Abstract—We discuss the spread of fans and fandoms within Sweden. With a specific focus on fan fiction and video games, we describe Swedish fan activities in relation to the fact that Sweden is a connected country—that is, a highly technologically developed society. We also describe fan activities in relation to the fact that the level of English-language proficiency is high among Swedish children and teenagers.

Keywords—Fan community; Fan fiction; Video games


1. Introduction

Fans exist all over the world. It is probably easier to find similarities than differences in how fans explore their interests, share knowledge, and use characters and narratives to create identity. Here we aim to describe Swedish fan activities in relation to the fact that Sweden is a connected country—that is, it is a highly technologically developed society. For instance, 92 percent of all citizens between the ages of 16 and 24 have access to the Internet from their homes on a daily basis (Findahl 2013).

Furthermore, because the level of English-language proficiency is high among Swedish children and teenagers, we also discuss the high involvement in fan activities as a possible result of a generally high level of proficiency in English. This is partly due to the use of subtitled English-language programs on Swedish television and considerable involvement in English-mediated online activities. In SurveyLang 2011, the first large-scale international language survey in Europe involving 15-year-olds in 14 countries, Sweden was top ranked for English as a foreign language on all measurements (http://www.surveylang.org/). Because of the combination of high connectivity and English-language proficiency, Swedish fans engage in a variety of fannish expressions, including fan fiction, digital games, and conventions.
2. A connected country

[2.1] Sweden offers fertile ground for fandoms, primarily as a result of a nationwide well-developed infrastructure for Internet access. Growing up in such a connected country, the vast majority of children become what Prensky (2001) aptly calls digital natives. Interestingly, although many young people live a large part of their daily lives online, large-scale surveys from the Swedish Media Council (2013a, 2013b) reveal that it is common to be involved in online activities while being physically (or geographically) close to one another in real life. For instance, among boys aged 9 to 12, almost four out of 10 state that they often play digital games together with friends, which indicates that gaming is very much a local social activity for them. Watching TV is another media activity that many children and teenagers report that they enjoy doing together with friends or family. In other words, the digital, online part of young Swedes' lives seems to serve dual functions. On the one hand, online activities, including reading fan fiction sites and playing digital games, make it possible for children and teenagers to nurture international acquaintances online (Olin-Scheller and Wikström 2010; Pugh 2005; Hellekson and Busse 2006; Piirainen-Marsh and Tainio 2009; Sylvén and Sundqvist 2012; Sundqvist and Sylvén 2014). On the other hand, young people might do the same thing while sitting next to each other on the couch.

[2.2] In Sweden, older siblings are generally the ones who introduce younger siblings to various fandoms, such as digital games and fan fiction sites, thus further conflating online and real-life relationships (Swedish Media Council 2013a, 2013b; Olin-Scheller 2011). This is easily done when the Internet is only a click away in one's home—and it is becoming increasingly easy. For example, in 2005, more than half of all Swedish 9-year-olds used the Internet; in 2013, the same was true for all 3-year-olds. In fact, 55 percent of all Swedish 3-year-olds use the Internet on a daily basis. This percentage increases with age, so that 87 percent of all 6-year-olds are connected daily, as are 93 percent of 13- to 16-year-olds (Swedish Media Council 2013a, 2013b). Moreover, among older teens, approximately 85 to 90 percent have a computer of their own, and almost 100 percent have a cell phone (Swedish Media Council 2013b). Needless to say, among the activities young people engage in online, using social networking sites is popular, especially among girls. For instance, at the age of 17, 42 percent of Swedish girls spend more than 3 hours per day on Facebook or similar sites, whereas the corresponding percentage for boys is much lower, at 15 percent (Swedish Media Council 2013b). Social networking, such as being active on Facebook, is a vital part of staying in touch with other fans and sharing photos, as well as accessing information about a fandom, such as news about actors and events (Olin-Scheller 2011). Of course, our findings about fan activities among Swedish young people might very well also hold true for youths in other comparable countries, such as Norway (Norwegian Media Authority 2014).
3. Fan activities in Sweden

[3.1] Scholars such as Henry Jenkins (2006) have noted that convergence culture has affected the spread of cultural products. Convergence culture may start with a book, which is remediated in films, fan fiction, and digital games, as well as in all sorts of other media adaptations. This convergence phenomenon has greatly influenced Swedish fans and fandoms (Olin-Scheller and Wikström 2010). However, even though there seems to be considerable diversity, the field of fan fiction is dominated by a few very influential stories. The Harry Potter, Twilight, and Hunger Games universes have engaged many fans in Sweden, and the fandoms around these fan-textual universes have been immensely productive, with fans creating fan fiction, fan films, and Web pages.

[3.2] Even though, for example, Twilight fan fiction appeared in Swedish shortly after the first books in the series were published, the number of stories increased rapidly after the first film was released. A large survey of 932 participants indicated that other fandoms were also widespread within Sweden (Olin-Scheller and Wikström 2010), including fandoms around manga stories such as Naruto (first released 2000), Final Fantasy (first released 1989, based on the 1987 video game by Square Enix), and Sailor Moon (first released 1991), as well as around now-classic texts in the Lord of the Rings (1937), Star Wars (1977), and Star Trek (1966) universes. Findings from the same survey revealed that approximately 6 percent of all Internet users within the age group of 15 to 24 regularly read some kind of fan work, 2 percent regularly commented on these texts, and 1 percent regularly created and published their own texts. These findings correspond well with those presented by other studies on user behavior, content contribution, and online communities (Horowitz 2006). The survey, which covered different forms of media narratives, showed that there were no significant differences between boys' and girls' involvement in the production and consumption of fan-created content. However, there was a significant difference regarding what kinds of media boys and girls prefer: girls were more interested in written texts, while boys preferred visual forms of expression, such as images and videos. These findings are corroborated in other Swedish studies on media habits and gender (Findahl 2009; Carlsson 2010).

[3.3] A study of Swedish Twilight fans (Olin-Scheller 2011) found that fans built communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) and communicated in a number of ways with other fans, with the textual universe of Twilight as a point of commonality that might then be departed from. However, even though the fans used digital devices to collect and update information about the fandom, the main use of this information was to create identities and meaning and to strengthen already existing relations with friends off-line. Also, when discussing the mediated text, the fans regarded the novels (as opposed to the two films that were available
in Sweden when the study was performed) as the real source text, and they talked about them as something particularly important. Thus, the books as artifacts can be said to play a unique role within the Twilight universe. Fans want to touch the books, turn the pages, and read their favorite parts over and over again. They carry the books around with them, and they may furnish their rooms with the books in specific ways. However, what keeps the wheels of convergence culture spinning largely consists of digital material, such as photos, films, and Web sites.

[3.4]  In addition, fandoms around digital games—in particular *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), *Counter-Strike* (Valve Corporation, 1999), *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward and Activision, 2003), *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011), and *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000)—engage a large number of young people in Sweden, as reported in biannual reports from the Swedish Media Council that are based on data from representative, random samples of children and teenagers. It is worth mentioning, though, that fandoms around digital games mainly consist of boys. Half of all the boys aged 14 to 15 play at least 3 hours per day—that is, they are what the Swedish Media Council labels high consumers. However, no girls are high consumers (Swedish Media Council 2013b). Furthermore, when different age groups are compared, children aged 9 to 12 are the ones who play the most. In this age group, 98 percent of all boys and 76 percent of all girls play digital games. As they get older, the gender gap increases, mainly because girls decrease their playing. There is also a gender-related difference in terms of the games played: boys prefer action and sports games, which are much less popular among girls (Sylvén and Sundqvist 2012). However, the first-person survival sandbox game *Minecraft* appeals to both boys and girls; the game is a current worldwide success. Considering that fandoms easily grow in Sweden, it might not be a coincidence that *Minecraft* was created there by game developer Markus Persson. Persson, who was born in 1979, grew up accessing the digital world easily from his home, evidenced by the fact that he started programming when he was only 7 years old. He produced his first text-based adventure game a year later with the help of type-in programs ([http://minecraft.gamepedia.com/Markus_Persson](http://minecraft.gamepedia.com/Markus_Persson)).

[3.5]  Another fan activity widely spread around Sweden is the fan convention. Conventions are mostly organized around manga fan communities (for studies about convention activities, see Taylor 2006; Pearce 2009; Jenkins 2010). Here, for a few days, fans build a world where they meet, socialize, and engage in their interest both online and off. The activities during a convention can be described as a miniature festival located at a school or a similar place. The conventions are often organized by the fans themselves. Many of the fans engage in cosplay, dressing up as characters that appear in the narratives (Bruno 2002; Winge 2006; Olin-Scheller 2012). Cosplay is an activity that takes place in a real-world, not online, environment, and in that respect, cosplay is similar to other activities that also focus on being present, such as live-action role-playing games. A big part of cosplay is taking photos and publishing them on various fan sites. Like many other
fan activities, cosplay is a way to continue the narrative and the meaning-making process surrounding the cultural product. In addition, local area network gatherings for those who enjoy playing digital games are often arranged in a similar fashion, generally by bringing together young people from the same geographical region. Both manga and gaming conventions are usually endorsed by Sverok, the Swedish gaming federation, which, at 100,000 members in 1,100 clubs, is the largest youth organization in Sweden (http://www.sverok.se/english)—another indication of the special context this northern country offers fandoms.

4. Discussion and concluding remarks

[4.1] As mentioned above, the level of proficiency in English is high among Swedish children and teenagers. A key explanation for their high level of English skills, including the top scores on various measurements in SurveyLang 2011, is claimed to be the result of young Swedes' extensive involvement in English-language-mediated activities in out-of-school contexts—activities like the fan-related ones we describe here. Other empirical studies corroborate the findings of SurveyLang 2011, in particular regarding the links between learning English and playing digital games (Olsson 2011; Sundqvist 2011; Sundqvist and Sylvén 2012, 2014; Sylvén and Sundqvist 2012). Interestingly, being a fan may motivate some young Swedish children to try communicating online in written English—a cognitively complex linguistic activity—after only 2 years of formal English instruction in school (Sundqvist 2014). For example, they may communicate via Twitter in order to stay in touch with important idols such as singer Justin Bieber or members of the boy band One Direction.

[4.2] Thus, the fact that Sweden is a highly connected country seems to contribute to a high level of proficiency in English. In turn, this language proficiency contributes to widespread online activities among Swedish young people. Technological advancement, English proficiency, and fandom activities are all closely interrelated. However, being connected to the Internet and being heavily involved in digital fan activities do not necessarily imply that one's main focus is international. Instead, digital activities are associated with closeness, both in terms of relationships (friends sitting on the same couch when going online) and geographical locations (attending local cosplay or gaming conventions). This way of being and acting as a fan is likely not limited to Sweden or Swedish fan communities; it is probably also the case in other areas with ubiquitous Internet access and English-language proficiency. Nevertheless, Sweden offers particularly fertile ground for digital fandoms.

5. Works cited


Olsson, Eva. 2011. "'Everything I read on the Internet is in English': On the Impact of Extramural English on Swedish 16-year-Old Pupils' Writing Proficiency."


