Elf Fantasy Fair 2010

Spotting Fans

Fantasy Fairs

Historically, fantasy fairs are a typical continental event but are amply inspired by American Renaissance fairs. The first Renaissance fair in the United States was a weekend event held for charity by a school teacher in 1963, which has been organized annually ever since. The European tradition has held events similar to Renaissance Fairs for many years, based on previous eras or historical fiction, such as Dickens’s novels. However, these events often have a strong educational component to them and are often captured as “living history” that reenacts the past. On a local level, the Netherlands has various events that display its folklore, such as nostalgic markets that include the reenactment of historical labor and technologies. More permanent institutes have rebuilt entire towns, such as the medieval and Greco-Roman theme park Archeon. However, events such as the Elf Fantasy Fair have clear commercial aims and emphasize fiction over history.

Often promoted as the biggest fantasy event in Europe, the Elf Fantasy Fair gives range to about 25,000 people each year. The event is held on a Saturday and Sunday. While some visitors enjoy it for two days, most attend the festival only for a day. The Elf Fantasy Fair typically engages in a type of world building around its event. Its lore and myths flourish around the idea that the terrain of Haarzuilens is transformed into the mystic land of Elfia (see figure 1). Rituals and parades in honor of Elfia, symbolized by an annual king and queen, are meant to foster this fictional immersion.

For a scholar who wants to dive into media fandom, this fair is surely a good place to start. The fair is held outdoors at castle De Haar in Haarzuilens, near Utrecht. A special bus takes visitors from local train stations to the festival grounds. Others travel by car, which is what my friend Shanna and I do. On 25 April, we drive from the south of the country to the tenth edition of this festival. It is the fifth time that I join the fair.

Fictional Bricolage

The fair has diverse settings that allude to historical and fictional genres. We are supposed to volunteer at the “Manga Holodeck”, which blends science fiction and Japanese popular culture. Since we have ample time before Shanna’s workshop starts, we explore the Elf grounds and meet up with Karlijn, a fellow
Figure 1: Photograph at Elf Fantasy Fair by Kees Stravers
artist of our doujinshi circle OpenMinded. The three of us admire the sights, but do not look at the merchandise that much. None of us is really interested in buying things. We attend the fair for the people, the atmosphere, and to see some familiar faces every once in awhile.

Our hike takes us from the “Dark Woods” to “Medieval Road” and back to the castle. Our friend Diana has a stand somewhere but we have some trouble finding it. She has made a very elaborate fantasy costume with huge wings and lots of laces, she told us, and should be easy to spot. Eventually we find her surrounded by a group of photographers and take some photos of her ourselves. Diana is also the official Elf model this year. She is featured on the posters in her “steampunk” costume, a nostalgic outfit with goggles and mechanical wings that won a prize the year before. She is also on the back of the festival map with a previous dragon costume of hers.

During our walk, Karlijn excitedly envisions the next anime convention. Karlijn works for the manga library “Mangakissa” with two good friends of hers and hopes to introduce me to them. A simple stroll over the festival’s ground takes us roughly two hours; the fair has expanded immensely compared with previous years. The stands sell commodities that vary from books, mead, and jewelry to gothic outfits. The musical atmosphere is created by bands and taiko drums to which some visitors start to dance. Since it is a warm day, local stands host readings and workshops outside rather than in the designated tents. Some stands focus on Japanese popular culture but, strikingly, these are not located near the manga platform.

The Elf Fantasy Fair is a highly diverse bricolage: an immense flock of fictional characters and genres. The conversations that I have with friends and acquaintances are about any and all fiction. Karlijn, who knows that I am into Wicked, talks to me about her experiences of visiting the musical but quickly migrates to Disney television series. Others recommend new television series or discuss fiction based on costumes that they see walking by. Some of my informants show open disregard to some mainstream series. The many Naruto cloaks and blue Avatar (2009) costumes are seen as a sign of bad taste and juvenility. Thus, fan hierarchies are constructed at the fair, based on what people wear and do. While the space may seem inclusive, celebratory, and immersive at first, exclusion is also a part of its social dynamics.

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1 Japanese fan comics or original comics that are self-published. Dutch comics tend to be original works inspired by the aesthetics of manga and its production models.
2 Steampunk is a hybrid genre of speculative fiction that is staged around mechanical technology driven by steam. Its pseudo-Victorian visual style is composed of material and technological tropes (e.g., gears).
Dress-Up

Though visitors clearly attend the Elf Fantasy Fair for diverse reasons, they share an interest in self-expression. Clothing is an important way of connecting with the others at the fair: even if that clothing only consists of a *Power Rangers* shirt or gothic jewelry. The diversity of the fair is supported by the visitors themselves, who have dressed up appropriately. While many visitors have donned their own designs or gothic dresses, others have made fan costumes of existing characters. While fans are often liberal in terms of gender and sexuality, the fair shows few signs of this. During our walk, we see hardly any cross-dressing visitors – save for a male Snow White whom we immediately photograph.

The nice thing about the Elf Fantasy Fair is that you never really know what to expect. Any minute, you can bump into Cleopatra, Jack Sparrow, or a *Naruto* cosplayer. I wear an outfit from the *G.I. Joe* comics, which does not draw that much attention. At the Flemish convention F.A.C.T.S. (2009), I had been recognized by many people in their twenties who had grown up with the cartoon. At the fair, compliments are scarcer, though some photos are taken.

Those who are not dressed up are usually photographers, parents, or wingmen. They can also be attending for the first time or be frequent visitors that have skipped a costume for practical reasons. For instance, I bump into an acquaintance of mine who had been working on an elaborate guard outfit based on Burton’s *Alice in Wonderland* (2010). However, after having arrived at the fair, he had ruined his costume when he tried to put it on in the parking lot. Naturally, he is still upset. He had spent hours on painting the outfit. He tells me that he has not seen the movie yet but that he is quite fond of Alice stories in general. The tale itself and the design of the outfits was a primary reason for him to pursue the costume.

I meet another friend later that day: Kees, an older fan and amateur photographer. He has attended the Fair for many years. We sit on the grass and discuss the festival. He accurately describes it as “nerd spotting”. “Most people”, he says, “go here to show themselves off and watch others do it too.” He states that the costumes and the atmosphere are what draw people to the castle. The Elf Fantasy Fair has a long history and is conveniently located near Utrecht, but the castle and its impressive garden are above all a sight to behold. The terrain offers enough space to hang out, plenty of grass to sit on, and enough fellow geeks to watch.

Still, a visitor to the fair can make new friends too. For instance, I bump into a Takarazuka\(^3\) cosplayer who portrays the Japanese version of “der Tod”, the male lead from the musical *Elisabeth*. The Japanese appropriation of this Austrian

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\(^3\) Takarazuka is a theater school and show choir in Japan for young women. In their shows, women play all of the leads, including the male ones.
classic stands out from its original. I recognize the costume immediately through the white wig and the black, feathery cape that symbolizes the wings of death. The encounter with this fan excites me since Takarazuka fans in the Netherlands are hard to find. She tells me that she has become acquainted with Takarazuka through musical fandom. She is an Elisabeth fan like me, and eager to see more of the Japanese shows. The woman explains to me that she wants to go to Japan – luckily her boyfriend’s brother lives there – to visit a show and get the DVDs. After this short chat, we disperse without each other’s contacts.

Visitors of the Elf Fantasy Fair have undoubtedly had the same experience that I had: one of marveling at the characters and fans that you meet. My friend Karlijn, for instance, is wearing her cosplay of the Ghibli movie Kiki’s Delivery Service (1989) and is recognized by a few enthusiasts, including an eight-year old girl. She is also wearing a Kiki outfit. The two of them take several pictures together and Karlijn is more than excited that she shares common ground with such a wonderful, shy kid. The sport of recognizing characters is part of the fair and also one of the elements that makes a stroll across the festival grounds so much fun.

Labor

The fair is also a place to promote your own shop and crafts. My friend Christel has a stand where she sells corsets. While I am chatting with her, several members of an anime fan club drop by that we have not seen for ages, as well as a staff member from our former live-action role-playing (“LARP”) society. Christel’s table quickly turns into a fan hub. We are all at the table to support her and are connected by our friendship to her. Christel started her own company two years ago when she finished her fashion education. Sewing had been her thing for years. She had always been willing to help me out when my own cosplays became bothersome and difficult. Ever since medical school, she had dreamed of becoming a professional seamstress. Finally, she realized that she needed to switch her education and just give it a try.

Now Christel is standing at the fair for the second time to sell corsets and jewelry. For the past few months, she has been working for the atelier of celebrity violinist André Rieu. The day before the fair, a documentary had been on TV about Rieu starring Christel, who had been too shy to tell everyone about it. For her, it had always been about the dresses. She was doing what she loved the most by working in the theatre on pretty attires. When I leave her stand, I wonder if I might visit Rieu’s concert at the Vrijthof in Maastricht this summer to see the dresses on-stage.
Usually the Elf Fantasy Fair is also populated by various LARP groups who give demonstrations of their play. This year, the groups are practically absent. On the map, I see that there is at least one group present that I overlooked: “Fase 3.” Its players can easily be recognized because this particular role-playing game focuses on warfare and is inspired by military genres rather than fantasy fandom. Many players wear uniforms or steampunk gear. Rumor has it that, during their sessions, they are up all night in the woods and stand on guard. That is to say, they battle and behave like actual troops. The LARP stems from science fiction and tactical shooters, a genre of digital games rather than fantasy.

At the end of the day, I attend a movie workshop. This session is about movie making and Shanna is eager to go there since it is related to a project that she is working on. She has gotten a job as a freelance artist to make a comic based on the novel Fantasiejagers (2007) by Mel Hartman. This is Shanna’s first job since she graduated in illustration. Years ago, I lured Shanna into drawing comics for our artist group OpenMinded. She is not our only artist who went professional, since many of them got jobs in the media industry or art scene. Shanna is now working with Mel’s script and has also brought her large A3 drawings to show the author.

As with any story that is produced these days, a novel version and a comic version are not enough. Fantasiejagers has gotten another grant for a movie version, Fantasy Hunters (2012). The director, Pedro Chaves, hosts the workshop while smoking and with his sunglasses on. All of us sit on the grass and Shanna and I hope that he mentions the Fantasiejagers project, but he does not. He has recently directed a low-budget (only 6000 euros) movie called Reiki (2009). This is the subject of his talk, which instructs us on how to make a cheap movie. Reiki has been produced solely through fan labor by a team of amateur editors, crew, and actors. Pedro tells us that, as long as you are creative, make good use of various online platforms, and are willing to work with other young professionals, you can pretty much do anything. Reiki seems a fine example of a cult movie that includes zombies and science-fiction themes. Only one member of our small audience has actually seen the movie, but he admits that he liked it.

Though his talk is not very engaging, I admire Chaves. He tries to motivate ten people sitting in the grass, who are not professionals but are simply interested in what he does. Flagging his small-press edition of Reiki with manga art on the cover, I can only smile at him. He shares many qualities with us doujinshi artists who keep investing in small projects, hoping that the readers will show up. He extensively promotes his content online, but, with an overflow of creative products today, his work may not stand out.

In times when I am cynical about the professional opportunities for fan works, Chaves’s optimism is striking. I am weary of these kinds of talks that make
everything sound easy and doable; talks that emphasize talent and creativity. They make me itchy because I have seen how hard my artist friends have worked to get where they are. Shanna, for instance, got her contract because she had worked hard to improve her drawings and constantly studied characters, objects, and landscapes. Christel made many LARP costumes and cosplay outfits since she was a teenager, before Rieu employed her. Karlijn started a web comic from scratch and is now studying animation. Every second of footage requires her to draw countless frames.

In terms of creative labor, fans work hard and can excel in their craftsmanship. Some become professionals while others remain highly appreciated within the creative culture of fandom. The fair is run by passionate individuals who sell their own clothing, art, and literature. This is one of the most interesting aspects of the festival. It showcases the sheer passion of crafters, storytellers, and hobbyists. I have seen many fans go stellar in pursuit of their dreams. Still, I always remind myself of how hard they worked to make this happen.

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