

LEVELED Book • z²

Comic Cons



Written by Keith and Sarah Kortemartin

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Focus Question

Why are comic cons popular in modern-day culture?

Words to Know

censorship	merchandise
controversy	panel
conventions	pop culture
diversity	readership
fandom	screenings
memoirs	venues

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Ticket holders make their way through the line to enter Comic-Con International: San Diego.

Welcome to Comic Con

Packed with thousands of other fans in an auditorium, you wait for the stars to arrive onstage. It's pretty warm in your Chewbacca costume, but you guess it's even warmer inside the armored helmet that guy two rows down is wearing. Who's he supposed to be, again? You turn your head to see better, but suddenly the crowd is on its feet, cheering. You jump up just in time to see Robert Downey Jr.—the actor who has played Iron Man in several movies—walk out onstage. He's grinning and tossing roses to the people in the front row. The *Avengers* panel has begun.

This is the world of comic cons: colorful, crowded, and built for fans of **pop culture**. If you collect comic books, watch cartoons, go to the movies, or play video games, there's something for you at a comic con. These fan **conventions**, called *cons* for short, happen all over the world. Some take place in huge **venues**, with thousands of attendees and multiple days of events. Some are very small, lasting only a day or an afternoon. Comic cons have events and attractions for every kind of fan, from young children to adults, from serious gamers to obsessive readers, and everything in between.



More than 130,000 people attend some of the larger comic cons each year.

Origin Story

Comic cons began in the middle of the twentieth century as places for fans to gather, trade comics, and discuss comic books. Comic books first began in Europe and Japan, but they didn't take hold of the popular American imagination until the 1930s with the release of *Superman*. Superheroes were the main focus of comic books during this time, and the books gathered devoted fans. When, in the 1960s and 1970s, comic book fans began to organize meetings, the conventions took off quickly.

One of the first organizers of comic book conventions was Shel Dorf, a comic book artist. Dorf organized small gatherings of fans in Detroit in the 1960s and went on to found the convention now known as Comic-Con International (CCI): San Diego in 1970. The San Diego convention attracted about 100 fans in its first year. It has grown to become the largest comic con in the nation, with over 130,000 people attending its events in recent years. Hundreds of other comic cons have sprung up in San Diego's wake. There are huge comic cons in New York, Seattle, Denver, Calgary, Chicago, and Phoenix every year. Tickets sell out quickly, so some fans camp out for days to be sure they get in.



A "Golden Age" comic dealer holds the first issues of *Superman* and *Captain America* and the first appearance of Batman in *Detective Comics*.

The Rise of an Art Form

What has driven this explosive growth? First, comic books have become popular again. Comic books enjoyed a wide **readership** during the "Golden Age" of the 1930s and 1940s, but that readership dropped in the second half of the twentieth century. During that time, some people thought of comics as low-quality literature or as kid stuff. But in the late 1980s and early 1990s, legendary comic book series such as Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* and the Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, and John Higgins collaboration *Watchmen* broke new ground for the art form, drawing devoted readers and critical praise.

Since then, popular and critical interest in comic books has soared, and writers and artists continue to explore new topics and styles. Today, comic books have a wider range than ever. Traditional superhero stories coexist with stories about war, family drama, and everything in between. Graphic novels, a spin-off of comic books, are some of the most popular titles in young adult fiction at the moment, and graphic **memoirs** are at the cutting edge of nonfiction.

Art Spiegelman's graphic memoir/novel *Maus*, based on interviews with his father, a Holocaust survivor, won the Pulitzer Prize—one of the most prestigious literary awards in the country. As topics for comic books have grown wider, so have audiences. Convention attendance is way, way up, as fans of every gender, color, age, and nationality can find something to relate to in comic books.



Art Spiegelman discusses *Maus* during the International Berlin Comic Festival.



The film *Guardians of the Galaxy*, based on Marvel characters, was a summer blockbuster in 2014.

Second, the enormous success of recent Hollywood movies based on comic book characters has resulted in increased popular interest in comics and increased attendance at comic cons. Movies such as *Iron Man* (2008), the *Spider-Man* films of the 2000s, *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Avengers* (2012), and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) were audience favorites that attracted new fans. Movies are now a big part of the programming at comic cons. Famous actors, writers, and directors from comic-book movies make regular appearances on panels and draw huge crowds.



Manga illustrators display their work at a comic con in Europe.

Movies are only the beginning, though. Comic cons around the world have grown to include video games, television shows, and science fiction and fantasy novels. The audience for comic cons has become so large that some fans have split off to form conventions focused on specific genres. For example, there is strong attendance at cons devoted to anime and manga (animated films and comic books from Japan). There are cons for fans and collectors of classic comics, cons for fans of sci-fi and fantasy fiction, and cons for fans of steampunk, horror, and humor, among many others.

Big Cons and Small

Comic cons happen in cities all over the United States, too. Outside the huge conventions in San Diego and New York, you'll find smaller crowds but huge fan enthusiasm. Check online or in your local newspaper to find out if there's a comic con coming to a town near you. You might be surprised at what you'll find: local artists and comic book fans mingle with big-name cartoonists and movie stars at many smaller cons. At any comic con in the country, you might come across the star of your favorite show or the writer of your favorite books. You're also likely to meet local artists and make new friends.



A boy practices his lightsaber fighting technique during the Philadelphia Comic Con Wizard World Convention.



Costumed audience members enjoy an advance screening of *Star Wars Legends* at CCI: San Diego.

Comic cons don't just celebrate creative works and **fandom**. They also provide spaces where fans can show off their own creativity. In 2005, for example, CCI: San Diego introduced an independent film festival in which aspiring filmmakers could submit work for prizes, with **screenings** throughout the four-day convention. Currently, filmmakers can submit movies in categories such as action/adventure, animation, horror/suspense, and (of course) movies based on comics. Submissions are judged by panels of industry experts. The festival gives filmmakers a valuable opportunity to get feedback.

Cosplay

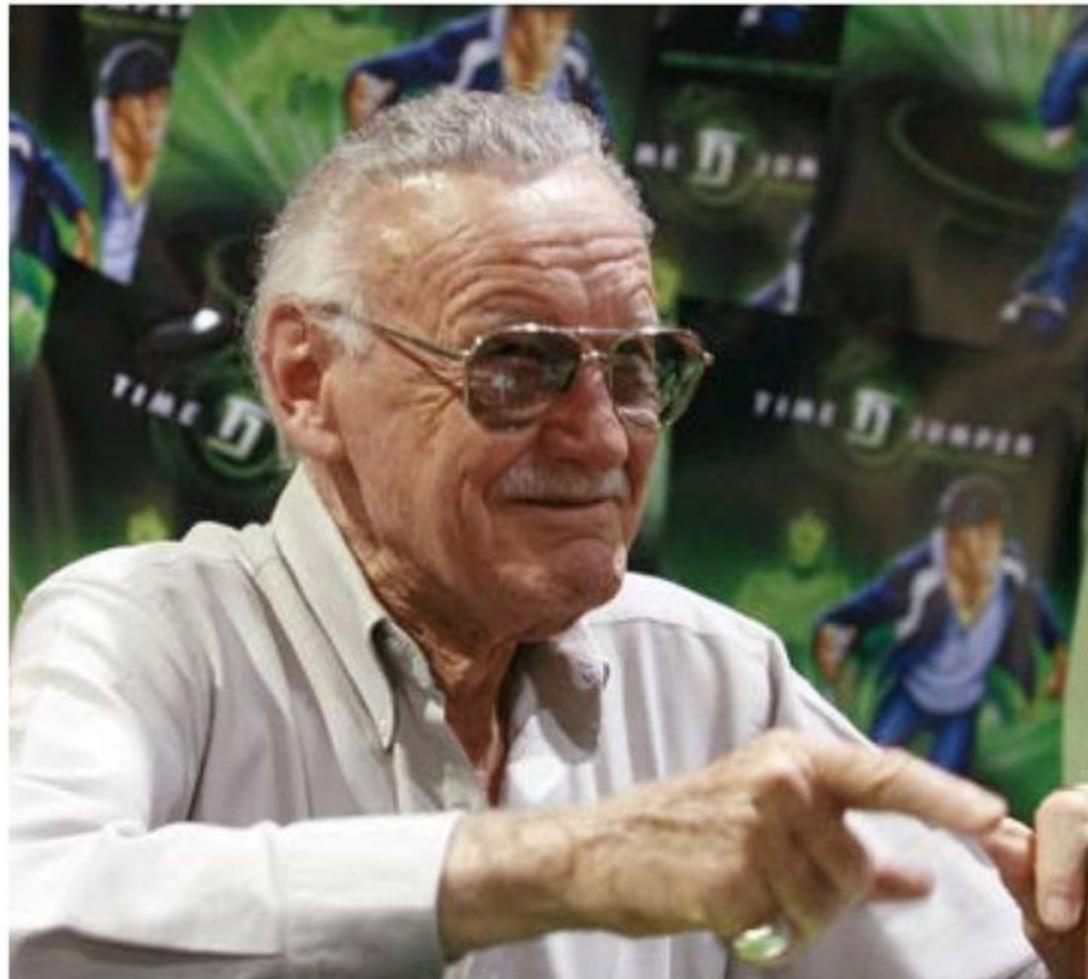
Fans also have the opportunity to display their creativity through the long-standing comic con tradition of cosplay: fans dressing up in costumes as characters from comic books, anime, manga, animated films, and other fantasy genres. Cosplay (a word coined in Japan as a combination of the English “costume” and “play”) is serious business for fans worldwide.

Cosplay costumes can be bought from costume providers, custom-built, or handmade. Many cosplayers carry realistic props such as a character’s weapons and accessories, and some cosplayers act like their favorite characters while they are in costume. Costumes can be simple or incredibly detailed. Some cosplayers even use contact lenses to change their eye color or design temporary tattoos to match a character more closely.

Figuring out how to make or build a costume is a big part of the fun for many fans. Cosplay is a major part of comic cons worldwide, with vendors selling costumes in the convention exhibit halls and hundreds of costumed fans in the audience. Many conventions also hold contests in which cosplayers can pose for photos and participate in skits or interviews based on their characters.

Celebrity Appearances

Comic cons also provide opportunities to interact with creators on a personal level. A huge part of comic cons' appeal comes from the writers,



Legendary writer, editor, and publisher Stan Lee often appears at comic cons. Lee helped create many of Marvel Comics' most popular superheroes, including the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, Thor, Spider-Man, and the X-Men.

artists, actors, directors, and other industry participants who regularly appear on panels at conventions. At these panels, audience members can hear their favorite stars speak about the experience of making comic books, films,

and shows. Audience members can sometimes ask direct questions during panels, have their photos taken with celebrities, and get autographs on comic books and posters. These personal interactions become treasured memories for many fans. Celebrities themselves frequently say they have positive memories about their comic con experiences. They often note how warm, friendly, and devoted the fans at conventions tend to be.

The Exhibit Hall

The center of a comic con's creative energy is the exhibit hall, where people can mingle and talk, and where all kinds of material related to comic books, movies, TV, games, and other forms of pop culture is on display. Fans can buy and trade comic books, along with other **merchandise** such as action figures and toys. Experienced collectors can find rare and unique editions of comic books, and beginning collectors can get a head start on their collections. Fans can often meet artists and writers in a signing hall. Some conventions offer a portfolio review area where aspiring artists and writers can meet with publishers in the hope of landing a book deal.

Even if you're just hanging out in the exhibit hall, there's a lot to see and do. Cosplayers wander by in colorful costumes, movies and movie trailers are screened regularly, celebrity sightings are always possible, and there is an endless supply of colorful merchandise to browse through.



Dolls for sale fill a display at a New York Comic Con.



A panel of experts discusses the anime industry during the MCM Comic Con in London.

Growing Pains and Issues

The growth of comic cons has not come without some **controversy**, though. Some comic book fans feel that the bigger cons have become much too large and that the focus has moved too far away from comic books. With all the movie, TV, and game fans, they argue, the original inspiration for comic cons can get lost. Many comic cons could indeed be more accurately described as pop culture conventions rather than comic book conventions. Arguments also break out between some devoted fans over who knows most about a series, movie, or fictional world. These arguments may sound silly, but they're evidence of the deep emotional connection these works inspire in their audience.

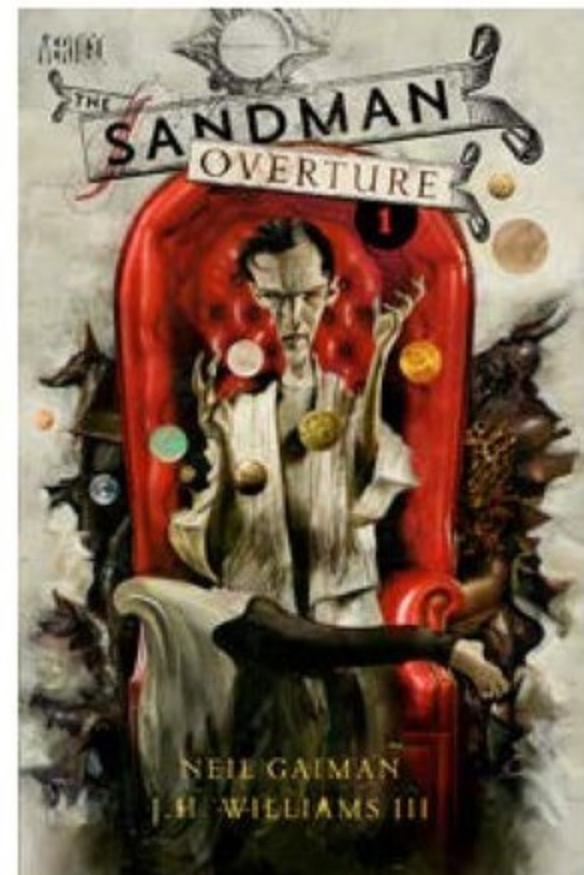
The audience for comic books and comic cons has changed drastically as well. While comic book readers and comic con attendees used to be largely male, about forty percent of recent CCI: San Diego attendees are female. Among con attendees under thirty, the gender split is roughly fifty-fifty. In fact, a whole generation of younger fans are discovering cons: more than half of the people attending recent cons are under twenty-nine. The increased **diversity** of the comic con audience brings larger crowds and is a welcome development for most fans.



A girl looks through comics at a Wizard World Comic Con in Portland, Oregon.

Comic cons can also be a place to discuss larger issues in the outside world. Some authors are taking on serious topics such as racial and gender equality, politics, and war. These comics are not to everyone's liking, and some have become the subjects of "banned book" campaigns, in which a community asks a library or school to take a book off the shelves. *Spider-Man* and *Batman* comics have been challenged because of adult language or themes. **Censorship** has been a panel topic at recent cons, with readers, teachers, and librarians discussing the issue.

One result of these discussions has been the rise of the labels "graphic novel" and "graphic memoir" to classify comic books that are intended for adult audiences. Some comics are fictional and some aren't; some are educational and some are meant for pure entertainment. Some deal with large social problems and adult themes, while others provide an escape into fantasy worlds. Given this diversity, should all comics be shelved together in libraries and schools or not? What role do comics have in our larger society? These questions are frequent topics at comic con panels.



Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series has been banned in some school districts.

Pushing the Boundaries

The continuous expansion of the comic book landscape can be challenging, but overall it's an exciting time for comic cons.

The huge diversity of the comics (and other pop culture media) available today has resulted in bigger, more diverse audiences for comics and conventions.

Fans of every age, gender, and nationality can find themselves represented in a comic somewhere. Heroes might look like Superman,

A young girl shows off her pink *Star Wars* stormtrooper costume at CCI: San Diego.

a young girl from Botswana, or a reporter on the ground in Bosnia. There is no limit to what can happen in a comic book or who can be its heroes. In the end, this is what draws people to comic cons. The cons (and the stories that drive them) create worlds where ordinary people can be transformed into heroes, and where heroes can be virtually anyone. People lose themselves in possibility every time they dress up as a favorite character, trade books and trivia questions with fellow fans, and shake hands with an artist at a comic con. Many people return to that experience over and over.



Glossary

censorship (<i>n.</i>)	the omission or suppression of all or part of a publication, play, or film because its content is considered offensive or threatening (p. 18)
controversy (<i>n.</i>)	a disagreement over an issue (p. 16)
conventions (<i>n.</i>)	large gatherings that can last for several days where people discuss their work or a shared interest (p. 5)
diversity (<i>n.</i>)	a wide variety of many things (p. 17)
fandom (<i>n.</i>)	all the followers or fans dedicated to a given interest, such as sports, entertainment, or celebrities (p. 12)
memoirs (<i>n.</i>)	written retellings of people's experiences (p. 8)
merchandise (<i>n.</i>)	items that are bought or sold (p. 15)
panel (<i>n.</i>)	a group of people invited to knowledgeably discuss a subject in front of an audience (p. 4)
pop culture (<i>n.</i>)	popular ideas communicated through mass media that are part of the mainstream experience of modern societies (p. 5)
readership (<i>n.</i>)	the audience or readers of a piece or type of writing (p. 7)
screenings (<i>n.</i>)	organized showings of movies or television programs (p. 12)
venues (<i>n.</i>)	places where organized events are held (p. 5)

Comic Cons

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Connections

Writing and Art

Create a comic strip featuring your favorite fictional character.

Math

Pretend that you spend \$20,000 to organize a comic con. You decide to charge a \$25 admission fee. How many people will have to attend to cover your expenses? Show your work two different ways.

The logo for Reading A-Z features the word "Reading" in a large, bold, red sans-serif font. The letter "R" has a small sun-like icon above it with rays extending to the right. To the right of "Reading" is the letters "A-Z" in a smaller, bold, red sans-serif font.

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