

Fan Interest Over the Life Course as a Tourist Motivator

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Abstract

The emotional investment and interest that fans exhibit continues in many cases over the course of a lifetime, going through changes as the person changes. A survey of fans of *Fighting Fantasy*, a book series from the early 1980s, shows that their continued interest has accompanied changes. Awareness and understanding of the ways in which such interests change over time, and stimulate activity such as tourism, will enable us to provide better experiences.

Introduction

Traditionally, fan interests were seen as an aberration. Fans were regarded as people – generally young – who went through a dysfunctional period of excessive interest in a topic. With the advent of fan studies, and especially following the work of Jensen (1992), the idea of a fan being in a pathological state has been robustly challenged. More recently, the characterisation of fan interest as a phase in life has also come under critical scrutiny, most notably from Harrington and Bielby (see, for example Harrington & Bielby, 2010). They draw on the concept of *life course* and its associated scholarship to examine how fan activities are integrated into the development of a person over time.

This paper will explore some of the ways that fan activity transcends the conventional “emotionally invested consumption of a media text” beloved of fan scholars, and becomes the impetus for a wider range of activity over the course of a fan’s life. In addition to examples from the literature, it will present the preliminary results from a research study undertaken on fans

of the *Fighting Fantasy* book series. The survey sought information in order to help suggest fruitful further avenues of research.

The specific focus of this study is the impact of fan interests on decisions related to tourism. Although tourism is undertaken by the younger age groups referred to above – especially when they are students and thus have more time available – the bulk of tourist decisions are made by older age groups, and those decisions represent a significant element of leisure expenditure over the life course. Understanding the relationship between fan interest and ageing is likely to provide us with a greater grasp of some of the motivations behind tourism.

What is ‘life course’?

Fry (2003) succinctly describes life course scholarship as being about “understanding lives through time” (p. 271). This understanding extends to the specific circumstances facing specific generations in specific places. While life is often conceptualised in terms of evolution, and passing through predetermined stages, often by means of established rituals, life course scholarship recognises the heterogeneity of life,

considering instead identifiable “general patterns of stability and transition.” (Harrington & Bielby, 2010)

To provide an example of the relevance of this to fan interests, consider the way in which J K Rowling’s Harry Potter series intertwined with many of its readers’ lives. The series depicted Harry and his friends from the time they entered school, with each successive book telling the story of a school year. Although the publishing schedule of the series meant that this pattern would not co-ordinate exactly with the lives of readers, there is no doubt that for many, Harry Potter books marked significant milestones in their early lives as the following, written as the series drew to a close, demonstrates.

The sadness that many readers will experience ... has nothing to do with the fate of the characters and everything to do with ... the end of childhood. The readers who have grown up with this series – who have read it, as it were, in real time as it unfolds – are themselves at that end. Saying goodbye to Harry is like saying goodbye to a piece of themselves. (Jones, 2007)

Bielby and Harrington (2010) point out that while theorists such as Sandvoss (2005) have discussed adult retentions of transitional objects from childhood, there has been less consideration of theories of *adult* development. They look at fan interest and life milestones (as in the Harry Potter example above), changes in the self as a fan over time, how age norms function in fandom, and how the fan “object” itself changes over time. These ideas will be adopted as guiding principles for the present study.

What is Fighting Fantasy?

In this study, fans of the Fighting Fantasy series of books were asked about how their interest in the series had affected them over their lives. The Fighting Fantasy series was started in 1982 by Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone (Jackson

& Livingstone, 1982), published by the Puffin imprint of Penguin Books, and quickly became extremely popular, particularly with young boys, in the UK, and in other countries around the world, especially in the Commonwealth. The books were non-linear, interactive adventures told in the second person in which readers would make choices in a branching narrative. They would also solve puzzles, and take part in conflicts, using dice and rules derived from a simplified form of the rules used in the then-popular tabletop role-playing games. At this stage, video games were still in their infancy, and Fighting Fantasy books offered similar pleasures at significantly reduced cost.

The initial series of 59 Puffin books ran between 1982 and 1995. Certain books were reprinted by Wizard Books between 2002 and 2012, with four new titles being added. Finally the series was acquired by Scholastic in 2017. Again, old titles were reprinted – though notably none of the four new books published by Wizard – with four additional new books also being released.

Fan activity related to the series has continued over the years. In addition to related websites produced by individuals, there were paper fanzines and active ‘gamebook’ newsgroups on the Usenet service (one of the original Internet functions, along with mail and file transfer protocol), and this communal fan activity has continued on web forums and Facebook.

The fan activity has also extended to in-person meet-ups. These range from the relatively informal, such as the “You Are The Beer-o” pub quiz nights (Aukett, 2022), to the Fighting Fantasy Fest conventions such as this year’s, held at the University of West London.

Literature review

There are countless examples in the literature of the intersection of fan interest and life course. These range from the relatively quotidian to the outright dramatic. In the latter category, one could cite the example of the Bob Dylan fan and

collector who bought the house where Robert Zimmerman (Bob Dylan) was born in 1941 and is attempting to restore it to exactly how it was when Dylan lived there. (Bickerdike, 2016, p. 95). Similarly dramatic is 50 fans travelling to London in 2013 in order to take part in a *Doctor Who* themed wedding event to celebrate 50 years of the television show (Johnston, 2015). This is no mere relegation of fan interest to a casual category of “leisure”; here it impacts with one of life’s most significant milestones.

More everyday examples include a topic closely related to the above *Doctor Who* event (based on a television series with the same producer) in Petersen’s (2017) exploration of the fan response to the TV show *Sherlock* by a group of women all over 50 years of age. Petersen notes that “fan practices are to a certain extent structured in relation to age.” (Petersen, 2017) Petersen also explores how the reality of fan interest extending across the life course impacts with the conventional expectation mentioned at the start of this paper, with the controversy surrounding actor Benedict Cumberbatch’s apparent disregard for older fans of the series in which he starred.

An example of fan interest dictating behaviour is arranging travel in such a way as to sample craft beer: “On their first vacation together five years ago, they hit over twenty different craft breweries in fourteen days.” (Peterson & Largent, 2021) The first named author is here referring to herself and her husband, who is evidently a fan of craft beer in every sense that counts, and who equally evidently plans vacations based on this.

While eating and drinking is generally regarded as a necessity of life, the above example makes plain that it can become a fan interest. Hills (2021) writes about the way in which the experience of visiting a restaurant has been mediatized by the celebrity of certain chefs. Hills chooses for his specific example Heston Blumenthal; I have also visited one of Blumenthal’s restaurants (Dinner, in London) as well as those of other celebrity chefs, though Hills greatly exceeds my own “fan

activity” with his success at visiting multiple Blumenthal-related restaurants, including one in Australia.

Visiting a restaurant is a reliably adult experience, but many fan interests which persist over the course of life are haunted by their association with childhood: for example, toy collecting. Toys collected are often the toys of the collector’s childhood, but there is evidently a difference between the child playing with these toys, and the adult collecting them (often keeping them pristine in the original packaging). On the other hand, sometimes the adult reprises the behaviour of the child.

Complicating resolution of this debate is that in adulthood, activity in the transitional realm tends to be confined to culturally legitimate domains such as the arts, religion, philosophy and so on, or concealed from others. To do otherwise in Western cultures, particularly in the US, raises concerns about arrested development, because when adults retain the objects of imaginative play associated with earlier stages of the life-course, they put themselves at risk of violating normative cultural expectations about psychological maturation. (Bryant, Bielby, & Harrington, 2014)

Mention of religion as a “culturally legitimate domain” brings up the affinities between fan activity and traditional religion. This area is complicated by phenomena such as the number of people who list their religion as Jedi (the quasi-religion depicted in George Lucas’s *Star Wars* films) in censuses. For example, in the UK 2001 census, 390,127 people, or 0.7% of the population of England and Wales, identified as Jedi (National Statistics, 2002). Leaving this to one side, religious language is commonly applied to fan behaviour. The etymology of the word *fan* itself is generally believed to be derived from *fanatic*, which has connotations of religious fervour.

Within religion, one of the functions of

pilgrimages is to provide a rite of passage: a transformative experience. The “fan pilgrimage” has received attention in the literature, and has been an important element in previous work by the present author (Mason & Rohe, 2018; Suzuki-Shaw & Mason, 2020; Mason & Suzuki-Shaw, 2021). Notably, Brooker (2007) argues that, as with the religious experience which provides the metaphor, a pilgrimage does not necessarily need to be physical/geographical. As with the mystic’s “internal” pilgrimage, it can be a mystical *experience*, or what Cziksentmihalyi (2008) calls “flow”. Bickerdike (2016) picks up on this quasi-religious dimension to the experience of consuming a media text, while then exploring its manifestation in more literal pilgrimages, such as visits to the multiple locations across the globe (though many in Northern Ireland) used for the TV series *Game of Thrones*. Religion, of course, often supplies the societal rituals to mark significant life-changes such as birth and marriage, and creates its own significant milestones too. The intrusion of fan interest into marriage has already been noted above, but we can perhaps draw an analogy between induction rites such as baptism or christening, and the importance many fans give to their transition from fan to non-fan:

Becoming a fan thus re-directs the life course, gives new meaning, structure and purpose to specific life stages, and marks periods of one’s personal past – hallmarks of a major turning point according to life course scholars. (Harrington & Bielby, 2010)

It should also be noted that there has been a parallel development of life course scholarship informing theory about tourism. Fu, Kirillova and Lehto (2022), for example, contrast the “snapshot” understanding of the tourist experience with one that takes account of changes over time: not only at a societal level, but in terms of personal life circumstances. Like Harrington and Bielby, they are profoundly influenced by Erikson’s (1950)

work on stages of psychological development. Their research uncovers the interaction between life changes and tourism: “Travel is made sense of in the life context, and life is made sense of through travel practices.” (Fu, Kirillova, & Lehto, 2022, p. 9) They also give practical recommendations on how tourist experiences can be tailored to this reality.

Method

To explore a specific instance of fan interest persisting over the life course, an exploratory survey was designed to capture a wide range of information. Questions included specific details such as age and length of time since reading the first *Fighting Fantasy*, but also included space for relevant opinions. The survey was conducted as a Google Form which was initially distributed via *Fighting Fantazine* (Bardy, 2022), a fan web forum derived from the *Fighting Fantasy* fanzine with the same name and editor. However, participants were encouraged to spread the link on other *Fighting Fantasy*-related forums, and as a result 100 non-blank responses were collected within the space of six days, with an additional response appearing five days later.

This method of distribution was designed to attract active, interested fans of the series. Participation was also encouraged by the present author’s position as one of the authors who contributed to the original run of the series until Puffin cancelled it in 1995. The survey asked about participation at *Fighting Fantasy Fest 4*, a convention based on the series, held at the University of West London on September 3rd, 2022, which the present author also attended.

Respondents were given the opportunity to send emails with follow-up information, which a small number did. Other than information so presented in follow-ups, or volunteered by respondents themselves, full anonymity was maintained.

At certain points the questions branched. For example, those who reported having previously

given up on the series were asked what made them return to it, and those who reported that Fighting Fantasy was particularly suitable for certain age groups were asked to specify which. Similarly, only those respondents who reported making lifestyle choices based on the series were asked to give examples.

Results

Responses were examined and all deemed valid, save for one (response number 52) which was blank, and therefore removed.

Out of 101 respondents, only one would not self-describe as a ‘fan’ of the series. This respondent’s responses were not markedly different from other responses, however. It should be remembered that the term *fan* is not always regarded as unambiguously positive.

Table 1, below, shows the age ranges of the respondents, with a rough guide to how long they have been reading the books.

Table 1. Age distribution

Age	Respondents (n = 101)	Started reading
17–21	1	About a decade ago
27–32	1	3 years ago
33–40	25	With two exceptions, between 23 and 35 years ago
41–49	52	With one exception, between 25 and 40 years ago
50–59	22	Between 36 and 40 years ago

Fighting Fantasy has been republished twice in the UK, and at various times in various locations around the world, so the exceptions noted in the table above do not represent anomalies. If anything, their number is surprisingly small.

In response to a question about what age groups Fighting Fantasy was suitable for, 84 of the 101 respondents declared it suitable for all age groups. Of the remaining 16, 9 limited it to age 16 or younger, Two extended this range to age 21, and five specified almost all age ranges, with exclusions at the top, bottom, and/or middle of the

age range.

36 respondents have been reading Fighting Fantasy continuously, while 65 have given up at some point and then come back to it. The reasons given for returning to the series were analysed, and tagged with general markers. The nine tags which resulted were as follows:

Nostalgia

This reason was often expressed as a one-word answer.

Gaming

Many respondents reported playing video or tabletop games, and these led to a return to the gamebooks.

Social

This includes encountering Internet forums or in-person meetings such as the Fighting Fantasy Fest.

Re-evaluation

The respondent had occasion to change their opinion of the books, because of artwork, or a change in their own tastes.

New books

The new releases mentioned above were encountered by respondents and rekindled their interest. Alternatively, respondents discovered the existence of hitherto unknown (or untranslated) books, or were able to access the books online.

Life change

Respondents reported that circumstances in their lives had brought them back to the series. This might have been changes in access to finance, space and time. It includes parenthood. Certain responses noted that the series had always been valued, suggesting that giving up on the series had been a more-or-less unwilling decision occasioned by life circumstances.

Collecting

Respondents who had collected the series felt the desire to collect once more.

Lockdown

The necessity of finding activities while unable to go out and socialise during the Covid-19

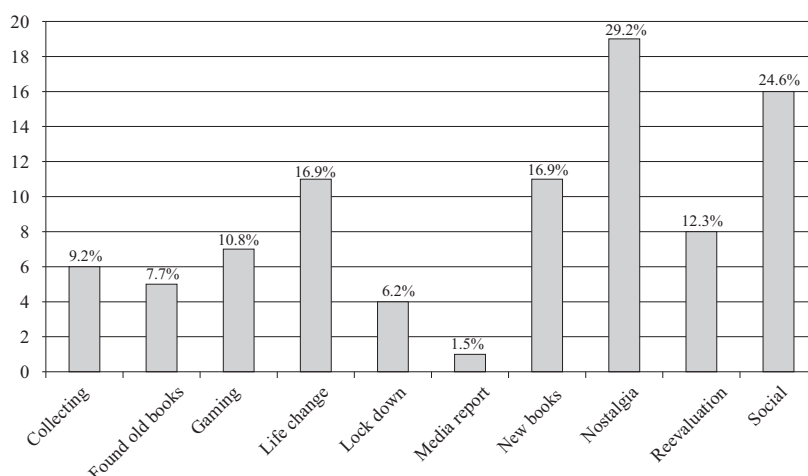


Figure 1. Reasons given for returning to Fighting Fantasy (n = 65)

lockdowns led some respondents to return the series.

Media report

One respondent returned to the series after being reminded of it in a newspaper article.

Found old books

Respondents came across the series, whether during a move, tidying up, or in a charity shop, and the reminder re-stimulated interest.

Multiple tags could be applied where multiple reasons were given by a single respondent. The results are shown in Figure 1. The percentages given refer to the proportion of the population of 65 who expressed the given reason.

Respondents were also asked to rate the extent to which they viewed Fighting Fantasy as a purely solitary activity, as against one which could be shared with others, with 1 indicating purely solitary, and 5 indicating best shared. The average result was 2.4, and all possibilities were chosen by multiple respondents.

Asked about their interest in making lifestyle choices related to their fan interest, 16% said they were not interested, 56% said they were mildly interested, and 29% said they were very interested. Qualitative data was collected regarding respondents' examples of lifestyle

Table 2. View of the series as solitary or social

	1 Purely solitary	2	3	4	5 Best shared
Respondents (n = 101)	22	42	18	10	9

choices made as a result of fan interests. Although a number of respondents were unclear about the question, and 35 gave no examples, 18 responses indicated that the respondents had travelled because of a fan interest. This ranged from travelling to Fighting Fantasy events to tours of shooting locations, whether *Game of Thrones* in Northern Ireland, or *Lord of the Rings* in New Zealand. A variety of other interesting responses were given.

Discussion

Although the Fighting Fantasy series – especially the currently published Scholastic range – is ostensibly aimed at younger readers, only two respondents were younger than 33. The results indicate that almost all of the respondents had a relationship with Fighting Fantasy that had extended for a number of years of their lives. Over half of respondents were in the age range 41–49, meaning that they would have been between 14 and 22 when the original series

ceased publication in 1995. The majority of the remaining respondents were either a little older than this (but no older than 19 when the original series started), or a little younger (but no younger than 7 when the original series ended). It seems reasonable to suggest that these committed fans are overwhelmingly those who encountered the series in their youth, and that they either continued with that interest until the present day (approximately 36% of respondents) or have returned to it based on some trigger.

The triggers for a return to interest in the series are varied, with none being dominant. The most commonly cited trigger was nostalgia. Of course, as an answer this is far from clear about psychological motives; as has often been noted, nostalgia isn't what it used to be. Nevertheless it indicates that a continuing fan interest in Fighting Fantasy involves a desire for an expression of continuity with the respondent's past self. This is not to say that it is an expression of identity *per se*. In their comments, many respondents made it clear that their approach to, and feelings about, the series were different now to how they had been originally. As a personal note, in my long exposure to fan comments about the series, I have with increasing frequency been told variations on the theme: "I didn't like your books originally, but I like them now". Thus the nostalgia is not purely about experiencing the same feelings from decades ago. It is about the pleasure of such recall, mixed with a new pleasure derived from being able to experience the series as a different person: being able to appreciate books that were not liked so much in the past, for example.

We can see here that a life course approach to fan interests reveals their dynamic: the relationship is continually being modified and re-evaluated as a result of life development, whether of a social or personal nature.

The second most significant factor in fans' return to the series was the social element. This should be understood in association with the question relating to the extent to which Fighting

Fantasy itself is, or is not, a social activity. When considering this question it should be noted that the books are by definition *solo* gamebooks, so it might be expected that the results would skew towards the lower end of the scale. Nevertheless while the average result was 2.4, each possibility was chosen by multiple respondents, and notably a significant number of respondents answered 5: that the books were best shared with others. Examination of the correlation with the 'Social' tag for returning to the series suggests that social reasons for returning did not significantly correlate with a view of Fighting Fantasy as best shared. Indeed four respondents who returned for social reasons answered 1, purely solitary, to this question.

Although the books are not, on the face of it, conducive to social activity, some respondents mentioned reading them to their children (a strategy which, bafflingly, never occurred to the present author). Nevertheless, the social dimension to Fighting Fantasy exists largely divorced from the books themselves. As with so many forms of fan activity, it consists of the sharing and celebration or criticism of the fan interest with others of like mind. Notably, this survey was conducted as the Covid-19 pandemic appeared to be winding down. Most respondents had been through periods of lockdown in which their social life was heavily curtailed, and several noted that their return to Fighting Fantasy came about because they used the books for leisure during lockdown. The fact that they were connected to the Fighting Fantasy fan community sufficiently to participate in the survey demonstrates that this return also had a social dimension.

We should also note the third most significant factor in a return to the books: changes in life circumstances. In many cases, respondents here commented less on the reason for their return than on their reasons for giving up in the first place. We can see how various pressures, whether from work or relationships, or even the psychological

fear noted earlier of “arrested development”, conspired to induce respondents to abandon their interest in Fighting Fantasy.

The free answers given in the survey contained a number of examples of lifestyle choices derived from or related to fan interests. As noted in results, above, 18 respondents indicated that they had travelled because of their fan interest. Specific examples of this included:

Went to New Zealand to tour the Lord of the Rings locations

Attending concerts as part of a holiday

GoT [*Game of Thrones*] tour in NI [Northern Ireland]

Going to my first FF convention this year

Other answers, however, ranged from small-scale or local items such as second-hand bookshops and libraries, to dramatic revelations such as:

Fighting Fantasy was a fundamental part of my developing a love of adventure and travel. It inspired me to leave the U.K. at the age of 21 to seek out adventure and work overseas ... and now, 24 years later, having lived in six countries in Asia and Africa I’m still following that life! I was lucky enough to meet Ian Livingstone in Indonesia, and share with him how his writing and Fighting Fantasy were instrumental in my life choices.

In a strange way, my career choice

I moved to Chiang Mai (Thailand, not Allansia) and started a company making natural medicines + performance-enhancing herbal extracts for martial artists + combat athletes

These appear to support the contention that fan

interest is not ephemeral, but can represent an important motivating factor throughout the course of life.

Conclusion

Fan interests can stimulate specific tourism decisions, and both fan interest and tourism develop over the course of life rather than being “snapshot” events which can only be understood in terms of their immediate circumstances. Both tourism and fan interest relate the experiences of past life stages to the present in a process that should reward further investigation.

The results of the survey conducted here show that a certain proportion (not necessarily a large proportion) of fans makes life choice decisions, including tourism, based on their fan interest. Further research can examine this in more detail, and consider how providers of tourist experiences can respond in an agile fashion to the actual desires and needs of tourists.

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