

Chapter Title: Geek

Chapter Author(s): Christina Dunbar-Hester

Book Title: Digital Keywords

Book Subtitle: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture

Book Editor(s): Benjamin Peters

Published by: Princeton University Press. (2016)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvet0023.18>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Princeton University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Digital Keywords*

## Geek

Christina Dunbar-Hester

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *geek* as “depreciative. An overly diligent, unsociable student; any unsociable person obsessively devoted to a particular pursuit.”<sup>1</sup> This usage goes back to at least the 1950s. The *OED* offers a more recent definition (from the 1980s) of *geek* as “a person who is extremely devoted to and knowledgeable about computers or related technology,” and notes that “in this sense, esp. when as a self-designation, not necessarily *depreciative*.” Another iteration of *geek* meant a circus freak or carnival performer. This usage is a bit earlier, with the *OED* listing 1919 for a carnival performer and 1935 for the colorful description “a degenerate who bites off the heads of chickens in a gory cannibal show.” Precedent for both the circus geek and the academic geek is found in nineteenth-century usage meaning a foolish, offensive, or worthless person.

*Geeking* as a verb also has a lineage that might surprise us. By 1990, to *geek out* meant to study hard, a denotation linking the phrase to the studious diligence of *geek* as a noun. More specifically, the 1991 *New Hacker’s Dictionary* links geeking out to technology, offering the following definition: “*Geek out*, to temporarily enter techno-nerd mode while in a non-hackish context.”<sup>2</sup> But in its 1930s incarnation, the *OED* defines *geeking* and *geeking out* as “to give up, to back down; to lose one’s nerve. Also with *out*” (in addition to the definition linked to performing as a circus freak). Geeking was originally equated with weakness and failure.

This inversion—from geeking as weakness to geeking as mastery—is worth scrutinizing. Yet even as geeking signifies academic or technical potency, it retains hints of cultural ambivalence. Though geeks may now be celebrated as heroes, they are still characterized in popular culture and the popular press as physically weak,

socially maladjusted, and outside of “normalcy” more often than not. Geeks may or may not differ from nerds. On this distinction, science and technology studies scholar Ron Eglash quotes novelist Douglas Coupland, who writes that “a geek is a nerd who knows that he is one.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, self-awareness and embrace of one’s geeky status are components of geekhood. Geekhood can be borne with pride, whereas nerds are just nerds, dweebs, losers.<sup>4</sup> In popular culture, *geek* can mark outsider status (e.g., the reality television program *Beauty and the Geek*, 2005–8) or outsider status along with studiousness (as in the cult TV show *Freaks and Geeks*, 1999–2000). Katherine Dunn’s 1989 novel *Geek Love* centers on carnival geeks negotiating belonging within their family and the wider society.<sup>5</sup>

To explain this drift over time, we might look to the transition from body work to “knowledge work” that has occurred over the twentieth century. As cultural historian Anson Rabinbach explains, throughout the nineteenth century, society was understood to be powered and moved forward by bodies at work: “The human body and the industrial machine were both motors that converted energy into mechanical work.”<sup>6</sup> By the late twentieth century, though, the *mind* was ascendant, at least metaphorically. (Industrial and body work still exist, of course, but they have been rendered invisible by a combination of offshore manufacturing in global supply chains and the discursive exaltation of managerial and intellectual work, which marginalizes service work and manual labor.)

Geeks have been caught up in this shift, moving from a position of weakness and marginality to a position of greater relevance and influence. Human minds, not bodies, are understood to be the seat of power in late capitalism. That said, geeks have not moved into unambiguously hegemonic positions, and the geek body retains its status as a site of spectacle. While geeks no longer decapitate chickens with their teeth, they are often portrayed as gawky, puny, and bespectacled<sup>7</sup>—perhaps not monstrous, but still deformed.<sup>8</sup>

The genealogy of *geek* is important for multiple reasons. Not only is it now centered on knowledge (especially arcane knowledge); it has transmuted from a term of insult into a more positive descriptor. Many people use *geek* to describe themselves and others in a fond, self-aware form of teasing and playfulness. As with other iterations of identity politics,<sup>9</sup> geeks have laid claim to a title with a

history as a term of disparagement in order to gain power over its use, and they now derive strength from a label that had once been injurious to them. Geeks' embrace of this term now signifies their own uniqueness, their distinctness from the mainstream and commonality with each other.

Notably, *geek's* acquiring positive valence and in-group signification coincides with computing's rise in prominence over the past three or four decades. Computers have made a leap in the popular imagination from symbols of dehumanizing bureaucracy to intimate machines for self-expression and liberation.<sup>10</sup> Programmers, computing magnates, and hackers have catapulted into the limelight. This is evident in the stature and perceived social power of such figures as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg. Their technical "wizardry"<sup>11</sup> is an object of public reverence. At the same time, especially as geeks shade into hackers, they may be met with suspicion and ambivalence, as Julian Assange and Edward Snowden can attest.<sup>12</sup> This indicates that the freakish, threatening elements of geekhood may still be conjured (see [hacker](#)). (Programming exhibits a long history of conflict between practitioners and the institutions that employ them, including contestations over requirements for entry and craft versus science status, as computing historian Nathan Ensmenger has shown.)<sup>13</sup>

"Wizardry" is also gendered, of course. Technical masculinity precedes computing.<sup>14</sup> Historian of communication Susan Douglas locates amateur radio operators' work with radio as a site of reinforcement of ideas about masculine identity and technical competence in the early twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> She discusses how the tinkering work performed by men and boys, celebrated in the press, helped attenuate tensions between conflicting definitions of masculinity. Tinkering offered access to a masculine technical domain that was accessible and valued, and that stood in contrast to masculine ideals of ruggedness, strength, and plunder, which were becoming less accessible and less valuable. Douglas's account demonstrates that radio amateurs seized the new technology and interpreted it in a way that emphasized masculinity and different gender roles in relation to it; the technology was used to reinterpret masculinity itself. Electronics tinkering was a remarkably stable elite masculine hobby during the twentieth century, offering

suburban men and boys both a masculine space within the domesticity of the home and training for white-collar technical professions.<sup>16</sup> But by the last couple of decades, the object of tinkering had begun to shift away from radio and toward computers.<sup>17</sup>

The continuity of tinkering as a masculine pursuit offers some clues about geek identity. Computer geeks (like the hams before them) are overwhelmingly likely to be white men (or youth), often from middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds.<sup>18</sup> Reasons for this likely include exposure to computing at a young age, parental educational achievement, gender expectations and socialization of children and youth, and cultural norms in computer science and hobbyist communities, among others.<sup>19</sup> Geek identity is a factor in the perpetuation of the exclusivity of technical cultures ranging from engineering to Silicon Valley (see [community](#), [forum](#), and [gaming](#)).

This is not to say that participation in computing or related technical pursuits is closed to all who are not white men. Strategies to combat the association of geekiness with white masculinity include linking geek identity to technical *engagement* as opposed to technical *virtuosity*.<sup>20</sup> Technical communities including free and open-source software and hackerspaces have repeatedly sought to address issues of “diversity” within their ranks.<sup>21</sup> Women can and do identify as geeks.<sup>22</sup> And Ron Eglash argues that Afro-futurism is an example of an improvised way to achieve technical prowess or identification without being tied to geekiness *per se*.<sup>23</sup> Yet the association of white middle-class masculinity with aptitude and affection for computing is entrenched.

It is worth locating geeks in space and culture, not only in time. Arguably, to be a geek is to assume a subject position within capitalism, or at least in a technologically advanced society where an abundance of gear and a surfeit of time (whether one’s own leisure time/volunteer labor, time stolen from an employer, or something in between)<sup>24</sup> can be presumed.<sup>25</sup> A subsistence farmer is not a geek, no matter how technically adept she is. Not only does *geek* originate within a largely North American or European cultural context, the export of geek identity can be interpreted as a means to bring people in other parts of the world (especially the Global South) into alignment with neoliberal<sup>26</sup> and capitalistic values. It is

not a coincidence that some of the values of geek communities, including self-organization and peer production, can be easily ported onto discourses of entrepreneurship and bootstrapping.<sup>27</sup>

Such attempts to export geekhood to, say, “Africans”<sup>28</sup> rightly identify “computer capital” as a “mark of distinction with which to ensure their viability on the job and in the social structure.”<sup>29</sup> Yet they fail to consider the inadequacy of the “distributive paradigm” as a mode of intervention into systemic inequality.<sup>30</sup> In other words, social power and technical participation are imbricated to such a degree that they may at first glance seem interchangeable, but increasing participation in technology is no guarantee of movement into a more empowered social position.

Despite the towering symbolic value of IT, geek identity as a global subject position faces obstacles. Gender, for example, is constructed and experienced not in isolation but within a matrix of factors that affect social identity, which include class, nationality, ethnicity, and race.<sup>31</sup> Much of what we know about the intersection of gender and technology suffers from the fact that scholars have disproportionately attended to Western cases. Ulf Mellström suggests that we “[need] to investigate configurations of masculinity and femininity in a cross-cultural perspective more thoroughly”<sup>32</sup> in a study illustrating the relative prevalence of women computer scientists in Malaysia. The fact that women are more likely to become computer scientists in Malaysia than in the United States does not necessarily mean it is easier for women to be geeks in Malaysia. Mellström never uses the term at all, and indeed, we would be wrong to conclude that it is an especially meaningful category in this case.<sup>33</sup>

Anthropologist Carla Freeman advocates “localizing” our understandings of work with technology, by which she means attuning any analysis we might conduct to the historical, sociological, geopolitical, and economic factors that materially ground all instances of work with technology.<sup>34</sup> This resonates with the acknowledgment by Wendy Faulkner and many feminist scholars that context matters and “one size does not fit all.”<sup>35</sup> Geekhood has the potential to be opened up or modified to fit local conditions of selfhood experienced across nations, genders, or other cultural categories. But every effort should be made to place geekhood, as mode of selfhood

and citizenship,<sup>36</sup> within the historical and cultural context from which it emerged. It cannot be held out (or exported) as a universal way of being in the world.

*See in this volume:* activism, community, democracy, gaming, hacker

*See in Williams:* capitalism, community, culture, technology, work

## Notes

Thanks to Lucas Graves, Lilly Nguyen, Ben Peters, and the Digital Keywords workshop participants for comments on this entry during its development.

- 1 This obsessive diligence may also be expressed as fandom (Bailey 2005).
- 2 *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, 2014. Emphasis in original.
- 3 Coupland 1996 quoted in Eglash 2002, n. 1. See also Dunbar-Hester 2008.
- 4 The *OED* notes that *nerd* has also acquired a definition as a person who pursues a “highly technical interest with obsessive or exclusive dedication.” However, it is still more likely to be depreciative, and it is also more broadly defined as “an insignificant, foolish, or socially inept person; a person who is boringly conventional or studious.” Much more could be said here. For example, the appearance of the “black nerd” in popular culture indicates that reclamation of *nerd* is possible as well. Significantly, this appropriation (re)codes *nerd* racially, tying African-American-ness to intellectualism. (It thus decouples blackness from primitivism, a linkage exemplified in musician Brian Eno’s statement “Do you know what a nerd is? A nerd is a human being without enough Africa in him,” quoted in Eglash 2002, 52.) It also expands roles for African Americans beyond “thug, athlete, or rapper.” See “The Rise of the Black Nerd in Popular Culture” (*CNN Entertainment*, March 2012), online at <http://www.cnn.com/2012/03/31/showbiz/rise-of-black-nerds/>. It is worth noting that all the examples of black nerds cited in this piece are men.
- 5 Thanks to Jack Bratich for discussion of these references, as well as for reminding me that “geeking” can occur around topics other than technology. See also Jason Tocchi (2009) on geek identity within popular culture.
- 6 Rabinbach 1992, 2.
- 7 See, e.g., Pullin 2009 for a discussion of how prostheses mark disability.
- 8 Thanks to Ted Striphas and Ben Peters for offering the insight that the circus provides a field for playing out human-nonhuman-animal boundaries, offering a “dirty,” transitory space to work out the larger body-mind societal transformation.
- 9 For example, *queer*. Judith Butler points to a tension for these terms of exclusion, in that even as they are reclaimed and vested with a “positive resignification” (1993, 223), a total metamorphosis, in which past derogatory

- valences are cast off, may serve to vitiate their full significance. She cautions that “normalizing the queer would be, after all, its sad finish” (1994, 21). See Dunbar-Hester 2008.
- 10 Streeter 2011; Turner 2006.
  - 11 Rosenzweig 1998.
  - 12 Gregg and DiSalvo 2013.
  - 13 Ensmenger 2010.
  - 14 And computing was originally women’s work. See Abbate 2012; Light 1999.
  - 15 Douglas 1987, chap. 6.
  - 16 Douglas 1987; Haring 2006.
  - 17 See Coleman 2012, 28–30, on youth and coding.
  - 18 See Dunbar-Hester 2008; Kendall 2002; Misa 2010.
  - 19 Kendall 2002; Margolis and Fisher 2003; Misa 2010. See Ensmenger 2010 on the historically tenuous status of programming and the rise of academic computer science.
  - 20 Dunbar-Hester 2008; Dunbar-Hester 2010.
  - 21 Coleman and Dunbar-Hester 2012.
  - 22 Newitz and Anders 2006.
  - 23 Eglash 2002. See also Fouché 2006.
  - 24 Söderberg 2008; Turner 2009.
  - 25 See Coleman 2012; Kelty 2008; Söderberg 2008.
  - 26 Streeter 2011.
  - 27 Streeter 2011, 69–70.
  - 28 See “How Tech Geeks in Africa Are Transforming IT Education” (*Computer World*, April 2012), online at <http://www.computerweekly.com/opinion/How-tech-geeks-in-Africa-are-transforming-IT-education>.
  - 29 Postigo 2003, 600.
  - 30 See Eubanks 2007.
  - 31 Delgado and Stefancic, scholars of critical race theory, assert that “race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological nor genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (2001, 7). I invoke race as a category of analysis in light of this insight.
  - 32 Mellström 2009, 886.
  - 33 Mellström argues that two main factors influencing Malaysian women’s computer science participation are how Malaysian society constructs appropriate class positions for its multiracial population, and that Malaysian women may embrace “global, corporate masculinity” in part because many Malaysian men reject it for being Western or foreign (2009, 898).
  - 34 Freeman 2000, chap. 3. See also Wyatt 2008.
  - 35 Faulkner 2004, 14.
  - 36 Of course *citizen* is rightly a contentious concept for some. In my use of the term, I wish to signal activity around civic or communal participation, not to marginalize those without full legal status as citizens. Though I do not have space to interrogate “citizenship” here, using it to stand in for a mode of engagement open to “everyone” may present problems.



## References

- Abbate, Janet. 2012. *Recoding Gender*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bailey, Stephen. 2005. *Media Audiences and Identity: Self-Construction and the Fan Experience*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge.
- . 1994. "Against Proper Objects." *Differences* 6: 1–26.
- Coleman, Gabriella. 2012. *Coding Freedom*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Coleman, Gabriella, and Christina Dunbar-Hester. 2012. "Engendering Change? Gender Advocacy in Open Source." *Culture Digitally: Examining Contemporary Cultural Production*, June 26. Online: <http://culturedigitally.org/2012/06/engendering-change-gender-advocacy-in-open-source>.
- Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. 2001. *Critical Race Theory*. New York: New York University Press.
- Douglas, Susan. 1987. *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899–1922*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Dunbar-Hester, Christina. 2008. "Geeks, Meta-Geeks, and Gender Trouble: Activism, Identity, and Low-Power FM Radio." *Social Studies of Science* 38: 201–32.
- . 2010. "Beyond 'Dudecore'? Challenging Gendered and 'Raced' Technologies through Media Activism." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 54: 121–35.
- Eglash, Ron. 2002. "Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters." *Social Text* 71: 49–64.
- Ensmenger, Nathan. 2010. *The Computer Boys Take Over*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Eubanks, Virginia. 2007. "Trapped in the Digital Divide: The Distributive Paradigm in Community Informatics." *Journal of Community Informatics* 3(7).
- Faulkner, Wendy. 2004. "Strategies of Inclusion: Gender and the Information Society." Final Report (Public Version), SIGIS IST-2000–26329. University of Edinburgh.
- Fouché, Rayvon. 2006. "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud: African Americans, Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological Creativity." *American Quarterly* 58: 639–61.
- Freeman, Carla. 2000. *High Tech and High Heels in the Global Economy: Women, Work, and Pink-Collar Identities in the Caribbean*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gregg, Melissa, and Carl DiSalvo. 2013. "The Trouble with White Hats." *New Inquiry*, November 21. Online: <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-trouble-with-white-hats/>.
- Haring, Kristen. 2006. *Ham Radio's Technical Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kelty, Christopher. 2008. *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Kendall, Lori. 2002. *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Light, Jennifer. 1999. "When Computers Were Women." *Technology & Culture* 40: 455–83.

- Margolis, Jane, and Allan Fisher. 2003. *Unlocking the Clubhouse: Women in Computing*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Mellström, Ulf. 2009. "The Intersection of Gender, Race and Cultural Boundaries, or Why Is Computer Science in Malaysia Dominated by Women?" *Social Studies of Science* (39): 885–907.
- Misa, Thomas, ed. 2010. *Recoding Gender: Why Women Are Leaving Computing*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-IEEE History Center.
- Newitz, Annalee, and Charles Anders, eds. 2006. *She's Such a Geek: Women Write about Science, Technology and Other Nerdy Stuff*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.
- Postigo, Hector. 2003. "From Pong to Planet Quake: Post-industrial Transitions from Leisure to Work." *Information, Communication & Society* 6: 593–607.
- Pullin, Graham. 2009. *Design Meets Disability*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Rabinbach, Anson. 1992. *The Human Motor*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Rosenzweig, Roy. 1998. "Wizards, Bureaucrats, Warriors, and Hackers: Writing the History of the Internet." *American Historical Review* 103: 1530–52.
- Söderberg, Johan. 2008. *Hacking Capitalism*. New York: Routledge.
- Streeter, Thomas. 2011. *The Net Effect*. New York: New York University Press.
- Tocci, Jason. 2009. "Geek Cultures: Media and Identity in the Digital Age." PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania.
- Turner, Fred. 2006. *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2009. "Burning Man at Google: A Cultural Infrastructure for New Media Production?" *New Media & Society* 11: 73–94.
- Wyatt, Sally. 2008. "Challenging the Digital Imperative." Inaugural lecture presented upon the acceptance of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) Extraordinary Chair in Digital Cultures in Development at Maastricht University, March 28. Online: <http://www.virtualknowledgestudio.nl/staff/sally-wyatt/inaugural-lecture-28032008.pdf>.