

## **AirSpace Season 3, Episode 8: Open the Gate**

### *Intro Music in and Under*

Emily:

Welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. I'm Emily.

Nick:

I'm Nick.

Matt:

And I'm Matt.

Nick:

Most of us belong to a fandom of something, a movie, a game, a character, a book series, a story, a band, a sports team or even blocks of all of those things. But why do we love the things that we love? What makes us want to join a fandom?

Emily:

For some, joining in is really hard. Fandoms or groups within fandoms can be exclusive, with members wanting to keep people out or only let the right people in. With social media and the abundance of pop culture conventions, lots of communities have formed and grown but the walls around fandoms can still be nearly impenetrable for some.

Matt:

We'll talk to Hilton George, one of the founders of Blerdcon, who started his own annual convention to create an inclusive space around the Black nerd experience. And journalist and playwright, Bim Adewunmi, who's written a lot about the ways that fans can be excluded and included. It's fandoms, gatekeeping and making space, today on AirSpace.

### *Intro Music Under and out*

Nick:

There's a lot of scholarly work around fandom and we are not fandom scholars, we should say that at the very top. And although we are fans ourselves and have done some work in these spaces, there are many, many different ways people experience fandom and we do not have the time or scope to go through all of them today. Our basic working definition; fandom is a participatory culture formed of a group of people that enjoy something, usually a media work, for the purposes of today's conversation, which we'll define as a book, a movie, a game, a comic, team, et cetera.

Emily:

Hearing the term fandom, the only thing that came to mind was, clearly we're talking about Comic Cons exclusively, which is completely, as it turns out, completely incorrect. Again, not fandom scholars over

here. And so, it wasn't until, really, having somebody describe to me what can be encompassed by fandoms, it's anything from being really into *The Bachelor*, that is a fandom even if it's not something you would consider a fandom. It's you wanting to hang out with a bunch of people who are watching the thing that you're watching or doing the thing that you're doing and you just want to talk about it.

Matt:

Yeah, and I think the modern fandom that we're talking about today is mostly stuff that is associated with various different forms of popular culture, so it's rooted in our consumption of media and our consumption of popular cultures.

Nick:

Until we really started research for today, I considered, like *Star Trek* fandom and the stories that I know about it from the 1960s to be the fundamental beginnings, where the show almost went off the air at one point and there was a big letter writing campaign and that's how they got to one more season. And one more season meant that it could be syndicated and syndication is really where the franchise found its legs. And then, there was another letter writing campaign for *Star Trek* fans to rename the first space shuttle test articles, so that's why you've got test article shuttle *Enterprise* but that's actually not the origin story of modern fandom as we've defined it today.

Matt:

So, you can point back to earlier versions, there's definitely even just prior to *Star Trek* and those things is, the comic book fandom of earlier days where kids would both collect and trade comics. But even before that, you can go back to even earlier literature, like the *Sherlock Holmes* novels, where people became incredibly invested in the character of *Sherlock Holmes* and his rivalry with *Moriarty* and everything that happened to those characters in those novels.

Nick:

And even though it was a long, long time ago, we look back and we see behavior, with the *Sherlock Holmes* franchise, that was familiar to us today. So, spoilers, he dies halfway through the series but that created a popular outcry among the readers and people wrote letters and people wore black armbands to mourn this fictional character who had died in a pulp novel. But it was such a part of their lives that they felt the need to express this grief for a fictional story, to the point where *Arthur Conan Doyle* was compelled later on, several years after the fact, to bring *Sherlock* back and begin writing original stories again. So, the letter writing campaign of *Star Trek* was pivotal for many but it was not an entire original joint. It drew on kind of a legacy of popular culture enjoyment and fan activism that was, at that time, still living memory but several generations before that point.

Matt:

What the *Sherlock Holmes* story illustrates is, one of the things that I think is special about fandom is that we think about media as things that we consume. But fandom is really about taking that media and participating in it, in some way and forming a community around it and in feeling like you are actually, in some way, taking part in that media.

Emily:

So, I think fandoms, now that we've defined them, I think they kind of evoke a very specific image of what fandoms include. But as we kind of talked about, also a little bit, fandoms don't require that you attend a Con and dress in costumes. What that fundamentally brings up is this idea that, being a fan is really just about finding joy in something and that could include something as simple as just poking around the internet to see what other people are saying or poking around the internet to find what other people are creating in and around this fandom. And can go to that point where you actually start to do some of that creating yourself. But it's generally about this idea of joy and delight. And so, we took the opportunity to talk Bim Adewunmi.

Bim Adewunmi (interview):

My name is Bim Adewunmi, I'm a journalist, a producer, at This American Life and a playwright.

Emily:

She spent a lot of time talking about this, thinking about this and actually writing about fandoms and what this participatory nature entails.

Bim Adewunmi (interview):

I think it's the nature of the collective, right? No one ever really thinks about the teenage girls involved in Beatlemania as a fandom but they were absolutely a fandom. And I think it's the idea that, you can organize and plan something to bring about more enjoyment of a thing that you already enjoy. I think, for many people, that is something that they don't do but on the other hand, a lot of people do in fact, do that.

Nick:

I mean, we can acknowledge that the internet is not solely for talking about movies and TV shows but why would we? So it's solely about for talking about movies and TV shows and the internet, along with, I think, the discovery on the part of content creators, that people want to engage with media in this way, that there's an opportunity for modern media to catalyze this phenomenon, to where you can watch an episode of a new TV show and immediately jump online and find people who are wanting to talk about it. But then, it also magnifies and quickens the negative aspects of fandom, which I think, is something else that we want to talk about today. And it goes beyond, kind of, the stereotypical isolation that fans can feel because they are in the traditional, 1980s sense of the word, nerds. It goes beyond that and that's been, kind of, mainstreamed in a way that is at one time helpful but this absolutely rapid instant ecosystem of fan communities jumping up of every stripe has also intensified and magnified some negative features of white Western culture, writ large, including racism, sexism, ableism and classism; just to name a few of them.

Matt:

Things get a little dicey when people start trying to carve out lines within the community and that can get very toxic very quickly. It's not just normal infighting about who knows more arcane trivia or has the best memorabilia, these darker manifestations undercut the community aspect of what fandom can be.

Nick:

Yeah, and there's a certain natural occurrence here, that's not what we're talking about. So, the phenomenon that we're referring to is broadly referred to as gatekeeping. And there's a certain amount of that, that occurs by itself in that, franchises are something that can be very dense and can take a lot of time and sometimes money invested in, to actually experience and become conversant and fluent in. What I mean by that is, say there's 300 episodes of your favorite TV show, you meet somebody who likes the show also but they've only seen half of one season. How do you relate? How does that work? There's a learning curve and that kind of goes along with it but that's not really what we're talking about here. In a modern sense and in practice for many years, there's also been an intentional level of gatekeeping that magnifies people's pre-existing prejudices that they bring from outside of the fandom, into the fan community and try and exercise those perspectives, toxic though they may be, within the walls of a particular franchise.

Matt:

So, one of the things about nerd culture, even though nerd culture is now becoming more mainstream, that stereotypical image of the nerd, maybe the nerds that we were back in the 80s and 90s, you still tend to see the, kind of, privileged white perspective on nerd culture coming through there, even though there are plenty of Black and other people of color or fans of the same franchises that we liked as kids. And when I talked to Hilton George,

Hilton George (interview):

My name is Hilton George, I am the creator and co-founder of Blerdcon, the Black Nerd Convention.

Matt:

He was able to give me a really good description and definition of what he calls the Blerd, B-L-E-R-D, the Black nerd and the culture that surrounds the Blerd community.

Hilton George (Interview):

Well, I'll take you one step further. The first known broadcast media use of the word blerd came from the show scrubs and everyone's favorite character, Turk.

*TV Clip-Scrubs*

*Turk (Donald Faison):*

*I spent all weekend talking to my cousin, who just so happens to be the world's biggest Blerd. That's a Black nerd. Anyway, he taught me everything...*

Hilton George (Interview):

And all of my presentations on Blerd culture and Blerd events, I always put those slides in, to the PowerPoint, to see just how far back the word goes. It is emergent as a subculture within a niche community of the expanding universe of geeks that have come up in this last two generations. And the community takes on a lot of the same dynamics within the Black community, as the Black community does within the larger community of the world.

Matt (from Interview):

What was the moment when you decided, you know what, I want to start my own Con and I want to make it specifically a Blerdcon?

Hilton George:

So, I was able to attend a lot of conventions in a very short period of time, probably somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 or 60 and since 2014. And one of the things I noticed is that, there was always this rumbling about things like representation and inclusion in the geek world and in the Con production community. And I always noticed that, Black and brown people were there, we were in attendance at the conventions but then, you would look at the panels list and would there be anything speaking to the Black nerd experience? And you wouldn't really see it. It's not woven throughout the convention, as opposed to put into this little pocket. And I said to myself, you know, I've got a pretty decent resume, events production and promotion and marketing, from my college days, as being a low budget Puff Daddy on campus, you know, doing all the kind of events and stuff that I used to do.

And I said to myself, I wonder what offerings there are out there? What conventions there are that focus on the Black nerd experience, that have all of these different fandoms represented. And I didn't see anything of that scale and of that breadth, that was focused on the Black nerd experience. And I said, it would be cool if there was one just like it. And I forgot to step back and put my finger on my nose and wait for someone else to do it and I just ran head first into it with no sense of self-preservation.

Matt:

So, Blerdcon is unique but it's not alone. There are several other annual conventions working to make space for specific communities and experiences. IndigiCon, for example, which focuses on Indigenous and native pop culture and appreciation of pop culture, is another great convention. And awareness of fan toxicity is something a lot of cons are taking very seriously.

Emily:

I've never been to Blerdcon but we presented at DC's Comic Con, called Awesome Con, a few years ago, which was my first con experience. And I remember, Awesome Con is not one of the older cons, right, like it's only been around for, I don't know, maybe six or seven years, it's not a particularly old con. And what was really interesting to me was, walking around, I really appreciated the sense of community that was being brought together and specifically noted on signage, walls, placards, all of the things, where that statement that said, 'costumes are not consent' and I thought it was really interesting because I appreciated that it was there but I didn't fully appreciate until we started talking about fandoms, why it needed to be there because of some of these deeply seated issues that exist in fandom because they reflect what's going on in the world today.

Nick:

Yeah, Hilton did a great job of unpacking why conventions work for combating manifestations of underlying racism or sexism or ageism.

Hilton George (interview):

I do think that is what's special about the geek community and the con community. We are connected, regardless of politics, regardless of race, regardless of age, region, language, orientation, gender, to the fandom. If I walk up and I see you with a Naruto shirt on, I know that we've got 650 episodes of anime

that we could talk about and not fight and we can just fan out and enjoy and connect and see each other as human beings before this other stuff kicks in because you're white and I'm Black or you're old and I'm young or you're gay and I'm straight or whatever those tripwires that are laid out for us, we bypass all of that. And by the time we find those things that may trip us up, it's too late because we've already recognized one another's humanity.

Nick:

He kind of gestured towards the idea of, when you've got this shared body of information about this thing that you love, you can immediately jump into conversation. Which is, I think, if I'm going to call out to my Star Trek nerds out there a little bit, like Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra, somebody out there got it, don't worry. You've got this whole system of communication that's based on metaphor and reference but then, you've got the anonymity of the internet that can spawn and emboldened these movements, like the sad puppies and Gamergate, which are explicitly predicated on misogyny and white supremacy, as ways to police who gets to partake in these shared ideas.

Matt:

Right. It's totally turning that historical stereotype, of the nerd as the white man, into a claim about who actually owns nerd culture. And in that way, it is turning the stereotype into a weapon, in trying to keep the community pure, in the sense that they're trying to use it.

Bim Adewunmi (interview):

And in that regard, of course, fandom is essentially a microcosm, right, of society at large. And so, whatever problems are out there, end up being replicated in very rarified fandom spaces as well. And I think it's very odd that people sometimes believe fandom to be a purer or better place and it's just like, that's literally impossible. It's made up of the people who are outside of the fandom and so, of course, it's going to have the same problems.

Emily:

Gatekeeping doesn't just happen in specific isolated spaces. Yes, Gamergate was specifically caused by toxic levels of sexism in the gamer community but structural racism and sexism permeate our culture. And as Bim is saying, fandoms are cultural microcosms with all the same nuanced biases that show up in our interactions with each other in every aspect of society. And there is a community within fandoms that are trying to pull those walls down. I think Bim did a really good job talking about, how fandoms existing in and of themselves allow fans to sort of see something in some of their favorite media or pop culture outlet and see something that doesn't strike the right chord. And they actually use their fandom as a way of sort of pulling down the barriers there and trying to re-imagine what it would be like in a more inclusive space, in a more inclusive environment.

Bim Adewunmi (interview):

I often talk a lot about how a lot of Black people have learned to understand what it is to be anything except Black because there are so few versions of that in the fiction and the non-fiction that we see on screen, right? So, I have a lot of empathy for, for example, a middle-aged radiotherapist, who lives in Seattle with his father and lives close by to his brother because I love Frasier. You know, like, I love Frasier. I understand his flaws, his little ticks. I understand him as a human being. I have come to understand him as someone who is complex and contains multitudes.

The reverse is not true for a lot of us. It's remarkable how white characters get to be universal and black characters are very niche and it's like, dudes, this doesn't make any sense. And logically, I think, people know it doesn't make any sense but it's just the way things are done. And so, it's difficult to kind of come into a space where, finally, on your favorite show or whatever, there is a Black character and you're like, great. Finally, we're going to see someone who looks like me and has a feeling of blah, blah, blah. Or it's just, even though they don't look like me, they're Black and they're there. That's, literally, as it exists in the world, how wonderful that finally, this show has discovered that Black people exist, great. And then, you get into the show and the writing is terrible or it's not very sensitive or it's just, you know, there. And it's like, oh man, what a waste.

And so, the good thing about fandom is, then you have something like fanfic, where attempts are made to rectify some of the stuff that the showrunners are doing. It doesn't have to be cannon, you can make the character the dream version of the character that you wanted it to be. And away from fanfic as well, there are forums where you can have conversations about, you know, the bad representation, for example, of a Black character on a TV show and be like, huh, that was a missed opportunity to do X, Y, or Zed. There are all these things that could have been done there and that was missed. It's a chance also, to commiserate. You'll see lots of... in the general fandom are like, well, that was a great episode last night. And in the little Black old corner and be like, well, that was trash guys and here are the reasons why.

And the wider fandom generally will, in my experience, I have to hasten to add, will be like, well, those are very small things, so why don't you get over it? And it's like, ooh, I thought we were all friends here, apparently not. And so, it's like this weird thing of just being a fan inside a larger fandom, has its own problems because there is so much that is, you're told to discard as you come in. Just come in as a fan, you can't come in with any criticisms, you can't come in with any kind of critiques, no one's here for that, we're all just here having a good time in this fandom and here you come sowing the seeds of discontent. And it's like, Am I? I'm just expressing that this was done badly and could be done better.

And that's the other thing, fans of all people are coming to something with love, they want the thing to succeed. These are not the stereotypical haters, they are coming in because they want the thing to be better. That's the nature of fandom, you love something so you have the ability to kind of be like, hey, you know what would make this great thing that I love you and better? This. And to be met, instead, with derision and essentially straight up racism, you know, undiluted, unadulterated, the freshest from the source, is always just like, Jesus. Like I just want to love this thing and you're not even here to entertain the possibility that this thing is flawed and has room to improve. And that's, you know, it has a very cooling effect on your fandom.

Emily:

Gatekeeping has caused a equal and opposite reaction in these communities that are working towards pulling down those barriers because fandoms allow them the space to do that. It's a way in which people are trying to combat gatekeeping because it exists and it's going to continue to exist. But I think the power of fandoms is that, there are these spaces that are getting created for people to sort of stand up and speak out, in really creative ways.

*Musical Transition*

Emily:

I actually really thought the reboot of Ocean's 8, with an all female cast, and Ghostbusters, with an all female cast, were excellent. And I've heard criticism that they were objectively, people didn't like them. However, I actually don't know, from an objective standpoint, if those movies were good or if the criticisms are really coming from the standpoint of, we just don't want to see women in those roles.

Nick:

I think we can assert that a lot of that criticism was coming from the misogynistic point of view, considering that a lot of that criticism was leveled at the film before it was made.

Matt:

Yeah

Nick:

When it was announced that those movies were coming out, people were starting to tear them down. And I, Emily, like you, loved both of those versions of those stories. I think the most recent Ghostbusters film is one of the best versions of that property that was ever released.

Matt:

And I love the original Ghostbusters but, like, you watch that original movie, it's still a great movie but you can't argue that any of those characters are fundamentally more believable or better than the women characters of the later, they're ridiculous. They're ridiculous characters who study pseudoscience and get kicked out of their university because they can't manage to get any accurate results. There's nothing that great about it.

Nick:

Right, I think we can all agree to be bewildered at the assertion that the fact that they were all women is what made the most recent Ghostbusters unbelievable. It wasn't the demons, it wasn't the proton packs, it wasn't the firehouse, it wasn't any of those things; it was the fact that they were all women. I think we can, on its face, call that the bald faced misogynistic assertion.

*Clip from Ghostbusters Trailer*

*Erin Gilbert (Kristen Wiig):*

*Someone is creating a device that amplifies paranormal activity and we might be the only ones who can stop it.*

*Music and ghost growling*

Nick:

I'm right there with you on Ocean's 8 and the new Ghostbusters because you can hide behind the idea that, oh, it's not good because it's the fourth movie in the Ocean's series or, oh, the third Ghostbusters movie, of course, it's not going to be any good, they've run out of steam. But let's face facts, the movie

hasn't come out yet and what you're saying is, you don't like, what you're calling, a "gender bent" cast because you think it's social activism in entertainment and that's exposing a preexisting prejudice.

Emily:

Well, and these are a lot of the same conversations that revolved around the announcement that the new Doctor was going to be a woman. And when Daniel Craig announced that he was going to only make one more James Bond movie, there was a lot of speculation that maybe the next James Bond that they would cast would maybe be a Jane Bond. And it was really curious to watch all of the commentary come out about whether or not they would do it or not do it because there was this duality between, it was totally believable that, in this moment where we wanted to see strong women characters on the silver screen, contrasted with, oh, nobody wants to see that. And all of that speculation really started happening when Jodie Whittaker was cast as the new latest Doctor in Doctor Who.

*Clip from Doctor Who*

*The Doctor (Jodie Whittaker):*

*Is anyone excited? Because I'm really excited.*

*Graham (Chris Chibnall):*

*You won't be if it's a bomb.*

*The Doctor:*

*Don't kill the vibe Graham.*

Matt:

And in Doctor Who, it's just ridiculous that you would think that there would be any limit to what form the doctor could take. He's been through so many different incarnations. He's been old, he's been young, he's been ginger or actually no, he hasn't been-

Nick:

No, no, never ginger.

Matt:

Never ginger, sorry. That's the one thing the Doctor seems not to be able to do. So why not? Why wouldn't the doctor be a woman in, at least, one of his incarnations.

Nick:

It's worth noting that, still after all of these decades, the doctor is still white and has always been white.

Matt:

Science fiction, the actual media that we are consuming from science fiction, is becoming more inclusive and more diverse, right? More people are seeing themselves represented on screen. A great example of that is, the Star Wars movies that have come out most, most recently, where the cast have become much

more diverse than they were in the first three or even the three prequels that came out after the first three. So, now we're on... Wait, now we're on the sequels that came... I get lost in the Star Wars universe.

Nick:

You and George Lucas both.

Matt:

But anyway, it's becoming more diverse and more inclusive. Which means that fans often have a reaction to that, both good and bad. Some of this is the type of gatekeeping we were talking about before and the racism that might creep in to the gatekeeping, when people start to try to claim that the franchise should not change, the franchise should stay white.

Nick:

I kinda see where you're going with this. And while I've read many, many unfounded criticisms, of Ray as a character, that just are glaringly misogynistic, I think the flashpoint that might illustrate this best is, do you remember the internet reaction the first trailer that came out that showed John Boyega as a Stormtrooper?

*Star Wars Movie Trailer Clip*

*Finn (John Boyega):*

*I was raised to do one thing but I've got nothing to fight for.*

*Piano music and star ship noises*

Nick:

And the goal with which people said and asserted that Stormtroopers were not Black, despite the fact that thousands of them have never taken off their helmets.

Emily:

And I think it's also important to point out that, just casting a Black character doesn't solve the problem either.

Matt: Right

Emily:

I know there were instances where Finn's character was completely removed from some of the movie posters, really minimizing his role in the film, which is a blatantly racist act. You want to support a film that's trying to diversify its cast and its characters, at the same time, there's still gatekeeping happening within that realm and that context. And so, I think, it's good to note that universes like Star Wars are diversifying. They have an enormous length of road ahead of them, in order to get to where they're in a space that can really be deemed diverse and equitable and inclusive.

Matt:

mmhmm

Nick:

The measures that are underway now are good but you're right, Emily, they're not fixing a problem as much as they are trying to address it and in many ways highlighting the problem that is reflected in segments of fan reaction. We could sit here, and we won't, and talk about the writing in the new Star Wars trilogy but whether or not, and I've heard this posited, John Boyega's character is minimized partially because of his race and less out of confusion over where the franchise was headed in general, that's not for me to say because I'm not the writer and I'm not the person who's experiencing that part of the fandom. That's something that I think a lot of people need to sit down and watch and listen, rather than jump on their keyboards and give their knee jerk reaction to everything that happens within fandoms. I think we can all acknowledge that nerd culture is pretty mainstream at this point. It was never and it is certainly no longer the dominion of the loners at the lunchroom table.

### *Musical transition*

Emily:

So, I think, when we started talking about fandoms and really the context of Star Trek, I think for all of us, that's maybe our point of reference. But I feel like when we first started talking about different topics we wanted to do for the podcast, I keep going back to, I don't know whose suggestion it was but Balloonomania, back in the early days, when hot air balloons were like the latest, greatest thing. And if you actually look at how that affected fashion, people started wearing pants that were... think of joggers like lined with fluffy petticoats, so there were these great big puffy pants or they did this to their sleeves, where they had these great big puffy sleeves or they just had balloons in their jewelry or balloons in their hair because they were so excited about hot air balloons.

And that might be in and around the same century as something like Sherlock Holmes, I don't really know, this is more Matt's department. But I think about these fandoms in ways, like really, in some ways, like silly sounding ways in which fandoms really affected the popular culture at the time but it's not actually really any different than it is now, other than we have the internet. And so, you can actually have these global communities that can, in some cases, be like really heavily specific into that thing that you're really interested in or it can be as broad as something like me, let's be real, who's just going to watch a show on Netflix and then look for the hashtag on Twitter for like 20 minutes, and then, I'm going to move on to the next thing.

Nick:

I think as exemplified by Emily's example of Balloonomania and a thing that we are acknowledging in every topic that we've discussed today, if you think you are the epitome of the oldest original purest form of your particular fandom, you are not.

Emily:

You are definitely not. In fact, you're probably a fan of that thing because of somebody else's fandom that came before you.

*Music up and under*

Matt:

Think about the 12th century monks who were so into Aristotle.

Emily:

Is that a thing?

Nick:

It may have been. Aristotle is so over and done.

Emily:

Or Egyptian revival and the late 1800s. Fandoms come in many forms people.

Nick:

It's true. There's something for everyone.

Emily:

There's something for everyone.

Nick:

AirSpace is from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. You can follow us on Twitter or Instagram at @AirSpacePod. AirSpace is produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart. Mix by Tarek Fouda. Special thanks to Andrew Fletcher. We're distributed by PRX.

*Exit music ends*

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