looking at James Bond, we'll have been to the Worldcon and all that that presents, and we'll no doubt have other things to look at, but it's back to fiction with a Walther PPK bang.

As always though, for now, many thanks to Emma and Helen, Claire Brialey for the letters section, Lynda E. Rucker for the assistance she gave and all our brilliant contributors.

I hope you enjoy this issue, and remember, it's only a fanzine, and you have the right to reply.

Thanks for the support
James

In my dreamland far away, past the ocean of onlineness, in the land of fanzina, where I was High Lord of Solicitation, acting with King Christoff, I would engage the greatest artisans the land possess, and I would give very specific direction as to what I would like, for I have visions, and these visions remain stuck in my brain until an artist can wrinkle them out and create them into fictional reality. Mo Starkey and Hilary Pearlman have both managed to tolerate my madness and bizarre requests. And so we have this cover.

So, it may be the Politics and Comics Issue Or the Political Issue with Comics. I am not sure. Anyhow, what I had in mind, was a group of people (they all happen to be favourite comic characters of mine) in a variety of civilian clothing posing for a photo, in a bar, with the cover in a classic comic book style.

I did a very bad thumbnail, to give Mo an idea of what I was looking for. They do not need to be perfect, I will know who they are, but they should look like normal women, having a few beers, caught in a moment.

From left to right we have quite the ass kicking line up...

Cinder DuBois, Tulip O'Hare, Kit Ryan, Deena Pilgrim, Kate Kane, Barbara Gordon, Detective Teigel, Echo, Halo Jones.

And the comics they all appeared in, although some have appeared in more, Cinder and Ashe, Preacher, Hellblazer, Powers, Batwoman, Batgirl/Birds of Prey, Hitman, Daredevil, Halo Jones

They are all worth reading, Preacher gets a mention elsewhere in this issue, as does Batgirl and in a previous issue I made mention of most of them, as being exemplary demonstrations of fine women characters in the media of comics.

Poor Mo, I could have gone on and on and on, Promethea, Tesla Strong, Judge Anderson, Venus Bluegenes, Tyranny Rex and I didn't even think about the good old Marvel X characters..

Anyhow, that's what the cover is about, Thanks Mo.

JP Readers Write Letters, edited lightly by Claire Brialey

Well, several readers write, one more than once.

At the end of last year, issue 11 was a Sherlock Holmes special; and in April there was issue 12, about *Blade Runner*, which saw a welcome return for guest editor Pete Young. And you read them, I presume, if you're also reading this now. What most of you didn't do, it appears, was respond – or at least not via a letter of comment. It's a curious thing: enough people enjoy what Chris and James were doing with *JP* last year to put it on the Hugo ballot (although that obviously doesn't make it unique among things that Chris and James have been doing), but that enthusiasm seems not to extend to writing to the fanzine itself. Maybe the editors don't mind; maybe they're hearing from you in other ways. Maybe the contents of this issue will prompt some more response.

There had even been some discussion in the letter column in issue 11 about responses to fanzines published electronically. Since that's also a topic that continues to be raised in other fanzines, I wouldn't necessarily have expected too many comments about that – but I wondered whether it is part of the reason there's not been much comment

about anything at all. But I gather that some paper copies of issue 12 were distributed on both sides of the Atlantic; and it looked great, as we've all come to expect from Pete, so I can't really explain what's going on – or, rather, not coming in – here.

Previous comments about *Dune*, however, continued to prompt some discussion:

Barbara Johnson-Haddad

Much as I enjoyed reading the various responses that *Dune* provokes in people, I must take issue with Andy's comment that James Cameron stole the idea of the ecological world set of *Avatar* from *Dune*.

The environment for *Dune* was a nigh sterile desert. The idea behind the world of Pandora is a lush, heavily jungled world: 'Out beyond that fence every living thing that crawls, flies or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat your eyes for jujubees.'

Thus my contention is that Cameron may have stolen a world for his movie, but it was not Herbert's *Dune*. I believe he stole Harry Harrison's world, Pyrrus, from the first of his Deathworld Trilogy. The world of Pyrrus is inhabited by empathic to telepathic creatures that react with hostility to city-bound humans wanting to kill them. Other humans have adapted to Pyrrus, living far removed from the city and managing a telepathic symbiosis with the planet life forms in a more eco-friendly fashion. So – while the world was likely stolen – the filed-off serial numbers come from another author.

—17 February 2012
USA

I even left you the comment hook in the last letter column about why a science fiction fanzine was doing an issue about Sherlock Holmes. But it seems you weren't falling for that either.

Lloyd Penney

You're discussing one of my favorite topics, none other than Sherlock Holmes.

I remember sitting down with the first full collection of Conan



Doyle's stories, the full canon, an old, musty-smelling book with red boards and no dust cover, and I read the book from cover to cover, soaking in the intelligence, the methods, the quirks of the Great Detective. I imagined he was supremely confident, yet a little short-tempered, constantly having to explain his *modus operandi*, and explain his smarts to the unobservant. I saw many of the Rathbone Holmes movies, and thought them a little too Hollywood, and I never liked Dr John Watson (Nigel Bruce) being played as a dense fool. I figured he was learning Holmes's methods, or at least trying his best to pick them up, but he couldn't be a fool and have his own successful medical practice. Watson was a veteran of the British wars in Afghanistan, and was smart enough to survive that carnage. Hollywood just didn't seem to pick up on what I did.

The television channels I can watch contain a lot of Canadian, American and British programming, so I have enjoyed the adventures of Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot on PBS and the local education channel. But most of all, I enjoyed those adventures of Sherlock Holmes starring the late and much-missed Jeremy Brett. Brett's Holmes had the confidence, the short temper, the slight arrogance – all the characteristics I thought Holmes had or should have. So many said there'd never be a Holmes like Basil Rathbone, but I believe Brett surpassed him. Brett also had the luck to be involved in the Granada project that dramatised every story in the canon which, to me, firmly ensconced him as The Holmes, taking the title away from Mr Rathbone. The Granada series also treated Dr Watson as an intelligent man; some of Holmes's

lines were given to Watson, and even Mrs. Hudson got some interesting lines. All intelligent people.

I know there are pastiches and sequels galore, even an 'authorised' novel that came out just a few weeks ago (*The House of Silk* by Anthony Horowitz), and while I haven't seen most of them, I do have some of Laurie R King's books, with Holmes as a beekeeper in his retirement years. L B Greenwood has also written some fine pastiches. The latest addition to Yvonne's Sherlock Holmes book collection is a biographical book on ACD, called *On Conan Doyle*, by Michael Dirda. (Picked up at a Globe and Mail book sale, it's the uncorrected page proof version of the book, and on the back are blurbs of praise from Neil Gaiman and Christopher Roden. Roden is the founder of the Arthur Conan Doyle Society, and currently lives east of Vancouver, British Columbia in the town of Ashcroft. His wife Barbara used to live in Toronto.)

But I tend to stick to the canon. I did not care to see the first, or the second, Sherlock Holmes movies with Robert Downey Jr and Jude Law; it just didn't seem real to me; a little too much reinvention of the characters, and a little too much Hollywood again, I think. Yes, both movies seem to have a measure of steampunk in, but I never thought Holmes to be an action figure, and he seems to be played as one in these movies. I cannot offer any commentary on the current BBC series *Sherlock*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch, for I haven't seen any of the episodes.

I'm a page in, and I still haven't made any commentary on the fanzine! I will wind up my own personal essay of my interest in Holmes by saying that there is a Holmes association in Toronto, the Bootmakers of Toronto, and we were members for a number of years, but found that the club itself was full of old friends, and that we found it impossible to break into the group. A quick Google says that the club is still going, and its magazine, *Canadian Holmes*, is still being published.

I do not recall any action in any of the Granada dramatisations taking place in the London Underground. Lots of horses and carriages, though, but no subways. The trains were well represented, lots of steam.

Tom Feller brings up a Canadian version of Holmes and Watson I'd rather not remember... Holmes was played by the tall and lanky Matt Frewer, best known as a comedic actor, and his Watson was played by Kenneth Welsh. I am told that many Sherlockians despise the Asimov anthology *Sherlock Holmes: Through Time and Space*. We actually have two copies, one for each of the SF and Sherlockian shelves. Edge Publishing is in Calgary, and their Gaslight series





of arcane Holmes stories are entertaining – at least the one I have, *Grimoire*. I must get myself *Grotesque* and *Arcanum*.

Turning to the loccol, nobody writes LoCs to ezines, eh, Mr Purcell? Next con I'm at, I'll write Nobody on my con badge, and see who notices. Electronic zines do deserve as many LoCs as paperzines do. If I had my way, they'd all be paperzines, but I understand why they're not.

Thanks for a fascinating Holmeszine to page through and enjoy. There's always more to discuss and think on when it comes to our favorite detective.

—6 January 2012

Etobicoke, Ontario (Canada)

I couldn't describe myself as a Holmes fan. I'm not at all anti-Holmes, but I realised when James and Chris were putting issue 11 together that I've never read the stories. But somehow I'd acquired knowledge of Sherlock Holmes, and from this I'm inclined to think Holmes and his methods must have become an iconic part of British culture. By the time the Jeremy Brett / Edward Hardwicke TV series was originally shown in the UK in the mid-1980s, I knew enough to appreciate it as a good and thorough interpretation; so it wasn't from that I learned what I do know.

I mention all this, naturally, as a prelude to being frivolous, in this case by encouraging everyone who's not yet seen this wonderful web page to check out **Otters Who Look Like Benedict Cumberbatch**. (<http://redscharlach.tumblr.com/post/19565284869/otters-who-look-like-benedict-cumberbatch-a>)

This is not, of course, meant to imply that the next correspondent looks like either. Although you may consider, or choose to imagine, that he does.

Joseph Nicholas

Thank you very much for sending me a copy of *Journey Planet: The Blade Runner Issue*. It looks very, very impressive. Unfortunately (or not – it depends on your perspective), *Blade Runner* is a film for which I have next to no affection.

I have seen it twice – once at the cinema on its original release and once on television, many years later, when it was shorn of its narrative voice-over. (I've no idea which of the later versions that might have been.) But although the film might be admira-

ble as a work of art, it left me emotionally cold: I could not engage with it, and thus could not manifest an interest in its plot, its characters, or its ideas. The only point of (mild) interest, for me, was its look; I recall this elicited a deal of excited comment at the time, about its world being a grungy, lived-in near future where the new existed cheek-by-jowl with the old – which struck me as a curious comment to make, because new-next-to-old is routinely offered by almost all cities in the developed west. Additionally, a ‘grungy, lived-in’ feel was exactly what was being offered by the then emerging sub-genre of cyberpunk, particularly in William Gibson’s stories of *The Sprawl*. (In an interview in an early issue of *Interzone*, in fact, he said of *Blade Runner* that it ‘looked so much like the inside of my head’ – he was working on *Neuromancer* at the time – that he fled the cinema about halfway through.) In that

sense, the film’s set designers were largely reflecting an emerging zeitgeist (some of them may even have been reading Gibson and Sterling), and the film critics who went bonkers over its look were displaying nothing more than their ignorance of contemporary science fiction literature.

Indeed, many of these same film critics seem not to have spotted the precursors of this look in two previous films: 1979’s *Alien*, whose crew members did not wear shiny silver jumpsuits and spent much of their time in low-ceilinged, under-lit spaces; and 1977’s *Star Wars* (now *Part IV: A New Hope*), which had what J G Ballard described as ‘supertechnologies already beginning to rust around the edges, the pirate starship like an old tramp steamer, the dented robots with IQs higher than Einstein’s which resembled beat-up DeSotos in Athens or Havana with half-a-million miles on the clock’ (‘Hobbits in Space?’ in *A User’s Guide to The Millennium: Essays and Reviews*, 1997).

An additional strike against the film is its internal inconsistencies. For example, the information delivered near the start that six replicants have escaped but that one had already been caught and killed before Deckard’s arrival, leaving him four to hunt down – but of course six minus one is five, not four. The explanation that the missing replicant must be Deckard himself seemed to me to be straining at a gnat, since there’s nothing in the film to suggest this. Another example: if the replicants have been genetically engineered to have shortened life spans then of course the Deckard and Rachael characters will die



just like the rest of them, so their escape from LA at the end of the film is without point. But the biggest internal inconsistency of all is that deliberately shortened lifespan: if replicants don’t live very long, then why do they need to be hunted down in the first place? All by itself, that last seems to me to render the film wholly without point or meaning.

Clearly, however, my view is a minority one, obviously not shared by many other people – as this issue of *Journey Planet* shows, and as the film’s critical and public reception over the years has shown. That the words of Batty’s final speech have become so widely quoted in so many contexts, in either their original form or as parody, indicates how deeply embedded in popular culture the film’s tropes and styles have become (even though the words are meaningless: beams can’t glitter in a vacuum because the dust they’ll pass through is too thinly spread; the ‘shoulder’ of Orion will appear so only when the constellation is seen from Earth). A version even appeared in a spoof column written for *The Guardian* by the fictitious Malcolm Tucker in the weeks preceding the 2010 general election.

It might perhaps be said by some that my view of *Blade Runner* is not just a minority one, but wrong through and through!

—26 April 2012
South Tottenham, London (UK)

Interestingly, the other letter received so far on issue 12 is from someone else who doesn't describe himself as a great enthusiast for Blade Runner – although he's also seen it twice. Maybe all the real fans contributed to the issue itself. For now, though, it's that man again:

Lloyd Penney

The reason this will be a rather short letter is that I saw Blade Runner exactly twice. I saw it as a rather dystopian movie, with influences from the Dick novel, and some proof that Harrison Ford could do more than play Han Solo. It was a confusing movie, with a general 'WTF?' at the end. Was Deckard a replicant himself? Difficult to know at the first viewing, unless you were meant to take those questions with you when you left the theatre. Not every movie has to have its plot tied up in a pretty bow. I remember the Director's Cut, and not much more than that. The fact that there's been so much discussion about this movie and its iterations shows that more people saw more in the movie than I did.

I've got the movie font at home, and if I were simply going to print up this LoC and send it to you via the tender mercies of Canada Post, I'd use it.

I'd not heard of the idea of the sequel anywhere. Seeing as the movie was released in 1982, I think it would have to be re-released for a new generation to see before the new movie comes out. But then, look at the sequel to TRON... got that font, too.

Obviously, the movie didn't affect me the way it did so many others. Still, I was pleasantly reminded of some of the artwork used to promote it, and some artwork I'd never seen.

—27 April 2012
Etobicoke, Ontario (Canada)

Thanks also to Ian Millsted: 'Thanks for the paper copy of Journey Planet received at Eastercon. Did I promise to contribute something by taking this? If so, let me know what I can do.'

If you want to appear here, send your letters:

- By email to: journeyplanet@gmail.com
- By post in Europe (c/o James) to: 54 Bridge Road, Uxbridge UB8 2QP, UK
- By post in North America (c/o Chris) to: 1401 N Shoreline Blvd, Mountain View, CA 94043, USA
- By post from anywhere else in the world to whichever of those addresses you prefer.



THREE POSTS ON PRIVILEGE

Straight White Male: The Lowest Difficulty Setting There Is

originally appeared on <http://whatever.scalzi.com/>

I've been thinking of a way to explain to straight white men how life works for them, without invoking the dreaded word "privilege," to which they react like vampires being fed a garlic tart at high noon. It's not that the word "privilege" is incorrect, it's that it's not their word. When confronted with "privilege," they fiddle with the word itself, and haul out the dictionaries and find every possible way to talk about the word but not any of the things the word signifies.

So, the challenge: how to get across the ideas bound up in the word "privilege," in a way that your average straight white man will get, without freaking out about it?

Being a white guy who likes women, here's how I would do it:

Dudes. Imagine life here in the US — or indeed, pretty much anywhere in the Western world — is a massive role playing game, like *World of Warcraft* except appallingly mundane, where most quests involve the acquisition of money, cell phones and donuts, although not always at the same time. Let's call it *The Real World*. You have installed *The Real World* on your computer and are about to start playing, but first you go to the settings tab to bind your keys, fiddle with your defaults, and choose the difficulty setting for the game. Got it?

Okay: In the role playing game known as *The Real World*, "Straight White Male" is the lowest difficulty setting there is.

This means that the default behaviors for almost all the non-player characters in the game are easier on you than they would be otherwise. The default barriers for completions of quests are lower. Your leveling-up thresholds come more quickly. You automatically gain entry to some parts of the map that others have to work for. The game is easier to play, automatically, and when you need help, by default

it's easier to get.

Now, once you've selected the "Straight White Male" difficulty setting, you still have to create a character, and how many points you get to start — and how they are apportioned — will make a difference. Initially the computer will tell you how many points you get and how they are divided up. If you start with 25 points, and your dump stat is wealth, well, then you may be kind of screwed. If you start with 250 points and your dump stat is charisma, well, then you're probably fine. Be aware the computer makes it difficult to start with more than 30 points; people on higher difficulty settings generally start with even fewer than that.

As the game progresses, your goal is to gain points, apportion them wisely, and level up. If you start with fewer points and fewer of them in critical stat categories, or choose poorly regarding the skills you decide to level up on, then the game will still be difficult for you. But because you're playing on the "Straight White Male" setting, gaining points and leveling up will still by default be easier, all other things being equal, than for another player using a higher difficulty setting.

Likewise, it's certainly possible someone playing at a higher difficulty setting is progressing more quickly than you are, because they had more points initially given to them by the computer and/or their highest stats are wealth, intelligence and constitution and/or simply because they play the game better than you do. It doesn't change the fact you are still playing on the lowest difficulty setting.

You can lose playing on the lowest difficulty setting. The lowest difficulty setting is still the easiest setting to win on. The player who plays on the "Gay Minority Female" setting? Hardcore.

And maybe at this point you say, hey, I like a challenge, I want to change my difficulty setting! Well, here's the thing: In *The Real World*, you don't unlock any rewards or receive any benefit for playing on higher difficulty settings. The game is just harder, and

potentially a lot less fun. And you say, okay, but what if I want to replay the game later on a higher difficulty setting, just to see what it's like? Well, here's the other thing about The Real World: You only get to play it once. So why make it more difficult than it has to be? Your goal is to win the game, not make it difficult.

Oh, and one other thing. Remember when I said that you could choose your difficulty setting in The Real World? Well, I lied. In fact, the computer chooses the difficulty setting for you. You don't get a choice; you just get what gets given to you at the start of the game, and then you have to deal with it.

So that's "Straight White Male" for you in The Real World (and also, in the real world): The lowest difficulty setting there is. All things being equal, and even when they are not, if the computer — or life — assigns you the "Straight White Male" difficulty setting, then brother, you've caught a break.

Comment.

I should note that I'm planning to Mallet anyone who decides to start a debate on the word "privilege" in this thread. I've already established that straight white dudes often cannot deal with the term rationally; there's no need for a) any of them to prove it, b) anyone else to reiterate the fact.

This is also one of those threads where I will remind people to be civil to each other because there is a lot of opportunity here to slip into incivility. The usual suspects, I assume, know who they are.

I should warn people that I'm feeling slightly cranky today so my tolerance for rhetorical nonsense and bullshit is going to be lower than usual. Bring your very polite "A" game today, kids.

Finally, I will credit the genesis for the "lowest difficulty setting" concept comes from <http://www.cracked.com/blog/the-8-stupidest-defenses-against-accusations-sexism> at Cracked, by Luke McKinney, in which "straight male" is described as being the lowest difficulty setting for sexuality. I'm expanding on the idea a bit.

"Lowest Difficulty Setting" Follow-Up

It's been a couple of days since I've posted <http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/15/straight-white-male-the-lowest-difficulty-setting-there-is/> aka the "Lowest Difficulty Setting" piece, and it's been fun and interesting watching the Intarweeps basically explode over it, especially the subclass of Straight White Males who cannot abide the idea that their lives play out on a fundamentally lower difficulty setting than

everyone else's, and have spun themselves up in tight, angry circles because I dared to suggest that they do. Those dudes are cracking me up, and also making me a little sad.

There have been some general classes of statement/questions about the piece both on the site and elsewhere on the Internet, that I would like to address, so I'll do that here. Understand I am paraphrasing the questions/statements. In no particular order:

1. I fundamentally disagree with every single thing you said!

That's fine. It happens.

2. Your metaphor/analogy is good, except for [insert thing that commenter finds not good about the metaphor/analogy]

Well, yes. Metaphors are not perfect; it's why they're metaphors and not the thing the metaphor describes. Likewise analogies break down. I thought the "lowest difficulty setting" description worked well enough for what I wanted to say, but I don't think it's perfect. "Perfect" wasn't what I was aiming for. And of course, if you don't think it's the right metaphor/analogy, that's fine. Please, make a different and better one — the more ways we can make a general point to people who need to understand that general point, the better chance they will listen.

3. Your description should have put wealth/class as part of the difficulty setting.

Nope. Money and class are both hugely important and can definitely compensate for quite a lot, which I have of course noted in the entry itself. But they belong in the stats category because wealth and class are not an inherent part of one's personal nature — and in the US particularly, part of our cultural sorting behavior — in the manner that race, gender and sexuality are (note "inherent" here does not necessarily mean "immutable," but that's a conversation I'm not going to go into great detail about right now). You can disagree, of course. But speaking as someone who has been at both the bottom and the top of the wealth and class spectrum here in the US, I think I have enough personal knowledge on the matter to say it belongs where I put it.

4. I'm a straight white male and my life isn't easy! My life sucks! Your "lowest difficulty setting" doesn't account for that!

That's actually fully accounted for in the entry. Go back and read it again.



This one's a stand-in for all the complaints about the entry that come primarily either from not reading the entry, or not reading what was actually written in the entry in preference to a version of the entry that exists solely in that one person's head, and which is not the entry I wrote. Please, gentlemen, read what is there, not what you think is there, or what you believe must be there because you know you already disagree with what I have to say, no matter what it is I am saying.

5. What about affirmative action (and/or other similar programs)? It just proves SWMs don't have it easy anymore!

Asserting that programs designed to counteract decades of systematic discrimination are proof that Straight White Males are not operating on the lowest difficulty setting in the game of life is not the winning argument you apparently believe it is. I'll let you try to figure out why that is on your own. Likewise, anecdotal examples of a straight white guy getting the short end of the stick in some manner do not suggest that, therefore, it's hard out there for all straight white men all the time.

6. Your piece is racist and sexist.

This particular comment was lobbed at me primarily from aggrieved straight white males. Leaving aside entirely that the piece was neither, let me

just say that I think it's delightful that these straight white males are now engaged on issues of racism and sexism. It would be additionally delightful if they were engaged on issues of racism and sexism even when they did not feel it was being applied to them — say, for example, when it's regarding people who historically have most often had to deal with racism and sexism (i.e., not white males). Keep at it, straight white males! You're on the path now!

7. I feel this piece is an attack on straight white men.

You need to re-calibrate your definition of "attack," then, because it's depressingly (or hilariously) out of whack. Suggesting all straight white men should be defenestrated into a courtyard covered with spikes would be an attack. Noting that straight white men operate at the lowest difficulty setting in life is an observation.

Otherwise, in a general sense, when people point out the things straight white men get on credit (or don't have to deal with), the unspoken part of that is not "and that's why we plan to burn all you bastards in a big screaming pile when the revolution comes," it's "hey, just so you know." Because you should know. It's not about blame, it's about knowledge. Stop assuming it's about blame. Paranoid and hypersensitive is no way to go through life.

8. You did not lay out in exhaustive factual detail, with graphs and charts, your assertion that straight white men operate at the lowest difficulty setting in our culture.

Also generally lobbed at me by aggrieved straight white men. And indeed I did not. Also, when I write about tripping over my shoelaces and falling on my ass, I do not preface the comment with a comprehensive discussion of the theory of gravity. For two reasons: One, it's not needed because for anyone but committed gravity-deniers, the theory of gravity is obvious and taken as read, and two, that's not the focus of the entry. In the case of the "lowest difficulty setting" entry, I took what I see as the obvious advantages to being straight, white and male in our culture as read. One may of course argue with that assertion, and some did in the previous comment thread, but I have to say I've generally found those arguments to be less than compelling (see point six, above).

9. In your comment thread with the article, you censored people who disagreed with you.

I indeed malleted quite a few people in that comment thread. Most of them disagreed with me philosophically on the issue under discussion. They were also being assholes. They were malleted for the latter, not the former. Who gets to judge when someone's being an asshole here? Why, I do. Because it's my site. A quick look through the comment thread in question shows that quite a few people, who disagreed with my ideas to varying levels of strenuousness, had their comments posted unmolested. That's because they were generally polite to others in the thread, did not lead with their asses, and their comments were not generally dripping with racism/sexism/condescension/stupidity. This is all covered in <http://whatever.scalzi.com/about/site-disclaimer-and-comment-policy/> the comment policy, which is linked to on every page of the site.

Now, people may be upset that in addition to deleting people's comments, <http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/16/a-childs-treasury-of-deletions> I also mocked them when I deleted their comments. But, you know, when you show up on my site and decide to shit all over the carpet, I'm not going to be nice to you. Also, <http://whatever.scalzi.com/2009/05/17/because-flowcharts-make-everything-clearer/> this.

10. I am never going to buy anything you write ever again. I don't care.

11. Not every straight white man thinks what you wrote is wrong.

Of course. Noting that some straight white men are having difficulty accepting the idea they operate on the lowest difficulty setting in life doesn't mean that all straight white men do, or that any particular straight white men will experience said difficulties. Alternately, there are a lot of straight white men who think my premise is wrong to a greater or lesser extent, but who can express that disagreement cogently, and even forcefully, without additionally coming across as a five-year-old having a tantrum because he's been told he has to share his toys. Straight white men, like any group, have all sorts of personalities.

12. You wrote the article and pointed out the straight white men live life on the lowest difficulty setting. Okay, fine. What do I/we do next?

Well, that's up to you, isn't it? What I'm doing is pointing out a thing. What you do with that thing is your decision.

That said, here's what I do: recognize it, and

work to make it so the more difficult settings in life becomes closer to the one I get to run through life on — by making those less difficult, mind you, not making mine more so.



Final Notes For “Lowest Difficulty Setting”

It's now been a week and a day since I posted <http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/15/straight-white-male-the-lowest-difficulty-setting-there-is/> the “Lowest Difficulty Setting” piece, and the dust around is finally beginning to settle, so a moment for some final notes on it before I let it go off into the sunset.

1. Overall, it was interesting. If I had to do it over again I would have posted it yesterday instead of a week ago yesterday, because a week ago yesterday I had five days of travel and business ahead of me which kept me away from the site and led to the comment threads not as pruned for twits as I

would have liked. This should be an indication that I honestly did not expect the piece to blow up like it did. I was occasionally accused of writing the piece for attention, which is an interesting thing to accuse a writer on a public blog of; I mean, duh, yes, of course I wrote it for attention. However, I did not write it solely for attention, nor did I expect the amount of attention it got. So: interesting experience.

2. I've been asked for whom the piece was written, as at least some of the Straight White Males who were the focus of the piece did not take kindly to it, and thus it could be argued that it failed. Well, the audience for it wasn't specifically white straight males, it was everyone, including and especially those folks looking for a way to explain the concepts of under discussion, especially to white straight males, without hauling out the dreaded word "privilege," into the discussion. This did make the subsequent discussion here and other places just a little bit meta, but that's okay.

3. Do I still think the analogy is useful? Sure. For one thing, the piece was useful for some folks already, both in giving them a new way to articulate the idea, or to think about it. I've got enough anecdotal evidence for that. For another thing, while the piece has received hundreds of thousands of page views, both here and other places online, that means there are still millions of folks who have never heard the analogy. Could still work for them.

4. There were a number of complaints about the article, many of which I addressed in "<http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/17/lowest-difficulty-setting-follow-up/> the first follow-up post, although of course there were complaints about those responses as well. One of the biggest complaints was lack of facts in the piece, and while I argued and would still argue that the piece was about the analogy rather than the (to me rather painfully obvious) underlying assumptions, it's still something that sticks in the craw of some. So, fine. For those folks, <http://www.jimchines.com/2012/05/facts-are-cool/> the estimable Jim Hines has thoughtfully given you some facts to chew on, although it should be noted that those are the beginning of the wall of evidence, not the only facts to support the piece's underlying assumptions.

The second major sticking point is the chunk of folks who really very truly believe that I should have put class/wealth into the difficulty setting in addition to or instead of race/gender/sexuality. Again, I've already explained why I designed the analogy as

I did, and while I think it's fine that people disagree, I haven't been sufficiently convinced by their arguments that I was wrong in the manner in which I designed it. I think some people are suggesting that I don't think wealth and class matter in a significant way; they need to reread the entry. It's not about whether it makes a difference. It does. It's about where it's properly placed in the analogy. Some have commented this is set-up that really is specific to the US, not other places in the Western world; I'm not wholly convinced of this, but then I live in the US, not other places in the Western world.

Also, let me be blunt about this: I think there's a relatively small but non-trivial number of people arguing the wealth/class thing who believe that if they can only and simply make this all about wealth and class, then they can flat-out deny (or at least hugely mitigate) the idea that the US in particular still has issues with race, sexuality and gender, and that directly related to that, they have unearned advantages as straight white males. Well, that's just stupid, and I'm not in the least inclined to indulge these folks in their particular fantasy.

Finally, and in general, please note the piece is really not intended to be a be-all piece; it couldn't and won't do everything. It's a start to a discussion or a stepping stone to another part of a discussion.

5. Among the straight white males (and some of their friends) who read the pieces, my guess is that the majority found it non-controversial or perhaps food for thought, or that if they disagreed, and many did, they did so at a setting somewhat below "froth." But there was <http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/21/lowest-difficulty-setting-follow-up-now-on-kotaku-comment-on-comments/> a loud but I suspect relatively small number who disagreed at a setting of "froth" or above.

This is of course their right. No one has to agree with me. What I do find interesting is the rhetoric that was often involved, which, for lack of a better way to put it, seemed to me like an attempt to delegitimize my standing as, you know, as a white dude who loves him some women. And I suppose I get this; it's true enough that most of the folks who point out the unearned advantages of straight white maleness are not at least one of those things. When someone from inside the fence makes the observation, a lot of the tricks and tools one might use to discount the message and demean the messenger just won't work, and one has to fall back on some ridiculous "No True Scotsman" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_true_Scotsman) sort of argumentation.

The silliest example of this I've seen are the fellows who've noted darkly (no pun intended) that I live in a little town that's more than 98% white; I think the idea there is that I choose to live among the white folks and/or don't know what it's like to live among the dark folks. Leaving aside anything else about this assertion that's racist and stupid (and ignores the idea that there might possibly be women and/or gays and lesbians in Darke County, Ohio), this is an interesting argument to offer about someone who grew up in the LA area, went to school in Chicago, and then lived in Fresno and the DC area prior to moving to Darke County, Ohio, and whose family here in Ohio is packed to the brim with people of Hispanic and African-American descent. Perhaps a little research — perhaps on this very site! — might have been in order. It's been otherwise suggested that I'm a quisling to other races, genders and sexualities (which lead to my recent tweet which said "THE MATRIARCHICAL HOMODARKOSPHERE WANTS ME TO TELL YOU I AM NOT THEIR PUPPET"), that I'm a beta male and that I'm ugly, or at least "profoundly unhandsome." And so on.

Dudes: You can't demote me. You just literally cannot. Despite your best efforts, when I go out into the world, in 98% white Darke County, Ohio or anywhere else, I'm still me, and me is pasty, and Y-chromosomed, and very very fond of the opposite sex.

Beyond this, mind you, the idea that simply

noting the concept that white straight males operate on the lowest difficulty setting is the equivalent to an attack on, or a call for guilt on the part of, people who literally had no choice to be born white, or male, or straight, suggests of a level of panic that makes me wonder how these particular fellows manage to get out the door every single day of their lives. Fellows: I haven't a single trace of guilt or angst on the subject. I don't know why on Earth you think I think you should. But if you want to work on making life better for everyone, well, that would be a mitzvah, don't you think?

6. And that's pretty much where I am on all of this at the moment.

(PS: I'm about to go out the door to the dentist's, and depending on how things go I will be shot up full of painkillers for several hours and in no condition to deal with the comment thread this entry would inevitably spawn. Also, will anything be said that wasn't already said in three other separate comment threads on the subject, positive and negative both? I'm thinking: Not really, no. So I'll just go ahead and keep the comment threads closed for now. If I get back home with my head undrilled, I may unlock it then. In the meantime, don't worry, there's all the rest of the Internet to air your comments on. I like Twitter, myself.)



THE PROBLEM WITH THE LOWEST DIFFICULTY SETTING

I'm subscribed to John Scalzi's blog, so I got the "Lowest Difficulty Setting" article in my email when it was first published and read it with a progressively sinking feeling. If that gets around, I thought, it's not going to be good. (And indeed it wasn't, to the point that there have been a few posts following it specifically about how severe the backlash has been.) But I left it alone. This is the converted appropriating a metaphor, it's a little squicky, but no harm, I supposed. Gamers can take it.

But I started to write this when I read John's comment that the purpose of the article is to provide well-intentioned advocates of privilege-comprehension with a metaphor that would be "comprehensible" and "palatable" to straight white men who don't like the word "privilege" — and at that point I put my hands on my head and started mumbling *no no no no no please don't do that*.

The reason why you shouldn't, "dudes", isn't primarily the awkward cultural appropriation (speculative fiction reaching to take what belongs to games). You shouldn't because it's not going to work. And in fact it probably does make things worse.

I pored through the comments hoping to find evidence against this. John is smart and well intentioned, I thought, so maybe I'm missing something. I was looking for a single instance of gamer (or non-gamer anti-privilege person) saying "hey I never understood privilege before but now I TOTALLY GET IT!"

Except there isn't one. I couldn't find a single one. And I don't expect to. That's how cultural appropriation¹ works: it's nifty for those appropriating, not for the indigenous culture. (For those upset about the use of cultural appropriation here: no, this is not Tom Cruise the "samurai" saving Ken Watanabe, but the fundamental problem is the same: use of a metaphor without understanding of its cultural implications — absolutely a different scale of problem, however.) This should tell you that the core metaphor as presented doesn't work, or rather only functions to act as a righteous bludgeon for the already-converted (of which there are many gamers², make no mistake). If you go to where gamers are reading the essay, most of them are passing it by ("Clearly, the gaming com-

munity has trouble understanding the (overused) concept of priveledge, so trying to dumb it down for us was necessary. Thanks."³) or arguing with it — as many within the speculative fiction community have enjoyed pointing out. Look at all the poor upset white boys! Look at all these dumb people I had to censor! ⁴It is such a good thing we fine science fiction people with our noble culture may yet save these gamer savages from the perils of their own primitive thinking.

What bugs me most is that this reaction doesn't actually have that much to do with whether or not gamers understand or accept the concept of privilege. It has to do with its presentation, which claims to be helpful but came across as one nerd trying to dominate another nerd (and one of them has a cheering squad: hey, what kind of memories might that evoke in your average non-athletic intelligent eighteen-year-old?). Gamers get that — and they're *programmed* not to respond well to it.

The same way that you don't wade into a science fiction convention and start declaring that George Lucas is the greatest science fictional romance writer ever to have lived, you don't wade into a nest of gamers and start calling them "casual players"⁵. Rather, you can, but most reasonable people would assume that the consequences are upon your own head if you do. Do I agree with this attitude toward 'casual'? Fuck no,⁶ but I'm aware that it exists, and that the use of this particular metaphor was calibrated — I think unintentionally, out of lack of connection with game culture — to be about as maximally offensive to a core gamer as it could possibly be. To be "casual" takes away everything about their primary self-identification, and is not going to remotely elicit a rational response.

The nature of privilege is that it is invisible. Calling this demographic a bunch of care bears⁷ is not going to open their eyes. It's going to piss them off, it's going to hurt them, it's going to make them remember every time a bigger more popular kid got in their face and told them that what they are is stupid, that their struggles have no meaning, that they don't deserve to be understood. In the wake of that pain, they will only retreat further, and make the jobs of those of us trying to reach them harder, because

when you're inside your own pain you aren't able to contemplate systems, you can only see the world through the lens of your own experience. And what is painful for a veteran of the game industry's culture wars⁸ in watching this is that teaching systems is one of the things that video games do best⁹. The context of the game lulls you into safety so that you can think rationally, process differently — it's enormously powerful. So to see something like this come at it in such a backwards fashion, and in fact give the community an excuse to retreat into defensive shield-banging — it's sad and exhausting.

If it was instead a vector for Internet drama and self promotion, rock on, it did that. But there's a price, and those of us on the borderlines are going to be picking up the tab.

My problem is I want a change. I want my people to understand me again. This matters to me because I have been driven out of communities I used to love (like Kotaku; like Penny Arcade) by exactly the attitude that John's article is trying to correct.

So here instead are some metaphors that I think might have a better chance at working — with the caveat that what is really needed is for people to sit down and talk to each other like people, without lecturing or aphorism. But with that said, here are some things gamers do understand — often better than the general public.

Gamers Understand Systems

This is what the article was reaching for, but never got to because the train of thinking stopped at "straight white male is easy mode". "Easy mode" does not a system make. "Easy mode" is an approach, a perspective, and so is manifestly cart before horse, especially if you don't already understand the major lines of force at work in the core loop.

This is the beginning of the bigger picture:

We are all in this system together. Your starting stats were not your choice. In fact, if you don't understand this system, the lack of understanding you have *is a product of the system itself*. It's a product of suburbia and some of the very best intentions of the generations who have come before us, who desired prosperity and safety and a hopeful future. They were not wrong to do so.

But the problem is that their desire and the pockets of safety they created also created distance between the more fortunate and the most fortunate. The fact that you reject the concept of "privilege" *is part of the system*. The fact that because you have low exposure to minority cultures you are able to lump them into a fictitiously complaining "other" is part of

the system.

The thing that is painful about a metaphor like this being used to hurt gamers is that it represents everything gamers should be better at. Understanding systems is a critical life skill (and an under-taught one), but understanding systems in a game is intuitive and fundamental. That's why this metaphor is so appealing. But its design is fundamentally flawed, which is also why gamers reacted to it the way they did. When their cognitive analysis kicked in, they found it unsupported and subjective, because it was as it was drawn.

So here's a design lesson: you don't come to the design with the motivation. You don't force the player to use the mechanics that convey your message. You set up the system and then you let the player draw the conclusion. This is what fundamentally differentiates interactive design from other art forms — including writing. A system that makes obvious its intended author-driven conclusion is a broken system. Revelation occurs when the hand of the puppeteer is invisible. Leading with "lowest difficulty setting" is showing the hand.

And there was something else the system was missing.

Gamers Understand Numbers

The fairness of any game system is assessable by the balance of its numbers. This is where a 'message' comes through, if there is one. And the reason why this metaphor, properly drawn, would have been so effective is that gamers — especially online gamers — have an innate sense of fairness and balance. They understand that an unbalanced system is inherently wrong, and that is what we live in.

But the only thing that will convey that within the context of this system is objective measurement. Fortunately, that measurement is readily available.

These are ten random examples of quantifiable improperly calibrated system balance in American society:

- 50% of high income students complete college, compared to 9% of low income¹⁰; (more here from Nick Mamatas¹¹ on correcting the metaphor for class, and why if you're poor and white you should actually care about this stuff *more*)

- 9.9% of white Americans live in poverty, compared to 12.1% of Asian Americans, 26.6% of Hispanic Americans, and 27.4% of black Americans¹²;

- in 2010 7.5% of Asian Americans were unemployed, compared with 8.7% of white Americans, 12.5% of Hispanic Americans, and 16% of black Americans¹³;

- in 2010, women earned 77% of what men did (though the DC area performs better at 91%, and Vermont and California rate 84%)¹⁴;
- from the same study, Hispanic women earn 61% of what white men earn;
- in the manufacturing economic recovery of 2011, men recovered 230,000 jobs, while women lost 25,000 jobs¹⁵;
- in 2006, 6% of people with a disability had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 17% of the general population; 50% of veterans living in poverty have a disability¹⁶;
- gay or lesbian teens are five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts (20% compared to 4%)¹⁷;
- auto lenders give an average \$300 loan markup to white borrowers, while black borrowers average \$700 markup¹⁸;
- white names receive 50% more callbacks on resumes than black names.¹⁹

This list could keep going. (It probably *should* keep going, but hopefully this is enough to make the picture very, very clear.) Jim Hines has another rundown. [**Ed: see our reprint of Jim Hines's piece elsewhere in this issue.**]

So let's take one of them and extrapolate its design implications: the 77/100 rule for women's compensation. Imagine if, according to random drawing, you had received a game that only included support for 77% of the achievements. Most other people received the fully featured game, but yours caps out at 77% — 100% is impossible. How would that impact every aspect of your thinking whenever you played that game, whenever you talked about it with other players, whenever you read about it in the press? What if the players who had the full game — which is most of them — never wanted to talk about your missing 23%? What if they thought it was no big deal, or worse, didn't even know what you were talking about when you brought it up? You'd keep your head down, you'd play because it's the game you have, but being unable to talk about this core part of your experience with most of the other players would persistently distance you from them, like a piece of glass in your shoe. That is what system imbalance does.

At the end of the day we would never ship a game that randomly removed 23% of the features for half of the population, so it's a little surprising that these numbers are considered okay in our daily life.

There are other ways of quantifying privilege. One way is to just start keeping count and paying attention. The brilliant "Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack"²⁰ by Peggy McIntosh does this.

This is the article that first made me really connect with and understand what privilege was. It was what made me believe it — because it itemized in very specific and concrete terms the things that those of us who live with privilege (absolutely including myself, though I'm only the "straight" of the "straight white male"). It made them familiar, quantifiable, and immediate — which is exactly what a game simulation does. (Especially revelatory to me was #15, *I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group*, not just because this happened to me all the time when I was younger, but because as a community we do this all the time in the game industry — the very first question I received on the #sffwrtcht interview was what it was like to be a woman in games — but that's another discussion.)

The system has become very good at programming into us that the word "racist" is bad, but it has been terrible at getting us to own our place in the system that is racism. It is way easier to apply a binary definition of "racist" to a person and demonize that person — and therefore also react violently when "racist" is applied to us. But "racism" is systemic imbalance in a particular direction.

And, of course, everyone's a little bit racist, because we live in the system and are shaped by it. Our sheer life experience will give us limited exposure to some cultures, and with limited data, our



brains naturally type based on insufficient evidence. This isn't something to be afraid of or ashamed of. It just is.

That doesn't, however, mean nothing can be done about it.

Gamers Understand Agency

This might be the most important part of the message.

You have the power to change this system. You can be the hero within it. Gamers know this. That however dark the circumstances, there is always a win state. Even if this might not be true in real life, you strengthen yourself by assuming that it is, because you're always looking for the win. This is also what makes things like systemic racism so difficult to talk about with game-cultured players, because it seems like such a tremendously unfair and unmovable system. Our instinct is to check out of it.

But the thing is, if the ruleset *does* work this way, you're ripping yourself off by not understanding it. You're within the system and you're not even aware that the system is there. You can choose how you use it and how you operate within it — but you should make that choice from an informed standpoint. And if you think the system *doesn't* work this way, you should defend that position by presenting systemic evidence that refutes the numbers that currently come back from the system (see above).

And that's the bottom line. Understanding the system makes you a better player. For yourself, for your guild, for the game.

Andrea Rubenstein has written a great essay at the *Official Shrub.com* Blog about what you can do about privilege²², and these things really do help. Remember the 23%. What helps is understanding. What helps is acknowledgment. What helps is listening. When you shout from the outside, when you deny the numbers, when you pretend it doesn't exist, you're being a Jack Thompson²³. Don't be Jack Thompson.

Finally, there will come a moment when you have the advantage, and you can open the door for someone else. When you do that, you will be a hero.

Gamers Understand Mainstream Market Pressures

Gamers have also understood for quite a long time now that games like *Ico*²⁴ are rare and games like *Call of Duty*²⁵ are very common. Gamers don't like this and in fact grouse about it constantly.

Often the game publishing industry is held responsible for this, and not unreasonably so. But game publishing doesn't hate *Ico* (or *Journey* or *Fa-*

cade). Game publishing is a system. It neither hates nor loves anything, and this indeed is partly why it is the recipient of so much gamer angst.

The system is not designed to provide you the highest quality games. The system is designed to make money. By definition this means the system is designed to make *the lowest quality game that you will pay for*. It is highly incentivized and structured to give you exactly as much quality as you will demand and not one iota more. This system is not evil. It is not malicious. It is market physics.

But just because it is a system with rules and force trajectories doesn't mean it's unchangeable. The same is true for racism and actively negative establishment systems.

Affirmative action — for instance — is like Kickstarter coming in to pivot the system, manifesting the will of an educated populace to retrain the market to a force other than the one it has been optimized around. It exists to attempt to create *new markets* that will achieve *independent sustainability* and strengthen the larger market — the way that Kickstarter campaigns, ideally, provide venues for new games to be made that are outside the traditional game publishing area of expertise, and hopefully create entirely new genres of games over time. And Kickstarter really doesn't threaten the establishment. By its very nature, it can't. If a game could be made within the traditional publishing space, the fact is it probably would be — it's easier, more profitable, and more stable. But that doesn't mean there isn't room in the space for both, and in fact it's a good thing for the entire market that both exist.

It may be that all of this is water under the bridge at this point. My fear is that the accelerating stratification in these communities — some have argued in all communities²⁶ — means that over time we will be less and less capable of communicating with each other. For those of us nomads who are happiest moving from group to group — cross-pollinators — it's this frustrating experience of witnessing group polarization and feeling powerless to stop it. I have bowed out of more of the gaming community than I've liked, and the "lowest difficulty setting" article made me uncomfortably aware of how I don't yet fit in the "angry progressive speculative fiction" tribe, either. Cognitive dissonance, hello.

And at the same time I have this angry gnome in my head whispering that the divisions are bullshit. We are all one community. So in this much I disagree with recent calls to end "Geek Pride", even when I agree with the content of those arguments. But if a concept of Geek Pride unifies us as a community, if

it makes us part of a tribe, let us use it to hold ourselves to a higher standard. Let us use it to be responsible for the actuation of our geek ideals. And let us not leave anyone behind. If you dug the article, fine, have at — just let's not pretend that the reaction was anything other than a natural response to an attack calibrated to generate hate, and realize that your glee in othering those who didn't understand it may be creating enemies out of allies.

I'm so tired, guys. I'm so tired of the rage. I'm so tired of the distance. I'm not saying it isn't justified or that I don't understand it. I'm just saying it's harder, but better, to reach into the face of rage with love. I'm not saying that anyone does or does not have a right to be angry. I've felt it, I feel it regularly, especially when my community produces things like this²⁷ Tentacle Bento game that make me want to break things²⁸. But at the end of the day we should be able to reach higher than articles that lash out (“dumb”, “stupid”, “homophobic”, “racist”) at people whose primary crime is ignorance, and over whom we have the privilege of education.

I like to think that the only way to fail is to despair.

Thank you to Corvus Elrod (<http://zakelro.com/>) and the gang at the Homeless Moon (<http://homelessmoon.com/>) for discussing this stuff with me and beta reading this article. It was difficult to write and is not perfect, so I sought extra eyes. Any of its wrongness is entirely my own.

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Endnotes

- 1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_appropriation
- 2 <http://borderhouseblog.com/>
- 3 <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/forums/read/528.375383-John-Scalzi-explains-Being-a-straight-white-male-is-easy-mode-for-life#14571608>

- 4 <http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/16/a-childs-treasury-of-deletions/>
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FACTS ARE COOL

First published at <http://www.jimchines.com/2012/05/facts-are-cool/>

John Scalzi recently wrote a blog post about "Straight White Male" being the lowest difficulty setting in the game of life. After reading the post and the 800+ comments, I figured I'd join the herd and write a response. So I've dug up some information for the commenters who seemed to completely lose their minds about Scalzi's argument...

I've done my best to find reliable, objective sources for all of the information below. The following is focused on the United States, though the trends certainly aren't exclusive to the U.S.

"[B]lack males receive [prison] sentences that are approximately 10% longer than comparable white males with those at the top of the sentencing distribution facing even larger disparities" (Rehavi and Starr, 26).

"The ratio of women's and men's median annual earnings was 77.0 for full-time, year-round workers in 2009 ... African American women earned on average only 61.9 cents for every dollar earned by white men, and Hispanic women earned only 52.9 cents for each dollar earned by white men" (Drago and Williams, 1).

Poverty rates in 2009 (DeNavas et al., 15):

- For non-Hispanic Whites: 9.4%
- For Asians: 12.5%
- For Blacks: 25.3%

Hate Crimes in 2010 (U.S. Dept. of Justice):

- Race: 69.8% were motivated by anti-black bias, compared to 18.2% that stemmed from anti-white bias.
- Religion: 65.4% were anti-Jewish and 13.2% were anti-Islamic.

At birth, the average life expectancy of a white baby in the United States is four years longer than the average life expectancy of a black baby (U.S. Census Bureau).

"30.4% of Hispanics, 17% of blacks, and 9.9% of whites do not have health insurance" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

"Nearly 1 in 5 women in the United States

has been raped in her lifetime (18.3%) ... Approximately 1 in 71 men in the United States (1.4%) reported having been raped in his lifetime" (Black et al., 1).

"Nearly 1 in 2 women (44.6%) and 1 in 5 men (22.2%) experienced sexual violence victimization other than rape at some point in their lives" (Black et al., 19).

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth "are nearly one and a half to seven times more likely than non-LGB youth to have reported attempting suicide" (Malley et al., 5).

39.3% of white first-time, full-time college students complete a degree within four years, compared to 20.4% of black students, 26.4% of Hispanic students, 42.8% of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 18.8% for Native American students (National Center for Education Statistics).

The event dropout rate for white high school students in 2007-2008 was 2.8%, compared to 6.7% for black students, 6.0% for Hispanic, 2.4% for Asian/Pacific Islander, and 7.3% for Native American students (National Center for Education Statistics).

U.S. population vs. representation in Congress. "In the total population, whites make up 66.0%, Hispanics are 15.1%, Blacks are 12.8%, APIA (Asian and Pacific Islander American) are 5.1%, and AIAN (American Indians and Alaskan Natives) are 1.2%. In Congress, whites make up 85.8%, Hispanics are 5.8%, Blacks are 7.5%, APIA are 1.7%, and AIAN are 0.2%. Men are 49% of the total population, while women are 51%. In Congress, men are 82% and women are 18%" (Kathail).

There are only four (0.7%) openly gay/lesbian members of Congress. (Washington Blade).

I could go on, but this seems like enough to present a glimpse of the playing field.

If you say, "I don't care about race/gender/orientation. I only look at the individual!" these are some of the things you're looking away from.

If you say, "Why are you attacking straight white men?" then let me reiterate that I'm presenting facts and research. Are you suggesting that reality is attacking straight white men?

If you say, "But I'm a straight white male and my life wasn't easy," I'll tell you to take Remedial Log-

ic. Nobody here or in Scalzi's original post has suggested otherwise.

If you say, "Women have it easier because they can use sex!" I'll probably just banish you for being an idiot.

If you ask, "Well what do you want me to do about it?" then I'll say I want you to be aware. I want you to recognize the problems. I want you to take some responsibility—not for historical injustices you weren't personally a part of—but for trying to make this country better for everyone.

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WHAT IS THIS PRIVILEGE THING ANYWAY?

Let's role-play: You are a heterosexual man in the UK and your wife has just given birth. She wants to return to work. You want to take a few months paternity leave. You can't. You are only legally entitled to two weeks but your wife can have twenty-six weeks. You are at a disadvantage because of nothing you can control. Your wife is privileged because of nothing she can control. You both suffer.

Why though, is your wife "privileged"? What does this word mean? "Privilege" is connected to, but different from, sexism, racism, homophobia, classism and every other ism you can think of. We tend to think of "isms" as specific individual actions. Football fans making monkey noises at black players is obviously racist. A woman being told she should be looking after her husband and not working is obviously sexist. "Privilege" is different to this. Privilege describes the invisible systems which give one group a disadvantage over another group through no clear direct action on the part of the privileged person.

If you are (a heterosexual) male you are less likely to be a victim of domestic violence than a female; you are probably less cautious about who you date and move in with because domestic violence isn't something you think about. If you are male you won't be belittled for having a hairy pubic region, and you won't worry about going to the beach if you have a few stray hairs sticking out of your swimsuit, (and you get more choice than Speedo-style trunks!). If you are female you are less likely to commit suicide than a male; you will not have been encouraged to hide your emotions as a child and if you feel depressed you are more likely to talk about it with people and seek help. If you are female you can walk down the street wearing high heels and long skirts without your gender-identity being questioned.

"Privilege" is a result of gradual developments in how society is structured. You didn't make the system. You might not even realize that in some ways you both benefit and are disadvantaged by the system, but you are. This isn't your fault, it just happened. To explore the ways in which you might benefit or lose out

in the lottery of birth, consider Googling "privilege checklists." There are lists describing and discussing what it means to be privileged and disadvantaged based on gender, sexuality, skin colour, class, and religion ... there are even lolcat checklists.

Recently, John Scalzi posted an article explaining privilege in gaming terms, trying to avoid using the word privilege because it apparently freaks people out. <http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/15/straight-white-male-the-lowest-difficulty-setting-there-is/> Judging by the comments that would seem to be the case. So, why is there often a vitriolic reaction against the word "privilege"?

Let me create a potentially reactionary example based on *The Painted Man* by Peter V. Brett. (Spoilers! Run away, run away.) In the book the lead female protects her virginity. She rejects the idea of having children. She is forceful and independent. She is gang-raped. A few days later she has sex with a virtual stranger. During which the following exchange happens:

"What if I get you with child?" he whispered.

"I hope you do," she whispered back, taking him and pulling him inside her.

What else is there to know? she thought again, and her back arched in pleasure. (2009, Voyager paperback, 493-494).

An academic might claim that this highlights the author's privileged status as a male: the idea that after being gang-raped and experiencing considerable physical and mental damage a woman would (a) suddenly decide that babies are a pretty neat idea, and (b) be physically and mentally able to enjoy sex. Academics might use this to highlight Brett's privilege as a male not because men don't get raped, but because men don't generally think of the consequences of rape. Men aren't taught that rape is something they need to fear, they aren't taught the short and long-term physical and psychological impact of rape. In this regard, the post-rape sex scene demonstrates why the author is privileged in his maleness: and how the systems in place led to him writing something which, for many readers, lessened the book.

PRIVILEGE

Privilege – sure I am better off than some, of course I am, I get that, but am I not allowed to think it’s a shite term that does fuck all to fight discrimination where I live.

Inequality is rampant, discrimination is abhorrent. I am unsure what I can do to stop that, but I do my own thing on many issues, fighting my little hobby horse battles, challenging people when they perpetrate a wrong, going on strike when there is discrimination and victimisation, standing proud with men and women against many issues from invasion by Britain and America to the right to choose abortion in Ireland. At times, the issue was clear, even in school when I vocalised the unpopular anti-Spuc stance and I sought allies and support where I could.

Yet I have been thinking about John Scalzi’s and others’ pieces, and I have come to a personal conclusion that superimposing a term that gets people’s backs up, does not win any battles or effect any change at all, and eschews common ground and a fighting spirit amongst many potential supporters.

John Scalzi’s piece is a good metaphor for the (totally wrong) disparity in treatment that people receive in society. Instead of us all being treated equally, some get treated better, others worse. It is a good way to explain this discriminatory reality that affects people differently, although in the UK, one might adjust it a bit. Well, probably a lot actually.

That is indeed a problem with political issues in the fringes of science fiction fandom. American terms get quickly subsumed into use by British online fans, without any thought to how it really is, without awareness or empathy for the many people in Britain who are discriminated against.

Of course Britain and America share many historic elements, whether it be their initial passion for slavery, imperialism, colonial acquisitions or conquests, the fight against the Nazis, the use of capitalism to make the rich richer and as a weapon against the poor. Today Britain and America both control pieces of land beyond their borders, but somehow theirs, while Americans of all backgrounds who run with this topic and are so sure that the situation/their

experience in America is so reflective of the whole world, and the British who agree, blindly without reflecting on realities, are incapable of seeing the irony in that.

Privilege gained currency in academic critical race theory in the 1980s, although it had been around for a couple of decades at that point. The term white privilege was a way of conceptualizing racial inequalities between white people and people with other skin colours.

And you know, I can understand that, America had a kind of apartheid, there was segregation, and I am certain that it was crystal clear that being Black would be or could be a disadvantage, especially in certain states.

Yet, skin colour is not always required for discrimination, and in London in the 1960s, signage clearly stated “No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish” on boarding houses. This discrimination continues, and it wasn’t black people who were evicted last summer from Dale Farm, but White Irish Travellers. A variety of Eastern White Europeans can be as much of a focus of ire and racial hatred as any other ethnic minority in the UK, you can be a white Muslim and still see, feel and hear hatred in the streets as right wing groups protest.

Saying that white men, as this is the current adjustment made to the term, are privileged is not incorrect. In actual fact as a generalisation it is true; white men are better off in many ways. In actual fact, I could chat with many men, although not all, I suspect, and in quiet conversation explain how they are indeed lucky, better off and they would see it.

Yet, the term Privilege, or how it is used, does not engender sympathy or understanding or empathy.

It’s a problem with terms imported from academia: it’s a language, a jargon, which may be good for discussions within that environment, but don’t always travel well outside that environment. And it also ‘privileges’ those who are more comfortable and familiar with that environment—and if we are going to keep using that word, being educated is certainly a ‘privilege’ as well.

You ‘have’ something and because of that

there is discrimination.

With a finger pointed, accusatory across the internet screen.

Not really winning hearts and minds.

Then the perpetrators of discrimination, the people at all levels, who treat people differently, go unchallenged. I want equality for all, I want people to be treated the same and accusing some white harmless dude and making him feel guilty because of 'luck' is not the way. I want a system where instead of decent people being angry with one another, we find a new fairness and equality by questioning decisions and challenging perpetrators of discrimination.

Understanding there is a problem may be a way to achieving, but I fear it's possibly a diversion from the real task at hand.

I work in London. I am a train driver; here I have learned we have Black, Asian and Ethnic minorities. This is the term we use, and people are proud to be Black, to be Asian, to be of their ethnicity and to identify as such, as I am of being Irish.

But it isn't a pissing competition to see who is worst off. As soon as someone is accused of being 'better' off there is an inherent and perhaps human recoil to defend and rebut the accusation. Often I feel it is because of the way such accusations are made, matter of fact with no understanding for the individuals' situation or position, circumstances, happinesses or horrors that are ongoing; it's just easy.

Personally, I disagree that the term privilege is useful or a sensible way to describe the disparity in society that exists and the discriminations which are perpetrated against some and not others. In actual fact I think the term polarises and does damage to the understanding that equality is the goal. While I value education, and feel that those reading a science fiction writer's blog, who do not understand the disparity or discrimination, or maybe have had a row over the term privilege, may come around to understanding that there is an issue, then that's good, but I personally do not feel that it actually challenges the discriminators, which is what I feel people need to do and worse, it doesn't increase or strengthen the ranks of those who want to fight against discrimination.

Although privilege may sound neutral to those who are familiar and comfortable with the term, it's still a word that has negative connotations, and no amount of people insisting that they 'don't mean it that way' is going to change the fundamental fact that privilege is a word we use in other contexts to sneer at someone, to say that they have never suffered, never worked for anything, always had an easy ride. In

other contexts, we don't use the word privileged to describe people we like or respect.

I look at things like the stop and search figures for London and that is what we need to challenge. I work in central London and disparity is a reality; maybe I do want this part of society to catch up and I feel the ongoing online discussion, much derailed by poor terminology is a distraction.

The term is accusatory and used aggressively, and this does not induce positive conversation let alone thought. I feel it creates a defensive and antagonistic argument, and eschews thoughtfulness. The discussions become finger pointing pissing contests. No point in that. Just demonstrates the flawed use of a word.

Chris was worried when I said I was going to discuss privilege, and I could not understand why. Privilege is not a tough issue AT ALL. The problem is the adoption by some of a term which doesn't engender any empathy, and is accusatory in nature, perhaps as it is an abstraction, or just because it is misappropriated from academics studying critical race theory, when there it was 'white privilege' and specifically about America.

It is undeniable, here in London, that there is a disparity in how people are treated, based on many things, but skin colour is one for sure, and discrimination occurs. Within the Indian community there is caste and profession, within many communities there are qualifiers for better placement within society and the structure. A fine Westminster schools voice, will get you very far in this city, or Winchester, or Eaton. Yet that is also wealth, and wealth is another element that can change things.

We need to find narratives and terminology that brings about clear and level thinking, and gets people who do not suffer from discrimination to think about why that is. It needs to be a conversation with empathy, that motivates and encourages thinking about one's good fortune and others who have not had it, and how that is indeed wrong.

Privilege as a term fails that, terribly. Of course my thoughts may fall on deaf ears, as I see this conversation is, in many ways, much like arguing with fundamentalist religious types, which I have done. There is the same ideological rigidity and self-righteousness despite it all.

White people. I am not white, I am Irish. Yet some American will easily and happily decide what I am. What I am is Irish, proud to be Irish, happy to be Irish and welcoming to any person of any race, creed, nationality or whatever. Our world of SF was meant to be about greeting the alien, not fighting against

them, understanding and empathising with humanity. Discrimination is wrong, all of it, and we should treat people truly equally, with respect, understanding and care.

Fighting against discrimination should be a common goal, and therefore terminology should be used that links, binds us against discrimination and inspires, not alienates.





Women on Comics - a series of comments from correspondents.

Fionnuala Murphy;

I wasn't really a comic book girl. I mean I read Beano, Bunty, Dandy, Whizzer etc but not the superhero books. I am a child of the eighties though, my introduction to superheros was through the medium of Television. And Wonder Woman.

I loved that show so much. I loved the backstory (the island in Bermuda run by women – how cool?). The fact that Diana chose to leave what she knew to explore the world (and save it) really appealed to me.

And I am going to be honest.. the Costumes (the way she changed costume), the invisible plane (how does a race of amazons make an invisible plane anyway?), the rope of truth, the bullet stopping bangles.. all filtered into my brain.

Wonder Woman/Diana was awesome.

Also.. I loved She-Ra.. She had a horse that turned into a Pegasus.. and she was hotter than her brother Adam. What's not to like?



Gail Carriger;

After a childhood of She-Ra, I was always most attracted to kick ass female comic book characters. That may be one of the reasons I'm a Marvel girl. DC had female characters, but I found myself really hunting for them and they were often villains. (Although, I had a brief passion for Amethyst, Princess of Gemworld.) By contrast any given Marvel superhero team had at least one strong woman. The 1980's cartoon Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends featured Firestar. I LOVED her. So I went on a quest to find her in the comic book world. As a result, I may be the last remaining fan of the New Warriors, Firestar's young adult superhero team.

Firestar was a tough red head who wore a costume that pretty much covered her from head to toe. She was never overtly sexualized and was both smart, and powerful, and a real human female with emotions and concerns. She often lead the New Warriors. And she could fly. I didn't just like Firestar, I wanted to BE her.

She was a strong powerful younger woman. I never really liked Storm or Jean Grey. I think they felt too old to my High School self. I was more likely to identify with the members of the team who felt my age, like Firestar, Shadowcat, or Rogue.

I think I identified with the premise of Firestar's whole team, which was all high school aged. Their concerns seemed more realistic to me. Their problems less about saving the world and more about learning the limits of their own powers, establishing relationships, and trying to work as a team. In this context Firestar was the stable one, the lynchpin for the group.

Catriona Moriarty

Favorite Female Superhero

So, I was just sitting here, minding my own business, when I remembered I was asked to do an article on my favorite female comic book superhero. Having just come back from an anime convention where I was a costuming guest, I set aside my Newton Ewell autographed copy of *Exalted* for tonight's game and ran to my closet. Let's see... I have Lady Robin... Lady Death... The Witchblade (extremely versatile cosplay!)... Princess Leia (There are comics!) Hmm. Good, but not precisely what James was after.

Shift to the other closet. Kikyo... Princess Mononoke... Rangiku Matsumoto... Orihime Yuri...

Then it hit me. These attractive bits of women power weren't exactly what I wanted to write about. Oh, they're interesting. They fit the super hero stereotype. They have to have superpowers just to stay in those outfits and there are brains involved too. Sometimes.

In the end, I discovered two names at the top of my female comic book superheroes list and I think I probably already have their costumes in my sock drawer: Gail Simone and Rumiko Takahashi.

Gail Simone broke the ground for female writers in comics books. If not for her work in *Women in Refrigerators*, she would not have drawn the eye of the fans and industry folks to the plight of women in comics. She pointed out that women seemed to be designed by the industry to be the victims, and thus the impetus for male superheroes to be heroic. This attention meant a reconfiguring of the mindsets of the comic book big dogs. Once this happened, she was hired to write for many comics, eventually to include *Deadpool*, *Birds of Prey*, and *Wonder Woman*.

As a woman who is NOT a victim, nor a Mary Sue, I am grateful for her ability to swing a female-filled refrigerator at something like the Marvel and DC and live to get the awards for the mantelpiece. I don't know of many ladies who could do that to a glass ceiling that big.

My other comic superhero is one with whom I am more familiar: Rumiko Takahashi. Writer and artist for the *Inuyasha* series, she took a 3-panel comic from the *Weekly Shonen Sunday* into a full on worldwide icon. *Inuyasha* is one of

the best known, best voiced, best DUBBED animes on the planet and people dress up like her creations at every convention. She went on to do *Ranma 1/2* and several others which have netted her award after award and placed her as one of Japan's most affluent individuals. Takahashi's women are strong and useful, her men arrogant and beautiful and when you get involved with their stories, you play the episodes or read the mangas over and over and over again.

I know people with backup copies of *Inuyasha* so they don't have to go without it when the current copy wears out. I know people who have worked on their *Sesshomaru* costumes every week to make sure they have the patterns right when they dye the cloth. I know people who cast their own teeth for the characters.

I guess that means I know a lot of weird people.

But that means these people have taken comics to a level seen by *Titanic* and *Star Wars*. Takahashi is to anime what J.K. Rowling is to novels. And Simone is to women what a lever is to machines: The most basic foundation with the ability to move the moon.



Carol Connolly

Back in January of this year, Netflix finally arrived in the UK and Ireland. A lot of folk were narked because the launch selection was mostly just terrible Nineties action movies, but I was delighted because, well... it was mostly terrible Nineties action movies! When I ran out of dodgy Bruce Willis vehicles, I turned my attention to Netflix's animated offerings, curious to see if the 90s X-Men, Spider-Man and Sonic the Hedgehog cartoons really were as awesome as I remembered (the answer is Yes, Yes, and Yikes That "Cool" Slang Has Really Dated). And then I saw it - Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends. To say I was obsessed with this show as a child is to really, really understate things. When I was four, my mother read Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends comics to me as I lay curled up under my Spider-Man duvet, and when I had fallen asleep she would tip-toe out - but not before closing my Spider-Man curtains. I dressed up as Spider-Man for Hallowe'en. I dressed up as Spider-Man even when it wasn't Hallowe'en. If Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends did not live up to my memories of it, my heart would literally wither in my chest and I would fall down dead

from despair (smug people are thinking "Pfff... she used literally when she meant figuratively"). To them I say "YOU GREATLY UNDERESTIMATE MY EMOTIONS ABOUT THIS SHOW"). So it was with real trepidation that I clicked "Play SI:E1". But my fears were groundless - not only was the show as kick-ass as I remembered, but I rediscovered Firestorm.

The core concept of Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends is elegant in its simplicity - after teaming up with two other superheroes (Iceman and Firestar) to defeat a villain, Spider-Man figures out their secret identities (Bobby Drake and Angelica Jones, respectively) and realises that they all attend the same college. Iceman, as the name implies, can freeze anything by touching it and travels at high speeds via giant slides made from ice. Firestar can generate fire and can fly. The three heroes decide to team up permanently, and sublet rooms from Peter's Aunt May while attending college. OK, so the concept is neither simple nor elegant, but in every single episode they had to hide their crime-fighting gear from Aunt May and it was absolutely hilarious. No,



Aunt May, don't vacuum the boys' room now, Peter's cleaning his Spider-Man costume! Genius. The characters of Spider-Man, Aunt May and Iceman were all taken from Marvel's comic book line-up, but Firestar was created specifically for the cartoon (apparently because of difficulties securing the rights to Marvel's other firey superhero, The Human Torch). The show totaled 24 episodes, and first ran on NBC between 1981 and 1983. I would have watched the programme from 1983 onwards, when the UK station BBC1 started showing it.

Firestar was eventually incorporated into the Marvel comic book continuity as a member of Emma Frost's Hellions. Since then she has been a solid second stringer in the Marvel universe, and was even an Avenger for a while. Unfortunately, what most current comic fans will associate Firestar with was a recent EpicGenderFail by Marvel. She was one of the stars of the short-lived Marvel Divas, a comic book which was in all seriousness pitched as "Sex and the City in the Marvel Universe" and was exactly as bad as it sounds. Firestar's plot arc in the series was that

she had developed cancer, because... uh... chicks love reading about cancer? Or something? Seriously, the whole thing was a mess, and I'm getting depressed just thinking about it. On a more positive note, while researching this article I have discovered that Christy Marx, who wrote the Firestar origin episode "A Firestar Us Born", has just been tapped to write the upcoming DC comic "Sword of Sorcery: Amethyst, The Princess of Gemworld". I hear my pull-list calling...

Amethyst: Princess of Gemworld's original series has a fantastical version of the storyline that would be used later for The Princess Diaries

Rewatching Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends, I was delighted that the series was much as I remembered it - Peter was still a witty science geek, Bobby was nice but dim, Angelica was strong and kind, Aunt May was still hilariously clueless about the shenanigans going on right under her nose, and the comic-relief pet dog was still awful. But as I watched, my attention kept turning to Firestar. It wasn't that her character had changed in any way from how I remembered it - she is still the smart, articulate, powerful, kind character I remembered watching as a child. But now I realise that she is something very rare - a female character portrayed as equal to her male counterparts. She frequently comes up with clever villain-defeating plans, in the obligatory at-least-once-per-episode kidnapping scenario she's often the one who rescues Spidey and Iceman, and she attends college where, miracle of miracles, her courseload seems to be mainly science-based. She's not a random cookie-cutter female trope, she's a character.

While Spidey's influence on my younger self was obvious (or at least his influence over my bedroom decor was obvious), I am starting to wonder if Firestar had a stronger, more subtle influence over me than I ever realised. If asked to describe Firestar, four-year-old me would have talked about her fire-generating abilities, or her flight power, or her cool mask. It never would have occurred to me to describe her as "being just as good as the boys", because four-year-old me didn't realise that was anything out of the ordinary. It would be quite a while before I started noticing trends in the cartoons I watched which

older-me-with-internet-access now refers to as The Smurfette Principle (only one female character on a show) and the Women in Refrigerators trope (female characters being bumped off to make the male characters' plots more angst-y).

Before I rewatched this show, I was worried that my memories of it wouldn't match the reality. Now I'm depressed because, far from being laughable, a 30-year-old show is in some ways more progressive and radical than most of the cartoons children are watching today.



PREACHER



Eloise Hopkins on Preacher by Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon

Humans fall just the same as angels.

I have recently rediscovered my love for graphic stories and decided to fuel my desire with *Preacher* – a comic that has long been recommended to me, but that I have just not had the time or opportunity to read until now. From the very first line I was hooked and read through all 66 issues in four days. OCD or addiction? Perhaps, but at least my vice is healthier than that of most of the characters.

This is not a review so all I am going to say to recommend the series is that I now consider it an essential read for anyone who loves mature stories, wants an exploration of the human condition, or has any interest whatsoever in reading graphic stories. This is a superior example and I cannot believe I did not make time for it earlier.

I struggle to pinpoint exactly what element of the comics I found so compelling, and conclude that it is a combination of excellent writing, strong imagery, and fantastically rendered characters that all worked perfectly together to keep me turning pages. There is something so relevant, so simplistically basic, about the events in *Preacher* that even with the fantasy elements of the story, cause and effect are depicted to such a realistic degree that I find myself relating to and empathising with almost every character and every situation.

Perhaps it the characters themselves, all wonderfully flawed as they are, that drew me so completely into a world in which I could easily find common ground with fallen angels, a destructive vampire, a possessed preacher and a selfish god. The lead character, Preacher of course, was the star of the show, and what a star; a man as determined and caring as he is ruthless and powerful, to the point where I could not help but root for him.

The supporting cast is no less colourful or intricate, and what really solidified the brilliance of *Preacher* for me is that over the course of the series

the back stories of all principal and recurring characters are outlined, so we get a full picture of how they were shaped by their pasts and of the context in which they dwell.

One that I could relate to perhaps more than the rest was Tulip, Preacher's once lover, who many years later is reunited with our hero and becomes caught up in his quest to rid himself of the spirit that possesses him. Theirs is not an easy story and it is this level of ongoing tension and conflict that make this such a strong series.

Tulip's past is revealed to us and we realise that her strength, and her reaction to the way Preacher treats her, are a direct result of her upbringing. She is someone that never quite fitted in, was never really given opportunity or encouraged to fulfill her potential, and who was touched by tragedy at a young age. Tulip built up barriers around herself, and when she finally found someone she did fit with it, it was for life; when she fell in love with Preacher, she fell hard.

The bad news for Tulip is that Preacher's actions, driven by his desire to keep her safe, do not always align with her view of what he should do, and often during the narrative they are separated as a result. Tulip does not handle being without her soul mate well. It is as though Preacher is her one link with the world; that he grants her acceptance and understanding, and when that is taken away, her grip on herself and events around her becomes skewed.

The biggest tragedy perhaps is that she is forced to seek solace in someone who is really not good for her and, like the angels that caused all the trouble in the first place, Tulip falls just the same. One of the most powerful moments in *Preacher* was Tulip's turning point, and as she regained her strength and perspective, the true beauty of her character was revealed. I could see a lot of myself in Tulip. Whether that is a good thing or not, I am not sure, but I suspect that every reader will find a deep connection to at least one character here just as I did.



Phoenix Comic Con by Alissa McKersie

I was fortunate enough to have attended the best Phoenix Comicon in four years this Memorial Day weekend. During my weekend, I had the privilege of interviewing six amazing female comic writers/artists participating in the convention. Each creator has their own style, not only in their art, be it writing, coloring, ink, drawing, etc., but even in who they are. However, there are some similarities in the answers to the questions I asked them, you will find. I asked each creator what they were currently working on, who their favorite female creator was and why, and who their favorite female character was and why.

Madame M:

Three years ago, Madame M released a superhero vampire comic called “Super Vamp.” Last year, she came out with her 5-story comic book, “Glamour Ghouls.” Her booth has a collection of her characters on bookmarks, necklaces, and of course, Super Vamp (in the shape of a coffin!). Her favorite female creator is Jill Thompson because Jill’s art is “creepy cutsie” and she has “amazing watercolors.” Madame M’s favorite female characters are Vampirella and Elvira (both in person and in comics). Vampirella, because of course she liked the fact that she was a female superhero, but the fact that she was a vampire was just right up Madame M’s alley. She especially appreciated the issues that gave some backstory on Vampirella. Since the character is immortal, it was more interesting to see her in another time period. Madame M grew up watching Elvira and loved how she was sexy and mysterious but didn’t take herself seriously and had a quirky sense of humor. You can find Madame

M’s work at www.madamempresents.com and <http://www.supervampcomic.com/>

Kathryn Immonen:

Kathryn is a comic writer and has just finished working on issue 7 of Avenging Spider-man, is in the middle of her next creator-owned project (with Stuart Immonen), Russian Olive to Red King, and that’s all that she can talk about right now. Her favorite female creator is Ann Nocenti. Nocenti’s issues of Daredevil were the first superhero comics Kathryn ever read and they’ve stayed with her. Kathryn’s favorite female character is Hellcat. Partly because she had the privilege of being able to bring Hellcat back from relative obscurity but she also feels that Hellcat has had an interesting publishing history that makes the character unique for Marvel. Kathryn mainly loves that Hellcat is an adorable, incautious nutcase. You can find updates on Kathryn’s work at www.immonen.ca (maison immonen).

Jean Arrow:

Jean is a writer and artist currently working on the third issue of her comic “The Extraordinary Tales of Lazer Woman and Strong Girl.” She has some secret comic projects up her sleeve that are serious and scientific. She can say that she is working with Thomas Hall from “Robot 13” and “King.” Her favorite female creator is Wendy Pini, the illustrator from ElfQuest in the ‘70s and ‘80s, possibly because it’s the first comic that Jean ever read. She also likes Jill Thompson because she is “unbelievable,” as Jean says. “Jill has amazing watercolors!” Jean also feels



that the way Jill writes and the way she speaks to her is very cool. She finds Jill extremely humble. Jean's favorite female character is Lady Death, as she was Jean's first female character. Jean says Lady Death is her favorite because she is strong and feminine. She can enjoy being a woman and being powerful. Jean was 13 and she found that Lady Death was a great example to grow up on. You can find Jean on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Jean-Arrow-Fan-Page/155609371119910>.

Jolene Houser:

Jolene may be familiar to you from Womanthology. She is currently working on a book for Arcana and a film called Agent 88. Jolene's favorite female creator is Becky Cloonan, because she has a different style. Jolene feels that Becky's style is a mix of anime and American art and that she really stands out. Jolene's favorite female character is Joseph Linsler's Dawn, because she's pretty, she's curvy, and she's strong. You can find Jolene at [HYPERLINK "http://jolene-h.deviantart.com/"](http://jolene-h.deviantart.com/)

Bianca Thompson:

Bianca is an artist currently working on sketch

cards first and foremost for Marvel, then for DC, Unstoppable, Night of the Living Dead, and The Avengers 50th. Bianca's favorite female creator is Julie Bell because she has many strong female heroines in her books. Her favorite female character is Phoenix because she is the reason Bianca started drawing in the first place. She saw a card of Phoenix on her best friend's brother's floor and thought, "Oh, man, she is so cool," and that's when she started to draw. You can find Bianca's work at www.thephoenixxx.com/biancaart

Nei Ruffino

Nei is a Digital Colorist currently working on Green Lantern: New Guardians for DC and Soulfire for Aspen. Her favorite female creator is Jen Broomall, because she is promising new talent and she is "an amazing person," says Nei. Her favorite female character is Catwoman. Nei says that Catwoman is pretty awesome, because she has got some attitude and she takes care of herself. You can find Nei at www.neiruffino.com

I am grateful to the artists who took the time to sit and talk with me, thank you. It was a wonderful convention for me!

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CHICKS DIG COMICS



Chicks Dig Comics - Reviewed by James Bacon

It's nice to have a books dedicated to comics. I am one of those comic readers who cherishes Frank Plowright's *Slings and Arrows Guide to Comics*, Paul Gravett's *All you need to know about Graphic novels* and *Alan Moore: Storyteller* by Gary Millidge Spencer, so it was a real pleasure when I heard that the Hugo winning editor Lynne M. Thomas (*Chicks Dig Timelords*) teamed up with Sigrid Ellis to do this collection.

With over thirty pieces, by a variety of contributors, it is a wide range of comic book readers, but it is also nice to read what people really think. That the contributors are mostly women, is an added bonus as it reinforces my belief that women do enjoy reading comics of all sorts, and that women creators exist and want to be part of the business.

With so much to choose from, it's hard to pin point why I devoured this book so quickly, pencilling in notes on the margins as I went. I was interested in every single word, even words that annoyed or confounded me, and I secretly wished, I could chat with all these writers, or the ones who wrote essays, in person, in a bar next to a comic shop. Of course, I cannot speak about all the articles, as there are just too many, but I choose some of my favourites.

The way pieces were pitched, it was stunning, so when posed with 'Who do you think Cyclops should end up with? Jean Grey or Emma Frost' Sean-an McGuire goes into explaining with real depth and understanding. The battle that is Jean and Emma both in the hearts and minds of the readers, and within the pages of the comic is lovingly discussed, with passion, and I just was transfixed.

Erica McGillivray who is involved with Geek-GirlCon (<http://www.geekgirlcon.com/>), somehow

captures the essence of the camaraderie that is cosplay, the feelings of being part of something, the appreciation people give. I love cosplayers and really feel people make a fantastic effort for comic conventions, and Erica somehow justifies my sentiments through her own experience.

Amanda Conner is stylishly interviewed and it had considerable insight, which is hard sometimes, but when I read her say that comic art should 'make the reader understand the story as if it had no words' I knew that this was so true. As a teenager, we used to judge the greatest comics by this method, is the story there, with no words, and that is the measure of a great artist. I also really loved her take on Power Girl, a character that I have generally been put off by, mostly by her slightly accentuated physique, but since reading this interview, I have given it a go and it has proven worth it, proving that one should never judge a comic by its cover.

In a similar behind the scenes way, Dark Horse editor Rachel Ediden spoke marvellously about what her job entails, and I really enjoyed it. Alisa Bendis, Greg Rucka and Louise Simonson all continue the rich vein of unique and considered opinions. I especially enjoyed the interview with Terry Moore.

One of the enjoyable elements of the book is how it made me think, and question. Gail Simone for instance wrote strongly of the effect of Batgirl/Barbara Gordon being paralysed. How she felt she was 'chumped into buying a product made by people who actively loathed me and my gender' and then she speaks highly of the 'raft of British writers' who seemingly heralded in a change.

Of course, Alan Moore wrote the story that

saw Gordon paralysed, and although he may have also spearheaded the British invasion, he himself thought, '...I've never really liked my story in The Killing Joke. I think it put far too much melodramatic weight upon a character that was never designed to carry it. It was too nasty, it was too physically violent. There were some good things about it, but in terms of my writing, it's not one of me favorite pieces.' And I can see that it was a dark story, that lead to a popularity of griminess that has not always had quality, but when one reads the script for the first 12 pages, one can only wonder where Moore was at, as he is one of the greatest writers of female characters in the industry, which is rather ironic in this instance.

And Ms. Simone's opinion is slightly at odds

with Tammy Garrison's experience, where she felt that Barbara Gordon is awesome, but I wondered was that awesomeness somehow attributable to the hated incident that put her in a wheelchair.

Its good reading when it makes me think this much.

One thing I wondered about is that I do not have a problem with boyfriends recommending comics to girlfriends. I used to make tapes as a teenager and more recently CD's, and it was just about sharing an interest. I have recommended Preacher to many women who I have been with or known, as a great comic story, finite in its sixty six issues, and in Tulip a brilliant character, which to my surprise, some have connected with and many girlfriends have shared their interests with me. So I was a bit perturbed by what is wrong with that, but then perhaps there is a cliché or patronisation that I am missing, as I apply much judicial thought to all comics I recommend to whoever the reader.

But on recommendations, I definitely would recommend this book to both well-informed comic readers and perhaps readers new to the

media.

Kurt Amacker interview with Alan Moore. - <http://fourcolorheroes.home.insightbb.com/killing-jokescript.html>

www.mania.com

<http://madnorwegian.com/424/books/chicks-dig-comics-a-celebration-of-comic-books-by-the-women-who-love-them/>





How I wanted to write Batgirl by Tony Keen

Back in my youth (in my case, my early twenties), like many comics fans, I had a fancy to write superhero comics for a living. Fortunately, I never got to do so – most of my plot ideas were rehashed from my favourite stories by other people. But let me tell you who was top of the list of characters I wanted to write. Not the obvious ones, like Superman or Batman. I *did* want to write the Avengers, and Captain America. But top of the characters I wanted to write was Batgirl.

Technically the second Batgirl (though the first was a hyphenated Bat-Girl) was created for the *Batman* television series in the 1960s, and simultaneously appeared in the comics (in a different, and rather less gaudy, costume). She was Barbara Gordon, daughter of Batman's ally Commissioner Gordon.

Why did I want to write her? Because she was cool. She was more than just a female knock-off of Batman. Sure, she was a female knock-off of Batman, but she was never as broody or miserable as Batman. When written properly, she was of a lighter disposition than Bats, but she still took her superheroics seriously, and wasn't frivolous. After all, this was an independent career woman, with a Ph.D., who was head of a major public body – the Gotham Public Library – and subsequently a United States Congresswoman.

Of course, sometimes she was badly written, especially in the early days, when writers could get away with more sexist nonsense than they can now. So sometimes she employed Bat-compacts, carried a Bat-purse, or stayed out of a fight because she had a run in her tights.

But sometimes she was written brilliantly. My favourite Batgirl moment is one of the first I read, in *Detective Comics* 526, the five hundredth appearance of Batman in *Detective*, back in 1983. The writ-

er was Gerry Conway, who generally is a workaday comics writer, but capable of occasional moments of brilliance (aged twenty, he wrote the classic death of Gwen Stacy story in *Amazing Spider-Man*). Here, the overall story is Conway being pretty mundane. But that Batgirl moment...

Dick Grayson and Alfred are at Wayne Manor, when they see the famous silhouette of Batman at the window. But they know that Batman can't be there, so who is this? It turns out to be Batgirl. "Scared you?" she says. "I must be improving." She goes on to explain that, *of course* she knows Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson are Batman and Robin, she isn't stupid after all, but she let them believe she didn't know their secret identities because it seemed very important to their male egos that she not know.

One of the other things I liked about Batgirl was her costume. Okay, she was saddled with impractical high-heeled boots, but apart from those, it deviated from the standard superheroine costumes. Most superheroine costumes look like swimsuits or lingerie, or both, and have lots of bare flesh exposed. This applies even to a character who supposedly represents strong womanhood, like Wonder Woman. Many costumes, such as the Black Canary's, seemed more appropriate for the boudoir (admittedly, a kinky boudoir) than for the mean streets. Batgirl's Earth-Two equivalent, The Huntress, was saddled with a one-piece tank suit, split down to her navel, and thigh length boots. Not as bad as the costumes Dave Cockrum and Mike Grell inflicted on the female members of the Legion of Superheroes, which were often barely there at all, but still.

Even when superheroines don't expose flesh, they are usually light coloured, such as the yellow of Batgirl's predecessor, Batwoman. Combine that with the usual skintight superheroine costume, and you

end up with costumes such as that of Black Orchid, which draw attention to the body. Okay, many male superheroes have costumes that similarly draw attention to the body (after all, the Sub-Mariner has spent almost his entire career wearing nothing but a particularly tight pair of Speedos, which explains a lot). But there were plenty who don't, and besides, the men are generally portrayed in other ways as more than simply sex objects.

Batgirl's costume was different. Yes, it was skintight, but it was coloured in dark hues, predominantly blue-black. She wore a cape that could envelop her. The only exposed flesh was, unusually, her lower face. Few superheroines wear a full cowl, most going with a domino mask (e.g. the Huntress) or no mask at all (e.g. Wonder Woman), a look Jim Lee gave to Batgirl in *All Star Batman and Robin the Boy Wonder*. The only other superheroine of the 1960s that I can think of whose costume gave this little emphasis to her body is Sue Storm, the Invisible Girl.

Then, in 1988, along came *The Killing Joke*, by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland. I'm not a great fan of *The Killing Joke*. I think it's a distinctly minor Moore work, and in terms of definitive portrayals of the Joker, falls short of the Steve Englehart/Marshall Rogers 1978 version. I know I'm in a minority here, though at least I'm in good company, as neither Moore nor Bolland like it much either.

Editor Chris Garcia will note that *The Killing Joke* is his single favorite Batman comic ever.

But my views of *The Killing Joke* are no doubt influenced by what happens to Batgirl in the course of this story. Barbara Gordon is shot and paralysed by the Joker. This has attracted a lot of feminist criticism, and rightly so – it is a classic example of a phenomenon that is found all too often in comics and other dramas, doing something nasty to female characters in order to motivate their male associates. At the time it seemed a bit like pulling the wings off flies (somewhere I said so at the time). Moore himself now rather regrets doing this.

Step forward Kim Yale. Yale was incensed by the treatment of Batgirl in *The Killing Joke*. Together with her husband John Ostrander, she came up with a way of restoring dignity to the character without simply negating *The Killing Joke*, which would not, at that point, have gained editorial approval. Barbara became Oracle, a woman living with her disability, and acting as a source and processor of information, who

later became the key organiser of the 'Birds of Prey' team. This was the most positive depiction of disability in comics since Professor X.

Meanwhile, others have taken up the Batgirl identity, Cassandra Cain and Stephanie Brown. In the interim period, Barbara appeared in other media – as a pre-teen in *Batman: The Animated Series*, in *Batman & Robin*, made into Alfred's niece, and in the tv series *Birds of Prey* as Oracle. Then, last year, as part of DC's relaunch, she was cured of her disability, and took back the Batgirl identity.

I'm not at all sure about this. I never wanted Barbara to be crippled in the first place, but restoring her seems disrespectful to the work of Yale and Ostrander and those that followed them. So I shall ignore the issue, and turn to 500 pages of early Batgirl stories, *Showcase Presents Batgirl*.





Batgirl (by Bryan Q Miller, Dustin Nguyen, Pere Perez) an article by Mike Abbott

I have a fondness for good, straightforward superhero comics. It's harder to find comics like that than you might think. I like "adventure", not "horror", or "noir" or "conspiracy fic". I don't really want "edgy" (though if it comes along, I'm, you know, okay with it), and these days a lot of the best comic writers are trying to do that – and a lot of the rest are following them. (Alan Moore jokes that there is an entire genre of graphic novels based on the fact that he was in a bad mood in the 1980s, and I don't think he's completely wrong about that.)

I'm also not a big fan of postmodern comics, irony, heavy-handed parody or stories where everyone dies. I'm really not a fan of heavy violence, or female characters defined by their sexuality and sex-appeal.

What I like is a story where a likeable, reasonably upbeat protagonist (or protagonists) has adventures, and deals with successes and failures with resilience and humour. Jokes are good; and although I'm all in favour of character development and personal growth, I can get by without them. But good characterisation is important: I like to think I know the characters well enough to understand what they do and why.

Recent comics in this vein have included Pak and Van Lente's Hercules tales and Abnett and Lanning's space-set comics for Marvel. And Batgirl, written by Bryan Q Miller, where it happens that the protagonist is a young woman, and most of her supporting cast are female as well. This isn't a big deal for me one way or the other, but in a heavily male-dominated field, it's a refreshing change. (And there will be readers for whom it's much more important, and I support the variety, for their sake.)

Stephanie Brown, Batgirl, deals with her student life, supervillains, Valentine's Day, and some very strange companions with wit, intelligence and skill. Oracle (Barbara Gordon, a previous Batgirl, now in a wheelchair) is her best friend and adviser, but Stephanie never loses her agency or independence. I will go further: she is written with respect and love.

So, this is a recommendation: there were 24 issues of this comic, collected into three graphic novels, which should still be on sale. If you like this sort of thing, go buy them.

The rest of this article is kind of comics-history minded. If you go away now and read the comic

instead, I won't take it badly.

Stephanie has a... difficult past. I've always thought she was an interesting character, with potential. When I say "difficult", I'm not referring to her origin. Stephanie, the daughter of the Batman supervillain Cluemaster, is appalled by her father's crimes, takes the name Spoiler and starts secretly leaving clues to his crimes where Batman can find them – this being a twist on the usual "bonkers villain leaves obscure hints to taunt Batman" story that they used to love so much. As origins go, I quite like this one – it's unusual, it makes Stephanie active instead of reactive, and it gives her an unusual home life that suggests stories. Also, it doesn't involve rape, which is more unusual than it should be for a female comics character. (Mind you, she was only fourteen at the time...)

After that, Stephanie spends some time sort of hanging around the Bat-comics, being under-used, and then someone says "I know! She can become the new Robin, and she can be completely useless at it, and Batman will fire her!" And someone else says "Yes! And then we can make our new villain extra-scary by having him beat Stephanie to death, so Batman can have angst about it!"

In the distance was the faint sound of Michael slapping his hand on his forehead. Also, the louder sound of the internet pointing out quite how full this was of misogyny, loss of agency, and general "girls are icky!"ness. Go look it up if you want to – I'm too tired.

Apparently someone listened – or someone who always thought this was a bad idea started to shout – and Stephanie was revealed to have been saved near death. It was one of the tougher comic resurrections – they had to have the pathologist lie to Batman – but it stuck. In an expanded Bat-family, with two Batmans, a Robin and a Batwoman, they made room for Stephanie to be Batgirl, and have a comic of her own. And a damn good comic it was too.

The comic ran for two years, but stopped when DC did their "New 52" revamp. Barbara Gordon got her legs back and went back to being Batgirl. Starfire turned into an emotionless sex doll, they started a comic about a stripper superheroine (Voodoo), and Catgirl shagged Batman in the first issue of her new comic. As far as I know, Stephanie doesn't exist at all in the New 52 universe. Maybe it's just as well.



Pádraig Ó Méalóid on Women in Alan Moore's work.

It would probably be quicker to try to make a list of Alan Moore's work that *doesn't* contain strong female characters, as they're in all of his work, right from the beginning. While everyone recognises that Halo Jones (2000AD, 1984-1986) is a hugely important piece of work, and one of the great female comics characters, dating right from the beginning of Moore's work, she's by no means the only character from that time worth noting. There's Liz Moran from Marvelman (Warrior, 1982-1984). There's Roxy O'Rourke from Skizz (2000AD, 1983). There's even Chrysoprasia, AKA Crazy Chrissie, from DR & Quinch (2000AD, 1983-1985). All, in their own ways, strong independent women. And here's a few more, from right through his work:

Mina Harker from League of Extraordinary Gentlemen

Sophie Bangs, Stacia Vanderveer, and Barbara Shelley, all from Promethea

Ginda Bojeffries from the Bojeffries Saga

Avril Lear/Marvelwoman from Marvelman

Evie Hammond from V for Vendetta

Abigail Cable from Swamp Thing

Laurie Juspeczyk/Silk Spectre from Watchmen

Suprema from Supreme

Miss Masque/Diana Adams, The Fighting Yank II/Carol Carter, and Princess Pantha, all from Terra Obscura

Cobweb/ Laurel Lakeland from Tomorrow Stories

Ingrid Weiss, Dhalua Strong and Tesla Strong, all from Tom Strong

Robyn 'Toybox' Slinger, Lieutenant Cathy "Peregrine" Colby, Detective Wanda "Synaesthesia" Jackson, Sergeant Jackie "Jack Phantom" Kowalski, Officer Sung "Girl One" Li, Officer Irma "Irmageddon" Wornow, Officer Rexa Smax, and Leni "Sky Witch" Muller, all from Top Ten

Agent Brears from Neonomicon

Undoubtedly there are more, that I've missed or forgotten about.

Pádraig Ó Méalóid chatted with Alan Moore about Halo Jones, James' favourite Moore character as part of an interview for 3:AM.

PÓM: I have to say, I was rereading the three volumes of [*The Ballad of*] *Halo Jones* recently, and of all the things that you haven't finished, I really lament not being able to see what happens in the other six books of *Halo Jones*. Did you have an idea where it was all going?

AM: Well, I'd got the idea that she'd go through fabulous adventures, the next adventure would have probably been when she was a female space pirate with **Sally Quasar**, who was somebody that I'd mentioned, and I would have been basically going through all the decades of her life, with her getting older in each one, because I liked the idea, at the time, of having a strip in 2000AD with a seventy or eighty year old woman as the title character. And also because – it's probably true in my work that - I mean, I wrote *Marvelman* (<http://slovobooks.blogspot.com/2010/01/marvelman-copyright-same-comic.html>) when I was in my, what, twenties?

PÓM: If you wrote that when you – you would have been just coming up to thirty, I think. In 1983 you would have been thirty, so it was around then. Late twenties. [*Moore was born in November 1953, and the first part of his revival of Marvelman was published in Warrior #1 in March 1982, meaning he was twenty eight years old at the time. PÓM*]

AM: You'll notice that I made the central character, what, he was forty two...? Which was a lot older than

people – all superheroes at that time were in their twenties, sort of.

PÓM: Well, they were sort of indefinably aged, but yes, obviously...

AM: They were in their twenties forever, sort of. So I think that – I've always wanted to explore characters of all races, all genders, all ages. It just seems to me to be a natural way to approach any kind of storytelling. It would have ended up with *Halo Jones* upon some planet that is right at the absolute edge of the universe where, beyond that, beyond some sort of spectacular lightshow, there is no space, no time, and it would have ended up with *Halo Jones* – all the rest of the people on this planetoid because, actually, time is not passing; you could stay there forever, potentially - and what would have happened is that *Halo Jones*, after spending some time with the rest of the immortals, would have tottered across the landing field, got into her spacecraft, and flown into the psychedelic lightshow, to finally get out. And that would have been the ending. So, you've saved me a lot of writing, and you a lot of unnecessary worrying.

PÓM: Well, thank you very much. Alan, I genuinely appreciate that because, really, as a complete work,

it would have been... words like magnum opus, and that kind of thing, and it's just a shame -

AM: Well, you know, my comics career is studded with shame. There are a lot of things that could have been. I'm pleased with the ones that worked, and who knows, if I genuinely tried to do, I don't know, eight books of *Halo Jones*, or whatever it was, I would have, I don't know, gone off the boil, something like that. Maybe it worked out for the best.

PÓM: Yeah, there's a certain poignancy in the fact that she was a poignant character in herself, anyway, so there's kinda something there about it being an unfinished tale, and we have to imagine how it's going to be?

AM: Yeah, it gives people a space to play with it in their heads.



Why A Fanzine on Gender Parity?

Well, it's all James' fault. Unless you really like what you're about to read, in which case it was all our idea.

All joking aside, we are honored to have helped James and Chris with this issue of *Journey Planet*, and thank you, the readers, for taking time to explore the numerous facets of this topic with us. It is an important discussion for fans, pros, and conrunners to have - discussion will always foster growth and new ideas, which is really what science fiction is all about, isn't it?

Both of us, Helen and Emma, had strong reactions upon reading the initial piece by Paul Cornell that started all the talk about Gender Parity on Science Fiction Convention Panels. At Eastercon, there was much discussion about the topic, and how the 2013 Eastercon was going to implement a policy of gender parity, and the 2014 Eastercon was not going to do so. Opinions were flying everywhere, and our own views continued to grow stronger as well.

James offered a forum for us to express those views. The catch, of course, was that he also wanted us to solicit opinion pieces from other people involved in Science Fiction Conventions, both fans and pros, and then edit them together into a section of *Journey Planet*.

We said yes. You're about to read the results right now.

In April 2012, we sent out emails to 80 people requesting articles on the Gender Parity topic. This solicitation for articles was a very important part of the editing process, more than one might realise. We

asked people to focus on how and why it is now being implemented. We asked for articles for, against, and firmly ambivalent on the topic.

We received back 29 articles, in addition to the ones written by us. (If you want to get nitpicky, we received writings from 31 people - one article had addendums from two other people.)

We are told by Chris and James that this is an excellent response rate. We're going to believe them, and give high fives all around.

We certainly agree that the articles received were clearly well thought out, articulate, witty, and

they bring up a variety of excellent points guaranteed to further the discussion. We are grateful and thank all of our contributors for their time and effort in joining us here.

We hope you, the readers, continue to read on with open minds and a willingness to embrace different opinions, new ideas, and challenges to your beliefs.

Sincerely,
Helen Montgomery and Emma J. King

For more information on the issue, see the following links:
Paul Cornell's initial announcement and subsequent discussion:



<http://www.paulcornell.com/2012/02/panel-parity.html>

Report of the Eastercon announcements regarding Gender Parity policies:

<http://file770.com/?p=8670>

Eight Squared's explanation of their policy and reasoning behind it:
<http://eightsquaredcon.wordpress.com/2012/04/27/why-we-are-committing-to-gender-parity-on-panels/>

Introduction by Helen Montgomery and Emma J. King

Women into Science and Science Fiction – a Personal Perspective

When I started my PhD at Glasgow University I was the only female postgraduate research student in my department. A few years later I became the first female academic in Chemistry at the University of Strathclyde. Promoting greater participation of women in science is a passion of mine. I've been strongly involved in it for over 20 years – from early days as a junior lecturer running schools workshops for girls, to my current role as postgraduate research school co-ordinator, preparing applications to Athena SWAN, a charter for recognising and celebrating good employment practice for women in science, engineering and technology¹.

Why am I writing about this in *Journey Planet*? Because I firmly believe that some of the same strategies that are proving successful in science are relevant to the current debate about gender parity in convention programming and can help encourage more female fans to participate. Two things that have worked well in science are networking and mentoring. Networking in this context means making female scientists aware of each other's research. So if, for example, I have to decline an invitation to give a talk at a scientific meeting I can readily suggest a female colleague to fill the spot. Effective mentors need to be available at all levels – we all look up to people like Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell but not all of us can, or should, aspire to be her! Instead, senior undergraduates should serve as role models for 1st years; postgraduates for undergraduates; academic staff for postdoctoral researchers etc. Key characteristics of effective mentors are that they should be approachable, encouraging and supportive, but also constructively critical when required (with the emphasis on 'constructively').

At Satellite 3, we used some of these approaches to promote female participation in programme, with the aim of achieving equitable gender representation overall. This has always been the policy of Satellite conventions. We actively manage our programme, where necessary taking positive action, but avoiding positive discrimination (reference ² explains the distinction quite well, at least in the UK Higher Education context). As a result, many female fans will likely recall being actively pursued to give talks, sit on panels, and create games or quizzes! Was this approach successful? I'd argue that it was. The membership of Satellite 3 was 40% female: 60% male, and the gender distribu-

tion of programme participants was exactly the same (including some all-women panels and some all-male, depending on who was available, willing and, most importantly, knowledgeable about the specific topic being discussed). A lot has also been made about the dominance of male Moderators on convention panels. At Satellite 3, 47% of Moderators were female... 47% were male... and 6% was an animatronic plastic dinosaur! Several female fans participated in their first ever convention panel. All were recommended by other women, who had encouraged them to agree to have their names put forward.

What of the future? Well, Strathclyde Chemistry now has 10 female academics (of 40) and we recently appointed our first woman to a Chair (not me, sadly – maybe if I spent less time conrunning...). Our undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts are both >50% female. Clearly there is still some way to go, especially at senior level, and further effort is required to achieve true culture change (for more information, see the excellent recent report on Women in STEM from the Royal Society of Edinburgh³). If Satellite 4, the 65th British National Science Fiction Convention, has a membership roughly in gender parity, then we fully expect that, though the same type of active programme management, we can run a programme that is balanced overall. However, I would challenge that this responsibility lies not only with the convention committee, but with fandom as a whole. Are you, or do you know, a female fan that could give an excellent talk on X, or contribute to a discussion on Y? Then please (ask them to) contact us at programme@satellite4.org.uk and volunteer. Or, if you prefer, send us a note of their contact details and area of expertise directly and we'll add them to our database. We can't promise to use every suggestion, but it is most certainly the case that the more expert women we have in our volunteer pool the better our programme will be.

Christine M Davidson (Programme Coordinator, Satellite 4)

1. <http://www.athenaswan.org.uk/html/athena-swan/>
2. <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=404799§ioncode=26>
3. http://www.rse.org.uk/cms/files/advice-papers/inquiry/women_in_stem/tapping_talents.pdf

Christine M Davidson

Balance to the Force

I'm sympathetic to the goals Paul Cornell set out in his call for Panel Parity. We're seeing across the culture women speaking out, and that's especially true in various geeky fields like comics fandom, technology, and science fiction fandom. We're seeing it in books like the Hugo-Award winning *Chicks Dig Time Lords* and conventions like *Girl Geek Con* in Seattle, and I think general SF conventions have a responsibility to respond to it as well.

CONvergence, in part recognizing that we hadn't had anything approaching parity in our guests of honor, picked a theme for 2012 celebrating women creators and characters in Science Fiction and Fantasy, and picked a slate of all women guests. Paul Cornell is a previous CONvergence guest of honor, and he is also returning on his own power to this year's convention, so our programming staff has been working with him directly to meet his desire for panel parity, but we've also considered how best this applies to our convention across the board.

CONvergence is a large (4500+) convention based in suburban Minnesota, with over 250 panels and over 280 program participants. Our convention population is balanced by gender, and our organization's board (and director-elect) and convention steering committee currently have nine out of our thirteen members being women. We're also a populist convention, with many of our panels coming direct from our membership in a variety of formats, some fully formed, some collected by people independently sharing the same interest. So we sometimes know only the interests of some of our panelists -- we don't ask, and don't always know the gender of all of our participants. Especially if it isn't relevant to the topic.

So we didn't feel that mandating and requiring that balance at the individual panel level was always best, but we were willing to work with Paul to meet his desire to be on gender balanced panels. There are a lot of variables and requests people make for program items, and making sure that women and men are represented equally overall in a particular event is another one. However, with as many panels as we have, it is statistically likely that a half a dozen or so panels will be made up of the same gender even if every panelist had a 50/50 chance of being male or

female - so we'll have some panels that are all men, and others that are all women.

CONvergence's convention program is pretty much settled at the time of this writing, and while we have panels that are single gendered, given the reports that I've done I'd estimate that we'll have about 45% women participation, which is more than if 2/5 of every individual panel was women, which is within the scope of what could happen with the Panel Parity proposal. There is further to go - some subjects, like film and comics programming, could be more balanced.

You need to be active in recruiting participation that breaks down existing biases, as well as keeping the subjects diverse -- and this isn't easy to do. If by enforcing panel parity you reduce something like gaming programming, since it may be natural to pick the subjects that are easier to get panel parity on, you haven't done anyone favors. We need to keep our subjects diverse - and you should encourage women that could speak to games, comics, and science to do so. This isn't impossible -- there are plenty of women who love and are experts in all of those matters. For example, CONvergence greatly increased our female participation in our science programming by networking with the *Skepchicks*, and our literary programming has had participation from groups like *Broad Universe*. For me, it is important not just to have a token addition, but to have full involvement in both the individual panel and the overall development of the program.

Getting more voices is also beyond just balancing the voices of men and women, but also for other underrepresented groups in our community. Panel Parity doesn't help with those issues of diversity -- and those are, perhaps, even more challenging to our communities. The parity tool won't work, and we should try to develop tools to increase the voices of all sorts of groups that want to participate in our events, and that means both participation on the 'general' panels, as well as ones that may focus on a unique interest for a particular group.

One of the reasons why I love fandom and have spent so much time in it is that at our best, we provide ways for a variety of different types of people to come together about what they have in

Michael Lee



Eszenyi Gábor Ádám

common. One of the richest experiences I've had as a result of my participation in fandom is that we're able to share our same common interests - and what we have in common is as important as what makes us different. It's been to my benefit that I've had friendships with women, people of color, people of various sexual identities and orientations, and so many others through fandom. A more varied fandom is a richer community, and finding ways to encourage that participation isn't just good for our convention, but can be good for our artist and scientific communities and businesses that we work with.

So for me, I'm supportive of the goals for Panel Parity, even when it doesn't always fit what I'd want to enforce at every individual panel; and we need to all try to be better about encouraging representation and participation of a wide variety of people. And that can't be a passive thing -- those of us responsible for putting together guest lists, program ideas, and recruiting participants should try to celebrate the entire community as strongly as we can.

Michael Lee is Activities Director for CONvergence in Minneapolis/St Paul.

Thanks to Emily Coombs for her feedback

Note: I asked our current CONvergence program-

ming heads for their comments as I wrote up my piece and are including them along as starting points for my writing.

Amanda Hofman-Fretham, Programming Head CONvergence 2012

One thing that makes it a little hard is who signs up for what. It's hard to do an even split if only men or only women sign up for a certain panel. Further, when trying to plan a successful panel it is sometimes tricky to schedule the best panelists and balance that with gender parity.

I do a lot of political caucusing/conventioning, and see the same issues. Each precinct, moving all the way through the caucuses at each convention are required to gender balance their delegates. The people who are willing, and the people who would be the best representatives don't always make it easy to balance the gender representation.

I certainly think it is something to strive for. I always find it strange that women always seem to be in the minority when we make up the majority of the population (speaking globally, not just our convention). I think the methods of getting to balanced representation can definitely use some work, and that is a bigger issue than just our convention. I think we have a good start at it, and being aware when we are scheduling helps. However, it is something the whole community needs to work toward to really be successful.

I hope that makes some sense! I agree with Paul's vision, and appreciate that he wants to work with us on this. I just think it will take some time to get there, and there are kinks to be worked out.

Tim Wick, Programming Head CONvergence 2012

I want to take a more holistic approach to the problem. Rather than ensuring gender balance on every panel, I want to work towards gender balance across the entire convention. Yes, there will be some panels that are skewed male and some that are skewed female but the question is: how do we ensure we have a balance *overall*?

We *should* start recruiting more women for the areas traditionally dominated by men (Movies, comics) and we *should* try to balance invited pros and Guests of Honor.

I think Paul's initiative is a good one and I think we should work to support the reasoning behind it. I just believe that the approach of "every panel" is not the best approach.

Gender Parity

Introduction: So, here is my article. This was written the night I got home from last Eastercon, thoroughly incensed about Eight Squared's announcement, with anger still burning bright, before JP was going to have a Gender Parity section, and before I had (perhaps foolishly) agreed to help edit it. I guess my stance has evolved a little since then, although mostly into resignation that those who want to behave in certain ways will continue to do so and that I am not going to change their minds. The sometimes extremely heated arguments that have been sparked about gender, discrimination and privilege, both online and in the flesh, have left me feeling very tired and somewhat jaded. But I have left my article unedited since the day I sent it to James and will let that less tired, less jaded version of me put my thoughts across as they were at the time. This is still what I think and feel, I've just lost the energy to argue the point, and in future will simply be staying away from places where I feel that my gender - or anyone else's - is being made an issue unnecessarily

At Eastercon this year, for the first time in my life – ever, anywhere – I felt just a little embarrassed to be female. Why? Two words. “Gender parity.”

I hadn't heard the phrase “gender parity” before it started to crop up on my twitter feed in the run up to Eastercon. I didn't pay much attention. Then one of the guests of honour publicly announced that he would step off any panel he was put on that did not include at least one woman, which I found mildly offensive. At the convention itself, there was the odd program item that didn't sit well with me – a panel about “how not to suppress women's writing”, for example (really? In a world of JK Rowling and Stephenie Meyer? I don't know what the panel was actually about, but the title was enough to put me off). Then in a largely favourable writeup in the guardian, a big deal was being made about the “inclusivity” of the event, particularly the large number of women present. So far, not too bad, just a list of things that made me feel a little uneasy.

These issues, which otherwise I might not have thought twice about, were suddenly all brought to a head when I heard that next year's Eastercon had announced that “gender parity” will be a policy. It is their stated aim to ensure that all panels will be 50:50 male and female, and there will also be a concerted

effort to ensure that, across the panels of the con, the moderators will also be 50:50 male and female, or as close to that as possible. Personally, I find this attitude highly patronising at best, and outright offensive at worst. I know that, in some quarters, my opinions on this will be highly unpopular and may provoke hostile reactions. I have also heard others, both men and women, express the same opinions in private but be fearful of talking about them publicly in case of backlash from their feminist “friends”. But equal opportunities and women's rights are something I am very passionate about, and I'm not about to shut up when I think they are being damaged, whatever anyone might think of me. I sincerely hope that others who feel the same will speak up, and that those who disagree with me will at least appreciate that we are all, hopefully, arguing from a position of caring about equality, and only disagreeing about the best way to go about achieving that.

I have spent all my adult life in highly male-dominated spheres. I studied theoretical physics at university, and my major hobbies are live role playing and SF/F fandom. I am not naïve enough to believe that sexism doesn't exist, and although I have experienced it more in other walks of life – the friends and family who assumed my name would magically morph into my husband's when we married, and still address me in writing as “Mrs J Ely” as if my own identity evaporated on that day; the car salesmen who can't bring themselves to talk to me directly, even though I'm the one buying the car, if my husband/father are present; the members of the public who refer to me as “the boss's wife” in my current project, despite the fact that I'm the boss – I have also encountered it within my chosen academic and social circles, although staggeringly little of that has been within fandom, and virtually none has been in recent years.

In academia, I generally found being a woman who did physics to be an advantage, rather than a disadvantage, although female role models were undeniably few and far between both in the history of physics and in teachers, lecturers and other faculty, though that rarely bothered me. I didn't leave research after my PhD because I felt discriminated against or pushed out in any way, I left because I had discovered I didn't enjoy research in the way that I had enjoyed being

Emma J. King

a student, and decided it wasn't for me. In live role playing (LRP) the issues were, historically, much more serious, and when I started going to games in my late teens the endless jeers about how women can't fight and open hostility towards any woman who dared pick up a sword used to be quite atrocious, and seriously detrimental to the confidence of any woman who was keen on getting stuck in. Also, the general level of open lecherousness directed at young women would have genuinely staggered any fan – yes, I know first hand all about the issues of harassment at cons, but trust me, the background level of pure misogyny has never, during my involvement, been in fandom what it has been in LRP (something I have always presumed, without much hard evidence, to be down to the machismo that naturally accompanies a hobby that revolves predominantly around fighting). I have certainly never felt physically sick at the prospect of going along to a fannish event because I knew I would be the only girl present and would receive a considerable amount of abuse, bullying and victimisation, the way I did about LRP events in the early days. I'm pleased to say all this has improved massively over the last 15 years and please, don't be put off LRPing because of what I've said here. Things are totally different these days, and LRP isn't all about fighting any more (that's just the bit I enjoy most), but if anyone, male or female, wants to spend their weekends pretending to be a medieval knight and having a good old scrap, come play with me....

I have never found fandom to be particularly bad in terms of sexism, even back in the good/bad/same old days. There were certainly always a lot more girls around at fannish events than there were at LRP games or on physics courses. There were also plenty of women involved with writing stuff and organising stuff, be it fanzines or fan clubs or conventions – okay, maybe not as many as the men, but really, gender never seemed to be an issue in fandom, and certainly much less of an issue in terms of number of women and the level of their involvement than the other spheres I hung out in. And in general, I feel that the situation has been gently moving in the right direction over the years, in terms of seeing more women GoHs, more women on panels and more women on committees. An open policy of positive discrimination can only be, in my opinion, a massive backwards step for women in this situation.

I am also not naïve enough to believe that all positive discrimination, in all circumstances, is always bad, but I think that it has to be employed very, very carefully or it risks seriously undermining the cause it seeks to advance, and should certainly only be con-

sidered where the “ism” it is attempting to combat is severe and extreme, or moving the wrong, rather than the right, way. To me, this is very clearly not one of these cases. Sure, women are generally somewhat under-represented in fandom compared to the population at large, but they're hardly conspicuous by their absence, and don't exactly seem to have a problem getting involved if they want to. Four of the last five Eastercons have had female chairs, and the next one will too, for crying out loud. That is not a sphere in which women are struggling to get ahead where they want to, or are being actively discriminated against or pushed to the sidelines. To me, equality is about equal opportunities. If the women who want to get involved can get involved, and are not facing obstacles purely because of their gender, then the opportunities are equal and a cry for “gender parity” is not asking for equality, but privilege.

The problem with positive discrimination is that it fundamentally takes away from the achievements of the group who have been positively discriminated for. In this case, it will inevitably undermine the credibility of every woman who is involved with the next Eastercon. Whether giving a talk, participating in a panel discussion, or even on the committee, they will all be looked at by people wondering “are they there because they're good, or are they there because they're female?”. This is NOT HELPFUL. In fact, it's massively patronising. It tells the world that women can't compete with the men on the same terms, but rather that we have to make a special place for them so their voice can be heard. They need help. They need special treatment. The implication is, inevitably, that they need this because they are intrinsically not as good or not as capable as the men, and whether this is what was intended or not, this is what some people will think and feel. They will look at every woman on a panel at the next Eastercon and assume that they are only sitting at the front because they are female and were given special consideration, not because of their personal or professional merits. This the very definition of sexism, being fuelled by the positive discrimination designed, misguidedly, to combat it. This is not exactly fair to the women who would have been on those panels anyway, because they deserved to be, and really isn't benefiting the cause of the women who would not otherwise have been asked and are only there to ‘make up the numbers’. It is also very unfair to the men who would otherwise have been on a male-dominated panel because they were genuinely the best person for the job in that instance, and have been thrown off to make a place for someone of the opposite gender who is not

as qualified or experienced in that area, not to mention the women who would otherwise have been on a female-dominated panel (they do happen occasionally) and are thrown off to make a place for a man. In saying this I do hope that the upcoming Eastercon will be applying their “gender parity” policy fairly in both directions, as allowing female-dominated panels but not male-dominated ones really would be moving, in my opinion, from a misguided but forgivable attempt to promote equality to outright misandry.

I am also not saying that, in spite of the fact that women who actively want to get involved in fandom can, unconscious bias does not exist in terms of picking guests or speakers or panel participants. What I am saying is that a publicly announced policy of positive discrimination and quotas for the number of women sitting on panels or moderating them simply does not help. If you are running a convention and want to ensure that unconscious bias about gender or anything else plays as little part as possible in the selection of your participants, then sure, talk to those involved with programming about doing their research well, about finding the right people for the job, not just the people who spring immediately to mind. Go out of your way to make sure you find the best qualified, not just the most obvious, people to talk on an issue, whoever they may be. And if your panels are shaping up to be almost all men, by all means ask yourself why that is the case, and check that good women, who would actually be better than some of the men, haven't been passed over just because they're women. But for goodness' sake don't start picking people just because they belong to a particular group, when that group is irrelevant to the subject matter under discussion, or making public statements that give the impression that this is what you will be doing. It makes it impossible for anyone to take any members of that group seriously.

Although I have been a fan for a long time, and have historically been involved with quite a number of program items of one sort or another, these days I don't actually go to that many cons, and I'm not even sure I will make it to next Eastercon simply because real life has become remarkably busy and I may just be working. Consequently I doubt anyone would be likely to ask me to be on a panel at it, but if they did I would say no because I refuse to be anyone's “token woman”, or to put myself in a situation where, even if I am genuinely being asked because I'm the best person

for the job, anyone could legitimately speculate that maybe I had only been asked because of my gender. I would strongly urge any other woman who wants to be taken seriously, now or in the future, to do likewise. Say yes under these circumstances and you are accepting that women – that *you* – need special treatment to be able to get along in what is really quite an equal opportunities place in the grand scheme of things, and a lot of people, me included, will always have in the back of their minds that maybe you were only asked because you were female. You will make yourself a second class citizen, and me along with you.

Instead, set your sights on the 2014 Eastercon, who have stated that they intend to have the best people on their panels, regardless of gender, which I believe is the right and proper equal opportunities approach. Pitch to them your ideas for talks or discussion topics, and make sure they know why you would be a fantastic person to speak on that issue. Be the best person for the job, not just the best woman they could find to make up the numbers.



Gender, and the Greater Issue at Stake

While I've followed the discussions regarding gender parity on convention panels, in anthology tables of contents, and so on, I haven't developed much of an opinion for one ironic reason: a great many of the panels I've participated in during my career, and anthologies I've appeared in, have featured mostly women, with only one or two men included. I'm usually identified as an urban fantasy author, which means I sit on panels with titles like "What's Up With All These Kick-Ass Heroines?" or "What the Hell is Urban Fantasy Anyway?" or "What's Sexier, Vampires or Werewolves?" These panels are always dominated by women writers, reviewers, editors, etc.

Which leads me to what I think is a greater concern: Why is there a perception that the entire genre has broken down along gender lines? Urban fantasy is for women, hard SF is for men. Retold fairy tales are for women, epic fantasy is for men. It's a disturbing trend, especially because these divisions don't match my real-world experience of genre at all. Based on the e-mails I receive and the people who show up at my events, my readership is pretty evenly split between men and women. Plenty of men are reading and writing urban fantasy -- but they're invisible because the critical sphere is continually discussing urban fantasy as by and for women. (To clarify, when I use the term urban fantasy, I'm referring to the current popular marketing trend of action-oriented novels featuring kick-ass heroes and heroines and particularly lurid covers. The broader definition urban fantasy ought to have is a whole other topic. Buy me a drink, I'll talk your ear off about it.)

Which leads me to suspect that the same thing is happening in reverse on other topics. Men predominate certain topics -- hard SF, epic fantasy -- not because women aren't there as creators and fans, but because they're invisible.

Addressing gender parity on convention panels is one thing, but I think we also need to address gender divisions across entire genres. Lack of diversity on panels may be a symptom of a larger issue.

Gender Parity, you know, I'd never thought about it until I was sent a link.

Carrie Vaughn

50/50 Is Not the Only Way

Growing up in the science fiction and fantasy community, the faces and voices on a panel never registered "sex". Although it's true that pretty much every one I've been to (aside from an ASFA meeting) was predominantly male. It never bothered me. I think because all I walk away with after a panel is a sense of progress and hope. It always created goals for me, never obstacles. Someday I want to be UP there with John Picacio, Bob Eggleton, or Jon Schindehette, talking about what it's like to break the glass ceiling of illustration in the information age. Or better yet now, as an adult, be on an entirely new list of panel participants.

I think with every generation of people that get involved in the genre, we WILL see more women being represented. I've met them, I work with them, I am them. I meet more woman either in, or into, sci fi and fantasy every day. If there's anything on the subject that annoys me, it's usually general commentary from a male counterpart upon meeting a lady who isn't scared to rock a Kraken mask. "That's so hot! Like finding a unicorn!".....Well, we aren't that rare guys.

Someday in my mind, the entire panel of "breaking into illustration" will be not just women, but a fond mix of all us mutts. My quantum possibilities are filled with eclecticism. 50/50 isn't the only way to be, there are too many different kinds of people on this earth.



Hillary Pearlman

Gender Parity

Apparently the debate is Gender Parity. I'm a bit fed up defending the need to ensure that we actually notice the expertise of 52% of the population (and close to a half of sf fans now). What I want to do is show you why the standard contra-arguments are the real problem, and, I hope, help you understand that if you try them on me you will get one of two responses: on a bad day I will simply write you off and walk away, too tired to bother engaging. On a good one it's geniality to incandescence in about 30 seconds flat.

My basic position is this: gender parity is not a thing, it is a process. By committing to it (and to related issues) it makes you think hard about what you are doing, question what you are doing and get creative. Just one example: Istvan Csicszeray-Ronay's in many ways brilliant book on science fiction, *Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* confines almost all the women writers to a section on feminism (a very common strategy). He has a chapter on linguistics. Had he gone through each chapter and thought "have I considered gender parity in the selections of my examples?" he might have remembered that one of the absolutely key sf books on linguistics, written by a Professor of the subject, is Suzette Haden Elgin's *Native Tongue*. As it is, the chapter, presumably based on a selection he thought of as "the best" is fatally flawed.

Standard argument 1: you wouldn't want to be a token!

Said to me by young man under thirty who had just moderated an all male panel at the Battle of Ideas (the nearest thing I know of to a non-sf, sf con and highly recommended despite my criticisms). There had been a pattern all weekend: women confined to panels on a very narrow spectrum of issues, all other panels, often very wide ranging, completely white and completely male (I met one very smart Muslim woman furious that her only item was on being a Muslim woman).

It was a panel on sf and the importance of futurism. The young man moderating it knew squat. Three of his panellists were clueless and two of them knew it (the fourth was Ken MacLeod). But apparently a woman expert in her field would, because she

was selected for being a woman, be a token. Me, I saw four token men.

This particular argument has gone out of fashion among pretty much everyone except those committed to ideologies that permit of no social divides except class. Too many people now notice the George Bush's of this world with their Yale Cs. Even the cries that forcing Oxbridge to examine their intake (which is essentially an argument for class parity) is "social engineering" are looking a bit weak, which is why the government is trying to socially engineer university entrance, and discovering that the clock is a little hard to turn back.

So instead we get:

Standard argument 2: we aren't committing to gender parity because we are committed to having the best people on the panel.

How did you define the best people?

Did you start by thinking "oh, X male author is great on that, who does he get on with?" and fail to notice that X male author is never seen hanging out with women? [I've done this one.]

Did you select from the people you know, without noticing that that is a group that is a function of your own preferences and prejudices? [I work in an academic field that was until recently mostly male, I have regularly made this mistake.] One way I've found to tackle this is to deliberately approach different subsets of people for recommendations.

Do you notice who recommends what kind of people? Do you note if men only recommend men to you? (The worst example of this one I know is the Radio 4 programme Chain Reaction. Each interviewee selects the next: women have chosen men, but when a few of us checked last year, the only two men who had chosen women were both gay, so almost any choice of a man closed out women from all subsequent choices).

Did you select people who have a particular mode of argument? Did you consider that people are socialised in very different ways, and that few UK

Farah Mendelsohn

women are trained to be as confident as their male counterparts (I was initially educated in a Jewish school, I had real trouble when I transferred into the mainstream because I was considered arrogant, argumentative and belligerent: boys acting the same way were praised). Do you consider that what might be praised in men is often put down in women and that shapes their behaviour.

Do you consider that judgements of ability may not be gender-blind however well intentioned people think they are (some orchestras now audition with a curtain, and a carpet to disguise footfall, the result has been a higher number of women accepted).

Did you focus on the pool of volunteers or loud mouths that still tends to favour men? Women have a nasty habit of adding the word “just” in front of their activities, in English it’s a diminution. They tend to be better at recommending each other than themselves.

Did you define “best” in terms of extra-world status without thinking in about all the different factor that may mean equally qualified men and women may hold very different positions (the drop out rate of women in science is horrendous and there is a lot evidence that mentorship structures are part of the problem).

Did you define the topic in such a way as to be able to say “women aren’t interested in this?” Such as the panel on sf and international relations at a non-sf event which was defined in such a way that apparently no women were known to have an interest in the area (Gwyneth Jones’s work for the WHO doesn’t count it seems). This was a common strategy with regard to politics in the nineteenth century: apparently women weren’t interested in foreign policy so they weren’t interested in politics. The former might well have been true (although I doubt it was universal) but the latter was only true as long as sanitation, maternal health, poverty [add here your own list] were considered “apolitical”. All feminist movements are as much about changing the agenda and bringing issues into the political arena as they are about rights: it is often refusal of men to accept that X is political that gets women involved in politics (anyone remember the campaign to get VAT off tampons?).

Sit down and examine how you got to that definition of “best”



Finally I have an anecdote to share.

In the 1990s my partner took a job in a department of very genial, very nice people with a very strong “just like us” culture. They thought E was just like them: he had the requisite public school background after all. It’s rather a shame you can’t ask people about their attitude to team games and the ROTC in a job interview.

There was one female full-time member of faculty in a department of around thirty.

Part One:

I had applied for a job in the department and wasn’t short listed, which didn’t really surprise me as I was in the last year of my PhD, although I had a few articles which was unusual then. What did surprise me was to discover that a) no woman had been interviewed and b) the job went to a young man whose qualifications were identical to mine, right down to the number of articles published. But he had been employed by the department as an hourly paid lecturer: he was one of theirs.

I couldn’t do much about this: as someone with a partner in the department it was hard for me to challenge, but my immediate reaction was to think: “Are they seriously expecting me to believe that there were no other female applicants with better qualifications than mine and his?”* The answer, when I did gently query was “We interviewed the best candidates for the job.” And they really meant it.

[*When I was in my twenties I had several experiences of being the token woman in interviews. By this I mean I was a plausibly qualified woman selected as being someone they wouldn’t have to hire but who made their figures look ok: I could tell this because I would be the only female out of five candidates, it was before I had completed my PhD and they would all have theirs, and I was usually ten to fifteen years younger than they were. Again, I was being asked to believe that I was the best qualified female candidate to apply.]

Part Two:

So I started watching, and over the next couple of years I saw them advertise jobs and only short list men. All of these jobs had something in common: they were all defined as political history, and by this was meant parliamentary history or diplomacy. When I asked I was told the history of –just for example– the suffrage movement—was social history. If you want to transpose it to the sf world, you can call it

the Theme problem.

The department taught other things, but those other things all seemed to be taught by hourly paid lecturers, and that’s where the women were.

I can be quite patient. I waited.

And then they made a mistake. They advertised two posts, one full time in political history, a second, half time, in women’s history—an area for which they were actually employing hourly paid lecturers to deliver the equivalent of a full time post. I pounced. They had an all male short list for the politics post and an all female shortlist for the women’s [not politics really] history post.

The short version is that it went to Senate, the Vice Chancellor got involved and an entire department found its hiring process under scrutiny and its definition of “best” ruled inherently designed to select male candidates. As there was a round of retirements at about that time, the result was a transformation. The department has not achieved gender parity, but forcing them to consider their profile, challenging the absence of women, and more than anything challenging that statement “We want to get the best candidates” proved illuminating.

So don’t tell me that you aren’t interested in gender parity when the “standard” is four men to one women to a panel, and that you only want “the best” unless you have systematically defined what you think “the best is” and how you went about selecting it.

A final point:

Gender parity goes both ways: why don’t we seem to have many men talking on panels about children’s fiction? I know quite a few men in the field who could talk animatedly and with knowledge on the subject. Panels on old age, on youth, on disability, on any kind of “social” issue tend to be dominated by women, yet these are issues that affect all of us. I would argue that the same kinds of networks, assumptions and classifications are at work. They limit all of us.

Gender balance in convention programs: practical considerations

I support the goal of gender balance on convention programs. A rich, diverse program needs different points of view. However, while I consider this a great goal for convention programs as a whole, I think it's an unrealistic, impractical, and at times not even a good goal on an item-by-item basis. A key reason for this -- that you often want the people who know the topic best on an item, and don't have a balance of men and women who know that topic -- has been discussed quite a bit. I'm not going to discuss those reasons here. Instead, I'm going to look at the logistical reasons.

Paradoxically, the cons that have the biggest talent base to pull from -- and thus are those that in a theoretical sense should have the easiest time achieving balance on individual times -- are the hardest from a practical, logistical sense. The big convention whose program I'm most familiar with is Worldcon (I co-ran a program in Philadelphia and Reno, and I was the deputy head at the last Glasgow Worldcon), so I'll use that for my examples. Worldcon's program has a treasury of riches: lots of program rooms, so you can run many great items, and an incredibly rich pool of talent from which to populate those items. Worldcon, in fact, is the only program I work on where we have to turn down a substantial number of good people because we have so many that want to be on the program.

But the other side of this great diversity is the sheer amount of work that Worldcon takes, work that is almost always being done by people who have full-time (or more) day jobs. Putting together a Worldcon program is immensely rewarding, but also immensely exhausting. You basically give up most of your free time for the better part of a year. And the last three months are very busy.

How does this relate to gender balance on panels? Let's say you create a panel that you consider very balanced. Then you run your checks, to find out that one of 4 panelists can't be on the panel at the time you'd picked. At a small-to-midsize con, you might spend considerable time trying to find a slot to

move that program item, perhaps by swapping with another item. At Worldcon, swapping items is very hard, given that you are running 15 or so in parallel, and that any change causes ripples through the program. Moreover, "gender balance" is one of dozens of variables you're trying to balance. To make things worse, you have a queue of 100 other issues you have to address after this one. So, at Worldcon, with rare exceptions when the item is one of those you can't bear to change or when the person who you'd have to drop is critical to the item, you spend only a short amount of time, then drop the person. In replacing the dropped panelist, you may try to again achieve gender balance, but you have to find someone who knows the topic and who is free at this time. And you want to do it relatively quickly, since you again have that queue of 100 more items waiting for you. So again, it's not always practical to spend as much time as you'd like to try to balance the item.

And the situation becomes worse after schedules are sent out. Panelists drop off of items. Whereas it was simply hard to move and modify items before you send out schedules, it's close to impossible now. And, you still have a queue of 100 items after this one to look at. (100 different items from a month ago, but still 100 items.) So again, achieving balance may take a lot of work. In some cases, the balance is so important to the item that you have to invest the time. In other cases, you decide you can't spare that time, and make the best choice you can.

Again, this doesn't mean that gender balance isn't a good idea. It certainly needs to be considered in the early stages of program, when deciding who to invite to be on program. This whole conversation has been a good one, since it will cause future programming heads to at least think about this issue, if they hadn't already. And it should be a factor to consider in creating and populating items. But in reality, it's not achievable on an item-by-item basis (or at least not with a small volunteer labor force who is working on the convention program over and above their day jobs).

Jim Mann

Aiming for Gender Parity is a Positive Process

I am pleased to see that some conventions have adopted a goal of gender parity on discussion panels. I believe that goals like this, to avoid having merely token representation of women or minorities by actively involving them in all kinds of programming, are a good thing. Not only do they encourage programming teams to welcome new participants or use established participants in new ways, they challenge program planners to be creative, and to build in themselves a better awareness of the breadth of character of the sf community and Industry. I think those are all good things.

It definitely does take extra effort to do this sort of thing, because often our female authors, like authors of color, are more likely to be published by small presses than the white men in the genre, and therefore less likely to be carried by bookstores or at-con booksellers, and less likely to be familiar to programming teams. Our female artists, authors and fans also may use male pseudonyms, initials, or other names not obviously female. It may take (*gasp*) research to find female scientists inside or outside the community, and then *cough, wheeze*) outreach to let them know we exist or to invite them to speak about their work. And in the meantime, you have to reserve space in the program in case your outreach to new program participants is successful.

This is all similar to some of what I did as head of Art Program for Renovation, the recent Worldcon in Reno. My goals within the Art Project included increasing attendance of art professionals in general, and specifically female artists and artists of color. I also wanted to have a panel discussion on race issues in cover illustration, and a personal goal of mine for general programming was to ensure we had a panel on works by authors of color. Those last two goals produced a requirement that we construct panels that were at least 50% a specific kind of panelist, in this case, non-white.

I have seen some people comment on technical issues of panel parity, and I do think that's one that needs to be handled carefully. I like how Paul Cornell stated things, which was that as a participant he would evaluate panel parity at the time of the panel. We had potential panelists who initially refused to be on the race-related panels because we had not yet hit the right ratio when the first draft of their itineraries went out, months before the con. While it is good for panelists to let conventions know if they want to see a certain type of representation in a particular panel, it is the convention's responsibility to resolve issues like that during the planning phase. Having participants step down off a panel ahead of time because a panel that's expected to be four to six people eventually currently has only three people, of which only one is whatever group they want to see represented, makes that difficult.

A convention programming team that's concerned about such issues may save themselves some pain if they include the target size of the panel in their initial draft that goes out to participants and at the same time ask for suggestions as to how they can round out the panel. We could not have made the panel "SF We Love by Authors of Color" happen without suggestions from others, especially from Vylar Kaftan, who didn't end up being on the panel due to a scheduling conflict, but who suggested a number of people including Naamen Tilahun, who did a fabulous job moderating the panel. Not only did she suggest Naamen, she also gave him a ride to the con from San Francisco, so extra kudos there.

Naamen responded to my personal invitation to be on programming, which I was happy to give not only because of Vy's recommendation, but also because I'd seen him on panels at Wiscon. I also personally invited a number of artists and art directors. My best success with that related to gender parity was with regard to Julie Dillon. Dillon is a

Anne Gray

fabulously talented artist who lives in California. She was unable to attend the whole convention but she did enter the Art Show, and she also attended Art Night and the Chesley Awards, where she received the award for Best Unpublished Color for “Planetary Alignment”, which has since been published as a cover of *Clarkesworld*. My favorite single moment of the con was seeing someone, I think it was Scott Edelman, point at her Art Show display and pronounce her “the best artist here I’ve never heard of.” Her work was recently profiled in *Locus*, so I’m hoping she’s on a trajectory to being well-recognized. And, of course, invited to cons.

I didn’t know Julie Dillon was local/regional to *Renovation* before I became Art Program head. I found that out because I actively did research to locate female artists who might be able to attend. Further, noting that there is an effect whereby people decide to come to the con near the last minute due to other people who are attending, we put placeholder

events in the program, reserving rooms with projectors for potential art items. We were able to take advantage of one of those empty spaces when Martina Pilcerova, who illustrated a collectible card set for *Game of Thrones*, let us know she would be attending. She and John Picacio discussed the art of *Game of Thrones* in a new program item, and she joined panels on “Painting for Collectible Card games” and “Concept Art for Games and Film”, bringing them up to gender parity (or in one case, 2 women out of 5 panelists).

If programming teams are open to inviting or welcoming panelists with whom they are personally unfamiliar, stretch themselves to get familiar with more of the fans and pros in the field, and pay attention to characteristics like race and gender, it’s really not that hard to improve ratios on panels. When I first suggested the panel on works by writers of color, I was disappointed when one member of the program team basically responded that he didn’t know

if most authors were white, brown or blue. If you say that with pride as a program planner, I think you’re taking pride in being lazy. Similarly with gender. If you can’t find women interested in any subject you have on the program, you aren’t trying hard enough.

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PS After *Renovation* we purchased prints of “Planetary Alignment” and “Gold Sea” from Julie Dillon. I am including a picture of one of our framed copies. I think it’s a unique image of a woman in a non-traditional situation illustrating the importance of including a female perspective in SF.



Why I'm Against Gender Parity

In American political parlance, I was against gender parity before I was for it. And then I was against it again. Never let it be said I can't flip-flop on my positions with the best of them.

Now, I don't run conventions, I don't even go to many cons; I mostly sit at home and write stories, and occasionally I turn up at a con and participate on panels. But I do spend a fair bit of time thinking about what it means to be a woman in a field where I am in the minority. I write horror fiction, where the ground is not exactly thick with women writers outside of the urban fantasy/paranormal subgenres (where women dominate hugely as both writers and readers), but really there are more of us than you'd think. On balance, I've found the horror genre to be mostly welcoming; yeah, there's a vein of rather overtly masculine-performing darker and more badass than you! swagger in some places, but I've made a point of avoiding people and places where I encounter that vibe (life's too short, right?) and the editors and fellow writers I know are smart and witty and talented and publish and write the kind of horror fiction that I dig and some are girls and some are boys and I'm pretty sure that when it comes to writing we all care more about how we are wielding our prose than anyone's gender.

And for a long time I really knee-jerked against that phrase "woman writer." I'm a writer first, just like a guy gets to be without demanding it. In the last couple of years, though, although I still expect to be considered as a writer first (and honestly a whole lot of other things before we get down the list to 'woman'), I've seen that there is some need to raise the profile of women working in the horror genre. I've written in several other places about women horror writers as well as my ambivalence about promoting women specifically, and of course that's not my focus here, but that same ambivalence fueled my initial reaction to gender parity: ack! No! I don't want anyone questioning my suitability for a panel with the assumption I've been placed on it because I'm a woman. I don't want to question my own suitability for a panel with the assumption of been placed on it because I'm a woman.

Then, after further thought and reading and a bit of conversation, I switched sides! In fact, it was

over a single point I kept turning over in my head: that when men are asked to participate on a panel, they don't wring their hands and worry that they've been asked because, say, they're friends with person doing the programming, or any other irrelevant reason, even if those reasons might be accurate. In rejecting gender parity, was I doing that thing that (I'm told) women are all too wont to do—taking myself out of the picture entirely? I hear over and over that women submit fewer stories, put themselves forward less for panels, are in general too retiring. Got a topic a potential male panelist doesn't know much about? He'll turn up and bluff his way through! A woman, on the other hand, is much more likely to demur if she feels she doesn't have much to offer on a subject.

So I thought, you know, I'd best be in favor of gender parity as I didn't want to be one of those demurring women or anything.

But really, this was only a single point in its favor. Gender parity is, I suppose, a kind of affirmative action, a practice I think is sometimes necessary to level playing fields, especially when there are long-standing and complicated social, cultural, and economic factors in play which can't be otherwise surmounted. I don't think this is the case here, and in the end, a lot more things bothered me than not about gender parity. First: the specific practice of trying to balance each panel by gender is an unnecessarily complicated approach—better, I think to strive for overall balance. Second: not all cons are created equal. There are industries (comics, anyone?) that desperately need to have their asses kicked into the twenty-first century. I'm not sure the staff of all fan-run conventions, many of whom are already committed to greater inclusiveness, ought to be the targets of an initiative like this in the same way.

But for me the biggest point goes back to this: in an effort to include me more, what this ends up doing is reducing me—all the ideas I might have and all the things I might think or write or be—to A Woman. Suddenly I don't get to be me, but a Representative of Women. I kind of feel—well, objectified, and marginalized, and, frankly, condescended to, like if I turn up on a panel and do really, really well, maybe people will come up and tell me things like wow that was as good a job as man could've done! Further-

Lynda Rucker

more, although I'm happy to embrace the term 'feminist' (although I suspect that by some standards, I am a very very bad feminist indeed), I don't like identity politics and I don't align myself primarily with feminist causes, but instead see feminism as part of a larger striving for social justice, inclusion, and equality. From that standpoint, you could even say that gender parity allows people to drop the ball—we'll all be so busy congratulating ourselves on our great experiment in gender equality that we won't notice all the other ignored people continuing to get ignored.

Obviously, me doing this can't solve the problem. But the first convention that announces they're going for 50/50, across the board, will have started to solve it.

- Paul Cornell

Would I attend or participate in cons that have a policy of gender parity? At this stage I can't say—I'm leaning toward yes, I still would, but it would depend a lot on the conversation and atmosphere around the policy and the convention itself. But I'd much rather see programming put together with an eye toward drawing from the largest pool of participants possible, with many different backgrounds and points of view (especially those we hear from less often) instead of a rigorous boy-girl-boy-girl approach to individual panels.

It's great that Paul Cornell proposed this. I think he did so in absolute sincerity and good faith, but it was also a polemical stance—and it often takes polemical stances to get people talking. I'm glad he spoke up, and I'm glad he tried the experiment, and I'm glad that others followed, because these things ought to be attempted and debated. But I won't be glad if this becomes enshrined as some sort of policy that conventions feel obligated to abide by, leaving me and my fellow female-identifying convention participants to be Representative Women instead of actual human beings.



Content vs. Cover

I was rather disturbed by the announcement made by the team running next year's Eastercon that they would be enforcing gender equality on all of their programme items. Until that point I had no idea that there was what appears to be quite a vicious and acrimonious debate on the subject going on within fandom - although I will admit that I enjoy science fiction fandom for the ideas, not for the politics. It all seems a little surprising that we should be taking such a potentially divisive step when there are, I feel, other imbalances that we still need to address.

In my professional life I've had to waste quite a few working hours attending committees for which my only qualification has been the lack of a Y chromosome. Being a woman in science and engineering has meant that I'm automatically in a minority in my workplace and, as a result, often when there is a committee seat to be filled it is deemed that having a female representative would show that 'we' - whichever organisation it happens to be - are taking gender equality seriously. It is deemed irrelevant that I could make much more useful use of the time in doing research, for instance, and therefore increasing the number of science and engineering technical papers written by female authors. Or that I could instead spend the time improving my teaching and supporting and mentoring female students entering a male-dominated profession. No, the important thing is that I am female, not that I have any special knowledge of, or particular interest in, the subject covered by the committee. The fact that I didn't even speak the language in which meetings would be held didn't stop my being appointed to one committee - but it did look good to external agencies that there was gender parity.

From personal experience, then, I would far rather have someone on a committee (or a panel) who wants to be there because they are passionate and knowledgeable about the topic being discussed, not who has been persuaded to be there to even up the numbers. Whether those people identify themselves as men, women, or small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri does not matter to me. I've been told that holding this belief makes me a traitor to my sex and a collaborator in the ongoing oppression of my gender, although I prefer to think of it as being more interested in the contents of the book than its cover.

Enforcing gender parity on panels is fair if your volunteer pool is equally divided between male and fe-

male. If this is not the case then a simple application of mathematics suggests that either a) a female programme participant will, on average, be on more items than a male programme participant, or b) the number of programme items will have to be cut in order to maintain the same average workload. After my recent work-related refresher course on the Equality Act 2010 I would think that expecting a particular group to do more work because of their gender might well be frowned upon - although, of course, whoever has the best lawyer wins with something like this and I'm sure that this form of positive discrimination would be claimed to be an essential part of developing fandom. As someone who's spent a lot of her professional time having to do extra work so that an organisation can look good on the equality front I really don't want to start doing the same thing with my recreational time. And as someone who likes to see a broad convention programme I don't want to see it diminished by a lack of appropriately-gendered programme volunteers.

There is another aspect to this that didn't occur to me until I was sitting at dinner one weekend with a group of fans new to the convention scene. I was horrified to hear the thoughts of one of them, and I'm thankful that he's kindly given me permission to share this as I think it's an important point. At his first couple of conventions he'd volunteered as a gopher and had helped out in various departments, and now thought that he was comfortable enough to volunteer to be on programme. Until, that is, he heard the announcement at the bid session. No point in volunteering then, he decided, because no-one was going to be interested in what a straight white middle-aged Christian male might have to say. Still, discouraging male programme volunteers will help even out the gender balance in the volunteer pool so that's okay, isn't it?

I am sure that the people proposing gender parity do so out of the best of motives and I would be happy to sit and discuss the matter with them in the bar. Having been on the receiving end of such policies before, however, I fear that while it will look good on paper it may produce a lot of bad feeling amongst fans. If we've reached gender equality in attendance then wouldn't it be more appropriate to take a more subtle approach to encouraging more female fans to volunteer for all facets of convention operations? Then we might apply our sledge-hammer instead to the improvement of the age and ethnicity distributions in convention membership.

Nik Whitehead

Gender Parity as a Band-Aid Solution

I've followed with interest the debate on gender parity on convention panels. As a woman who has been involved in the science fiction community since the early 1990s I have of course been aware that in general there tend to be more men than women in science fiction fandom. I started out in a science fiction club at the University of Western Australia. There were more men than women, but the women were accepted on their own terms as fans. They fully participated in the club life. They held committee positions in the club. They graduated, went out into the wider world, and started going to, and then running science fiction conventions. I have grown up in fandom in a world of strong, competent women. I have never felt that men have dominated the conventions I have been a part of. So it came as quite a surprise to me to find this debate going on at all. I quite simply thought it wasn't an issue.

I don't think mandatory gender parity on panels is a good idea. When I go to a panel at a science fiction convention I am there to hear about the subject of the panel. I want to be informed or entertained. I don't particularly care about the gender of the people doing the informing and entertaining. I would probably raise an eyebrow if all of the panels I went to were dominated by one gender, but I have never noticed this as in general as a problem with programming. I go to conventions for the science fiction. I trust the committees of these conventions to remember why their members come and to put together an interesting program. I want the panellists to be the best possible people for that panel. I would rather go to a good and interesting panel dominated by one gender than a lacklustre panel with gender parity. I have had the opportunity at many conventions to go to panels and discussions about feminism in SF fandom and I tend not to go. I'm here for the science fiction! Don't forget it's about the science fiction!

As part of this debate I've been hearing about groups that are under-represented in SF fandom. I hear about the greying of fandom and how there are not enough people of colour in the fandom. I've seen

first-hand how a supportive environment for people entering fandom can make all the difference. I came into fandom in a club that welcomed women. It was a university club that is still going strong. I believe a big part of the reason that Western Australia has a young people of both genders coming up to attend, participate in and run conventions is in a large part due to this club. It shows how fandom can positively grow if there is a good entry environment. If this debate was about not having enough young people on panels I'd be saying the same thing – you need to get the people into fandom first. You need to go to the root cause of the problem. If it's not enough young people in fandom you need ways like my first club to draw them in. The same goes for drawing women in. If the women are already there but there's not enough women volunteering for panels committees need to work out why. Perhaps they need to make volunteering more attractive. Perhaps the body of women interested in certain areas needs to be built up.

Whatever the reason for the problem the root cause needs to be found and be addressed. Having a blanket policy of gender parity is putting a band-aid on a problem that seems to run much deeper. It might mean that there are equal numbers of women and men sitting up there, but that's all. And we need more than that! We need the people up there to be interested and interesting. We need them to be informed and informative. We need them to be representative of our fandom. We need to be proud of our conventions, and the panels are the meat and bones of a convention.

So what am I doing about it personally? I'm not a very experienced panellist, but I'm going to volunteer. I'm going to take my expertise and interest and put it out there for all to see. I'm just one person, but if a lot of other single people do the same then gender parity is not going to be a problem. There will still be problems out there, and I don't have the expertise to go after the causes of all of these. But I'm going to do what I can.

Kylie Ding

Practicalities and Philosophies

I first saw the issue of gender parity at panels mooted by Paul Cornell in his Twitter feed, and later expanded on in his blog. Although I understand that he has since retreated from his original proposal to step down from any panel that was not gender balanced and to pull up random women from the audience, the basic theory, from what I understand, remains the same: that panels should have a 50/50 male/female ratio under nearly all circumstances.

I am certainly in favor of convention program planners keeping gender balance in mind, and I think that the recent wave of discussions around this topic has achieved some worthwhile consciousness-raising. However, I suspect that many people involved in the discussions are not fully aware of the constraints involved in creating a convention program. I'd like to address that issue first before going on to the more macro philosophical issue.

In order to assign women to panels, the program staff have to know about women who are attending the convention who want to participate in the program. One primary key in achieving gender balance is to urge female convention attendees to let cons know that they're planning to attend and that they would like to be on program, and for them to indicate the topics in which they are interested. Potential program participants suggesting the names of women who might be interested in talking about a particular subject or who would be a good addition to the program would also help.

I do think we can do a better job of this, as I know that many people (including, unfortunately, some convention runners) think that only authors or people well known in the genre are "qualified" to be on panels. (I once did a Worldcon panel on "Religion and Science Fiction" with James Morrow, Gene Wolfe, and a couple of other authors. Afterward, someone from the audience stopped me to say that she'd enjoyed what I had to say and asked whether my books were available in the Dealers Room. She was totally astounded when I said I was not a writer but a fan.) For larger conventions, other problems arise: Although specialized topics make for good discussions, often the people who are qualified to talk about a

given subject do not split evenly along gender lines. Also, due to gender discrimination in the greater society, unfortunately many topics related to science fiction are still unlikely to have a large pool of women qualified to discuss them.

Putting a large program together is a balancing act, and the variables are not always visible to someone evaluating a program from the outside. For example, the person you might want to add to an item to achieve gender parity might not be available at that time, or might have specifically requested not to be put on a panel with someone else who is extremely qualified to talk about the subject (possibly because s/he has done that panel before with that person :->). Also, potential experts on a given topic sometimes specifically request not to talk about that subject yet again (a common example is "Humor in Science Fiction").

Program staff sometimes also have to achieve balance in other aspects of a panel discussion besides gender. For example, what if on the aforementioned "Religion in Science Fiction" panel you want balanced representation from different religions? Or need to represent several points of view on a contentious subject?

There are also practical hurdles to overcome: Say you've created the first draft of the program, assigning appropriate people to items and assigning items to times. Even if you have been trying to keep gender balance in mind, you're still likely to have unbalanced items. After a review, you'd have to try to find appropriate people in the list of participants for gender balance, and then see whether they are available at the scheduled times or whether you need to reshuffle other items, which has a domino effect. Plus, often responses to an initial schedule mailing indicate that people can't do some items assigned to them, so you'd have to go through the whole exercise again. So much for the practical aspect. Now for the philosophical. Paul's blog entry included this explanation: "To make that happen, what really should be done is a ground-up examination of society, huge changes at the heart of things which would automatically lead to women being equally represented everywhere, not

Janice Gelb

just on convention panels. Well, we've all wanted that and worked for that for decades, especially those of us in fandom, and it just hasn't happened."

Personally, that's not what I've been working for, and I don't think that it's really what many people have been working for. I believe what we've been working for is for women to be considered equally for all positions. Once they are in the pool of qualified people, they should then be equally represented.

I, for one, have not been working to institute a system that would put women on panels who are not as qualified or appropriate to participate as men who either step down from a panel or are moved off a panel to achieve gender balance. Nor have I been

working toward a rigorous quota system that requires program planners to use gender balance as the primary and overriding consideration when creating an overall convention program (as I understand the 2013 Eastercon program coordinators are attempting).

The goal toward which I think we should all be working is to create the best and most interesting program for both panelists and audience. I don't think that a 50/50 gender quota requirement is in the best interests of either the audience or the panelists, or of some of the women who will be uncomfortable tokens to prove a theoretical point.



Gender Parity – A hot potato or a damp squid?

I recently attended Olympus, the British National Science Fiction Convention held over the Easter weekend 2012. I thoroughly enjoyed it, went to lovely and informative panels and generally had a good time discussing my favourite shows and books. So it was with a little bit of bemusement at first and then a bit more irritation that I picked up the somewhat heated discussions raised around gender parity that popped up here and there and cumulated in an outburst at the voting event for next years' Eastercons. I personally have never felt that I was discriminated against in any way on any panel or attending any panel. Yes, there seem to be more boys about than girls, but to me that comes with the territory. And it is not always the case. I have been on many a good item with only a handful of guys, if any. It all depends on the subject matter. So to me this was and dare I say still is not really an issue.

We must not forget how conventions are organised. We rely almost entirely on volunteers. I have had my share of experience in programming and know how difficult it is from the start to get an interesting and informed programme off the ground. You have an idea, or somebody suggests an idea. You say, great, run with it. Who could be on the panel. They come back and have a list of panellists. I am under no illusion that these are probably the person's friends, but as long as it is an interesting bunch, I would not mind. My only question is: Do you have somebody speaking for AND against the subject? Do you have different views on the panel? If all have the same view, then the panel will fall flat and be as boring as watching paint dry. At no point would I ask: Do we have half men, half women on the panel. That is, unless the item is about gender parity or a similar subject that men's and women's views would be opposed. Because if I did, where would I end? If we don't get enough women we cannot do an item on military history (sorry, gals, but you don't seem interested!) or an item on slash fiction in *Blake 7* (Again, sorry guys, but you seem to sit this one out).

But the problem does not simply start or finish with panel items, does it. We have to have a look at our demographic. I still see more guys attending

Eastercon than women. I may be wrong, but that is my impression. Therefore, I am not at all surprised to see more guys on the panels. If I go to a media con, especially, let's say a vampire con at the moment, I see more ladies. And funnily enough, there are then more ladies on the panels. (Especially if the discussion is around choosing which Salvatore brother I would and Elena should choose. But as my husband no doubt would say, not relevant here!) The question we have to ask ourselves is not how do we get more of the female Eastercon members onto a panel, even if we have to force the issue, but how do we get more women to attend the con in the first place. A separate subject, I think, which I will definitely address when (yes, it's when, not if) I get around to chair my own Eastercon. Because if you can get your sticky paws on more volunteers, if you get more friendships going in the bar or fan lounge or gopher den, then they will staff the panels the years after!

And one other thing. Where do we stop? If gender parity gets forced through, what about age parity, diversity, religion, sexual orientation, etc? You get the drift. If I have a panel about a book that juxtapositions the ages, I want a variety of ages on the panel. But would I have to care whether they are all male or female? If I discuss a movie about racism, I want to see ethnic diversity on the panel, but I would not be too opposed if they are all middle aged.

My conclusion then as future con chair, am I for gender parity? Yes, it may not seem like it from the above, but in general I am all for it. But it needs to come from the grass roots, in the membership and in the question how we attract more people from all ways of life. I work for a police service. In such a male orientated working environment you get to appreciate gender parity! But would I enforce it at a con? No, I guess I would not. Unless I see grave exceptions, aka a known expert is missed of a panel due to gender, but also age, diversity, etc, I would not step in. If the panel has competent, interesting people and the panel will deliver an interesting argument then that will be my priority. If we get more women to Eastercon, they will end up on the panels! Trust me, I am a women and I am a panellist!

Sabine Furlong

Aim or Means?

We are talking about panel parity. Equal numbers of men and women on SFF convention panels. Or a shorthand term for the collective effort to achieve that goal.

In the early 1980's, in my first fine flush of careless rapture in and around British SF fandom, it didn't matter to me that most of the people there were men. I was a feminist, but in fandom, for me at that point, gender was irrelevant. The content of the conversation was what mattered: I would talk to or listen to anyone providing they were talking about SF, or talking about the world with SF available for reference. Gender parity? The question did not arise. If it had...

In those years perhaps 10-20% of the people at British cons were women, and many of the women came attached to men: "Oh, I'm only here with my husband/boyfriend – I'm not really very interested in SF." Even when the woman was there for the SF, and there were quite a few us, it was never long before men outnumbered us in any conversation. Once, I sat down to talk to another woman, and twenty minutes later there were two conversations, each involving one woman and several men. Imagine the gender-proportionate panels of those years: with no women at all; a sole woman with nothing to say; or the sole woman with something to say, but always the sole woman.

We needed to do something about that, and so we did. We started having women-only con committees, and active discussion about women in fandom. At the Eastercon in 1982 was founded The Women's Periodical, a British APA* for women only, where women could talk to each other and not be distracted by the men. Oh, the arguments for and against; the hurt of men excluded; the anger of the ideologically opposed; the self-doubt of those not sure there should be a woman-only space in fandom, the range of different reasons for thinking that there should (or should not) be one. But it was this same discussion that we are having now: when the default is male, how and where can women's voices be heard? Fandom changed, and the APA thrived: we women took our fair place (some of us thought, though some said, at times, a disproportionate place) in the conversation. For a long time there seemed no need to have the argument at every convention.

And now we have come to the point where an Eastercon can be 50% female. And now we can press for gender parity on panels because we are truly half the

membership. Should we have it?

My first, surprised answer was "no", because I thought that British SF fandom had no need of it; that we had had this discussion, some years ago, this point had been won without needing to use this particular tactic, and we had moved on. My second answer was also "no", because I still think there are good reasons to have some single-sex spaces on convention panels as well as in other places (and yes, I am still a member of The Women's Periodical). And my third answer was still "no", because for me, all else being equal, the content of the conversation still trumps the gender of the participants.

But at this point I paused, and looked around to the wider world, and discovered (should I have been surprised?) that, still or once again, all else is not equal. There are new British SF fandoms (perhaps not grown out of the old ones?) having this debate. Perhaps new generations in this old fandom have fallen back once again to the male default (it has happened so many times, and I have been busy elsewhere of recent years). Perhaps even within this old fandom we need to have the discussion once again.

Gender parity on panels is not an aim, it is a means. The aim is that both women's and men's voices should be heard and valued, in all the forums where the human conversation takes place. And since this aim is not realised without thought and work and care that it should be so, we may well need this new conversation, and this new tactic, for this new era.

So I changed my mind.

(For the record: There is also the logically-consistent proposal that we should have only all-female panels until the historical imbalance has been redressed. To that proposal I still say "no". There needs to be a degree of balance within each generation. The past has not been fair to women; we will not redress that injustice for a new generation by being unfair to men.)

**APA: Originally an acronym for "Amateur Press Association", coined in the 1890s, and in wide use within sf fandom since the 1930s. An APA is a group of people who periodically produce individual pages or fanzines that are sent to a central administrator for collation and distribution to all members of the group.*

See <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Amateur+Press+Association> for further information.

Caroline Mullan

Hindrance or Help?

Well, the thing with the whole panel parity thing is this: I think it could be as much a hindrance as a help. I think there are places where this is a problem, and there are places where this is not a problem. If it's not a problem, why try to fix it?

The actual attending membership at P-CON in March - by which I mean the bodies that were there on the day(s) - was 84 people, including guests, committee, and attendees. Of these 43 were female, and 41 were male (if we counted one of the ladies as male instead of female, we would have had exactly half and half). I know that I counted the panel speakers, and the number of overall panel appearances, and in both cases the figures were very close to fifty/fifty - something like 47%F / 53%M, but so close that there was no real difference. Whilst it would have been easy to adjust these figures to make everything exactly half and half, what would have actually been achieved by this? One thing that *wouldn't* be achieved, would be having the people I wanted on the panels I wanted them on. I didn't actually look to see if any of the panels were 50/50, but if any of them did end up that way, it would have been as much chance as anything else. But, as far as I'm concerned, I had the people I wanted on the panels I wanted them on, and that was my primary goal. Would the con have been in any way better by imposing a rigid 50/50 policy on it? No, I really don't think it would have been better - quite the opposite, actually, as compromises would have had to be made to address something that none of us see as a problem.

Like yourself, I like working with women on con committees - actually, except for Ted Lee, who's Catie Murphy's husband, all the P-CON committee besides me are female. I'm going to suggest to them - and have already discussed this with Catie - that we specifically *don't* align ourselves with panel parity, because I see no need to do so. No-one has made any issue about issues of gender equality at P-CON - because, quite frankly, I don't really see how they could - but if anyone does, we'll deal with it the very best we can, and publicly if needs be. Adopting PP would actually be *limiting* for us - we've always had a large female attendance, and a good history of female guests, so I really feel that we, at least, have no issue.

Is Gender Relevant?

When I was asked to contribute a few words on the subject of gender parity, my first response was: 'Of course!' I do believe that gender parity is an important issue, but not for the reasons you might think. Although I hope to see a good gender balance on panels at conventions, in the genre press etc., my first thought when looking at panellists - or indeed picking up a book that looks interesting - is not what sex is the author/panellist? That, to me, isn't relevant in the same way as, in the case of programming, a person's qualifications to be on that panel; or, in the case of a novel, what the story is.

For me, the most important aspect of gender parity is why there aren't more women submitting work for publication in our chosen field; why the perception that genre fiction (I'm excluding paranormal romance from this, as the gender balance seems skewed massively to the female author in that particular subgenre - perhaps we should look at gender imbalance there, too?) is more of a 'boys' club' persists. If I'm looking at the programming for a convention, I want to see the most experienced people possible present, regardless of gender - although every effort should be made to see women are represented, it's not always possible to make the balance equal within that criteria, and I'd rather not see 'token women' on anything. It does women, and indeed the audience, no credit.

As an editor, and as a tutor for one of the major 'Home Study' writing courses, specialising in genre fiction, the majority of submissions and assignments come from male authors. To me, that is what we should be looking at - why do women feel genre fiction in particular (unless it's the slightly more acceptable 'dark fantasy' or 'paranormal romance') is for the boys? As a child, I read horror fiction, crime fiction, science fiction, pretty much anything I could get my hands on *except* romance (which I could never get on with; I can understand it being part of a story, just not the whole reason for one). Not once did I look at or think about whether a man or a woman wrote the story. And I didn't understand why it wasn't 'nice' for me to read the darker stories. I still don't. Until we manage to address that point, the argument will go on. For me it's not a matter of 'gender parity', as such. I just don't see that gender is relevant when reading a book, or listening to a professional talking about a subject I'm interested. The matter being spoken about, or the story contained within a piece of fiction, is what's important; not the sex of the person writing or speaking.

Pádraig Ó Méalóid

Marie O'Regan

Let's Be Sensible...

Achieving parity is something we tend to think of as a good thing, except when selecting our dentists, airline pilots etc, where excellence is a prerequisite. Gender and racial parity are examples that we've all been sensitised to, but we might also consider class and age parity, for example.

Let me be upfront here. I really do think that gender parity, the latest cause of fannish argument, is very important. In my fifties now, I have watched views on feminism and equality shifting, not only in popular culture but in feminist circles and academe too. I can understand this. My views have also shifted over the years. In my twenties I knew that equality had been achieved - all we had to do was be brave enough to reach out and grab the opportunities. In my thirties it became terribly clear that gender equality was a sham, at least for those women who wanted to have children. In my forties, with vast quantities of ambition and effort, I levered my way back onto the treadmill and now I look on, generally with mildly amused indifference, as age prejudice steams towards me, overtaking gender issues on the bend.

Yes, it's important! Women should have a say. Men should have a say. Transgendered people should have a say. What some people seem to have got confused about is how best to do this. In my opinion the overall representation should be fifty / fifty; that is, around about the same number of women should be on programme as men - but let's be sensible. Doing this on a panel by panel basis can lead to poor panels. For example, there tends to be a gender bias in some panels. Take two panels, one on knitting and fabric arts in SF and one on weapons in SF. There will be a range of genders interested in each panel. You can almost certainly find a man who is passionate about fabric arts and a woman who has a consuming fascination with SFnal weapons and both these people ought to be asked to contribute, assuming that they can speak eloquently on their chosen subject. And there we have the proviso. The aim of the panel is not gender parity, it is an amusing, entertaining or edu-

cational discussion. If you can achieve gender parity without weakening the panel you should by all means do so, but the gender of the panelist should never be the deciding factor.

For each panel we should be looking for people who are knowledgeable about the subject, people who can be entertaining about the subject, a group who can work in a balanced way together, someone who can moderate competently and then gender/race/age parity. If we end up with seven people who fit all these criteria to go on a five person panel then it would be a good thing to aim for parity but only after all other boxes have been ticked.

The level that we should be aiming for is overall parity for the entire convention and it shouldn't be an imposed quota. Perhaps the best thing to do is put together a rough idea of who should be on each panel and see how this comes out overall. At this level it is a much easier task and shouldn't lead to stupidly skewed/dull panels.

Of course, we perhaps need to go back a step and look at who is volunteering for programme. Some of us are quite keen to, others less so. There is a risk that we end up with the same old people maundering through the same old subjects. Perhaps we could think about how to change this, because without a pool of good female programme volunteers gender parity will lead to less good programme.

Finally, I know that this is obvious but, for goodness sake, people are doing this stuff out of the goodness of their hearts and are doing the best that they can, bringing their own formidable talents to bear. Having one woman attack another because she is not sufficiently hard core feminist is not the ideal way to get and keep competent women in the con-runner ranks and without women at this level the professional feminists amongst us can complain all they like, gender parity will disappear or come to us as the gift of the men.

The name is Pernicious, Pernicious Bacon.

I am interested to see so many people think and comment on gender parity. I must admit I have already been on a journey with it. When it came up (Paul Cornell's idea that is) I was in agreement with what he was talking about, but then I am a comics fan and know in comics fandom there is an atrocious deficit when it comes to women whether it be in the industry, on convention panels, or on guest lists. And I hate it. There is no rhyme nor reason.

So it made sense. With SF conventions, I was unsure and wavered one way and the other.

Then I realised I was thinking about this wrongly. I wasn't imagining the problem as I see it, and considering solutions or ideas, or creating concepts and thoughts that would deal with a problem, like I normally do. So I did.

There is an awful lot right with SF conventions, just as there is an awful lot wrong with comic conventions - even the ones run by women, such as Kapow, or even my favourite British convention, Thought Bubble, again run by ladies, which even last year they had the basic 'women in comics' panel, but SF cons...

SF cons are not at all bad places, and to be honest I came to realise that if any person had been discriminated against at an SF convention for being something (well apart from being an arsehole of course) for any reason, then that not only would be wrong, but it could be very easily highlighted. I also doubt many of the chairs of say, Eastercon, in the 21st century would allow such discrimination. Who would? Although yet it might happen sub consciously. How to avoid that, think positive.

SF conventions are very lucky, they have loads of people turn up who want to participate, including authors, scientists, creators, editors, publishers, artists, and fans, many of whom are drawn from the membership of the convention, and then cons have their GOH's as well as being able to extensively invite external speakers for specific items.

To be honest, with the fun cons that myself and Stef ran, ten years ago, it was the skill, ability or

knowledge that the person possessed that mattered, whether it be the British Chess Federation secretary, or piercers, or a person in psychic contact with aliens. Well they could be psychics in touch with aliens for all we cared, let alone male or female or otherwise. And anyhow we had tin foil hats to protect us from the messages.

I thought about how one could broaden participation, and realised that we, or I should say some, programmers are victims of their own actions. This may be because they apply an analytical or perhaps scientific approach, which may be too rigid, one needs to be creative and inventive as well.

For instance, programming 'popular people' whether it be Charlie Stross or John Coxon on many items is not good for the old participant pool. Also I would prefer four really good panels with Stross on them, rather than ten mediocre ones where he carries them.

Cons are very lucky that so many professionals attend, who are so willing to give up their time. Many love the genre as fans, and programme teams can never truly express the gratitude that is due. Yet, I think though that no one except the Guests of Honour should get to be on the programme automatically, simply because of who they are.

If a convention wants to have as diverse and interesting a programme as possible, this relies upon getting a wide variety of programme volunteers, recommendations and suggestions.

Uh-huh. Pernicious struck!

Encouragement. Why can conventions not encourage people to volunteer to join up as participants, maybe people who haven't considered it, or maybe are not within the 'fandom' net that we know, or who for whatever reason are not participants?

People could be encouraged to sign up as participants, especially those with a different angle, perspective, or experience to offer. Britain is such a diverse country, and in my mind all con programmers surely want to reflect that diversification. Of course an easy statement is to say that all con people should

James Bacon

be in charge of that, but I would disagree, I think a team of people, listeners, quiet and thoughtful, who watch and see, should reconnoitre and gently suggest, be it with a business card, or some quiet words, that they would be excellent on programme. Or in some cases it may be to point others within the team at them who they might be good to chat to.

Everyone is different and we should treat people the way they need, to make them feel welcome. Not evangelists, but rather thoughtful and positive, but happy to take no as an answer.

We should look beyond our safety zone, outside the convention circuit wire, beyond comfort, out at other events, and festivals, at other media, and invite, have the courage to invite. An item I cherish is a letter from J.K. Rowling; she turned down an invitation to a children's programme that I was running for Worldcon, as it clashed with a previously made engagement, BUT I ASKED, I didn't assume she would say no, or decide for her, I made the effort.

That can be hard sometimes, but I think it's worth it.

Of course there is a real issue, and a misconception is that only experienced or experts need apply. This is unhealthy and I can understand why it might be the perception. Yet as a creative type, as someone who uses their imagi-

nation to come up with ideas rather than a scientifically based tick box type, I think that it is easy to define 'best' as whoever I think at that time would be right for the panel, but that for the more analytical it is very hard to define who is the 'best' for any given panel. An example perhaps.

At Olympus, the 2012 Eastercon, there was a panel with Melissa Taylor, who had only known the subject eight months, had never been on a panel before, was young, was not a public speaker and the tick box world that many possess would fail what YOU or some programme experts consider is best, but she was best for that panel, and the best panellist. Melissa was the BEST panellist.

An exciting programme will challenge many norms, perceptions, expectations and make one think, so I do not understand why people are not asked to NOT disqualify themselves. Of course a convention wants experts, authors, professionals, people with experience and really need all of those people to sign up but why do some people decide for themselves that they are not suitable? This seems wrong, yet no

one publicly says anything, so isn't it easy to say to people not to rule themselves out.

Also, couldn't a con accept recommendations so when a convention member has seen someone, knows someone, reckons someone would be amazing, let the programmers know, and even with their details. Then the programmes can politely ask them if they would like to make a contribution. That's all they can do, ask. Not evangelise, or press or hassle, just ask politely and nicely.

Some people wonder 'why' they have been asked onto programme, and after working on convention programmes in earnest for twenty years now, I know it is because the programme team WANT that person to be on it, because they feel you will add to the discussion. Yet again another losing point, and

I think that participants who are unsure why they have been asked, need to be encouraged to ask, just ask why. The wonderful reply may cause blushes, but isn't that better.

Con runners should not deter any suggestions, or subjects. If con goers wonder why something has not been mentioned, maybe everyone is waiting for that person to say 'what about THIS'. I have spent hours considering ideas and suggestions and trying to bring them to fruition, but knowing there are suitable participants is a

huge help and knowing others want it, is even better.

There is the Teledu approach, allowing people free reign to design and bring their own programme items to the convention. Is there space for this type of activity, or will it cause the control freaks amongst fandom a little seizure?

Diversity is scary. Quotas are shite.

I do not know how long I would remain a programme volunteer, if every time I was asked onto a panel, it was to meet a quota for having 'Johnny Foreigners' represented. In actual fact one would start to doubt why one is being asked at all, and the default that it is to meet the quota would pervade throughout.

We want to enable and encourage and welcome participants to help make cons more diverse and reflective of the country we live in. I think this is hard work, but I also think that a positive and proactive approach, broadening the participant pool and welcoming more people in, will achieve it better than a quota system, and also have none of the potential political hackles raised.



Interesting, Fair, and Respectful

My experience with developing a convention program is at the Worldcon level and is largely logistical rather than creative.

If you want gender parity, you have to give the programming job to someone who is willing to put in the extra work to make that happen. Convention-running is a volunteer job and the programming volunteer may want to spend time focusing on some other aspect of the program. Should there be more focus on local flavor or new writers or classic science fiction or comics or gaming? Should there be more workshops or talks or discussion groups? If the convention chooses to focus on gender parity, there are some program volunteers who will not want to take the job because they will feel they don't have time to do that justice and do the other things they wanted to do with program. There is only so much time a person can spend on volunteer activities. Don't spring it on someone after they have accepted the job.

The gender make-up of the panels starts with the invitation list. Let me say that I think it is a laudable goal to have gender parity in the invitation list for a convention. I also think that convention planners should look at their invitation lists for other biases that could affect the program, not just gender biases.

Most of the time, it is not practical to require exact gender parity in the invitation list. Who the creative team invites is going to come from the people they know or have read or have seen on panels at other conventions. They may not know the gender of the person they want to invite. You may annoy participants by asking them what their gender is. Not everyone invited is able to come, so the list of participants is not 100% predictable. If this list does not have an equal number of males and females, it should be up to the convention and the creative team what to do about it based on their goals. I do think it is important for convention-runners to ask the question – am I showing a bias or prejudice, am I treating people well? If a convention has a gender imbalance in the participants, as an attendee you do not know

everything that went into generating the list. It does not necessarily mean there is a bias, so attendees should be thoughtful about how they inquire about it. It is good to make helpful suggestions rather than assuming the planners are showing a bias. Respect for others is a key – as a planner and as an attendee.

As a panel attendee, I am more interested in the fact that people are articulate and listen to the other panelists as well as express their own opinions rather than their gender. The panels I attend often have gender parity or more females than males on the panel, but I don't know if that is just because of the topics I am interested in.

I want the panels to be interesting.

I want people to be treated fairly by the convention.

I want to go to conventions where both convention-goers and convention-runners are respectful of each other.



Ruth Leibig

A Good Start

Gender parity in con programming is an issue I'm very passionate about. It's also one that I understand is complex and isn't going to be achieved simply through policy change. The discussion that has arisen as a result both of Paul Cornell's declared stance and from conventions advertising their intent to work towards gender parity has raised awareness of the issue and that is a good thing.

Women exist. We attend conventions, we read fiction, we write fiction, we watch fiction, we publish fiction, we critique fiction. We are here. We've been here for a while actually and it doesn't look like we're going away any time soon. We add value. We add depth and breadth and diversity. We are often the more qualified panellist and the more successful or interesting. We should be on programming panels. To have otherwise is a disservice to creating an interesting and vibrant convention programme. And to constantly produce convention programmes year after year with a dearth of women speaks more about the programme than it does about the pool of potential panellists to engage.

That said, there are many complicating factors contributing to the status quo. Having recently chaired a convention and worked closely with my programmer, I understand how difficult it is to deliver a programme with a gender balance. Doing so requires those working on it to be actively and continuously conscious of the balance, or lack of, as the programme unfolds and be willing to constantly correct. If this issue is not one of importance to those involved, it would be very easy for that disparity to occur.

Women have been treated poorly for a long time in relation to programming (where I'm from) and many are reluctant, and disillusioned, to now come forward and volunteer. Others have believed the negative feedback they have received from less welcoming con attendees and panellists and feel they have nothing to offer a discussion, even when they are the best suited to speak on the topic. Others still tend to be the only women consistently asked for panels and find themselves having to turn down programming requests due to time constraints. Gender parity cannot be achieved simply by having the same three women sit on every other panel. We ran a sign up form from our convention website for panellists to submit panel ideas and volunteer for programming. In our case, far more men volunteered and even asked to

be added to panels they had not been programmed on (for example, writing in to suggest they would be a more suitable addition to the line up) than women. In order to increase the presence of women on the programme, we actively approached women and called on networks of women to suggest appropriate women for panel topics. We achieved a much more balanced programme but we did so because it was important to us that we have gender parity.

After this convention I sat in on some meetings with previous programmers (all men) who were brainstorming for future con programming. Almost without fail, the programmers suggested men who they knew who would be suitable for topics and themes being considered. It was only with prompting that they would search to think of women who would also be appropriate and contribute to discussion. It makes sense that programmers will turn to people they know or are familiar, and people they've worked with previously to fill slots at the last minute. But if the programmers are men and if those men mostly interact with men, then the status quo will continue unchanged without external factors to prompt a shift in the way things are done.

But programmers aren't the only members of a sf convention and they aren't solely responsible for the status quo. As a woman on a panel, there is nothing more frustrating (or time wasting) than being ignored or spoken over or belittled during discussion. This has happened to me more than once and in situations where I have been the more qualified panellist to speak to the topic. I have spent entire panels fighting for my sound bites to contribute to discussion and I have also been on others where any contributions I've made have been ignored by the other panellists who wait until I finish speaking before continuing, refuse to acknowledge I spoke or to enter into discussion with me. There are now men whom I politely decline to be on panels with because I do not wish to repeat that kind of experience. That can really throw a spanner in the works for programming, especially for particular niche topics.

Programmers can programme women onto panels but that doesn't guarantee the discussion will have gender parity. It doesn't guarantee the panel won't be hijacked or derailed. And I am hesitant to think that the only thing that needs to shift is the programming of women onto panels. It is, though, a good start.

Alisa Krasnostein

Approaching Gender Parity as a Realist and a Slacker

I'll preface all of this by remarking that I run programming for a small convention in its second year. We didn't do so well at gender parity in our first year, in part because of the imbalance in local genre authors, and in part because our late cancellations skewed female. I was aware of it, but with the rest of the committee asking me to limit the number of badges I gave out and the lateness of the cancellations, there really wasn't much to be done.

This year, I'm approaching things with deliberate attention to gender parity. I don't think it reasonable to expect a perfect balance in either the program in general or on each particular program item, but it is reasonable to expect it to be close. Most panels should be close to even, including most of the marquee panels, and the overall use of the panelists should have roughly the same gender divide as the list of panelists. To prevent a large disparity resulting from a weighted list of panelists, I'm attempting to invite similar numbers of male and female panelists. I'm discounting the Guests of Honor from my invitation calculus, as those invitations are a matter of whole-committee discussion, rather than something I'm individually responsible for. So far, it's a fairly close divide. I'm looking at something like 16/14 as the split in invitations, which is about as good as we can expect for this size convention. I already know of two declined invitations that are going to make that ratio worse, but you expect not to get a "yes" from everyone.

(Aside: I know some cons get most of their panelists from volunteers among the membership, but that isn't feasible for us, or for most local conventions. On top of that, we're in an area of the US where our older fan-run conventions didn't spring out of the existing traditions of SF cons in other parts of the country, but made up a lot of their practices as they went. The result tends to mean differences in terminology from some places, the distinct lack of a green room, a relatively high budget for the consuite, and programs dominated by writers. We are only gradually seeing the tradition of fans being on one or two panels while attending, and especially on those

not designated as "fan panels", develop.)

The way I see it, the best way to approach this issue is to consider it as one of several values we use in constructing a program. Managing a convention such that there were precisely the same number of male and female participants with precisely the same number of seats on panels going to male and female panelists would require almost enough attention to detail to require an extra staff member just to handle it (or good software, but we're programming on the scale where it's honestly easier to do it by hand). It's trivially easy to invite similar numbers of male and female participants, and trivially easy to examine whether male and female participants are receiving similar number of panel seats. By contrast, making sure that an equal number attend in general and as near to equal a number as possible sit on each panel would be maddeningly time-consuming.

The important thing here is to not unthinkingly build a program which is badly imbalanced while acknowledging that you're going to have slight imbalances for any reasonable level of effort you put into this. In most places, it's trivially easy to get close to parity, so we should put in that effort. But if you make an honest effort and still wind up with some disparity, due to bad luck in who had to drop or decline, don't sweat it. Gender parity can be achieved, or at least approximated, with only a small amount of effort on the part of those responsible for programming. Perfect parity seems like a hard goal to reach, but getting near enough – treating panelists with the same consideration irrespective of gender, having similar levels of representation on panels irrespective of time of day and likely popularity, and inviting similar numbers of male and female panelists in the first place – is fairly easy. Doing these things is likely to make fandom a fairer and more welcoming place, which I see as an admirable goal. (Going the route of rigid enforcement of gender parity, however, is likely to make the programming staff a bunch of cranky, argumentative burnouts.) Since doing well at this is easy, and likely to have desirable results, I find it a reasonable goal to set for ourselves.

Warren Buff

An Impossible Goal?

On the surface, the Gender Parity On Panels pledge seems like an unworkable concept. If you've ever actually had to put a panel together you're likely to get the screaming heebie-jeebies at the very thought of it - "So first I have to think of a niche-yet-somehow-also-popular topic that isn't just a rehash of a panel we ran last year or a panel another con did last month. Then I have to find three to five experts on what is, as I have already said, a niche topic (bonus points if some of those people are actually eloquent. Double bonus points if they're eloquent while sober!). Then I've just got the minor difficulty of persuading these experts to actually turn up to my con. With any luck one of them will have had some experience with herding cats, so I'll make them the moderator. Oh, and I also have to make sure that I haven't scheduled a guest on simultaneous panels, and allow them to get some of that "food" stuff I hear is so popular nowadays. But that's not enough for you? Even though you acknowledge these panelists are experts in their field or big name draws or eloquent or at the very least tend to bloody turn up on time, you want me to go looking for someone else? NO NO NO NO NO NO NO!"



Hysterical tears (or a sarcastic bark of laughter, if that's more your thing) are a completely rational response to the request for Gender Parity on panels. And at first glance the concept even seems unnecessary. After all, this is the 21st Century! It's not as if anyone is deliberately keeping women away. Surely as long as the con has a generally welcoming environment towards women, they'll just turn up on panels. Like mushrooms in a field (translation for city folk: "like Starbucks franchises").

Except that hasn't happened, has it? Although women make up over 50% of the population, that fact is not mirrored in panel demographics. Because women experts are often overlooked by organisers, because women don't tend to put themselves forward as being experts, and because even when asked to be on a panel, women have been conditioned to shuffle their feet and say they don't know enough.

Of course, this is not a problem unique to Fandom. And it seems a tad unfair to make con runners responsible for solving millennia-old inequalities. But the reality is this issue is not going to go away. And it shouldn't. This is the 21st Century, and the fact that it's still rare for a con panel to have two women on it is, quite frankly, horrifying. The "where's my jet-pack" issue pales in comparison to "women aren't considered worthy to talk about sea monsters for an hour".

Thanks to social networking tools like Facebook and Twitter (and let's be kind and include Google+ too), it has never been easier to rustle up an expert on short notice. And that's even assuming that doing a simple Google search doesn't bring up a pre-prepared list of women experts in whatever field you're looking for (Maura McHugh's oh-so-handy "Women In Comics In The UK/Ireland" list springs to mind).

The Gender Parity On Panels pledge may seem like an impossible goal. But the bloke who came up with PayPal just sent a rocket into space. Impossible goals only seem that way until they have been achieved. And when your con has achieved gender parity on panels... well, someone will probably complain that a con they were at last month did it better, AND had free Wi-fi. But I'll be proud of you.

Carol Connolly

SF Conventions and Gender Equity

Emma J. King and Helen Montgomery sent me a most interesting link to Paul Cornell's announcement about gender equity on sf convention panels. Basically he is for it and considers it one of the most important, if not the most important, issue involved in planning panels. In his opinion, there must be an equal number of men and women on each panel, or if there are panels with odd numbers of panelists, the overall numbers of men and women must match. Emma and Helen asked me to comment on this. Does this policy make sense? Is it the most important issue in panel planning? Does the audience care? I have to say I come down firmly on the fence.

First, as a program planner, having Mr. Cornell step down from a panel I put him on in favor of some unknown women willing to talk about the subject, I have to say I object. We don't just throw people on panels and there may be reasons why certain people are or aren't considered. What if all the other panel members don't ever again want to be on a panel with the volunteer? What if she dominates the conversations, is only there to shill her books and doesn't even know the topic? What if I've carefully balanced the panel based on non-gender factors such as political affiliation, attitude towards the exploration of space or the green movement? Now he's just taken it on himself to rearrange all that and possibly circumvent the panel I had in mind. It may be better, it may be not. But it's not what the planners had in mind. Also, how does the con know that Ms. Unknown did any panels if we didn't assign her to them? Does she just walk up and tell someone "Oh, by the way, I did all Paul Cornell's panels because he wanted a woman on them?" Liability raises its extremely ugly head. As the programming chair, I say "Prove it." As Ms. Unknown, what do I say? "But I did, ask Paul?"

I do agree that some panels are heavily male-centered. Just look at the average military sf panel. Now I know many women who avidly read and enjoy military sf, understand both the science and the tactics, and may be more qualified to talk about life as a grunt than many men. So I'd look for that woman on the panel. But I wonder how to get gender-parity on the paranormal romance panel. I don't know any guys who read that. Maybe I don't know the right guys, but what would I do to balance out such a panel? Thinking more about this panel I wonder what would I really be trying to do. Balance chromosomes or balance attitudes and experiences? Which is more important? Which is more interesting? I don't feel

that women are really heavily outnumbered on panels on the whole and have sat on many heavily male panels, and even moderated some. I outshouted the men who wouldn't let me talk, and as moderator, reined them in and demanded that they let the woman (short guy, quiet person, etc.) speak. Maybe we just need louder women and short guys.

I also question the blunt male/female split. Do we really want gender equality or sexuality equality? Do we want chromosomes on the panel or experiences? Because the average Y-chromosome has pretty much the same experience as any other Y-chromosome. But a straight man has a very different experience from a gay one or a bi-sexual one, let alone a transgendered one. Same with the females. So do we balance the panel by saying we need one straight guy, one gay man, one lesbian and one bisexual woman? Interesting, but how would the program planner ever find out all this?? I for one would never think of including on a panelist questionnaire "straight woman." It's just not what I think of. When I'm thinking of panels, either to be on or to fill, I usually think of what the person has done, what kind of books has the person written, what did the person do in NASA, is the person really a survival expert? And most of all, can the person talk about it and be interesting, exciting and not take over and keep everyone else from talking? Then I may consider gender. Or I may not.

One thing I do see when I walk into the average sf panel room is the lack of color. I can count on my hands the number of people of color who even attend the sf cons I attend, much less speak on panels, and still have fingers left over. Isn't this as great a problem as gender? Why aren't people of color attending and speaking? For a genre that involves meeting the most outrageous aliens possible, it's a strangely white group. I know there have been panels on this but really, why are the con panels so white? Why are the cons so white? Isn't this imbalance equally as bad as the gender one? Should we concentrate on just one issue? Does the man/woman balance insure more variability on the panel than a white/not-white one would? Are the qualifications of a male highly published author so much more different from a woman author than a white panelist's are from a non-white panelist's? Or is it just easier to try to balance DNA and not look deeper and see what makes a great panel and then go out and try to put together that panel?

Pat Sayre McCoy

Perception and Reality

My first forays into fandom were as different as you could imagine.

On the one hand, I was writing short stories and drawing illustrations for fanzines in Robin of Sherwood fandom in the early 1990s. Media fandom then (as now) was predominantly female. The convention staffers were women, the fanzine editors were female, and my fellow contributors were, for the most part, other women. The handful of spouses, sons, gay men, and the incredible rare fannish guy who wrote fan fiction or illustrated fanzines were so rare as to be called unicorns. It took several cons before I even interacted with more than a handful.

At the same time that I was discovering small fan-run media cons in the Midwest, I also began attending Chicago Comic Con (which would become WizardWorld). There was a gender-flipped mirror of media fandom, where I was a lone woman in a sea of men of all ages.

In both cases, I simply accepted the apparent norm: that media fandom was something more women than men engaged in, while comics fandom was something more guys than ladies took part in.

Then as I grew up and out of my late teens and early 20s, I started questioning why.

Why were so many stereotypes of fandom male in the media, when all of my personal experiences with fandom involves women?

Why were comics perceived as a boy's club, no girls allowed, when in actuality many young women of my generation were passionate about mainstream superhero comics?

It has always been a generational issue, the slow change between accepting and internalising perception, versus recognising and adapting to reality.

The reality is, while the fan fiction authors are predominantly women, that does not mean there are not young men out there, writing just as furiously and passionately.

The reality is, the popularity and availability of translated manga and anime has brought an entire generation of young women into comics fandom, to the point where the crowds on a convention floor are thronged with mothers and daughters there for their own sake, not simply accompanying sons and boy-friends.

As the decades have gone by, and I approached my late 30s, I became increasingly aware that fandom

is in many ways a self-selected, self-built construct. I engage primarily with female fans online and off; so for me, in my experience, fandom remains predominantly female. But that is because I choose to engage in women's spaces. LiveJournal, where my friend's list is exactly that: a list of friends I selected to read, who remain primarily women. Talking with other women.

However, I continually slam up against the wide chasm of my perception of reality, versus the wider reality of both the world and the internet.

And in the wider world, many of the men of my same generation cling just as fiercely to *their* perceptions, formed by *their* own experiences, which do not always match up with reality.

In their reality, it is often the case that having one woman on a panel discussion at a convention means they have included all women.

In their reality, because they engage primarily with other men, that women are scarce or invisible, regardless of the number of women standing directly in front of them, waving their arms high above their heads, clamouring for recognition and attention.

It is a world where a female fan asking a question at a panel at the largest comic book convention on the planet has, by virtue of existing and speaking up, allowed herself to be mocked and chastised, silenced and disregarded as an outlier, an aberration, a voice to be drowned out.

It is a world where regardless of several profitable action/adventure film franchises with a female lead, a comics editor in chief can say without guile or cynicism that no female character in the history of his company's canon could possibly headline a summer blockbuster, nor would any actor of her generation draw the necessary crowds, despite any solid facts to the contrary.

It is a world where we often have to wait for the *next* generation of fans to hold the keys to the kingdom, for popular culture to acknowledge the reality we have already been living in *for a decade or more*.

It is a world where men still argue the lack of hard SF in television and film, while women triumph the unexpected golden age of scripted speculative fiction on the air around the world, after droughts of reality television, news magazines, and clones of the same old cops, lawyers, and doctors we grew up with.

Because we do not see the world through the

Tara O'Shea



same lens.

Because we do not surround ourselves with the same friends.

Because we can stand in the same space, engage in the same activities, purchase the same goods and services, and *still* be rendered invisible.

For me, the issue of gender parity within fandom--both accepting it, seeking it out, striving for it, and recognising it where it does exist, is a constant battle between perception versus reality. A never-ending (it often feels) demand that culture not just change, but *recognise* the changes which have already taken place, and continually welcome, support, and embrace change where we find it--or the lack of it.

After nearly 20 years of attending comics book conventions, I can still remember the feeling that moved me almost to tears when I went to a panel in 2008 on DC Comics newly-minted children's imprint, where not only were nearly all of the panellists women, but one of them included a young woman cosplaying Supergirl.

That feeling was me realising that something I could never imagined when I was her age, taking place right in front of me. And no-one thought it out of place, because it was so firmly a part of their reality.

There has been back-sliding. There has been in-fighting. The world of fandom is not perfect, nor will it ever be because it is a microcosm of the wider world which struggles with the same issues on a much less geek-centric scale.

But striving for equality and parity--not just in numbers, but in the way women and girls are treated by the media they consume, by the fans with whom they choose to engage, by the way they are represented in fiction and reality--can **never** be futile. Demanding it can **never** be negative. Creating it every chance we get can never **not** be a worthy goal.

Even if it takes another 20 years for me (and you) to see and recognise it.

Do The Math

Paul Cornell has called for a 50/50 male/female balance on all convention programs. In fact, he said that if he found himself on a panel with more men than women, he would recuse himself from the panel and invite a woman from the audience to take his place.

My response is as follows:

Gender parity is reasonable as a general goal, though I suspect there are panels where it would not be desirable, especially those specifically dealing with gender. It is also not achievable to the degree of precision Cornell wants (see below).

For starters, panels are small enough that one would not achieve parity even if the genders were selected by coin flips. On a four-person panel, there is a 1-in-8 chance of a 4-0 split, a 3-in-8 chance of a 2-2 split, and a 4-in-8 chance (or 1-in-2) of a 3-1 split.

As civil disobedience, Cornell's proposal makes perfect sense. But as civil disobedience, it also involves taking the consequences. In this case, that would probably include never being chosen to be on panels in the first place. Why should a committee work to put someone on a panel if there is a good chance that not only will they drop off the panel at the last minute, but that they will also put someone on the panel that the committee had possibly already decided not to.

One may also argue that while dropping off a panel is a reasonable form of protest, attempting to put someone else on is not, since that is coercing another person into your protest, perhaps without their actually realizing it.

In addition, there are any number of reasons why Cornell's approach can make things worse:

- What happens when person A says they don't want to be on a panel with person B and this is respected by the committee, but then Cornell decides to drop off and invites B to replace him? Person A is likely to stop volunteering to be on panels at that convention.

- Why (and how) is the convention supposed to know the gender of all the panelists? There are a lot of popular authors, artists, etc., who have pseudonyms. Even if one person knows their genders, it is not clear that the person tweaking the schedule will.

- If the committee has to have all balanced panels, they will have even more problems than usual with the difficult time slots: early morning, the first few time slots of the convention, and the last few time slots of the convention.

- Even if the convention puts together a balanced panel, what happens when some panelists fail to show up? Is the convention supposed to try to re-construct a balanced panel on the fly? Let the panelists do it themselves?

- Not to mention that applying Kant's Categorical Imperative, if all the men on the panel do what Cornell suggests, then you end up with a *really* unbalanced panel!

If someone wants to see a different demographic on panels, he has several options:

- he can volunteer to work on programming
- he can send suggestions to the convention for people to put on panels to achieve a better balance
- he can look at his panel assignments when he gets them ahead of time, withdraw from whatever panels he wants, and even *suggest* to the convention a replacement

Civil disobedience is supposed to be one of the last tactics used, not the first. Is there any evidence that Cornell has tried any of these alternative approaches?



Evelyn Leeper

A Letter To My Daughter, Samantha

June 1, 2012

You're going to be two years old in just over a month. What a world you're entering. Your father has been asked to stop drawing and painting for a few minutes, and present a written perspective on gender parity at science fiction/fantasy conventions. Hopefully by the time you read this, this issue will be dusty trivia. For now, since I've been asked, let's face this issue head-on, as best we can.

By the time you read this, many years in this future, hopefully you'll understand that your world is not necessarily fair. It doesn't necessarily offer tender mercy when you most need it. Hopefully, your mother and I will equip you well enough to face the toughest adversities of your own time. One thing I hope you've begun to learn is to think beyond yourself, and understand that you're part of a greater world fabric. It's a fine balance between finding the best for yourself, and doing the best for the world around you. That's one of life's greatest and toughest journeys.

To the issue of gender parity on *sf/f* conventions – in the distant past when I'm writing this, there's been a lively discussion, largely prompted by my good friend Paul Cornell, wherein some say that females are not represented on *sf/f* discussion panels, and perhaps in some cases are overlooked because of their gender. Paul took a stance saying that he would give his chair to a female on a panel if he saw that less than 50% of the panelists were female. He's a good and well-intentioned man. I suspect many will emulate him.

I understand his mission and his point, but I have questions. What about the paying audience who paid registration fees to see him on a panel, when he was promoted to be there? What are their thoughts, as he walks away as the panel begins, after they've spent time and money to see him? And when he steps

away, does the new panelist automatically bring something fresh and vital to the discussion that improves the value of the panel, sans Paul?

Ah, yes. I see that look. There's no guarantee there, is there? OK. Let's not worry about guarantees. Put that aside. After all, we've raised you to not seek guarantees.

OK – let's approach the situation in a different way. What if the onus of that decision is taken out of Paul's hands, and what if these decisions are made

by a programming director of a convention? So now the programming director presumably puts the gender math of the panels as a priority above even the overall quality of the outcome. Questionable, but don't dismiss it. Let the notion play out. So again -- do we have a better set of programming because of that math? Aren't these programmes where the lifeblood of a con's hopes, dreams, and ideas flow? Is this the best route to the best result for all?

Still tricky, isn't it? OK. Now shift your focus. Move the discussion to a more wide-angle view. Perhaps Paul's absence may or may not improve the value of a momentary discussion, but does his decision suddenly allow a new female voice to take his chair and flourish not only for that event but for future considerations too? Does that new voice take the opportunity and proceed to become a vital part of the *sf/f* discussion in the future? I guess we also have to ask, in full objectivity – is Paul's gender necessarily 'blocking' that female from having that opportunity?

Does Paul perceive that there are women tapping him on the shoulder to step out of the way? It's possible. But whether he does or not, he's choosing to step aside in a deliberate fashion, in certain situations.

Paul's an awfully gifted and unique human, and



John Picacio

very difficult to replace by anyone. It's very debatable whether he's 'in the way' of someone else, but if he is, and if all males are, I'm genuinely curious to see the talent that should be replacing him in these situations.

As for myself, I haven't perceived the same. The facts are that I've fought, scrapped and earned my place for consideration on discussion panels, by simply working my tail off, and knowing my business, backwards and forwards. When I started out, I didn't have the advantage of living in a large-market city or being bolstered by industry insiders or major PR campaigns. I just worked, and when I that failed, I continued to work. But now we're back to that tough part – when it comes to participating as a visible professional at sff conventions, do I now put all that I've earned aside, and my own professional aspirations, in the hopes of achieving an intangible, unguaranteed greater good that allows new female voices to possibly make themselves heard on discussion panels and perhaps even in art shows?

So now you're starting to see, aren't you? We have to ask ourselves if the issue of gender parity actually improves the quality of the panels and art shows, when it's applied as a policy of imposed ratio. Questionable, I know. So many variables.

And then we have the question of who enforces this? Do we police ourselves or do we allow others to police us? Ah. Now that's a more clearcut answer. I hope your mother and I have long since instilled that one in you, by the time you read this. Answer: You police yourself. And that's often a difficult thing to do.

And that's what I'm about to do.

Despite my professional and personal affection for the World Science Fiction Convention in Chicago, I'm going to forego all participation in programming as well as all art show participation in the 2012 Worldcon, for the days that I attend it. I'm not waiting for a programming department or art show coordinator to make that decision. It's up to professionals to be accountable, and decide for themselves what is best.

I'm hoping that by doing so, I'm investing in opportunity and hoping that vibrant female artist voices will fill my chair, and that this field that I love will be the better for them, in the long run.

Will I do this at every convention? No. This is a one-year, one-con experiment. I'm giving Worldcon in Chicago the opportunity because I believe that just because I don't understand something completely doesn't mean it's not true, or doesn't exist. I'm going to step aside and give the process a chance to bear productive fruit. So I'm foregoing my seats on all programming, and my panel space in the Art Show for this year, and let's see if we all win from that. I'm confident

that the advocates of this process will capitalize upon this opportunity, and I look forward to experiencing previously-unheard viewpoints.

Do I think all pros should follow suit and do the same? I wouldn't say that. I think what I'm doing is a gesture and again, an experiment. I want to see what happens. I'm curious. It's my choice -- not a mandate imposed upon me, or a choice that I expect anyone else to follow.

One final note to you, Samantha –by the time you read this, I hope your mother and I have helped you shape and hone one of your best traits – your fearsome will and independence. Lean upon it in dire times. It will serve you well.

Is there gender and racial prejudice in this world? Absolutely. And I fear it's still part of your reality as you read these words, many years after I'm writing them. Don't ask it for a balanced deal. Don't allow it to define you. Overcome it. I believe in you.

Love you very much,
Da-da

JOHN PICACIO is a 2012 Hugo Award finalist for Best Professional Artist, and one of America's most prolific sff cover artists of the last ten years. His work has won the World Fantasy Award, four Chesley Awards, two International Horror Guild Awards, and is regularly recognized in SPECTRUM: THE BEST IN CONTEMPORARY FANTASTIC ART. He is the artist of the best-selling 2012 George R. R. Martin / A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE Calendar (Bantam, July 2011).



Diversity

I've been following the recent discussion on gender parity in program, and I appreciate the chance to express my thoughts on the topic. The following is based on my experience in working on program at Worldcons. Some of the issues and constraints may be different for regionals and Natcons, but perhaps there will be some useful points of comparison.

There are many underpinnings of a good program. You want to have interesting ideas, and engaging panelists and lecturers. You want a broad spectrum of topics - literary, science, comics, costuming, and so on. And you want a broad and diverse group of people on the program - a group that reflects the fan-nish community in its talents, interests, backgrounds, and identities.

The recent discussions arose from situations where there was an absence of gender parity on panels. While not questioning those specific observations, I don't know that the failure to achieve gender parity represents the only or even the most frequent manifestation of poor representation of our community on program. Representation across ethnic backgrounds is also desired, and arguably lacking in no small degree. More conventionally, both fans and professionals should be represented. Likewise breadth of age in years as well as breadth of age in fandom. Critically, you want all of these people to be good on program - interesting, engaging, well-informed, respectful of their fellow participants, convention staff, and the other members of the convention.

But why worry about diversity? Can't you just focus on good ideas, and getting those intelligent and engaging people to talk about them? I'd argue that this is good and necessary, but not sufficient. Each of us is influenced and shaped by the experiences that we've had in our lives. Each program participant brings more than just their knowledge and points of view - they also bring their experiences and their reactions to those experiences. The program is enriched by taking advantage of those perspectives.

All of that said, what should you do to achieve diversity and how do you know you've succeeded? And, apropos some of the discussions around gender parity, what approaches might be best avoided?

As a program department or division head, it is important to recognize that diversity doesn't just happen. It certainly makes sense to start off with a list of potential program participants based on who you



Ian Stockdale

know, who you know of and would like to work with, and who could contribute to your program. Having built a list to those criteria, and before issuing invitations, you might do well to test the list against your goals for the convention. This is a natural point to check for under-representation of any type, and is not dissimilar to reviewing the list to see if you met your criteria for specialist expertise. Fill in the gaps at this point. By the way, this is not just a question of overall representation. If you look at an individual area of program (comics, science, etc.) you want to ensure representation as much as possible.

Once you've issued the invitations, you may need to follow up. Having constructed your invitation list with multiple goals in mind, you need to know if the acceptances are not sufficient to support some of your goals. If that's the case, and the goal is still important to you, then you need to take action. This can include both contacting invitees to let them know that you're looking forward to them being on the program, and looking for alternatives who you might have missed the first time around. Shrugging your shoulders and deciding it won't work out is an-

other option, but not an option that counts as having tried.

Similar considerations occur as you define and populate the program items, adjust the program to responses from participants, and add the late but too-good-to-miss ideas and participants. Bear in mind that you're not just trying to achieve balance across the program as a whole. Each program area - literature, science, art, comics, gaming, etc. - should reflect the broader balance and diversity of the whole program.

It seems to me that setting hard, uncompromising targets is not the best way to reach gender parity. Or to reach diversity or quality, in other respects. If you define per-panel gender parity across the whole program as a goal, you will almost certainly fail. There may be fleeting moments in program development when that is achieved, but they will pass as people drop off the program or add conflicts. It's not a bad idea to keep track of this as a metric of how you're doing, but an effort to make every single panel balanced may well sap energy that could go toward balance on a larger scale.

As with anything else in program, succeeding at diversity means going beyond what and who you yourself know. Being open to diversity means more than just sit-

ting back and letting people come to you. A good program team doesn't just fall back on who they know or have heard of, no matter how good those people may be. The team - and the leadership - must work at it the same way you do anything else that is important.

Just a closing word for program participants. Please communicate your concerns about your schedule - or the program as a whole - as early as you can. If you're on an imbalanced panel and find that a problem, please tell the program team and give your suggestions on how to fix it. They may take your suggestions, or be unable to (likely for quite legitimate reasons). If you don't think you should be on the item, then let them know that. Dropping early and giving the reason gives the best odds for a successful resolution. Please do not wait for the panel to begin and then invite a replacement up. However flawed you may consider the program, the team has worked to the best of their abilities to create an interesting program, and deserve to have its success or failure seen for what it is.



Feminism and Gender Parity

I am of an age where feminism had already given me new opportunities in life, where men had begun to believe in it, but where all the older generation were still living a very gender based lifestyle (this was the 60's and 70's). Where to go to art college, was not a problem, on the fashion design side, but to do fine art there were something like 60 men in our year to 10 women. This may well be the same as sciences now. There was also a presumption that you were going to work until it was time to give up your career and have children.

I went through the whole women's movement phases at vaguely the right times.. First I assumed the position that men and women are equal and also that there is no difference between them, and that therefore I had the right to act the same as the worst of them. Which basically meant I asserted my right to get as drunk and out of order and to screw my way through life just as blokes did. This particular brand of feminism seemed to go down well with certain types of men in the 70's.

Then I began to think that maybe men and women were a little bit different and that men only gave lip service to the concept of women having the right to behave as they did when it suited them. This started me down the whole men and women are equal but different stance, and I got a little bit caught up in the concept that men and history had colluded together to continually put women down. I blame a book I read called A Women's History of the World for that. I lent that book to a pregnant police woman in the hospital when I was giving birth to Joss and she never gave it back!

I had always been an avid reader of sf and fantasy and at this stage (the late 80's) there suddenly seemed to be a lot of feminist women sf authors around and I even went so far as to separate out and order my books by the gender of the writer.

Nowadays I am far more back to my original position that there is very little difference between men and women, a few biological ones but mainly the differences are social and spectrum based rather than gender based. There are lots of very feminine men and plenty of masculine women. I personally

would like to redefine what society sees as feminine traits and strengths however, so I could redefine myself as a feminine woman. That sentence may make no sense but what I am trying to do here is explain my own personal experiences of change within myself regarding feminist issues.

I also think society has changed incredibly from where it started out when I was a young woman. What seemed then to need a hard fight and vociferous attack now seems to fit more of a gently approach. Of course that probably just means I am getting more laid back in my dotage. Now for the more sensible part where I express my views.

Gender Parity would be great! What a fantastic idea. It's something we all want to achieve. The only argument seems to be about how we go about achieving it. Do we need it across all panels every time? Certainly not. That would be slightly ridiculous and lead to problems if one person dropped out and we insisted that the person we got to cover for them was the same gender no matter what.

Do I think we need the panels in general to reflect our society and be in general 50/50? Yes. I think that should be the goal, but if some panels have a few more women and some have more men that is not a problem. i.e. a general rule that participation on all panels in total should be 50/50, rather than on EACH individual panel.

This then gives some leeway to organisers on panels as a whole and is less likely to give rise to the view that a certain person is only on the panel for gender parity. Do I think we should have more variety on the panels? Yes. It's quite noticeable that the same people, time after time are on panels. This is mainly because they are the best speakers, but then they get the most practice.

There is also a problem in that until you know the people running a con or a friend of a person running a con you are not going to get an invite to a panel. There are newsgroups, LiveJournal, Facebook etc where they ask for volunteers and I think they do ask in the con progress reports for volunteers but unless you know lots of people or

Lisa Konrad

are very confident indeed you won't offer. I would suggest that they should be trying to get not only more women on to the panels but maybe more newcomers.

Setting a limit on to how many panels one person can be on in one weekend wouldn't be a bad start. I know the programme items organisers can get very desperate for people towards the last couple of weeks before a con, and that in fact it can be very difficult to get anyone to go on a panel at all sometimes, so adding gender parity by panel is going to be a hard one to do.

Not many people are used to public speaking, nor do they always know what to expect. Perhaps cons should offer more online on how they could approach a panel, what preparations they should make, etiquette for panels etc.

Going on a panel can be a very daunting experience. Could we have a panel every con where apart from the chair, it is all newcomers, picked almost randomly to be on a panel where they can talk about their experience that weekend? This would immediately involve them more and give them some experience of being on a panel. I also think that a SF con is one of the better events I go to for a non sexist attitude and is in fact (as it should be) way ahead in many ways of general society.

I don't though have the experience of the many female writers who I know feel that they can be somewhat overlooked, and it's also a fairly well known problem in the art world in general that women appear to be not taken as seriously as men. To be honest I think the main problem of British SF cons is not that women aren't being given equal opportunities to be on panels but the paucity of non white attendees. This problem seems far bigger to me and to not have been properly addressed yet. Sure we are getting more Asian and Ethnic young people along but we are not getting any young Black people at conventions. I think this should give everyone a major rethink about how we are running them, the Australian Worldcon I went to looked more racially diverse than any UK convention.

There is a problem of course too with the concept of tokenism, although the idea of changing my badge name to token and offering to go on every panel to get a free drink and sit there and just say 'hi I'm here to make up the numbers' appeals to the silent anarchist in me.

Perhaps gender parity is not upsetting me nearly as much as the idea that we look like UKIP in the racial makeup of our conventions, which should be 10 percent and we don't think we are even at 1.



The Story About The Landlord

I've struggled to relate to the plight of female authors who write under a male pseudonym or use their initials. Isn't that so Brontë? Surely we're past all that? But then, I thought, naively, that I'd never been affected professionally by sexist ass-hattery.

A few months ago I was chatting to one of the guys in my old studio space. He's a very sweet guy, mid-30s, the owner of a Cape Town boutique. My landlord, actually. He admitted to me that he was sorry that he was never going to read my book. "It's not you," he said, quickly. "It's just not my thing. I don't do movies or books by women or with female leads."

"Let me get this straight," I said. "Did you like Eat, Pray Love?"

"No, I fucking hated it. God. It was terrible."

"Okay. Did you like Alien?"

"Yeah, that was great."

"The Notebook."

"Total crap."

"How about Hanna? The Hurt Locker? Bridesmaids? The Hunger Games?"

"Those were cool. Oh. I see what you're saying."

Look, it makes me downright squirmy to complain about discrimination. I'm a white South African. I have been the opposite of discriminated against my entire life.

For 46 years, the whole system was rigged by a racist government so people like me could succeed at a terrible cost to other people.

Many fought against it, black and white, but there were also a scary number of blinkered citizens who thought it was normal and okay and "just the way it is".

How do you fix that kind of legacy? It's fraught territory. All the solutions so far are experimental compromises – from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission through to Black Economic Empowerment policies.

The latter was intended to be a force of discrimination-for-good, but I've seen it backfire, enriching the same pool of fat-cat businessmen) at the top without helping workers or the unemployed, and sometimes forcing qualified, passionate people out of jobs they loved on the basis of the colour of their skin.

It's hardly an ideal situation, but it's something. Some attempt to redress the past, and, more importantly, try to better for the future.

It's the best option we have until we can revert to a meritocracy when everything's sorted out and everyone is equal regardless of economics and race and gender and sexuality. Cue magical Disney animals breaking into song.

Before anyone suggests that I'm claiming cons are like SF women-apartheid! Let me be very clear. I'm not saying that.

I'm also not saying that race issues are exactly like gender issues, although the two are often tangled up in each other.

They're complex and deeply personal and it's easy not to notice if you're not being affected. And sometimes even when you are. This shit's insidious.

What I am saying we need to be aware of what's gone wrong in the past, and how easily we assume that the right to vote means that everything's fixed now.

We need to take a stand against sexism and racism and homophobia. Shoot that crap down where it stands.

But we need to do it in a way that looks to fix wrongs, not pile up on them. Feminism is humanism. It's about equal opportunities, the right to choice, lifting everyone up.

We have to be careful of demonizing categories of people. After all, some of my best friends are old white guys!

There isn't a neat solution. But we need to talk about it. We need to be better. And sometimes it really is about one conversation (or one panel) at a time.

My landlord went out and bought Zoo City, not just because I wrote it or guilted him into it, but because it's got dark magic and murder and the mean streets of downtown Johannesburg. All the sorts of things he's into.

I've also put him on to other books I think he'll like: Sights by Kaaron Warren and Maul by Tricia Sullivan and Deadlands by Lily Herne.

I've got a ton of other recommendations when he's ready.

It's a start.

Lauren Beukes

The Cats Look Up

People who stand up for causes aren't thanked by fandom. Not even when the cause is one everyone says they endorse, like the idea of equality between the sexes. Controversy inevitably follows any call to embrace orthodoxy as fannish cats hiss and spit and promptly scatter beyond reach of the herder.

Because calling out conrunners is a risky thing for an sf writer to do I initially admired Cornell's willingness to gamble with his popularity among fans by demanding accountability from con organizers for placing equal numbers of men and women on panels. Cornell said he would protest the lack of gender balance on convention panels by, if need be, dropping off, or enlisting a female replacement, whenever he found himself onstage in a male majority. From what he wrote, he clearly knew he was letting himself in for a fight.

And it, therefore, came as a great surprise to me when just a few weeks later Cornell seemed to back away from the position of leadership he'd staked out on this issue. Cornell wrote on his blog that Farah Mendlesohn had figuratively taken him to the woodshed:

"[She] took me to task for the way I'd initially approached the Panel Parity campaign. She called me on my egotism, and on various specifics of how I'd set up the plan. It was a hard message to read, but I realised, after a lot of huffing and puffing, that she was right."

He said he'd adopt Si Spurrier's variation of his plan by finding a woman creator beforehand to take his place on a panel, rather than hope to pick a volunteer from the audience. He was now going to credit "a whole history of people who've been doing this for decades." And he was going to shun personal publicity from his announced Plan, "sending such inquiries to the female-led 50/50 campaign, soon to be announcing itself."

As of this writing I haven't seen the announcement – perhaps it will manifest in this issue of *Journey Planet*.

Cornell expected resistance from the people he wanted to change. He does not appear to have been prepared to withstand criticism from those he

presumed to be his allies.

It's not my purpose here analyze the fine points of Paul's or anyone else's plan for reaching a fixed percentage. I honestly don't subscribe to the call for a fixed percentage. I do believe a good program organizer invests a lot of effort in finding women participants. I also admit that unless I'm challenged I'm likely to become complacent about my effectiveness at doing that job. So Cornell may reckon he has failed with me, yet I feel he's accomplished his purpose.

Mixed panels are more interesting for me, so that's the direction I already incline. My unscientific theory is that a mixed panel deters the male dominance games and posturing that bores my socks off, whether by actually modifying men's' behavior, or through the intervention of women panelists who won't accept being dominated by male participants. By avoiding what bores me I expect it's more likely other fans will have a good time.

The last con I programmed was Loscon 2010. When Cornell announced his initiative I went back and reviewed Loscon's numbers. We ran 91 discussion panels. Thanks to Paul Cornell's willingness to count 2-women-out-of-5-panelists as meeting the test of "equality" I can say 37 of the panels were gender-balanced. That's 40%. Which is a lousy percentage, because there are women writers, editors, artists and fans capable and qualified to talk about any topic. I just have to find them and persuade them to speak at the con. I liked the way Paul Cornell made me ask myself if I was working hard enough.

I only wish Cornell had absorbed Farah Mendlesohn's critique and forged ahead instead of stepping back. I have great respect for her knowledge and leadership and have no doubt that whatever she told him was insightful and convincing. Unfortunately, the way Cornell responded has deprived fandom of the example of his courage, which was more valuable than the ideological or historical precision of his stance.

After all, he got me to pay attention and consider action on the issue even though I didn't agree with his goal of mathematical equality. I should think a trend in that direction would be welcomed by fans

Mike Glycer

whose ultimate goal is gender parity in the composition of convention panel. If it's the right thing to do, the idea's supporters ought to welcome anybody with the courage to stand up and say so. Regardless of their gender. Or possibly, in this case, because of it, for surely the example of Paul Cornell jeopardizing his privileges as a widely-sought convention guest will be like a bonfire of the vanities, reaching some fans who would not otherwise pay attention and resulting in greater activity to recruit women for convention panels.

If a position on an issue has merit then everybody should have the potential to recognize the rightness of it. Courage also requires the person who takes a stand to follow through, not be thanked and excused like a superfluous juror for that devalues the issue and makes people wonder if it was so important after all.

Cornell would have profited from a closer study of Harlan Ellison's advocacy of a feminist issue in the seventies. After Ellison had accepted the invitation to be Guest of Honor at the 1978 Worldcon in Arizona, the National Organization for Women (NOW) called for a boycott of businesses in states that had not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment. Arizona was one of those states. As a champion of liberalism Ellison had to conform his plans to NOW's initiative. Ellison consulted with writers and fans including Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Vonda McIntyre, Marion Zimmer Bradley and Susan Wood. (Wood helped create "A Room of Our Own" for informal feminist discussion at the 1976 Worldcon.) Then Ellison publicly promised to attend the con "in the spirit of making the convention a platform for heightening awareness of fans" about ERA. He also wrote an article explaining his stance for publication in the leading feminist fanzine, *Janus*. Not for the first time, Harlan turned himself into a lightning rod of controversy. One thing he did not suffer, having worked with them ahead of time, was feminists repudiating his sacrificial advocacy of the issue.

Heightening participation by women in convention programming is one of my priorities. So is using panelists (1) that people are eager to see, (2) who are knowledgeable about topic to be discussed, and (3) have articulate, interactive personalities – three traits of a good panelist. What felt right about Cornell's strategy was how it warned me to pay attention to the balance between all these priorities.

Remembering that Cornell's actions were aimed at convention program organizers, it's worth considering how many program organizers are female and that they exercise their power to create what they believe is the best possible array of discussion panels.

When asked about Cornell's initiative Arlene Satin (Loscon), Emily Coombs (Arisia) and Priscilla Olson of (Boskone and Worldcon) told *File 770* they didn't agree with using a fixed 50/50 percentage. As Emily Coombs said, "We do not make a specific effort to have a 50/50 gender balance in each and every item in our programming, because we prefer to focus on diversity and qualifications. Balanced is not just a matter of gender. While your proposed action of stepping down at a panel in favor of a woman from the audience seems gallant on the surface, it rejects all the work the programming staff have put into providing a variety of viewpoints in addition to gender."

In her article for *Tor.com*, Emily Asher-Perrin wondered if any convention that adopts this plan "will suffer at the hands of convention-goers who would simply prefer to see the artists and writers who they like best on one panel together, equality be damned." That's the *Catch-22* of announcing that the plan has been adopted, arousing resistance among the cats who are constitutionally opposed to being herded, rather than opposed to the sentiment behind the policy.

Converting an ethical issue – equality of the sexes – into a mechanical test tends to push the discussion towards polar extremes, obscuring the fact that this is by no means an all-or-nothing situation. Fans who are attracted to the 50/50 idea are free set their conventions on that footing and show everyone how it works for them. *Eastercon2013* has adopted a policy of male/female balance on its panels.

There are enough popular and articulate men and women to permit balanced programming if only a committee can get them to attend, and it would be ironic if *Eastercon2013* had adopted this policy without an announcement, and implemented it so successfully that most fans never suspected it had been adopted. But that's not the way to change minds. And even if I haven't been won over to the 50/50 standard, I appreciate the need to shine a light on how fannish organizations address the issue of equality.

The Oliphant in the Room: Panel Parity and Positive Discrimination

“There are just as many female authors in the SFF [science fiction and fantasy] community as male, if not more,” wrote Lizzie Barrett for Gollanczⁱ.

“Overall in the UK and US, women write 45% of SFFH novels and men write 55%,” Juliet E. McKenna wrote in a guest blog for SFXii.

Recently, several feminists in SFF fandom have quoted similar figures on panels and in blogs, claiming almost half of SFF writers are female, and therefore, why shouldn't women occupy half of the spaces on writing panels?

This would be true if we lived in the US, where many female romance writers choose to write paranormal romance and urban fantasy as an add-on to their main careers, but is it true of the UK?

Probably the best source of publishing information is the 'received books' list printed in Locus Magazine. Locus lists almost all SFF books published in the UK, from fantasy and SF to horror, YA, and paranormal romance. From this, the Strange Horizons team established that in 2010, 37%, and in 2011, 33% of SFF books published in the UK were by womenⁱⁱⁱ.

However, the percentage of SFF books published in the UK by women does not equate to the percentage of women living in the UK who write SFF. I decided to conduct my own study, to determine the true percentage of UK resident female SFF writers. I analysed four issues of Locus Magazine, from Jan 2011, July 2011, October 2011, and May 2012.

Two things quickly became apparent. Firstly: although large numbers of women write paranormal romance and urban fantasy, very few actually write horror or science fiction. Secondly: UK residents write less than half of the SFF books published in the UK. We import a lot of genre fiction, particularly high-demand paranormal romance and YA.

In fact, in the UK, women make up only twenty percent of our native SFF writers. For every woman writing SFF in the UK there are four more men. This

means that if a panel organiser does not discriminate on the grounds of gender, an average panel of five SFF writers would naturally contain only one woman.

The real issue here is not inadvertent discrimination by panel organisers; it is that in the UK there are simply not enough female SFF writers. Yet feminists in SFF fandom have recently expended a lot of valuable energy complaining that only 20% of the writers on panels at February's SFXWeekender were female. In this confusion, the (actually reflective) number of female panellists became such a major issue that it triggered the current panel parity campaign. I can't help but wonder whether this energy could have been better spent establishing the true nature of the gender/genre problem.

In addition to this, several regrettable scapegoating incidents have occurred in the last year. Anthology editors, agents, reviews editors, and even bookshops have suffered accusations and fallout over alleged discrimination, sadly based on a poor understanding of gender/genre statistics in the UK.

Olympus 2012 was the first convention to operate under a strict gender parity rule. At first, it felt like a breath of fresh air to see so many women on panels. However, relief soon turned to repetition as the same small pool of female writers appeared on panel after panel.

The panel parity debate has come far too soon in a slow process of cultural change. To introduce panel parity so early in this process is to introduce positive discrimination, and this is something those in favour of panel parity need to admit, and own.

As a woman with a physical disability who operates in the fields of science and technology, I've experienced both negative and positive discrimination in education and the workplace. I consider myself an individual, not a gender, and reducing me to my body rather than assessing my skill set and intelligence did not seem constructive, and left me feeling patronised. Being a woman is most emphatically *not* a disability.

Emma Jane Davies



How about working to change attitudes towards women's writing within fandom? How about planning more panels towards female-oriented interests? How about valuing the kinds of books that women like to write?

Even excluding international writers, a large proportion of the female SFF writers currently published in the UK are working in YA, urban fantasy, and paranormal romance. Disproportionately few of these writers make

. Women do not need special concessions to allow them to compete as intellectual and creative equals with men.

Panel parity effectively makes a genuine problem invisible to fandom and the rest of the world. Are we so ashamed by the paucity of female SFF writers that we must deny the disparity, even to ourselves? Would the truth not act as a better motivation to those who wish to correct the real problem?

Should convention panels represent the makeup of the audience? Of course, on fan panels. But most con-goers don't go to cons to see fans, they go to see experts, writers, and guest-stars. Why should male SFF writers lose spots on panels to a small, overexposed pool of female SFF writers? To make up for centuries of oppression? How do two wrongs make a right?

Are young and up-and-coming female SFF writers so impressionable that they need exposure to fifty-fifty panels in order to influence them to write books? I doubt lack of role models is the issue here. Throwing our energy into a campaign to overexpose women with established careers does not seem helpful. Would it not be more beneficial if feminists in fandom instead supported and encouraged our up-and-coming female writers with feedback and advice?

In spite of all of those extra women at Olympus 2012, attitudes had not really changed. To invoke SF writer and feminist Joanna Russ: cultural values suppress women's writing by judging its content and subject matter as less valuable than men's writing.

appearances at SFF conventions. I know many women on the edges of fandom who are embarrassed to admit that they enjoy reading these kinds of books because UK SFF fandom is not always an inclusive and welcoming environment for them. It's easy to play paranormal romance bingo at conventions – how many times will you get to hear a panellist complain about these new-fangled trashy subgenres apparently designed to kill the brain cells of teenage girls?

There simply aren't that many women writing horror, science fiction, or grim attention-grabbing epic fantasy. Whether fandom likes it or not, many female readers and writers prefer their SFF to come with a healthy dose of relationship drama. It's hard not to wonder how much faster genuine parity would evolve if SFF fandom opened its heart to all female SFF writers, not merely the ones who conform to a masculine cultural ideal of what an SFF writer ought to be.

i Lizzie Barrett, Gollancz guest blog: <http://www.gollancz.co.uk/2012/02/gender-parity-a-special-guest-post/>

ii Juliet McKenna, SFX guest blog: <http://www.sfx.co.uk/2011/09/05/everyone-can-promote-equality-in-genre-writing/>

iii Niall Harrison, Strange Horizons: 2010 and 2011 review statistics http://www.strangehorizons.com/blog/2011/03/the_sf_count.shtml http://www.strangehorizons.com/blog/2012/04/the_2011_sf_count.shtml

I Am More Than My Vagina

par-i-ty (noun) 1) equality, as in amount, status, or character. 2) equivalence; correspondence; similarity; analogy

fem-i-nism (noun) 1) the doctrine advocating social, political, and all other rights of women equal to those of men.

I found myself with a variety of mixed reactions to Paul Cornell's gender parity proposal. Very conflicting reactions. Then I got angry.

I identify as a feminist. I believe in feminism as defined above. Mr. Cornell's proposal appears, at first glance, to be feminist in nature. Yet the more I thought about it, the more I found myself disagreeing with him - first about the process he advocated, and then realizing that his proposal, in its entirety, is not, in fact, feminist.

I realized as a convention runner, I felt extremely insulted. He has basically just said that all of us who *volunteer* to run conventions are sexist and misogynist. Really? When now there is a very strong contingent of female conrunners around the globe? Look at Worldcon as an example. This year, for Chicon 7, two of the three Vice Chairs are women. The Division Head for Programming is a woman. Her deputies are women. One of the Co-Division Heads for Events is a woman, as is one of their deputies. In fact, 5 of the 10 divisions are being headed by women. (Hey! We achieved parity! Without even trying! Go us!) Last year's Worldcon, Renovation, was chaired by a woman. Women were the Co-Chairs in 2010 and 2009. The Division Head for Programming in 2008 was a woman. I'm not really seeing a lack of parity here, nor am I seeing discrimination against women in powerful roles - but I am seeing a thinly veiled insult to all of the women listed above, as well as the many male friends we have that are our conrunner brothers.

I realized that as a conrunner who has put together a convention program, I'm appalled at the ignorance Mr. Cornell shows about the process, despite having been to several conventions as an at-

tendee. We can only work with what we have. If more men than women volunteer, then that's what we have to work with that year. If more women than men volunteer, then we work with that for the year. We can reach out to attendees - ask people to sign up via the website, send email invitations to people, call our friends, ask for suggestions from other participants, post requests on various social media sites - but in the end, we get what we get. We then do our best to put together an educational, thought-provoking, entertaining program that the attendees will feel brought value to their membership. It is an incredibly difficult task. (I still have nightmares about post-it notes coming to life, multiplying, and chasing me down, a la the brooms in Disney's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* cartoon. No lie.)

I realized that he has created a situation that can, and likely will, lead to some very negative experiences for conrunners. Conrunners are volunteers. We do this as a hobby to create a space where people who like the same sorts of things we do can all get together and have fun for a weekend. How dare Mr. Cornell hold us hostage? How dare he create a situation where conrunners will, and I've already heard are, being bullied because they don't want to have an official gender parity policy, for whatever reason?

I realized, most importantly, that as a woman, I felt very patronized. Who is Mr. Cornell to decide that I'm being discriminated against in fandom? Who is he to decide I need rescuing? Fandom is actually one of the few places where I do not feel discriminated against, by and large. When I show up at a science fiction convention, if I start talking to someone new, there is an assumption that I'm an intelligent, literate person. How often does that happen outside fandom?

I get put on panels because I am an intelligent, literate, entertaining, informative, amusing, opinionated person that the program coordinator felt would be a good match for the topic and the other panelists.

Helen Montgomery

I don't, I hope, get put on panels only because I have a vagina.

I believe the brilliant Bella Abzug said it best:

“The test for whether or not you can hold a job should not be the arrangement of your chromosomes.”

Let's say we introduce gender parity as a policy.

Right now, without that policy, I can walk into a panel and the attendees in the audience will think that I was chosen because the programming department felt I would be a good fit on the panel - entertaining, well informed, opinionated, vocal, etc.

With gender parity?

“Huh. I wonder if she's on this panel just because she has a vagina.”

That's where it will go. Audience members will wonder. Other panelists, particularly the males, but not exclusively, will wonder. I will begin to wonder.

Welcome back to the wonderful world of people assuming you're sleeping your way to the top.

It has the potential to create similar situations for men. There are some topics that tend to be dominated by women. If we have parity, we have to include men. Will they be there because they are a good fit, or because they have a penis and the programming department has a policy?

I don't want this. In either direction. What self-respecting person would?

Feminism is about equal *rights*. It is about women being treated as equal to men as people. It is about equal worth as people. It is not about having equal numbers of men and women on panels - especially if you're forced to put people on the panel who probably should not be on it, just to meet your quota. That hurts everyone.

I am pleased that a dialogue has started. It is an important discussion to be having. Bringing a concept into awareness is never a bad thing, and for that, I will thank Mr. Cornell.

But. (There's always a “but”, isn't there?)

The more important discussion to be having, in my opinion, is “What can we do to improve the convention experience for everyone? Panelists. Attendees. Organizers. Everyone. How do we welcome new people to our community? How do we draw in new people, while keeping those of us already here content to stay?”

When thinking about Mr. Cornell's post, I found myself asking several questions. What is he doing to get women to volunteer to be panelists? Is he recruiting them? Suggesting them to pro-

gramming departments? Asking other women and men that he knows to do the same? Is he mentoring them in any way?

For those of us who are in support of seeing a diversity of panelists, these are the questions we can ask ourselves as well. Then - go out there and recruit. Recruit women. Recruit men. Recruit people who identify as LGBTQ. Recruit people of color. Recruit people with disabilities. Recruit older fans. Recruit younger fans. Encourage them to volunteer, to speak out and be heard, to share their knowledge and passion for science fiction and fandom.

Four years ago at Wiscon, there was a panel called “Not Another F*cking Race Panel”. All of the panelists were people of color - and the one topic they would not discuss was race. The panel has been held every year since (this year known as “Return of Sibling of Revenge of Not Another F*cking Race Panel” for those of you keeping track).

Women are more than the arrangement of our chromosomes. We are fans. We are strong, capable, intelligent, and more than able to stand up for ourselves. We have knowledge unrelated to our race, gender, sexual orientation.

We are more than our vaginas.



Contributor Biographies

James Bacon is a Fanzine Editor and Hugo Winner

Christopher J Garcia is an editor of a number of fanzines. He's looking forward to talking about James Bond...

Emma J. King is a Sciencer and fan from the UK. She's pretty much as awesome as you can imagine!

Helen Montgomery runs cons, lives in Chicago and is Rad. You should find her at Chicon.

Claire Brialey won the Hugo for Best Fan Writer in 2011. She co-edits *Banana Wings* with Mark Plummer.

Mike Abbott is an English-type fan who has a couple of Hugo nominations for Best Fanzine.

Eszenyi Gábor Ádám is a graphic artist and model-maker <http://raskolnikov0610.deviantart.com>

Lauren Beukes won the Clarke Award for her novel *Zoo City*. <http://laurenbeukes.com/>

Warren Buff runs cons, edits zines and is a star of Southern Fandom. <http://efanzines.com/SFCB/index.htm>

Carla H. is a pretty spectacular artist and graphicist. <http://sweeter-than-reality.deviantart.com>

Gail Carriger is the author of the *Parasol Protectorate*. <http://www.gailcarriger.com>

Megan Clark is an excellent artist working in many media <http://jedijaina.deviantart.com/>

Carol Connolly is involved with The SF and F Book Chat, regular meetings in Dublin- <http://www.librarything.com/groups/thesffbookchat>. She is also a member of the growing legions of those who have had their names misspelled by Chris Garcia...

Emma Jane Davies is a fantasy writer, a science fiction writer, and a writer of fairy tales. www.emmajanedavies.com

Christine M. Davidson is a Senior Lecturer at University of Strathclyde.

Kylie Ding is an Australian fan and current GUFF Administrator. She's an exceptional fan and her daughter is a great artist!

Ditmar is a legendary fan artist from Australia! He has an award named after him. Man...

Emma England is either a researcher at Univer-

siteit van Amsterdam or Emma of Normandy. I'm leaning towards the prior...

Travis Friess is an artist from the United States <http://uncleguts.deviantart.com/>

Sabine Furlong is German fan living in England.

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Jim C. Hines is a fantasy author, Blogger and Hugo nominee <http://www.jimchines.com>

Erin Hoffman is a decade-plus veteran of online game design and the author of the Chaos Knight fantasy series from Pyr Books.

Eloise Hopkins is an author, book reviewer and freelance graphic designer currently based in the UK. She devotes her time predominantly to writing fantasy fiction and is working on her debut novel as well as dabbling with the occasional short story. www.eloisehopkins.biz

Kanest is an artist from Thailand. <http://kamiuzg.deviantart.com/>

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Evelyn Leeper is a many-time Best Fan Writer Hugo nominee. <http://leepers.us/evelynleeper.htm>

Michael Lee is the chair of the 2012 CONvergence. <http://blog.michaell.org/>

Ruth Leibig is an AWESOME human being and con-runner. Yes... yes she is!

Jim Mann is a con-runner and reader from Pittsburgh, maybe. Yeah... Pittsburgh.

Pat Sayre McCoy is a Chicago conrunner and

fan writer.

Alissa McKersie is a martial artist, fan and Awesomess She's from Arizona

Farah Mendelsohn is a Hugo-winning academic and writer. <http://www.farahsf.com/>

Craig Miller ran a WorldCon and works in Children's TV. He also did a great zine back in the day.

Catriona Moriarty is a costumer and writer. <http://www.tangledwebsonline.com>

Caroline Mullan is currently Chair of the Science Fiction Foundation, which publishes Foundation: The International Journal of Science Fiction

Fionnuala Murphy is a brilliant Irish con runner, who is amazing at programme creation

and graphic design, and makes James Wish he lived in Ireland still.

Pádraig Ó Méalóid is the world's leading expert on Alan Moore. <http://slovobooks.blogspot.com/>

Marie O'Regan is a Horror and Dark Fantasy writer.

Tara O'Shea is a Hugo-winning editor and writer from Chicago. <http://fringe-element.net/design.htm>

Hillary Pearlman is an artist from Florida. She won the Arisia art show with an awesome guitar body

John Picacio is one of the leading lights of Science Fiction Illustration. <http://www.johnpicacio.com>

Yvonne Rowse is a Nova-winning fan editor and fan writer from the UK. <http://yvonnemrowse.blogspot.com/>

Lynda Rucker is a Horror writer from Georgia. She's awesome! <http://lyndaerucker.wordpress.com/>

John Scalzi has won a couple of Hugos, written a bunch of books. <http://www.scalzi.com/whatever>

Maurine Mo Starkey is a Hugo-nominated Fan Artist living in the Bay Area. She's amazing! <http://colmahouse.deviantart.com/>

Ian Stockdale is a con-runner from the Bay Area.

Carrie Vaughn is the author of the Kitty Norville novels and several more. www.carrievaughn.com/

Nik Whitehead chaired the 2011 Eastercon, illustrious.

