

**The structure and impact of the East European
Comic Con**
**(Az East European Comic Con struktúrája és
hatása)**

SEN301

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Theoretical framework</i>	4
Transmedia	4
Fandom.....	5
Performance and participation	8
Conventions.....	9
Fandom and the entertainment industry	11
Performance and participation in conventions.....	13
<i>East European Comic Con</i>	16
<i>Conventions in Eastern Europe</i>	18
<i>Research methodology</i>	18
<i>Coding of social media posts. Event features of EECC</i>	20
Event features: Special guests, panels, and autograph sessions.....	21
Event features: Cosplay, costume contest.....	23
Event features: Artists' Alley	23
Event features: Other themed areas.....	24
Event features: Gallery exhibitions	26
Event features: Other.....	27
Practical information about the event.....	27
Other.....	28
<i>Audience participation and performance at EECC</i>	29
<i>The importance of EECC as a regional fan event</i>	30
EECC as homecoming party	31
EECC as publicity event.....	32
EECC as costume party	33
EECC as networking event.....	33
EECC as marketplace	34
EECC as ritual.....	35
<i>Conclusion</i>	36
<i>Limitations</i>	37
<i>Bibliography</i>	37
<i>Sources</i>	39

Abstract

Fans of different media content come together in communities known as fandoms, where they exchange information and express their passion for their favourite franchises. Despite the proliferation of online communication, live events remain central to these groups. Fan gatherings, from large-scale events to smaller regional meetings, provide an opportunity to interact and immerse themselves in the universes they love. But the size of the event has a big impact on the kind of invitees they can attract, the franchises that bring products or exhibitions to them, and thus the extent to which attendees can experience their fanhood. East European Comic Con, held annually in Romania, serves as a key point of contact for Eastern European fandoms and stands out as one of the largest events in the region. In my paper, I will analyse the social media platforms and website of the event to determine how it is structured, how it provides opportunities for performativity and participation for visitors, and its impact as a regional fan convention. Drawing on Henry Jenkins's criteria for analysing the San Diego Comic-Con event in 2012, I will explore the edition of East European Comic Con held on 1-3 September 2023, to answer the question: how can attendees experience their fanhood at this regional event? The aim of the paper is to shed light on the role of regional fan conventions for fan communities and the overall mark of such events on Eastern European fandoms.

Keywords: fandom, fan convention, East European Comic Con, performativity, participation

Introduction

In the age of the internet, fans of different media products rejoice online, where they can meet and express their shared passions with no physical constraints. These groups, known as fandoms, invest their time into franchises, which are often transmedia by nature, meaning that their story is spread out across multiple mediums and can only truly be explored by engaging with as much content and as many products as possible.

Fandoms, though now prevalent online, started out practising activities offline: participating in fan clubs, writing fan fiction that was published in fanzines, sending letters to studios for various reasons and organising local and regional meetings. These gatherings started in the 1930s, would evolve into what we now call pop culture conventions, some of which have reached an international level. San Diego Comic Con International is one of the most well-known examples, which also sparked the widespread nature of Comic Con-type events, that – contrary to the name – are now multi-genre fan gatherings, focusing on many facets of pop culture.

East European Comic Con is a multi-genre fan convention organised yearly in Romania. For more than 13 years it has provided local fandoms with pop culture-related experiences as one of the only such events in the country and the region. However, the opportunities and activities it can provide are limited. Compared to events in North America or Western Europe, East European Comic Con can rarely invite A-list celebrities, attract the attention of franchises and offer the exclusive activities that other, more popular conventions can, because of its location. In this paper I explore how the East European Comic Con is structured, what event features it consists of and which one of these offers participatory and performative experiences to the attendees. Finally, I conclude the impact the event has as a regional fan convention. Using the case study of the edition held between the 1st and 3rd of September 2023, I will answer the question: how can attendees experience their fanhood at this regional event?

The East European Comic Con has not been studied extensively before, thus the goal of my paper is to highlight the role and impact of regional fan conventions for Eastern European fan communities but to also point out gaps and future opportunities for analysis, constructing a foundation for further research on the topic.

Theoretical framework

Transmedia

Characters, world-building, timelines: the pillars of storytelling. However, in today's film and television industry, these aspects become much more complex.

Transmedia, a now widespread process, is the dispersion of integral elements of a fictional story across multiple channels, thus facilitating the multiplatform and multimodal expansion of content. This type of media distribution allows franchisors to encourage us, the audience, to engage with and consume as much content and as many products as possible. Transmedia storytelling as such works towards creating a unified and coherent experience, through a “narrative that is only truly complete when elements from multiple media forms are brought together” (Freeman & Gambarato, 2018).

Starting to develop at the end of the 19th century as a result of the industrial revolution, transmedia franchising gained momentum significantly since 2010 with the popularization of reboots, remakes, prequels, sequels, adaptations and cinematic universes in the entertainment industry (von Stackelberg, 2018). Therefore, transmedia storytelling and franchising has a profound impact on Hollywood's distribution of content, ensuring the “longevity and financial success” of texts well beyond the first iteration (Geraghty, 2017).

Transmedia universes usually start from an original medium where they are introduced to viewers and, if they gain sufficient popularity, can justify their expansion to multiple platforms. As the publication of content becomes more coordinated and releases appear simultaneously on multiple media platforms, the worlds they present will be seen across multiple types of media. This impacts the image of the universe that is formed of them in two ways. Multiple perspectives both help to immerse oneself in the universe, but on the other hand, representations in different media may diverge and clash (Wolf, 2018).

Even social media, which even smaller projects use to promote themselves and interact with fans, is a platform that allows for a transmedia presence. However, in the case of larger media franchises, the storytelling becomes much more ramified. Consumers take pleasure in connecting pieces of content distributed across a variety of mediums, while transmedia characters are heroes whose adventures can only be fulfilled through several platforms. Viewers develop emotional relationships with characters, are interested in the narratives of the story world, but also look to fill temporal voids in their understanding of the story, thus having the motivation to explore the transmedia franchises further. Based on this, we can identify 3 categories of transmedia storytelling, which also coincide with the ways franchises can expand: character-based, time-based and world-based transmedia (Bourdaa, 2018).

The stories of transmedia franchises thus become layered, with the original text being the basis on which complementary media expands. This produces the canon, which is the plot that is universally accepted as true. The universe created through this process is later elaborated on by the fans, the authors of the fanon. Fanon is the term used to describe fan-generated content that uses a particular franchise as its basis, transforming and repeating it through the content they create. Fanon often results in details and interpretations that do not conform to or contradict the canon, as agreement is rare due to individual perceptions (Hellekson & Busse, 2006).

Fandom

Before media fandoms conquered the internet, producing fan content and expressing their opinions about media products, there were Sherlockians – not yet bearing an official name, of course – who wrote parodies, pastiches and homages based on Conan Doyle's novels. Even at the end of the XIX. century enthusiasts of the Sherlock Holmes stories created their own works and continued the narratives for their own enjoyment after the author killed off the titular character. Thus, it is obvious that fan culture and fandom have been around even before it got

a name and well before the new media age (‘Scott Brown on Sherlock Holmes, Obsessed Nerds, and Fan Fiction’, 2009). In the following paragraphs, I will summarize the history of fandoms, based on Mark Duffett’s (2013) work.

The term fan, derived from the word fanatic, meaning religious zealot, originated in late XVII. century England. It got popularized in the United States years later when referring to sports enthusiasts, especially baseball spectators. In the coming years, it would be adopted to different usages across different media products, such as film or music audiences.

In the XIX. century the breakthrough of recorded music, cinema, and airwave broadcasting contributed to the dawn of media fandoms as we know them today. Some of the first fan clubs emerged thanks to films, when avid watchers would send letters to film companies to reveal the names of their actors. The radio programming in the 1920s also generated a following, listeners beginning to form attachments to announcers.

Mass audience trends, especially in music, became prominent in the 30s and 40s, which also led to the recognition of young people as a population segment and female fans as an integral part of fandoms.

The political climate in the 1960s was the catalyst of pop culture turning more towards the science-fiction genre and the exploration of the future. This sparked the popularity of media franchises such as James Bond, Star Trek and Doctor Who.

By the 90s, producers developed more complex works, already shaped for syndication, leaning into an episodic format. As pop culture became a globalized activity, fans could now access foreign products as well, opening the roads, for example, to the Japanese products to enter the American market, with fans often providing their own subtitles.

The dawn of transmedia franchises changed fans’ interaction with media products yet again. Inspired by the non-linear nature of video games, consumers started to desire a different entertainment experience and engage with texts more profoundly. Live broadcasting was also on the rise, offering the audience its own way of engagement: “the illusion of collective actions”.

Technological advances have always had an impact on fandoms. The introduction of the video cassette recorder gave the opportunity to viewers to capture and rewatch content as they pleased. This archiving tendency evolved with the use of the internet, home computers and new playback technologies. DVDs and similar systems allowed audiences to study episodes and movies more extensively. As broadcasters began to understand this trend, they shaped their franchises into being broadcast events first and box sets available on demand second. The internet and computers gave access to a more extensive catalogue of media products, even more

apparent now with streaming services, that free fans from the need to purchase physical copies of media products such as TV shows, movies, music or video games.

Computers and the internet also changed the possibilities of engagement with content, acting as the foundation of transmedia franchises. Fans, being early adopters of this technology, quickly shaped it into a tool for interaction both with products – playing interactive games, accessing websites with background information – and each other, by talking in chat rooms or on forums and creating fan works (Duffett, 2013b).

Indeed, content produced by fans began flourishing on the internet, a place where fan fiction was not held back by the physical limitations of fanzines and digital versions of fan edits, videos and music could be easily shared. With everything being available online and accessible to anyone, fans themselves could gain their own followings.

The internet also helps with the sense of belonging of fans. While before its existence, fans could interact in a “week-end only world”, in the digital sphere there are no geographical constraints. This connects even isolated people to their own fandoms, providing more opportunities for interaction and information sharing to those, who might not have a community in their region that they can identify with. Thus, the internet becomes a much-needed space for performance, participation and for fans to show their identity outside of organized events (Jenkins, 2006).

The entertainment industry recognizes the power of fans. With their participation and engagement at a high in the age of the internet, businesses look at fan marketing, as a source of promotion and income, employing tactics such as crowdsourcing and fangagement to use the audience to their advantage (Booth, 2018).

Being an enthusiast of media products comes with stereotypes, even starting from the terms fan and fandom. As previously stated, it is derived from the word “fanatic”, of Latin origin, which meant a religious devotee. The term evolved to have more negative connotations, however, referring to someone having excessive and mistaken enthusiasm, often equated to being possessed by a demon. Hence, fandoms initially had been labelled as being obsessed over entertainment, having intimate fantasies about stars and antisocial behaviour. They were characterized as people who would consume anything related to their topic of interest, disregarding the quality, only to gather worthless knowledge (Jenkins, 1992).

While these stereotypes still exist, the mainstream breakthrough of fandom and fan activities sees fans become more socially accepted and recognized as important to the entertainment industry. Members of these communities are anything but social misfits, on the contrary, they

are generally successful and do not shy away from interaction with fellow fans, on the internet, as previously discussed, and also in real life, at fan conventions (Branch & Phillips, 2018).

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines fandom as 1. all the fans (as of a sport) and 2. the state or attitude of being a fan. However, according to scholars, it is difficult to condense the meaning of the term into a singular definition.

Fandoms are not coherent or permanent. These communities are “voluntary, temporary and tactical affiliations defined through common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments.” Fans change their interests and thus, belong to one or more fandoms at the same time and move from one to the other freely. What holds these communities together, however, is the common motivation of epistemophilia, the pleasure of both knowing and exchanging knowledge about the topic at hand. Especially in the age of the internet, fandoms are not defined by localities, rather, their memberships are based on affinities (Jenkins, 2006). As such, fans form micro-populations, which are niche translocal cultures.

Fans are inherently aware of their limited relationship to the text. The narratives, while often freely used and manipulated by them in fan works, nevertheless belong to producers, who have the power to change plots and characters as they see fit. When this change does not align with fans’ desires, their reaction can be crucial, as fandoms are quick to express their anger and disappointment with the decision-makers (Jenkins, 1992).

Performance and participation

Henry Jenkins names performance as one of seven key principles of transmedia storytelling. Fans are actively trying to find the aspects of transmedia franchises and narratives that they can contribute to, especially in the age of the internet. He defines two concepts: cultural attractors, which draw together people with similar interests, and cultural activators, which give the same people tasks to do in relation to that interest (Jenkins, 2009).

Indeed, transmedia franchises and their marketing strategies rely heavily on the participatory nature of fandoms and engaging the viewers. Fans are encouraged to interact with the text and graduate from a passive audience to a constructive one, often becoming producers of their own works.

Even when not directly encouraged by the makers of the content, fans of transmedia franchises inherently have a desire to explore, participate in and get immersed in the universe of their choosing. Their practices are adjacent to folk culture, as they explore narratives and look to spend as much time with the text as they can.

Fan works and practices have long been researched as being an integral part of fandom. Fan fiction has existed almost as long as fandoms themselves. First published in fanzines, then migrated to many websites on the internet, they have been a crucial part of fan performance and participation.

Fans do not want to only produce works related to their interest, they also want to participate by the way of immersion. This can be achieved, for example, by playing video games or board games, role-playing or otherwise. These allow fans to act inside of their chosen universe, often move around freely and explore locations known to them from the source material, and, in the case of role-playing games, create their own characters. Fans also engage in the act of cosplay, which involves dressing up as a character from a franchise. These intricate costumes, often made by hand or by artists specializing in cosplay clothes and props, are essential parts of fandom, conventions and live-action role-playing – LARPing.

Fans will take any opportunity to participate in the topic of their choice. Whether it is through an official channel encouraged by the franchise or their own way, performance is perhaps the most visible way of joining the act of fandom and identifying as a fan.

Conventions

Conventions are an audience- rather than industry-facing media fandom event that constitutes a circulation of pop culture. Organizers act as intermediaries between the media and the fans, providing them with social, economic and cultural capital (Woo et al., 2020).

Conventions, as events meant to gather enthusiasts of certain subjects, have existed even before the start of transmedia franchises in the XX. century. As early as 1889, around 2000 children attended the Convention of the Golden Hours Club, dedicated to the fans of the Golden Hours „story paper“. With performances and speeches from charismatic celebrities and its own form of participatory aspects, this fan gathering of young adventure story readers isn't much different from the conventions we now know (Golden Kellem, 2019).

Worldcon, now at its 81st edition in 2023, can be considered as the genesis of today's pop culture fan conventions. Its foundations lie in 1936 when a group of New York science fiction fans visited their peers in Philadelphia. A year later, the first convention that was planned as a public event was held in Britain on January 3. The inaugural World Science Fiction Convention, otherwise known as Worldcon, was organized in 1939 (Coppa, 2006).

With fan culture beginning to rise in the United States in the post-war period, niche groups began to seek community and the expression of their identities. For example, Star Trek fans,

often credited as the first fandom, organized a 300-person fan gathering in a public library in 1969. As the significance of these events became more and more recognized, in 1972 the same fandom featured *Star Trek Lives!*, the first gathering to welcome guests such as the show's creator, Gene Roddenberry and entertained 3000 attendees instead of the expected 500. (Kiely, 2023)

Science-fiction conventions spawned several derivatives, such as anime, gaming, furry and comic book conventions.

In the comic book scene, the rise of fan gatherings can be attributed to the Silver Age of Comic Books, which marked the return of several superhero franchises and their characters. The 60s and 70s saw the founding of many conventions across the globe, some of which have grown to become the biggest events running to this day. Italy's Lucca Comic Convention was one of the first to focus on the genre, while still catering to many other fandoms. Today, it is the world's second-largest convention, short of only Japan's Comiket, which started out as a manga – Japanese comic – convention. However, probably the world's most well-known event comes from the United States of America. The Golden State Comic Con, now San Diego Comic Con, started out the same as countless other conventions at the time, but gradually it broke into the mainstream (Gramuglia, 2017). Much more than a comic book fan gathering today, SDCC is home to the announcements and panels of most major franchises and it has become one of the main hubs of pop culture fandoms.

Nowadays there are countless conventions entertaining attendees across the globe, with more than a thousand events being organized in the United States and about 150 in Europe.

Pop culture fan conventions are usually built around a specific theme. As I mentioned previously, science-fiction and comic book conventions are some of the longest-standing genres of the event, however, there are many different specializations a convention can have: video games, horror, anime, furies, toys, manga or specific franchises, like Star Trek, Star Wars or Harry Potter, to name a few. However, nowadays it's more common, especially for comic book conventions, to be a more general pop culture showcase, as San Diego Comic-Con and its namesakes are.

Conventions come in many shapes and sizes, however, there is a general structure most of them adhere to. Typically, conventions consist of two major parts: the programming and the permanent fixtures in the hall.

The programming refers to a series of shows, panels and speeches, that often feature celebrity guests, such as actors, showrunners or other prominent figures related to the topic of the

conventions. In the case of actors, this is occasionally accompanied by photo opportunities and autograph sessions, where fans can meet their favourite personalities for a fee.

In the convention hall attendees can usually find the artist alley, where creatives can showcase and sell their art. Besides independent artists, publishing companies or distributors also sell their products and merchandise to their fans. Convention-goers also engage in the practice of cosplay, the art of dressing up as their favourite characters. They also compete in contests where they present their intricate costumes.

Conventions often feature thematic areas, sometimes dedicated to a franchise or cinematic universe, that feature decorations set up to resemble the respective world. Occasionally, they also include exhibitions of props and costumes used in TV shows or movies.

Fandom and the entertainment industry

The discourse about participatory culture can be divided into two opposing viewpoints. The utopian perspective considers mass media a democratic landscape where ordinary people are free to become prosumers who can share their creative ideas. They don't passively accept that which is fed to them by experts, thus forming a participatory culture driven by committed and fan-based communities. This view, however, overestimates the power of self-determined and subversive cultural practices. In contrast, the dystopian discourse highlights corporate industry's ability to exploit the interactions of consumers. This approach is based on the new economic format which aims to create a new source of revenue by seducing audience members to contribute to the media product. Nonetheless, this outlook also fails to consider how much power corporate industry truly has in determining cultural production and participation (Müller, 2009).

Jenkins describes convergence as "both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process". New media channels offer opportunities for interaction to consumers, while mainstream commercial media is dominated by a small number of conglomerates. Thus, control can be seen both in the hands of grassroots organizations and industry-leading corporate organizations ('Introduction: "Worship at the Altar of Convergence": A New Paradigm for Understanding Media Change', 2008).

Fans and fandoms therefore have an important impact on the creation and distribution of content. They engage with both old and new media content, using the internet as a home for their practices and exchange of knowledge. Corporate media does not ignore this effect,

storytellers being encouraged to take participation into account ('Why Heather Can Write: Media Literacy and the Harry Potter Wars', 2008).

Consequently, fandom represents bottom-up, while the entertainment industry is the top-down convergence and participation. The two, while often working with the same source material – i.e. the fans of a certain media product and the creator/publisher/owner of said text – are vastly different, almost opposites of each other.

Due to these differences, there is a continuous tension between the two sides. Both imagine participation in a different way and aim for a different end result. This, however, also drives “many of the changes we are observing in the media landscape” ('Why Heather Can Write: Media Literacy and the Harry Potter Wars', 2008). Hence a level of cooperation between fans and the entertainment industry is a must, as one cannot exist without the other.

The utopian approach summarized by Müller (2009) is based on the fan practices that have existed well before truly interactive content was made by the official producers of media. Fans have always taken any opportunity to interact with the topic of their choice. Their primary pleasure is “enjoyment through engagement”, which is more than passive watching, it assumes an active process of “suspending disbelief, making meaning and participating”, in other words, engaging in counter-performance (Duffett, 2013a).

Audiences inherently have a desire to interact with the media product they are consuming, even without an explicit invite from the producers, so it is logical to think that they would be open to entering formatted participatory spaces.

To briefly reflect on the dystopian discourse, media products can rarely exist without audience interaction. On the most basic level, in the race for survival and for the first place, it is all about what the numbers show: which TV show has the most views, which movie had the biggest box office, which social media post had the most engagement. Often the value of content is based on the audience's reaction and interaction, whether monetarily – paying for a ticket at a cinema or subscribing to a streaming platform – or not – leaving a positive review or participating in discussions. This can often determine the existence of the product itself, as production requires a stable economic background. While it is true that sponsorships and other forms of income can cover parts of the monetary needs of producing content, audience engagement and participation are crucial to secure this backing. New media products therefore need to massively rely on fan interaction for their existence.

The current media landscape is thus mostly based on different formatted participatory spaces. Even the access to products is often structured in a way that audiences need to adhere to established conventions: streaming services build upon the audience's desire for products and

willingness to pay for the content they consume; YouTube now offers channel memberships to viewers who would like exclusive content and different interaction opportunities. Both formats are now widespread and regarded as the norm in their respective categories.

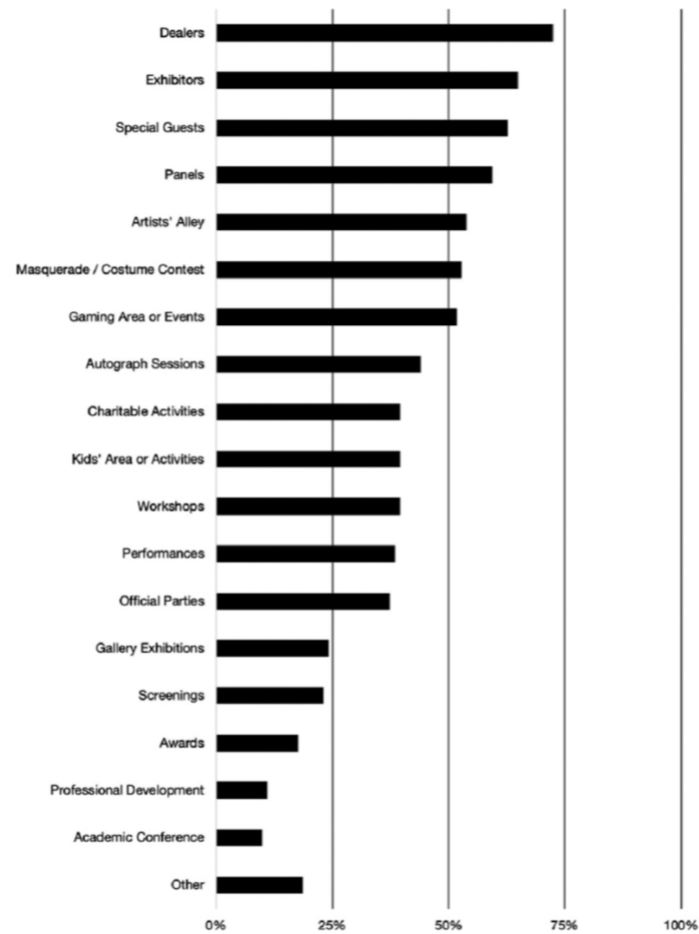
Social media is also one of the most crucial formatted spaces of participation nowadays. Media products now almost always have their own pages or profiles on different platforms, whether it is a TV show, movie, sports league or otherwise. There, producers can cultivate both a passive – by informing audiences without an explicit call-to-action – and an active audience – by inviting them to engage using the platform’s predefined options and encouraging the making of user-generated content.

While audiences will mostly hold a virtual power only, at best seemingly taking control of the narrative, there are examples of their efforts affecting production at a deeper level. Television Without Pity was a community which primarily served to build personal connections between fans and it allowed for people to post alternative storylines to their favourite shows. However, it also provided an avenue for fans to interact with producers and some even had an impact on the series they commented on (“‘Give Pete a Line’: Participatory Television and the TWoP Community’, 2016).

Performance and participation in conventions

Conventions, as events that cater to the audience’s needs to experience fandom and fan culture, offer many opportunities and formatted spaces of performance and participation.

Woo et al. (2020) list the following event features that appear frequently at conventions, according to a survey conducted on 91 events:



Graph 1.: Event features. Proportion of events including each feature/activity (Woo et al., 2020)

Indeed, conventions can be considered spaces of performance by their inherent nature of being both cultural attractors and activators, according to the classification of Jenkins. Fans of similar interests are drawn together by the theme of the event itself or the programming planned within it. For example, enthusiasts of the Marvel franchise come together for a panel held during the San Diego Comic-Con, or Harry Potter fans attend the Enter The Wizard World event in Paris to experience a convention all about their favourite fictional universe.

The most important aspect of performance most conventions usually offer is the opportunity to cosplay. Derived from the words “costume” and “play”, it describes the practice of dressing up as characters from different genres of fiction, through the means of clothes, props, accessories and make-up. As an extension of someone’s fandom, the purposes of the act are varied: “the expression of adoration of the character, enjoying attention or approval from audiences/peers, and experiencing the creative process of the costume construction”. As such, cosplay is as much about the performance as it is about the design, making, buying and assembling of the costume (Rosenberg & Letamendi, 2018).

There is a strong sense of community among cosplayers. Fans use forums and social media to help each other make the clothing, share tutorials about topics such as props or wigs, but also evaluate each other's costumes. Offline, conventions represent the social context where cosplayers can showcase their art, particularly in the West. While fans also cosplay without incentive, the act of dressing up is often institutionalised at events, being part of the programming in some way. Most commonly, costume contests and shows are held, where attendees can present their cosplay to a wide audience (Woo et al., 2020) (Nicolle Lamerichs, 2011).

Cosplay is an essential part of performance and fan practice. It creates and demonstrates an intimate relationship between the fan and the chosen character, but also the fictional work. Fans derive pleasure from actualizing fiction and performing as a character in real life, outside of the confines of the medium of the work they are referencing. Thus, through cosplay and, by extension, through conventions, a fan "constructs his or her identity in relation to fiction and enacts it" (Nicolle Lamerichs, 2011).

Conventions provide many other spaces for varying degrees of participation and performance. Most follow formats that are widely used among most events of this type. Out of the event features previously mentioned, some have participatory aspects to them, however, it is important to understand their limited nature. As previously stated, in many spaces of participation, the audience only holds a virtual power and cannot actually bring change to the fictional work. That is also true in the case of conventions. During these events, the audience participation is unique in the way that it is mostly motivated by the gaining of knowledge, as fans can ask questions or gain insider knowledge throughout different event features. Other parts of the event offer interactivity, such as exhibitions and immersive experiences through which fans can explore their chosen fictional universes.

During talks with special guests, panels or autograph sessions, convention attendees can find out information about several aspects of their favourite fictional universes. Invitees usually include actors, producers, showrunners, writers and other people involved with the production of franchises and as such, can provide fans valuable knowledge that would only interest the parts of the audience that are devoted to finding out more about behind-the-scenes facts. In addition to the information revealed freely by them, or through gatekeepers such as moderators, who ask questions prepared in advance, convention-goers can also ask their own questions to find out the details desired by them. This can happen publicly, during panels, at the audience question section, or privately, for example at an autograph or photo session.

In terms of immersive experiences of participation, many conventions offer exhibitions dedicated to different franchises and works. Ranging from a simple gallery containing props or a faux set built for the event, these showcases can provide varying degrees of insight and exploration of the fictional universes.

More intense immersive and participatory experiences can be achieved through gaming, many conventions having a dedicated zone for playing video games. Often offering demos of unreleased titles, they present an interactive way to engage with a fictional universe.

Another opportunity for participation at conventions can be exclusive screenings of movies or episodes or other presentations of exclusive materials. These usually happen prior to premieres of works, such as a season of a TV show. They also serve the fandom's desire for knowledge, in this case, specifically about the story of the universe.

East European Comic Con

East European Comic Con (from now on: EECC) is a multi-genre fan convention held mainly in Bucharest, Romania, based on the model of the San Diego Comic-Con International and the New York Comic Con events. Inaugurated in 2013, it describes itself as “the largest event of fans of TV shows, movies, gaming, comics, anime & manga in Romania”, making it one of the most significant conventions in the region, as well.

In 2013, the first EECC set out gathering teen fans of comics, video games, manga, movies and TV shows as its goal. The two-day programming of this edition included competitions, video showcases, autograph sessions and on-stage interviews with celebrities. Key event features present were a cosplay contest, a gaming area set up in cooperation with Electronic Sports League Romania, dealers and different themed areas – Japan Wing and Comics&More – and exhibitors. The Comics&More zone also housed the Artists' Alley, where young artists could showcase and sell their work. Furthermore, there was also a mini-zone dedicated to communities, fandoms of different franchises, where they could present their cosplays and activities (Ignat, 2012).

EECC grew in size over the years, however, the core of the event has remained the same. Currently, the following event features are listed on the EECC website in the “Activities” section, which constitute the parts of the convention that are mostly kept the same in recent editions:

1. Cosplay and cosplay contests (listed as separate activities)
2. Panels

3. Photo ops and autographs (listed as separate activities)
4. K-Pop Dance Showcase
5. Gaming Area
6. Props and Booths (referring to small exhibits themed around a certain franchise)
7. Photo Booths
8. Board Games

Not listed in the “Activities” section, but still part of the programming and main hall are the exhibitors (both commercial and non-commercial spaces) and the Artists’ Alley.

The location of the event has mostly been consistent, with Romexpo, one of Romania’s biggest exhibition centres and indoor arenas, housing almost all editions in Bucharest. The convention has also spawned some special editions throughout the years, such as the ICE Comic Con in 2014, Transylvania Comic Con in Cluj-Napoca in 2019 and the Summer Limited Edition in 2021, after the cancellation of the 2020 edition due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, three editions of the EECC were held: the standard one in Romexpo, Bucharest, in May, a special edition in Iași, in August, and another edition in the National Arena, Bucharest, in September.

Date	Location	Attendance
30–31 March 2013	Palatul National al Copiilor	9,400
9–11 May 2014	Romexpo, Bucharest	22,000
8–10 May 2015	Romexpo, Bucharest	30,240
27–29 May 2016	Romexpo, Bucharest	38,000
5–7 May 2017	Romexpo, Bucharest	45,000
18–20 May 2018	Romexpo, Bucharest	48,000
24–26 May 2019	Romexpo, Bucharest	52,000
18–20 October 2019	BT Arena, Cluj-Napoca	23,000
26–29 August 2021	Romexpo, Bucharest	-
26–28 August 2022	Romexpo, Bucharest	52,500
19–21 May 2023	Romexpo, Bucharest	53,000
25–27 August 2023	Palace of Culture, Iași	14,230
1–3 September 2023	National Arena, Bucharest	50,250
19–21 April 2024	Romexpo, Bucharest	
13-15 September 2024	National Arena, Bucharest	

Table 1.: All EECC events held or announced at the time of writing this article

Some notable guests over the years include John Rhys-Davies (Indiana Jones, Lord of the Rings), Finn Jones (Game of Thrones, Marvel), Jason Momoa (Game of Thrones, DCU), Andrew Scott (Sherlock, Fleabag), Paul Wesley (The Vampire Diaries, Star Trek) and remarkable YouTubers, artists, and cosplayers from Romania and abroad.

Conventions in Eastern Europe

To understand the position of the ECCC, a brief reflection is needed on the situation of conventions in Eastern Europe.

The convention scenes in North America and Western Europe are flourishing. Many events are already well established, such as the previously mentioned San Diego Comic Con, others service only one fandom or a niche subgroup. The main reason why these can be successful is mostly because of global pop culture's extensive penetration of Western countries. Meanwhile, in other regions such as Eastern Europe, media products don't always reach the same way, whether because of their lack of distribution, translation, or lack of interest from the public. Fans of certain content in this region can be few and far between and isolated physically, maybe not finding their fellow audience in their area. This makes it much more difficult for conventions to stay viable, as they have a much narrower pool of interested people, vendors, and artists to pull from for their event.

Looking over the – probably non-exhaustive – list of conventions available on fancon.com, there were over 1100 events held in the United States of America alone. In Europe, over 150 conventions can be identified, but only about 20 of these are from Eastern Europe. EECC is the only convention in Romania currently listed.

Knowing that face-to-face interactions, fan performance and participation in contexts such as conventions is important for the experience of fandom, it is important to consider the area EECC services. With no other similar opportunity available in the country, and a very limited number of them in the region, fans in the vicinity of the EECC rely on this event to be able to display their fannish behaviours in the offline world. Therefore, when analysing the convention, it is imperative to take into account its regionality.

Research methodology

In this article, I will conduct a case study using qualitative content analysis on the latest edition of the East European Comic Con, held at the National Arena in Bucharest, during the 1st-3rd of

September 2023. Through this research, I am looking to investigate the structure and curation of the convention, the possibilities of audience participation and performance during the event and its impact as a regional fan convention.

For this study, I will use the social media posts related to the event, alongside the event website for supplementary information.

While a total analysis of the event will require the survey of attendees and organizers alike, social media communication is vital, as nowadays it is the key channel to reach target audiences. Thus, what EECC posts on their social platforms should be an accurate and thorough representation of their event and its features, as this is how they will attract fans to participate. Therefore, it is relevant to study the convention's social media presence to determine its structure.

The convention uses Facebook and Instagram primarily to communicate about the event on social media. On Facebook, EECC posted about this edition 47 times before and 29 times during and after the event, while on Instagram, there are a total of 70 posts before and 12 during and after the event.

To select the relevant posts, I will use the following categories to code the content of these releases:

Domain	Code
Event features – based on the categories established by Woo et al. (2020), selected and grouped in view of the description of the event	Dealers and exhibitors
	Special guests, panels, and autograph sessions
	Cosplay, costume contest
	Artists' Alley
	Gaming area
	Other themed areas
	Gallery exhibitions
	Other
Practical information about the event	Practical information about the event
Other	Other

Table 2.: Coding

Based on these findings, I will conclude the current programming of the event and the participatory and performance-based aspects of its features.

In order to understand the importance – or lack thereof – of the convention as a regional event, I will use the topics presented by Jenkins in his 2012 article “Superpowered Fans”. In his text, he explains various aspects of the San Diego Comic-Con through which audiences “produce and engage with entertainment media in a networked culture”. The topics are the following (Jenkins, 2012):

1. Comic con as homecoming party
2. Comic con as publicity event
3. Comic con as costume party
4. Comic con as networking event
5. Comic con as marketplace
6. Comic con as ritual
7. Comic con as invasion
8. Comic con as jury
9. Comic con as consciousness-raising session
10. Comic con as life support

Considering the limitations of the East European Comic Con, I have narrowed down the topics to the first 6 as being relevant to the current article. Thus, I will be discussing the significance of the EECC in relation to those.

Coding of social media posts. Event features of EECC

There were a total of 107 distinct posts related to my chosen edition of the convention shared on the Facebook and Instagram pages of the East European Comic Con, after accounting for the content posted on both platforms.

I have assigned each post a primary code from the list presented previously. In some, justified instances, I assigned a secondary code to certain posts, which contained information pertaining to multiple categories.

The following topics were present in the posts about the September edition of the EECC:

Code	As primary topic	As secondary topic
Event features: Special guests, panels, and autograph sessions	17	1
Event features: Cosplay, costume contest	13	3
Event features: Artists' Alley	1	-

Event features: Other themed areas	28	-
Event features: Gallery exhibitions	1	-
Event features: Other	2	1
Practical information about the event	15	10
Other	29	4

Table 3.: Number of posts by code

There were no posts directly mentioning dealers and exhibitors or the gaming area, despite them being listed on the event website.

In the following section, I will analyse the depiction of each topic in these social media posts to conclude the programming and curation of the event.

Event features: Special guests, panels, and autograph sessions

This edition of the event had 9 guests: Osric Chau, Ian Beattie, Greg Austin, Tom Wlaschiha, Tom Canton, Mecia Simson, Dean-Charles Chapman, and Manu Bennett.

All actors were available for photo opportunities, selfies, and autograph sessions, for which attendees had to purchase separate tickets. Attendees could bring their own items to autograph or ask for a picture provided by staff, and they could also talk to the guests if time allowed for it. Actors also held public panels, hosted by Tom Canton or Ian Beattie.

Andrew Horton, Jack Gleeson and MyAnna Buring were also announced to be attending, however, they cancelled their appearance citing scheduling conflicts as a reason. In a comment on the announcement of Jack Gleeson's cancellation, EECC states that the contract they use when signing actors on to the event is an industry-standard, implemented by other events such as Fan Expo in Canada, which has a clause for immediate cancellation if the actor is engaged in filming or rehearsing for a screen or stage presence. Tickets purchased for the photo opportunities and autograph sessions with these actors were refunded and their appearance has been rescheduled for the 2024 edition.

While the event was held during the 2023 SAG-AFTRA strike, during which union member actors were instructed not to promote specific projects or discuss their current work, they were allowed to attend pop culture conventions (Fuster, 2023). EECC explained in a comment that they contract actors independently, thus they did not encourage crossing the picket line and the strike did not affect the booking of actors.

Nonetheless, actors still represented different franchises they have previously appeared in and fans recognised them from. The following franchises were mentioned in the announcement posts for the actors and thus were represented at the event:

- Supernatural (Osric Chau)
- Dirk Gently (Osric Chau)
- Star Trek: Discovery (Osric Chau)
- Carmen Sandiego (Osric Chau)
- Arrowverse (Osric Chau, Manu Bennett)
- Game of Thrones (Ian Beattie, Tom Wlaschiha, Dean-Charles Chapman)
- Gangs of London (Ian Beattie)
- Hayfields (Ian Beattie)
- Vikings (Ian Beattie)
- The Tudors (Ian Beattie)
- Alexander (Ian Beattie)
- Hunters (Greg Austin)
- Class - Doctor Who spin-off (Greg Austin)
- Summer of Rockets (Greg Austin)
- Mr Selfridge (Greg Austin)
- Stranger Things (Tom Wlaschiha)
- Jack Ryan (Tom Wlaschiha)
- Das Boot (Tom Wlaschiha)
- Rose Island (Tom Wlaschiha)
- Harry Potter (Alfred Enoch)
- How to Get Away with Murder (Alfred Enoch)
- Foundation (Alfred Enoch)
- Sherlock (Alfred Enoch)
- The Witcher (Tom Canton, Mécia Simson)
- Billy Elliot - West End musical (Dean-Charles Chapman)
- 1917 (Dean-Charles Chapman)
- Star Wars: The Acolyte (Dean-Charles Chapman)
- Spartacus (Manu Bennett)
- The Hobbit (Manu Bennett)

- The Shannara Chronicles (Manu Bennett)

While the 30 works represented might seemingly be an expansive list of fandoms, it doesn't account for their popularity or the role of the actors in them. Even if actors represent a relatively large number of fictional works, it does not necessarily mean that they catered to the fans' tastes, as these movies and TV shows might not be well known and loved in the region. They also don't take into consideration the relevance of the actor in their respective roles, as they may not have been memorable for the audience. Thus, how relevant and successful the chosen guests requires the survey of attendees and the target audience of the convention.

Event features: Cosplay, costume contest

In a series of posts where EECC explains various aspects and activities of the event, they list and describe the ways cosplay is present at the convention.

First of all, attendees are encouraged to dress up as their favourite characters from any type of media product, even if they do not wish to participate in other cosplay aspects of the event.

The Main Stage houses the Cosplay Contest, where participants who make their own costumes can compete by presenting short skits either solo or in groups. The contest was judged by professional guests, who also performed at the event: LevyLike, a Dutch finalist at the Extreme Cosplay Gathering, Alfheim Cosplay from Romania and Dyana Smythe from Greece.

The stage is also the home of the Cosplay Parade, a catwalk where people can showcase their costumes – not necessarily made by themselves – in a non-competitive manner.

Among the other cosplay-related programming, guest and judge LevyLike held a masterclass lecture about cosplay performances, as well.

Event features: Artists' Alley

There is not much information to be found about the Artists' Alley in the posts by EECC. They describe the event feature as “where comic artists, illustrators, graphic designers, and writers showcase their work. Fans can interact with artists, discuss their work, and even buy unique pieces directly from the creators”. They specify that it isn't a bazaar for hand-made products, rather it is a place for artists to showcase their drawings and illustrations.

Registration for interested parties was open until 1 month before the event.

Event features: Other themed areas

The Japan Area at the convention was organised in cooperation with the Embassy of Japan in Romania and The Japan National Tourism Organization, showcasing several traditional Japanese activities.

According to posts shared in collaboration with Izanagi, a Japanese film festival, the area was set up like a matsuri, a traditional Japanese festival, celebrating important moments, such as the harvest season or various patron gods, with 30 yatai – stands. In the following posts, they described the various activities that were available to try at the stands:

- A teru teru bōzu-making workshop: teru teru bōzu are traditional amulets, often made of paper or white cloth, often resembling ghosts, which are said to bring good weather.
- Traditional games:
 - Yo-Yo Tsuru: also known as Yo-Yo Fishing, is a game where you can fish for a makeshift yo-yo using a paper string with a hook on the end.
 - Super Ball Sukui: also known as Super Ball Scooping, is a game in which you have to pull rubber balls out of the water using chopsticks or a special paddle called a poi. The poi is made of thin paper, which breaks easily when it comes into contact with water.
 - Daruma Otoshi: also known as Falling Daruma, the game consists of a set of wooden blocks in different colours, which are arranged in a tower. The top piece is shaped like a Daruma, the name given by the Japanese to Bodhidharma, the founder of Zen Buddhism. The object of the game is to hit the lower pieces with the hammer to knock them out of the tower without knocking down the Daruma head.
 - Fukuwarai: children's game played on Japanese New Year. The game consists of a sheet of paper on which a face is drawn with all its features missing. These features - eyes, eyebrows, nose and mouth - are cut out and must be put back in place by the blindfolded player.
 - Miniature Sumō arena: Ton Ton Sumo, a game in which you choose your fighter and, with a joystick, control it to face your opponent.
 - Katanuki: Katanuki is a type of candy, in the form of a rectangular tablet, very fragile, on which is engraved a shape of an animal, flower or any object. Depending on the shape, the level of difficulty also changes. The aim of the game is for participants to remove the whole shape using a pin.

- Taiko: members of the Kodama Daiko group perform the rhythmic drums known as the “heartbeat of Japan”.
- Fūrin/making workshop: a traditional windchime. Once the heat arrives, it is hung on the balcony or in the window, to announce with its specific, crystalline clink the few moments when the breeze is felt.
- Matcha stand: tasting and making the famous green tea.
 - Sadō/chadō showcase by the Romanian-Japanese Studies Center "Angela Hondru": matcha serving ceremony.
- Japanese prefectures: an area to find out more about Japanese prefectures and their flags.
- Shodō writing workshop: Japanese calligraphy.
- Yukata stand: a place to learn about the traditional summer clothing.
- Omikuji: Omikuji are little strips of paper that herald the future. It is a very popular New Year tradition.
- Beyblade: the game that has taken the world by storm since the manga of the same name appeared in 1999. Beyblades are a type of powerful toy with complex mechanisms that consider balance, weight and rotational speed, and the story in the manga says they contain the spirits of sacred beasts, which makes them even more special.
- Origami: also known as the art of paper folding, as we know it today, is used in making various objects or animals for the entertainment of the public.
 - Separate stand for making Koi Nobori: sachets for chopsticks, made of origami sheets with special designs, but turned into koi fish.
- Setsubun: part of the spring festival Haru Matsuri, with rituals of casting out demons.
- Anime stand:
 - Guess the Anime Intro
 - Character vs. Weapon: Spin the two wheels - one with anime characters and one with weapons - and find out if your weapon can defeat the hero that has appeared.
- Himitsu boxes: Different types of wood are used to create a box, each with an interesting pattern. These have evolved from jewellery boxes into intricate puzzles.

- Uchiwa decorating: a symbol of summer and festivals in Japan, these fans, with bamboo handles and paper or fabric surfaces, are both decorative and practical for cooling off on hot days.
- Sencha showcase by Professor Kumiko Murooka from Ogasawara Sencha-dō: a special ceremony of serving Sencha, made from green tea leaves.
- Kintsugi demonstration and Japanese pickles (nukazuke) tasting by Hikari Tanaka, Japanese Artist and Fermented Food Expert: “Kintsugi is a traditional Japanese art form that involves repairing broken, cracked, or chipped ceramic items”; “Nukazuke are pickled vegetables made using Nuka-doko, a paste consisting of bran, salt, and water.”(Comic Con Romania [@comiccon.romania], 2023a)
- Live Sumi-e painting demonstration by Mitsuru Nagata, a master of Shodō: “a classic form of Japanese painting, with the use of Sumi ink crafted from soot.” (Comic Con Romania [@comiccon.romania], 2023b)
- Bon Odori dance lesson with Chihoco Yanagi, a performer of traditional Japanese dance: “a traditional Japanese dance from the Obon festival, a celebration dedicated to ancestors and the spirits of the departed.”(Comic Con Romania [@comiccon.romania], 2023c)

A stamp rally was available for interested attendees, which was part of a contest to win Japanese goodies.

With 28 primarily about this topic, the Other Themed Areas was the most talked about category among Event Features. All posts about this topic were about the Japan Area. Thus, it is logical to conclude that this was the most well-developed area of the event, with many professional co-organizers and guests. Another possible conclusion could be that the fans are most interested in this type of event feature, as in Japanese culture and activities. Nonetheless, it is the area that the event and supporting organizations released the most information about on social media. This, however, might be because most posts were shared in collaboration with Izanagi, in which case the film festival’s team may have handled the communication about the Japan Area.

Event features: Gallery exhibitions

HBO Max was present at the event with a Game of Throne’s themed installation that they posted on Facebook and the EECC shared. The exhibition consisted of the Iron Throne built as seen in the TV series.

Event features: Other

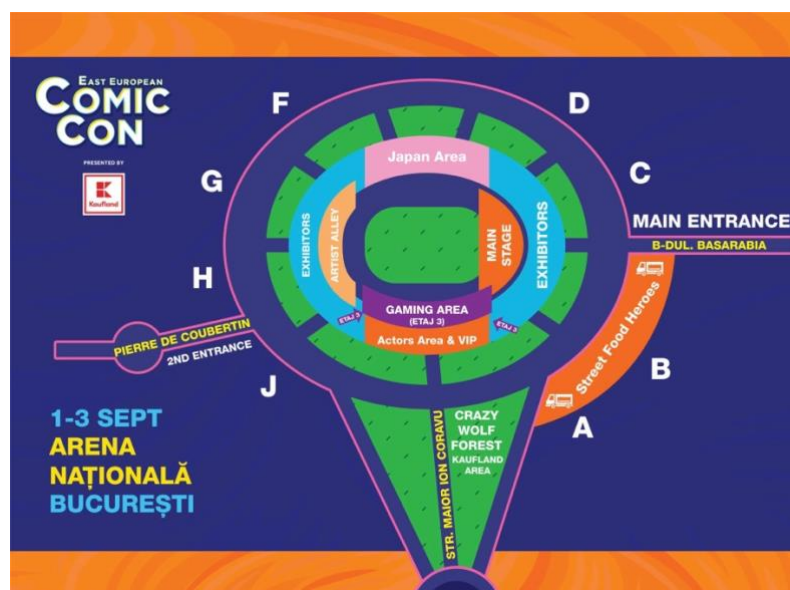
Besides the cosplay seminar, there were two event features that can't be sorted into the previously mentioned categories.

A K-Pop dance showcase was held on the Sunday of the event. Attendees could register by sending in a video of their group of people over the age of 14 doing a cover dance.

Tucano Coffee, a Romanian café chain, was also present at the event, offering an “unforgettable experience”.

Practical information about the event

EECC shared practical information about the event throughout its social media promotion. In the months before, they informed interested people about ticket sales and prices, applications for the Artists' Alley, cosplay opportunities, K-pop dance competition, volunteering, refunds for cancelled guests and more. Closer to the event they posted about the location, entry points and daily schedules.



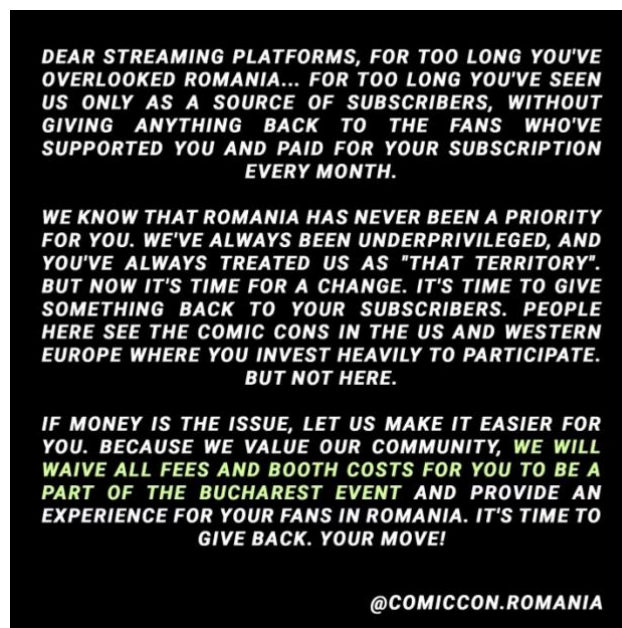
Picture 1.: Map of the location of the event (East Europe Comic Con, 2023c)

From this infographic, we learn that there was an exhibitors and gaming area at the event, even though they were not communicated about on social media. Moreover, a Crazy Wolf Forest/Kaufland Area was also established, though it is unclear what type of event feature it can be categorized as, with no information available on it through social media. Food was provided through the Street Food Heroes area.

Other

Most posts belonging to this category are photo albums shared during and after the event, including pictures taken at the Photo Opportunities with actors. Content with the secondary code “Other” was related to sponsor announcements for the Cosplay Contest.

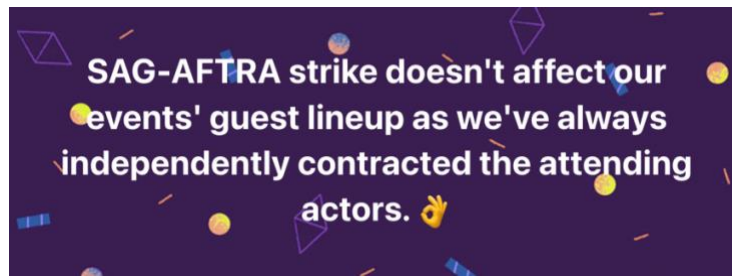
Two posts are outliers in this category. The first one, posted on 15.07.2023. is an open letter to streaming platforms, as an invitation for them to participate at the event with their own booth.



Picture 2.: EECC’s offer to streaming platforms (East Europe Comic Con, 2023a)

In this post, EECC conceptualizes a problem that they are facing, regarding the participation of streaming services, production companies and by extension, owners of the intellectual property of the franchises that fans and attendees want to see at events like conventions. The companies named and tagged in the post were Netflix, Sky Showtime, Amazon Prime Video, Apple TV, Disney +, HBO Max (now known only as Max) and Crunchyroll. In a comment on the post, EECC specifies, that HBO had been part of the event since the very first edition and Crunchyroll participated the previous year. As evidenced by a previous post and event feature category, HBO Max was present at this edition as well, with at least a Game of Thrones installation.

Another outlying post in the “Other” category is one clarifying an important aspect of the context in which the event was organised in, regarding the 2023 SAG-AFTRA strikes.



Picture 3.: EECC specifies that the strike did not affect the booking of actors (East Europe Comic Con, 2023b)

While EECC states that the strikes did not affect bookings, it is still an important aspect to consider when talking about this specific edition of the event. I will continue analysing this aspect in a further chapter.

Audience participation and performance at EECC

As evidenced by the event features, this edition of the EECC had a few opportunities for audience participation and performance.

The most important aspect of fan performance present at the event is cosplay. As previously mentioned, it is a vital fan practice, as a facet of showcasing the relationship between fan and character. The event had the most popular event features related to cosplay in its programming, namely the contest and the parade.

Audience performance through cosplay is important generally, however, its power can become even more significant in more isolated fan communities and smaller events.

Cosplaying can be understood as “the play of at least four identities: the founding identity of the subject’s understanding the self as self, the self as actor, the performing self as the masked character in the act of cosplaying, and the character itself as enacted identity.” In this way, it can be understood as one of the most complex ways of fan performance and interaction with fandom, fiction and character, as the cosplayer acts as performer, director, costumer and audience. Cosplay thus is a fan’s way to represent subjects that they are passionate about and in a sense, becoming the editors of their own story while embodying a character (‘The Lure Of The Mask: Identity, Expression, and Embodiment The’, 2022).

An intimate relationship as this gains even more importance when the opportunity for its practice is scarce for fans. While it is true that cosplaying lives as an activity beyond events such as fan conventions, with many cosplayers making costumes at home, holding their own photoshoots and posting their work on social media, live interaction is still essential. EECC is one of the only events of its kind in Romania and in the Eastern European region where fans

can live out their identity this way and thus, an important stage for cosplayers. Without it, fandoms of the region would be missing a vital avenue of fan culture and practice.

Another reason why having a safe space to express their identity is important for Eastern European fans is shame. As previously explored, fans are often on the receiving end of a lot of negative stereotyping. This is amplified in a region where global pop culture often does not penetrate and the wide public does not necessarily know different franchises. Fans who openly show their identity through ways such as cosplay are labelled as “weird” or “freaks”, since people may not necessarily understand cosplay as an art form or the origin of the character that they embody. EECC thus provides an environment where creative fans can play with the previously mentioned aspects of their identity freely and – ideally – without judgment.

In terms of participatory experiences, attendees had the chance to find out information from actors during panels, autograph sessions, selfie, and photo opportunities, in which all actors participated. Actors, who represented various franchises and works, were available for fans to ask questions from, encouraging participation through the exchange of knowledge.

In terms of exhibitions, the only one we have confirmation of through social media is the Game of Thrones-themed one by HBO. However, using this example we can operate under the assumption that, though opportunities are few, they can be even more meaningful for local fans. Fans enjoy interacting and immersing themselves into their preferred fictional universes. In regions which rarely have access to exhibitions, installations, prop collections and memorabilia or visiting filming locations – though in the case of Game of Thrones Eastern Europe, namely, Croatia served as a vital location for production – the significance of any exhibit heightens. With the replica of the Iron Throne being put on display at the EECC, fans could experience a vital prop from the show and the universe, which could undoubtedly offer a unique and fun experience to attendees.

Though according to the event map a gaming area was available at the convention, there is no information about it on social media. Thus, through this research, we cannot establish what kind of participatory experiences were available in the form of video games.

The importance of EECC as a regional fan event

In the following sections, I will discuss the impact of the EECC as a regional fan convention, based on the previously mentioned edition, with brief comparisons to San Diego Comic-Con.

EECC as homecoming party

Conventions started as local gatherings, often focusing on a single media property, celebrating fan practices such as fan fiction, clubs, etc., before – in some cases – developing into massive, all-encompassing multi-genre festivals. Now they are much more than a ground for fans to meet each other: Henry Jenkins (2012) describes San Diego Comic-Con International, one of the biggest fan conventions as an event that “puts the professionals in the center and the subcultural activities the conference was based on at the fringes” as it focuses more on “fans as consumers rather than fans as cultural producers.” Thus, Comic Con, as an event genre, is no longer only about the fans networking, it is an essential connecting point between fans and media properties, with many franchises debuting their upcoming releases, sending their casts to participate in panels and selling their merch at events. How does this aspect of conventions manifest at an event like EECC?

While much less attention is given to this event by professionals than the one in San Diego, the way the convention sees its attendees is still apparently moving more towards the consumer end of the spectrum. Fundamental parts of the event where fans can feel like cultural producers, such as the Cosplay Contest, are still a part of the event programming, there are no indicators that traditional fan practices, such as fan clubs, were present. In contrast, there are many venues of consumption – both by the owners of intellectual properties and others – set up throughout the convention: the exhibitors’ area, which includes commercial spaces, paid opportunities to meet and take pictures with actors, and booths set up by streaming services and franchises. Though the latter – namely the Game of Thrones installation – is not an experience that attendees needed to pay separately for, it acts as an advertising space for the brands, thus encouraging further consumption of their products. What is more, the title sponsor of the event is Kaufland, a German supermarket chain present in Romania, which also had its own area.

EECC does not have the multiple decade history that other big conventions like San Diego Comic Con have, which began operating in 1970. The Romanian event’s attendance currently is comparable to that of San Diego Comic-Con in 2000, so the fan gathering inaugurated in 2013 was already established into a scene where the consumerist approach was flourishing. As such, it lacks the roots of offline fan practices that much older conventions have evolved from. However, even in the landscape in which fans are seen as consumers, their coming together cannot be disregarded as a driving force of EECC: without them, the event would not have survived in the long run. With very few other available spaces for fans to interact with each other, now that EECC has been an established event for more than 10 years, it is an

irreplaceable meeting point for local fans, just like San Diego Comic-Con is essential on a worldwide scale.

EECC as publicity event

As previously mentioned, conventions have become an important part of the marketing strategies of franchises and streaming services, with them facilitating many activities, such as panels, exhibits, exclusive showings and much more at fan gatherings. Henry Jenkins (2012) writes „Hollywood studios and television networks have to pull out all stops if they want to play, from clips of previously unreleased footage or surprise appearances by crowd-pleasing celebrities to displays of costumes, props, and sets on the floor of exhibit Hall.”

At EECC, however, media franchises and streaming services are present a lot less. The question arises: do these organizations not see a regional event as ample publicity space? While we may not get a definitive answer to this question, the edition of the event discussed currently presents a curious case of how streaming services see EECC as a local, Romanian fan gathering.

In a previously highlighted post, EECC describes how the organizers see the relationship that streaming services harbour with their fans: they say that these media conglomerates do not prioritize their viewers from Romania, they do not give anything back to their subscribers from this region, while fans continue to see the efforts companies make at events in the USA and Western Europe. They offer free booths to any streaming platforms willing to bring their content to EECC. In this edition, we only see HBO Max explicitly joining the event through social media communication. While in this context the SAG-AFTRA strike might have some effect on this situation, it is seen as a clear issue by the organizers regardless.

Fans in Eastern Europe do not have the same opportunities offered to them by professionals as audiences in North America or Western Europe. Of course, those regions with exponentially more active fans will always get more content and activities related to franchises, however, the market in lesser-addressed regions is obviously waiting to be engaged. Streaming services could benefit from exposing attendees to products they have not encountered yet if presented alongside franchises they know and love already.

While currently the participation of streaming services at conventions is a rarity, EECC has verbally committed to bridging the gap between as many companies and fans as they can. With some having been present in past editions, there is hope that the growing number of attendees will be motivation enough for these media conglomerates to bring more experiences to the Eastern European region.

It is important to note that for other editions of the event there have been more detailed lists of exhibitors or gaming area participants released before the event. From a brief overview, some of the companies appearing as sponsors or other actors during the convention are Samsung, League of Legends/Riot Games, Warner Bros. Discovery, and Nintendo. Still, these names are few and far between, compared to the non-entertainment-related companies present. Thus, few media companies do not see EECC as an adequate platform for publicity purposes.

EECC as costume party

As it has become apparent from both the theoretical framework and the analysis of the event, cosplay is an essential property of conventions and that does not change in the context of EECC either.

Henry Jenkins (2012) describes cosplaying at conventions in the following way: “Because wearing red, blue, or green spandex frees us from what fans like to call our “mundane” roles and creates a festive environment.” Indeed, seeing attendees in their costumes not only means they can live out their fan identities, but it is also an essential part of building the convention atmosphere. Fan gatherings and cosplay have a symbiotic relationship. While cosplayers add to the unique environment of conventions, the events provide a new context in which characters can appear: “the more fanlore you know, the more you take pleasure in seeing incongruous juxtapositions” (Jenkins, 2012).

For fans and cosplayers in Romania and the Eastern European region, EECC is one of, if not the only places where they can experience such a visual mixing of fandoms and characters, put into real-world situations. In various pictures posted during and after the event, we can see people dressed as a plethora of characters, posing in a real-world environment that we’re not used to seeing them in, getting interviewed, dancing, interacting with people dressed “normally”, etc.

EECC as networking event

The bigger, international Comic Con events, such as San Diego Comic-Con, have become an important meeting point not only for fans but for industry professionals too. According to Henry Jenkins (2012) “industry insiders use the event to do what they do best— pass around business cards, buy each other lunch, and otherwise network. For the industry insiders and wannabes, the challenge is how to “dress for success” in this festive environment, how to hold onto professional standards while looking like you belong and are not simply a Comic-Con

poseur, there just to cut deals.” While this is possible at conventions that attract the interest of many franchises, streaming services, production companies and other organizations within the entertainment industry, what happens at regional events that, as we’ve seen, are often ignored by the industry?

Further research is needed to establish which industry professionals, perhaps from the local entertainment sphere, participate at EECC. From what can be seen through the social media communication of this edition of the event in particular, we don’t know if any industry insiders were present at the event, apart from actors.

It is unlikely that EECC will ever become a hub for entertainment professionals internationally, but the possibility of making the event a national or regional networking event should be explored further. One avenue that is already in place at the event is the Artists’ Alley, which, apart from being a source of revenue and exposure for the artists, is a meeting point for local comic artists, illustrators, and other members of the regional art scene.

To note, for other editions EECC has released a full list of artists, with often more than 45 people participating. From this we can gather that EECC does platform local artists, however, they should place an emphasis on showcasing this aspect in the case of every edition. With the event being the only one of its kind in the region, it is an important opportunity for interested artists, who should be communicated about before every edition to prove that EECC cares about the local art scene and that it is a viable platform for creators to boost their followings.

EECC as marketplace

While merchandise related to media products can be found in many physical and online stores now, there is still a sort of mysticism and exclusivity around what people can buy at conventions related to their preferred fandoms. Jenkins (2012) describes it as such: “Again, most media coverage highlights items that fit a mainstream conception of geek culture [...] And exhibit Hall is where all the different communities can find “the stuff dreams are made of”.” Usually, a mix of independent artists, small businesses, and industry-adjacent companies appear in the commercial spaces of the exhibit hall, often selling merchandise exclusive to the event.

Social media analysis does not reveal exactly who was at the Exhibit Hall of this specific edition of EECC, however, there have been examples of companies providing exclusive items at this event. Most recently, at the edition held in April 2024, Funko, a toy company that makes licenced pop culture collectibles, released event-exclusive vinyl figures (Funko Europe

[@funko_europe], 2024). This is an indication that there is a willingness from international companies to collaborate with regional events, and fans from this area can be a part of the exclusivity of bringing home a limited-edition item from the event.

Similarly to the situation of artists, EECC also has a chance to platform local merchants during their events. On other edition's maps, we can see a list of Romanian shops and sellers present in the shopping area, for whom participation at the event could lead to expansions or deals with new merch production company. While they do not contribute to the exclusivity of products, they can raise awareness of the fact that pop culture-related merch or collectibles are available in the country, showcasing to fans which shops can serve their wants and needs.

EECC as ritual

“We can share some of these same experiences now, year 'round, in cyberspace. But Comic-Con is the place where communities come together face-to-face, and thus anchor their relationships for the coming year” (Jenkins, 2012). Indeed, as previously explained, conventions were born from the inherent desire of fans to meet, exchange knowledge and live out their fan practices together. With the rise of the internet, they can do most of these activities online as well, but events still prevail, since nothing can replace the intimate nature and atmosphere of face-to-face gatherings that have been part of fan culture for decades.

In the case of EECC, where the convention is younger than the penetration of the internet, as a space for fans to interact. How can a paid event, which possibly requires hours of travelling and accommodation, compete with the ease of connecting with people on the World Wide Web?

More research into fans' motivation for participating in the event is required to establish whether convention culture – or the lack thereof – has an impact on the willingness to attend.

13 years is enough to build rituals within an event if certain parts of the programming are repeated and the sufficient number of attendees return year after year. Ritualistic event features include the Cosplay Contest and Parade, the presence of actors and their interactions with fans, the Exhibit Hall, Artists' Alley, and Gaming Area, however, these aren't unique to EECC, as they are characteristics of the convention genre. The analysis of more editions and the survey of attendees is required to establish rituals distinctive to the Romanian event.

Conclusion

East Europe Comic Con is a somewhat lone representative of conventions, more specifically Comic Con multi-genre events in the Eastern European region. While it is not built on the decades of fan traditions practised before the internet, it is still an important face-to-face meeting point even to the fans who were introduced to fandoms online.

Analyzing the social media presence of the 1st-3rd of September 2023 edition of the event, the structure of the event can be described as follows: the key event features were special guests, panels, and autograph sessions, cosplay related activities, Artists' Alley, exhibitors, the Japan Area, gallery exhibitions, a K-Pop dance showcase, a Gaming Area and other themed areas, including a food court.

Communication about the event features, however, is lacking in many instances, which is a downside, as it should be consistent for all editions of the event. No details are released about aspects such as exhibitors or the Gaming Area, thus not all opportunities are showcased thoroughly enough for the fans who want to know what they are getting for the price of the ticket.

The participatory and performative experiences offered at the event were the cosplaying opportunities, the interaction with actors and the gallery exhibitions. Cosplaying is highlighted the most, as the event provides a safe, but public space for attendees to live out their identities, where their costume and what they want to convey is understood.

EECC might never reach the complexity of flagship events such as San Diego Comic-Con, but it seems to be steadily working its way towards bringing more exclusive activities and merchandise to local fans who otherwise cannot experience these, securing its position as a regional entertainment hub. Though not everything can be generalized from this specific edition of the event, it is a good example of some issues and setbacks the convention as a whole faces.

EECC still goes virtually unrecognized and undersupported by the industry, with many big companies scarcely making appearances, although it is something they regularly do at other events in the USA or Western Europe. The Romanian convention makes a stand against this, the organization clearly prioritizing bringing as many streaming platforms and franchises to their fans as possible. Further research into why they do not establish booths at the event is needed.

The role of the event is clear: to bring fans together and offer them unique experiences related to the media products they are passionate about while bridging the gap between fandoms in

Eastern Europe and ones in the West. There are still ways the event can expand itself to become an international staple in conventions, however, more focus should be put on uniting the local entertainment industry professionals and offering more opportunities to local pop culture-related brands and artists, to uplift the community that keeps the event afloat every year.

In conclusion, with an ever-growing number of attendees, EECC is establishing itself as an important actor for fans of pop culture and providing irreplaceable experiences to the fandoms of Eastern Europe. Thus, further research on the event is warranted to better understand its effects and how it is set up from the organizational side.

Limitations

While this paper provides an overview of EECC, the analysis of one edition of the event fails to account for some nuances regarding the convention. I plan to conduct further research through social media analysis such as completing the coding of multiple editions of the event to establish patterns in the communication and a comparative analysis of an international event to highlight regional differences.

In order to truly understand what impact the convention has on fans and the challenges organizers face regarding the participation of actors, streaming platforms and franchises, a survey of the attendees and an interview with the organising team should be conducted.

Bibliography

- Booth, P. (2018). Transmedia Fandom and Participation: The Nuances and Contours of Fannish Participation. In M. Freeman & R. R. Gambarato (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies* (1st ed., pp. 279–288). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351054904>
- Bourdaa, M. (2018). Transmedia Storytelling: Character, Time, and World—The Case of Battlestar Galactica. In M. Freeman & R. R. Gambarato (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies* (1st ed., pp. 133–140). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351054904>
- Branch, F., & Phillips, R. (2018). An Ontological Approach to Transmedia Worlds. In M. Freeman & R. R. Gambarato (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351054904>

- Coppa, F. (2006). A Brief History of Media Fandom. In K. Hellekson & K. Busse (Eds.), *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*. McFarland.
- Duffett, M. (2013a). Fan practices. In M. Duffett, *Understanding fandom: An introduction to the study of media fan culture* (pp. 165–190). Bloomsbury.
- Duffett, M. (2013b). Introduction. In M. Duffett, *Understanding fandom: An introduction to the study of media fan culture* (pp. 1–34). Bloomsbury.
- Freeman, M., & Gambarato, R. R. (2018). Introduction: Transmedia Studies—Where Now? In M. Freeman & R. R. Gambarato (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies* (1st ed., pp. 1–12). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351054904>
- Geraghty, L. (2017). Transmedia Character Building: Textual Crossovers in the Star Wars Universe. In S. Guynes & D. Hassler-Forest, *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling* (pp. 117–128). Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.5117/9789462986213>
- “Give Pete a Line”: Participatory Television and the TWoP Community. (2016). In S. M. Falero, *Digital Participatory Culture and the TV Audience* (pp. 53–76). Palgrave Macmillan UK. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-50000-7>
- Hellekson, K., & Busse, K. (2006). Introduction. In K. Hellekson & K. Busse, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays* (pp. 5–32). McFarland.
- Introduction: “Worship at the Altar of Convergence”: A New Paradigm for Understanding Media Change. (2008). In H. Jenkins, *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide* (Central Library B.A.S.517; pp. 1–24). New York University Press;
- Jenkins, H. (1992). “Get a Life!”: Fans, Poachers, Nomads. In H. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (pp. 9–50). Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). Interactive Audiences? The ‘Collective Intelligence’ of Media Fans. In H. Jenkins, *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture* (pp. 134–151). New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2009, December 12). Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: The Remaining Four Principles of Transmedia Storytelling. *Pop Junctions*. https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/12/revenge_of_the_origami_unicorn.html
- Jenkins, H. (2012). Superpowered Fans. *Boom : A Journal of California*, 2(2), 22–36. Supplemental Index.
- Müller, E. (2009). Formatted spaces of participation: In M. van den Boomen, S. Lammes, A.-S. Lehmann, J. Raessens, & M. T. Schäfer (Eds.), *Digital Material* (pp. 49–64). Amsterdam University Press; JSTOR. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46mxjv.6>

- Nicolle Lamerichs. (2011). Stranger than fiction: Fan identity in cosplay. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 7. Directory of Open Access Journals.
<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2011.0246>
- Rosenberg, R. S., & Letamendi, A. M. (2018). Personality, behavioral, and social heterogeneity within the cosplay community. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 28.
<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1535>
- The Lure Of The Mask: Identity, Expression, and Embodiment The. (2022). In F. Lunning, *Cosplay: The fictional mode of existence*. University of Minnesota Press.
- von Stackelberg, P. (2018). Transmedia Franchising: Driving Factors, Storyworld Development, and Creative Process. In M. Freeman & R. R. Gambarato (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies* (1st ed., pp. 233–242). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351054904>
- Why Heather Can Write: Media Literacy and the Harry Potter Wars. (2008). In H. Jenkins, *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide* (Central Library B.A.S.517). New York University Press;
- Wolf, M. J. P. (2018). Transmedia World Building: History, Conception, and Construction. In M. Freeman & R. R. Gambarato (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies* (1st ed., pp. 141–147). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351054904>
- Woo, B., Johnson, B., Beaty, B., & Campbell, M. (2020). Theorizing comic cons. *Journal of Fandom Studies*, *The*, 8(1), 9–31. https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs_00007_1

Sources

- Comic Con Romania [@comiccon.romania]. (2023a, August 29). *RO Hikari Tanaka, artistă și expertă în alimentație fermentată, este cea de-a doua invitată din Japan Area! Ea va susține...* Instagram.Com.
https://www.instagram.com/p/CwiH2i0I3vR/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D
- Comic Con Romania [@comiccon.romania]. (2023b, August 30). *RO Mai sunt doar două zile până la #EECC, unde Mitsuru Nagata va susține pentru prima dată în România o demonstrație.* Instagram.Com.
https://www.instagram.com/p/Cwkr5aGIj8b/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D
- Comic Con Romania [@comiccon.romania]. (2023c, August 31). *RO Ne apropiem cu pași rapizi de o altă ediție memorabilă de #EECC! Suntem încântați să vă prezentăm*

- următoarea invitață*. Instagram.Com.
https://www.instagram.com/p/CwnRnfDI8Be/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D
- East Europe Comic Con. (2023a, July 15). *Dear streaming platforms, for too long you've overlooked Romania... For too long you've seen us only as a source*. Facebook.Com.
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=799652281628166&set=a.768309461429115>
- East Europe Comic Con. (2023b, July 18). *[Image attached]*.
<https://www.facebook.com/eecon/posts/801117371481657>
- East Europe Comic Con. (2023c, August 31). *Attention explorers! For ticket scanning, you will need to use Pierre de Coubertin or Basarabia Boulevard entrances*. Facebook.Com.
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=822301332696594&set=a.768309461429115>
- Funko Europe [@funko_europe]. (2024, April 12). *We'll be at East European Comic Con 2024 from April 19-21! Who's joining us? Stop by ROMEXPO, Pavilion B1...* Instagram.Com. <https://www.instagram.com/p/C5p9ZCXuiA1/>
- Fuster, J. (2023, July 10). SAG-AFTRA Lays Out Strike Rules: No Shoots, No Press, No Social Media Promos. *TheWrap*. <https://www.thewrap.com/sag-aftra-strike-rules-publicists/>
- Golden Kellem, B. (2019, March 9). The 19th-Century “Golden Hours” Convention Brought Young Readers Together to Meet Their Literary Heroes. *Smithsonian Magazine*. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/19th-century-golden-hours-convention-brought-young-readers-together-meet-their-literary-heroes-180968437/>
- Gramuglia, A. (2017). The Rise and History of Comic Conventions. *Vocal Media Geeks*. <https://vocal.media/geeks/the-rise-and-history-of-comic-conventions>
- Ignat, V. (2012, December 17). Comic Con—Cel mai mare salon de bandă desenată din lume, ajunge și la București, anul viitor. *Adevarul.Ro*. <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/bucuresti/comic-con-cel-mai-mare-salon-de-banda-desenata-1393598.html>
- Kiely, J. (2023, July 14). 10 Greatest Star Trek Convention Moments. *What Culture*. <https://whatculture.com/trekculture/10-greatest-star-trek-convention-moments>
- Scott Brown on Sherlock Holmes, Obsessed Nerds, and Fan Fiction. (2009, April 20). *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/2009/04/pl-brown-6/>