

Take matters into your own hands

Square Online Store [Create Your Store](#)

Flame Con 2019 Interview—Convention Chair discusses intersectionality in nerd culture

2019-08-30 17:00:00 by [Chris Compendio](#)

A mosaic of communities with much to offer



For the second year in a row, I ventured to the Sheraton Times Square for Flame Con, which bills itself as the world's largest queer comic convention. While it may be relatively smaller to other mainstream conventions like New York Comic-Con or PAX, Flame Con is still large and engrossing enough to get lost in. As I found from [my first Flame Con experience last year](#), the artist alley is still the best around, and there's no shortage of [fun, nerdy cosplay](#).

Panels included discussions about diverse representation in media, specifically comic books, animation, and television franchises such as the Arrowverse. Workshops gave attendees pointers on their art, comics, and cosplay work. And for the queer gaming folks, the Gaymer Lounge was the place to be for video game and tabletop game tournaments.

I wanted to dive into the heart of what made Flame Con a beacon for queer communities in the convention scene. Con organizers GeeksOUT put together an interview for me with Steve Gianaca, the Vice President of GeeksOUT and the Chair of Flame Con for a candid discussion on queer spaces in nerd fandoms.

Chris: Can you give us a brief history of GeeksOUT?

Steve Gianaca: Geeks Out started in 2010. We're a national nonprofit where our whole goal is to rally, promote and power the queer geek community. We have events all over the country. We have active chapters in DC, LA, a small one in Chicago and biggest one here in New York. We help other conventions and hosts creating diverse programming and queer representation. Basically we amplify the voices of queer creators and queer artists and of course we produce Flame Con, which is the world's largest

Squarespace Website Builder

Make and manage your own professional website with Squarespace's all-in-one platform.

[Learn More](#)

How many years has Flame Con been going on?

This is the fifth year.

How have you seen Flame Con expand in the past five years? Whether it's through attendance or through venue—

It's expanded in ways we weren't even ready for. Even after we hit our first Kickstarter, we thought we'd have a few hundred people in the venue, and 2000 people showed up.

You're probably not at liberty to say right now, but any plans in the future for expansion?

Oh, we'd always like to grow, but again, we are a nonprofit, so we have to make that realistic. We don't have any venues or solid plans for 2020, but we're always looking.

What kind of challenges would you say that queer creators face when we're talking about "mainstream" conventions?

I can tell you right now the entire way that Geeks Out, our parent organization, started is because mainstream conventions didn't have any access to queer creators. Our two founders went to New York Comic Con and we're looking for queer content. Not that you necessarily always needed queer content, but it's nice to have a little bit of a mirror in the content you're absorbing every once in a while. And there was nothing there. It was a needle in a haystack. So they decided, you know what, let's create a space that caters to our community. And FlameCon was born shortly after that.

I think you've described it on a macro level, but on a micro level in terms of like actually attending a convention, what do you think are some pain points that mainstream conventions might have for queer folks that Flame Con would like to alleviate in a way?

It goes from the incidental to the outright malicious. There's bias—there's conscious bias and unconscious bias. People will be scattered or relegated to hard to reach places if the con vendors either don't like them or don't think that they'll attract a larger following. There's also very big barriers of entry for the industry itself. Queer creators, creators of color, any marginalized community have a really hard time capturing the attention and the respect of industry professionals. Luckily that's changing but it's changing slowly.

What would you say that exhibitors benefit from specifically going to Flame Con?

It is 100% access to their target demographic. While you may, at larger cons, have one in 20 people come up to you, everyone at Flame Con is your target.

I had been to PAX East and there's a diversity lounge, but I found it by accident on the last day of the con.

We actually run it. And that's us putting up a little queer tent pole.

A misconception from people outside the know is that, you know, we talk about diversity and there'll probably be a lot of bad faith people out there who say, "Oh, it's not diverse if it's like all queer people," or something like that.

We get that all the time.

Yeah, exactly. But the queer community, if you want to call it one community, is very diverse and there's a lot of different, interest and sub-communities. Can you think of any off the top of your head, as in any interesting spheres of people who attend the con or are exhibitors at the con?

I know that we actually have a growing trans presence. We actively try and recruit guests of color to speak and exhibit their stuff. This year, we instituted a lottery system for our tables just to make sure that there's equal access to the con for all of our creators. At this point, our largest community is just a queer camaraderie. There's trans creators, there's ace creators, there's pan creators, there's bi creators, gay creators, lesbian creators and intersectional identities within there.

It's really hard to navigate "queer Twitter," let's call it. It's a lot of discourse, a lot of people debating on priorities [on issues amongst the community]. I don't want to be specific on which panel I saw [at this year's Flame Con], but there was a bit of a conflict—there was an audience member who was arguing that the panelists are not really talking about whatever their priorities are, like they were misaligned. Do you ever sense any discord or that misalignment?

Internally, no. Externally, yes. When I talk to publications or other entities that are geared more towards the main cis heteronormative market, they say they never read the comments. I'm sure you know that. But the comments are always, "wow, they have a queer convention, I guess we can't come." And I feel like screaming into the void. Yes, our convention is aimed at queer creators, but just as we go to standard conventions that are aimed at cis heteronormative white male consumers—we're there, we enjoy them, but that's not for us. But also we don't have a little barrier saying, "you must be this gay to get into Flame Con." You're welcome to come to Flame Con and enjoy content not aimed specifically at you.

What can the people at this convention, mainly I guess exhibitors and guests—what can they offer to the world at large? This is meant to be like a showcase for their content. What is it that's unique that they can offer to the "mainstream?"

I'm hoping what they're gathering from our convention is that they're not talented for queer artists. They are talented artists. Full stop. Ours is a good way for them to bolster their repertoire to gain a bit of confidence. And even field test and focus group some of their leanings and workings, cause a lot of people here at Flame Con collaborate. People that are on our panels collaborate, our vendors make new friends and make new business connections. It's a great networking environment and that camaraderie and that teamwork and that self-reflection on your work can help lead you into larger areas. We specifically don't cordon off our special guests on the floor. We mix them in with everyone else. So if you've only been drawing comics for two weeks, you might be with someone who's been at DC or Marvel for 20 years right next to you. We encourage that type of fostership and mentorship and friendship amongst established pros and newbies.

What kind of panels do you generally look to to have at the convention? What kind of like themes and bits of knowledge do you think are like important enough to share with attendees here?

Well, we have a brilliant programming lead named Maya Bishop, and she creates panels that are so far away from the standard "Hey, I'm queer and I'm a creator," because that's what you get at like the larger cons. We dive into "what does it like to be like an intersectional queer person?" "How do you market your material in a mass produced way?" That is actually I think a panel yesterday with Jen Bartow. How to make merchandise and get it to sell. Maya really looks for ways to create discourse for creators and attendees that will encourage them and teach them about representation, marketing, access into comic book life or art life. Everything has a queer bent. It's never just about being queer in the comics industry for programming.

You were talking about like internal versus external in terms of discourse. Do you think Flame Con is meant to be like a safer space? As I mentioned, there was a panel yesterday where things kind of got a little heated, so I'm wondering what level of discourse you're looking for from this convention.

There will always be some kind of conflict.

But there's no toxicity.

No, in fact, I'm not even mad that there was points of contentions on panels. I don't think panels and discourse should necessarily shy away from subject matter that makes you uncomfortable. As long as you do it respectfully. And what I'm very proud about Flame Con is that it is a collaborative and respectful environment.

Yeah, definitely. I would not describe anything I've seen as toxic or bad faith or anything like that.

No, I've been to the larger cons in the past and the artists can people get up with an ax to grind.

Would you hope that mainstream conventions would have the same level of intersectionality and inclusivity as Flame Con the future? To the point where what Flame Con is a normal at that point?

That is the dream, isn't it?

Yeah. I mean, this is me asking, are you pessimistic or optimistic or if you see the winds shifting in that direction.

I have seen so much growth in the industry in the last few years, but it's just a drop in the bucket. But yeah, you don't fill a bucket unless you keep putting drops in it. As long as it keep going forward—it is slow, I hope it gets faster, but I will never be pessimistic about positive change. I can just be even more hopeful and optimistic about quicker positive change. The mainstream comic and geek industry is getting more inclusive, getting more representative. You can actually see yourself in a lot of media these days if you aren't just a straight white guy, able bodied white guy. I want it to be better, but no, I'm not mad that we're changing for the better.

I'm just curious how important you think play and games, video games and tabletop games, are important to the queer community. My friends and I went to the [official] after party last night, and

we were talking about how it was all nerd burlesque.

Yeah. The entire party is geared around geeky content.

Yeah. And then the conversation shifted to "wait, wait. Most of the burlesque we've seen are all nerdy. So why is nerdiness and queerness so intertwined, you think?"

And gaming culture too?

Yeah.

I can only speak from personal experience on gaming. Gaming to me when I was young and in the closet, it was my way to escape and live a life where I can be something open and free. And that's how I developed that love. And once I came out, doesn't mean that I stop loving games. I just appreciated them all the more. When you're young and you're queer and scared and you get that one, that book, that tabletop game, that video game that let's you be free and happy, it's going to stick with you and imprint on you.

It's a shame that the gaming community in general can get toxic.

Yeah, a lot like the comics industry, they're getting better, but never play group chat or anything.

There's Gamergate, and then I'm hearing about ComicsGate.

And the relative ease that people let the f-bomb drop out of their mouth when you're playing a collaborative game online.

Yeah. They try to call it a "gamer word."

It's not a gamer word, it's just a bad word. It's derogatory.

Any other events besides Flame Con or anything else that people should be looking out for in the near future?

Well, if you're on the West Coast, we will be running the Diversity Lounge at PAX West. Then we'll be back in New York Comic-Con in the fall.



You are logged out. [Login](#) | [Sign up](#)

From the Web

Powered by ZergNet



Gaming's Most Brutal Continue Screens



Video Games That Were Banned in America



Babydoll From 'Sucker Punch' is an Absolute Bombshell Now



Video Games You Should Never Play in Front of Your Kids



Memes That Destroyed Lives



Why You Shouldn't Be Surprised About Major 2020 Game Delays



Mainstream Actors Who Turned to the Adult Industry



Pattinson's Struggles With 'The Batman' Keep Getting Worse



structoid. They are a massive MCU fan who also
[. more + disclosures](#)

Sponsored



Getting a Project Management Certification Is Easy on Yahoo

Project Management Skills | Search Ads

Almost Nobody Aces This Baseball Quiz!

QuizGriz

Flixist Comment Policy

Welcome to our community! The #1 Rule: Please be respectful. We can't all agree, but never make it personal. Please read our [Comment Policy](#) before commenting.



0 Comments

Flixist

1 Login ▾

♥ Recommend

Tweet

Share

Sort by Oldest ▾



Start the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS



Name

Like this article?

Subscribe to Flixist to receive daily updates of the latest articles delivered straight to your inbox.

Enter email address

Subscribe

[Hide this message](#)

Be the first to comment.

[Subscribe](#) [Disqus' Privacy Policy](#)[Privacy Policy](#)[Privacy Policy](#)

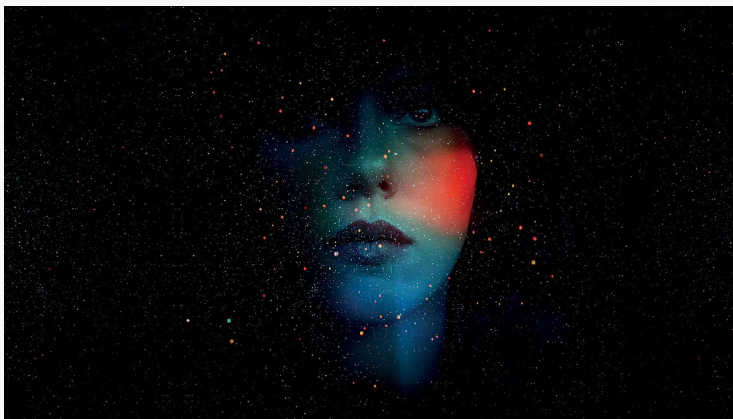
LET'S KEEP THE COMMUNITY GREAT

You're not expected to always agree, but do please keep cool and never make it personal. Report harassment, spam, and hate speech to [our community team](#). Also, on the right side of a comment you can flag nasty comments **anonymously** (we ban users dishing **bad karma**). For everything else, [contact us!](#)



1 comment · 1 week ago

- [Colin Trevorrow's original script for Star Wars: Episode IX leaks on Reddit](#)
1 comment · 1 week ago
- [Can we stop with all the 'Skywalker Saga' cameos in Star Wars media?](#)
2 comments · 1 week ago
- [Sian's top 5 films of 2019](#)
1 comment · 2 weeks ago
- [Clarice is CBS' sequel series to The Silence of the Lambs](#)
1 comment · 2 weeks ago



There's currently a bidding war for an Under the Skin TV series

0

I guess everything has to be a TV series, now.

So, in a move that perhaps makes less sense than the film itself, A24 and Silver Reel are currently embroiled in a bidding war for the TV

rights for a potential *Under the Skin* spinoff.

Under the Skin television spinoff? Oh, no. No thank you.

[expand story + comments](#)