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# Geek Cultures: Media and Identity in the Digital Age

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# Geek Cultures: Media and Identity in the Digital Age

## **Abstract**

This study explores the cultural and technological developments behind the transition of labels like 'geek' and 'nerd' from schoolyard insults to sincere terms identity. Though such terms maintain negative connotations to some extent, recent years have seen a growing understanding that "geek is chic" as computers become essential to daily life and business, retailers hawk nerd apparel, and Hollywood makes billions on sci-fi, hobbits, and superheroes. *Geek Cultures* identifies the experiences, concepts, and symbols around which people construct this personal and collective identity.

This ethnographic study considers geek culture through multiple sites and through multiple methods, including participant observation at conventions and local events promoted as "geeky" or "nerdy"; interviews with fans, gamers, techies, and self-proclaimed outcasts; textual analysis of products produced by and for geeks; and analysis and interaction online through blogs, forums, and email. The findings are organized around four common, sometimes overlapping images and stereotypes: the geek as misfit, genius, fan, and chic.

Overall, this project finds that these terms represent a category of identity that predates the recent emergence of "geek chic," and may be more productively understood as interacting with, rather than stemming from, dimensions of identity such as gender and race. The economic import of the internet and the financial successes of high-profile geeks have popularized the idea that nerdy skills can be parlayed into riches and romance, but the real power of communication technologies has been in augmenting the reach and persistent availability of those things that encourage a sense of belonging: socially insulated "safe spaces" to engage in (potentially embarrassing) activities; opportunities to remotely coordinate creative projects and social gatherings; and faster and more widespread circulation of symbols - from nerdcore hip-hop to geek-sponsored charities - confirming the existence of a whole network of individuals with shared values. The emergence of geek culture represents not a sudden fad, but a newly visible dimension of identity that demonstrates how dispersed cultures can be constructed through the integration of media use and social enculturation in everyday life.

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GEEK CULTURES:  
MEDIA AND IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Jason Tocci

A DISSERTATION

In

Communication

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Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of the Doctor of Philosophy

2009



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## ABSTRACT

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MEDIA AND IDENTITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Jason Tocci

Paul Messaris

This study explores the cultural and technological developments behind the transition of labels like ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ from schoolyard insults to sincere terms of identity. Though such terms maintain negative connotations to some extent, recent years have seen a growing understanding that “geek is chic” as computers become essential to daily life and business, retailers hawk nerd apparel, and Hollywood makes billions on sci-fi, hobbits, and superheroes. *Geek Cultures* identifies the experiences, concepts, and symbols around which people construct this personal and collective identity.

This ethnographic study considers geek culture through multiple sites and through multiple methods, including participant observation at conventions and local events promoted as “geeky” or “nerdy”; interviews with fans, gamers, techies, and self-proclaimed outcasts; textual analysis of products produced by and for geeks; and analysis and interaction online through blogs, forums, and email. The findings are organized around four common, sometimes overlapping images and stereotypes: the geek as misfit, genius, fan, and chic.

Overall, this project finds that these terms represent a category of identity that predates the recent emergence of “geek chic,” and may be more productively understood as interacting with, rather than stemming from, dimensions of identity such as gender and race. The economic import of the internet and the financial successes of high-profile geeks have popularized the idea that nerdy skills can be parlayed into riches and romance, but the real power of communication technologies has been in augmenting the reach and persistent availability of those things that encourage a sense of belonging: socially insulated “safe spaces” to engage in (potentially embarrassing) activities; opportunities to remotely coordinate creative projects and social gatherings; and faster and more widespread circulation of symbols – from nerdcore hip-hop to geek-sponsored charities – confirming the existence of a whole network of individuals with shared values. The emergence of geek culture represents not a sudden fad, but a newly visible dimension of identity that demonstrates how dispersed cultures can be constructed through the integration of media use and social enculturation in everyday life.



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## INTRODUCTION

At the annual “Pitch Your Game Idea” panel, convention attendees line up, offer a quick premise for a video game, and, in most cases, get laughed back to their seats. The pros invited to serve as judges offer some curt words of criticism, and a few clever ideas and audience favorites make it to the elimination round. The convention program specifies that this event is for “speculation only,” and the winners walk away with cheap toys.

A twenty-something guy advances to the front of the line, approaches the microphone, and offers his pitch. “It’s a jock simulator,” he explains. “It would be marketed as the best sports game ever.” But in fact, he says, it would be secretly designed to help high school athletes build their skills at bagging groceries for their future careers. The audience claps and cheers in approval, guaranteeing him a spot in the next round. Given the opportunity to expand upon his pitch, he explains that the first four minutes of the game represent each year of high school; then, players begin the grocery-bagging simulator, and finally witness “the cute chicks they used to date go off to date those they made fun of.”

Jokes like this go over pretty well at the Penny Arcade Expo, a fan-oriented game convention hosted by the creators of a popular online comic strip. Jerry Holkins, one of the pair of gamers behind Penny Arcade, has referred to PAX as a celebration of “the social pariah outcast aesthetic,” with musical acts “specifically relevant to the geek experience” (Totilo, 2005). According to Robert Khoo, Penny Arcade’s business manager, the comic boasts about 4 million regular readers, and PAX 2008 drew over 30,000 attendees. Video and computer games are not the only media represented at the

expo: A large room offers space to play various forms of tabletop games, such as hobbyist-market board games like *Settlers of Catan*, collectible card games like *Magic: The Gathering*, and role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, among others. The attendees' t-shirts indicate a variety of personal and professional interests less officially represented at the con, such as web development and science-fiction movies. The attendees are quite aware that their hobbies mark them as losers in the eyes of some, that terms like 'geek' and 'nerd' have long been associated with juvenility and braininess alike. It has only been in recent years, however, that 'geek' has been paired with 'chic.'

Penny Arcade Inc. is just one of several companies riding – and contributing to – the wave of geek culture. Internet-based<sup>1</sup> companies such as ThinkGeek, J!NX, and Nerdy Shirts design and distribute apparel and other merchandise related to computer programming, video games, superheroes, Japanese culture, caffeine, and other nerdy staples. *Wired*, which now hosts a weblog and podcast for “GeekDads,” has been joined by a number of other publications celebrating the nerd lifestyle, including magazines (*Make*, *Geek Monthly*, *Amusement*) and books (*Geek Chic*, *She's Such a Geek!*, *The Geek's Guide to World Domination*). As the quote by Penny Arcade co-creator Jerry Holkins indicates, geeks also have their own music: “nerdcore hip-hop” artists busting rhymes about code and supporting characters from *Star Wars*; “Wizard rock” bands who sing about Harry Potter; cover bands who play old Nintendo songs on electric guitars, or popular rock songs using old Nintendo sound chips.

The geeks are not the only ones who have noticed that it's hip to be square. “For the ectomorphs among us, it's a great time to be alive,” writes *Time's* Lev Grossman, who also leads the magazine's Nerd World blog. “There are women, it is said, who find

The O.C.'s Seth Cohen sexy, and men who feel the same way about bespectacled SNLer Tina Fey, to say nothing of emerging Harry Potter hottie Emma Watson. And Orlando Bloom – hello? Dude's an elf?" (L. Grossman, 2005). *InStyle* magazine has declared that geek is "in" (Nordberg, 2004, p. 346), and "geek chic" seems to have been an acceptable stylistic in mainstream fashion since the '90s (Dennis, 2007; Feineman, 2005; geek chic," 2003; Wloszczyna & Oldenburg, 2003, October 22). The reality TV show *Beauty and the Geek* taught audiences that geeky guys could get along with beautiful girls, though still suggesting that a new wardrobe and a makeover couldn't hurt. Spike TV's 2007 Guys' Choice Awards included a category for "Coolest Geek" alongside more traditional categories, such as "Most Unstoppable Jock," "Biggest Ass Kicker," and "Cockiest Crew" ("Spike TV," 2007). Taking stock of the situation, *New York Times* op-ed columnist David Brooks (2008) concludes, "For as it is written, the last shall be first and the geek shall inherit the earth."

By the same token, geeks have still not shed all their negative stereotypes. Reporting on research conducted by the SciFi channel suggesting that the U.K.'s 6.9 million self-identified geeks could be valuable to marketers, *Marketing Week's* "Diary" reports: "the survey shows that '87 per cent of geeks say that friends come to them for their opinions'. [sic] The Diary has checked and rechecked, and that is not a misprint. 'Friends' is indeed used in the plural" ("Nerds won't fail," 2005, p. 30).

Nearly seven percent of the U.K.'s population self-identifies as geeks. Geeks are getting their own clothing brands, magazines, reality shows. They are congratulating themselves for stealing the jocks' girlfriends, but they are still mocked as friendless

losers. Why should geeks be considered ‘chic’ now, if we can even say that they are at all?

The emergence of ‘geek chic’ represents a sort of culmination (or, according to some, perhaps the undoing) of a process that has been years in the making: the development of “geek culture” as a collective identity. This concept of the geek – the tech-savvy, pop-culture-obsessed, socially-awkward misfit and underdog – emerges during a confluence of developments in consumer capitalism and communication in American culture over the course of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Geek identity today is largely a product of rigid status hierarchies in schools, a collective affinity for entertainment widely dismissed as juvenile, and a new network of digital communication that makes it easier than ever before to recognize a sense of commonality with other geeks.

This dissertation explores how geek identity is constructed today, in light of such developments. I will discuss the experiences of geeks themselves from my own participant observation, interviews, textual analysis, and virtual community involvement. I will talk about how our broader cultural notions of ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ reflect certain ways in which those who would claim such terms now understand themselves. I will illustrate how the apparent coolness of the geek represents new tensions between the long-awaited desire to proclaim the “revenge of the nerds” and the unwillingness to abandon the authenticity marked by alienation. By tracing the circulation of the concept of the geek through everyday experience, popular culture, and, most of all, the symbols and discourses among the geeks themselves, I aim to illustrate that while anybody can be a nerd, geek cultures represent a new way of understanding how identity may be constructed through media in the wake of the digital revolution.

## Doing a Geek Ethnography

“*Wired*’s Geekster Handbook, A Field Guide to the Nerd Underground”

(Brownfield, 2008) appeared in the magazine and on its website, and was subsequently linked to and quoted by a number of other blogs. It features a photo of six types of geeks – fanboy, music geek, gamer, gadget guy, hacker, and otaku – with the “disposition,” “beliefs,” and “turn-ons” of each (Figure 1). It offers a tongue-in-cheek look at *Wired*’s own staff and audience, depicting the variety of interests represented in the magazine and geek culture more broadly.





**Figure 1.** From Wired's Geekster Handbook: "1. The Fanboy," "2. The Music Geek," "3. The Gamer," "4. The Gadget Guy," "5. The Hacker," "6. The Otaku." Photo by James Chiang.

The types featured in the article, however, aren't really mutually exclusive. When gadget blogs Gizmodo (Dugdale, 2008) and Geeksugar (geeksugar, 2008) linked to the article, for example, they polled their readers to find out where they fit in this typology. Gadget enthusiasts ranked understandably high, considering the sites' main focus, a comparable number of visitors described themselves as a "combination." On Geeksugar,

one visitor notes, “Like everybody else here, I seem to be a geek mutt.” Some point out missing categories that they also belong to, such as “science geeks” and “craft geeks.” It is, of course, an unscientific polling strategy, but it does offer a glimpse into how geeks understand their own interests as somehow related and overlapping. It also sorely complicates any effort to define geeks or nerds as particularly characterized by any one fannish, technical, or subcultural pursuit.

Geek cultures potentially encompass a staggering number of communities of enthusiasts, experts, and eccentrics. Even considering a single genre, such as science-fiction fans, we can identify a multitude of fan perspectives with differing interests and practices. We could discuss *Star Trek* fans who dress up at conventions in costume; *Serenity* fans who took it upon themselves to promote the DVD release of the movie; *Battlestar Galactica* fans who resent the recent Sci-Fi Channel “re-imagining” of the series, versus *Battlestar Galactica* fans who only watch the new series; and so on. And this, of course, is before we even consider other sorts of geekiness: band geeks, computer nerds, comics fangirls, hardcore gamers, and so on. In other words, geek culture is probably too big for any one researcher to address completely, but I still believe that it needs to be approached on its own terms, studied as a phenomenon in its own right to the extent that this is possible, rather than approached with *a priori* limitations in what it should include.

There is no single definition for what a ‘geek’ is. There is no one, right answer to the most common question I get asked: “What’s the difference between a geek and a nerd?” The technically accurate, appropriately academic, and altogether unsatisfying way of explaining this is by way of Wittgenstein (1998), suggesting that such terms function

like the word ‘game’: They have multiple uses which, at best, bear a “family resemblance” to one another (Wittgenstein, 1998). Another way of looking at this is that, like any other terms of collective cultural identity, these words are heavily contested. People get called these words against their will (usually as children), apply these words to themselves with pride (usually in adolescence or adulthood), and dispute who gets to use these terms at all (frequently, but not exclusively, by arguing on the internet). Therefore, rather than prioritizing one definition of ‘geek,’ this dissertation is structured to reflect four of the most contemporarily relevant ways in which this concept is constructed, often in competing and overlapping ways.

Chapter 1 reviews how a variety of areas of academic research have dealt with (or pointedly avoided) the concepts of ‘geek’ and ‘nerd.’ Of particular interest are studies related to education, computer cultures, and entertainment fans. Here, I argue that a more holistic concept of ‘geek’ needs to be adopted in order to understand the more widespread visibility of (and claims of belonging to) geek cultures. I attempt to outline a way of understanding how geek cultures emerge from a particular moment in the history of consumer culture and communication media.

Chapter 2 explains the methodological processes behind my geek ethnography. Over the course of multiple years, and spread between multiple sites both online and in physical spaces, I sought geekdom wherever I could find it. My approach has been predicated upon the notion that geek culture is located in no one single place, and that the geek experience is largely mediated; I, as the researcher, had to travel and perform likewise.

Chapter 3, “The Geek as Misfit,” is the first of four chapters reporting on my findings. Here I focus on the stereotypes and realities of social awkwardness and ostracism among geeks. Kids get excluded and harassed for any number of reasons, pointed and arbitrary, but whatever the cause, being a nerd is a still pejorative term in schools. As young geeks turn to computers, comics, and other ostensibly solitary pursuits to occupy themselves in their exclusion, they build upon unpopular interests that will come to serve as a point of commonality with other nerds over time. And the sense of awkwardness and marginalization itself – whether remembered from the past or still experienced in the present – comes to be regarded as a badge of pride, or a hurdle yet to be overcome.

Chapter 4, “The Geek as Genius,” discusses the idea that geeks are especially intelligent and technically proficient. Despite the common wisdom that Bill Gates made it cool to be a geek, the techies and geniuses often aren’t in it for the money. Anti-authoritarian ideals and the problem-solving prowess of the geeky mind, represented by the internet and the pursuit of entertainment as if it were work, are much more salient structuring discourses among the nerds themselves. Nevertheless, broader notions of cultural relevance still permeate geek notions of value, as evident in which kinds of enthusiasm get to count as “worthwhile.”

Chapter 5, “The Geek as Fan,” considers how the juvenile associations and cultural stigmas associated with stereotypically geeky entertainment media inform the ways that geeks understand their relationship to one another and to mainstream culture more generally. Popular entertainment and nostalgic juvenilia come to define a shared understanding of geek experience, centered around passions, pleasures, and the right to

be playful even as an adult. For many, this is a kind of geekiness that needs to be hidden; for some, it is a geekiness that needs to be shared.

Chapter 6, “The Geek as Chic,” explores the relatively recent notion that it isn’t just okay to be a geek, but actually kind of cool. Geeks are thought to represent their own hip subculture of sorts, with their own niche markets, their own sense of style, their own music. In this understanding, being a geek means not just being a misfit, or a genius, or a fan, but potentially any or all of these, blended together in a movement facing co-optation, or a market segment finally earning assimilation, depending on whom you ask.

Ultimately, this demonstrates the real role of media in contributing to a sense of geek culture. While the internet has played a part in making geeks seem a bit more normal, it’s what geeks *do* with media that has helped them to establish a sense of collective identity, commonly shared values, and discourses of authenticity. Through fanzines, tech hobbyist clubs, and conventions, quirky enthusiasts have been building up a sense of shared culture for decades, potentially beginning even long before we had a word for it at all. Now, however, the internet offers a sort of central hub through which the symbols of geek culture are circulated and distributed, both for materials designed stay online and also for objects and events destined for the physical world. The material culture of geekdom is now spread more widely, more quickly, more inexpensively than ever before. And no less important is the internet’s ability to remain sufficiently insulated from “outsiders,” while still nominally accessible to those who want to go looking for them – so long as they have a certain degree of technical literacy. Through this, geeks have developed a sense of cultural cohesion that was previously difficult to identify as

anything other than a shared sense of “otherness” and a hunch that certain entertainment markets and professional fields seemed to overlap quite a bit.

By approaching this study as an ethnography that considers geekdom online and off, in private and in public, I hope to encourage the notion that it is time to move past questions of whether “culture” or “community” can exist online or whether geek identity must be rooted in the forms of identity we recognize more readily. Rather, it is time to address what collective identities and communities look like in a world that allows cultures to form in spaces we weren’t sure were spaces at all.

#### Being a Nerd Ethnographer

One of the most common questions I get (after the one about the “geek versus nerd” distinction, of course) is whether I’m a geek myself. After all, it’s customary in contemporary ethnography to disclose one’s own involvement with the objects of study, and I am happy to do so – but my native status may be questionable depending on what we mean by the term, whose version of authenticity we subscribe to, or the mood you catch me in.

When chatting with people encountered in comic book stores, video game panels at academic conferences, and strangers at movie openings, I will admit that I am a huge nerd. When asked whether I am a geek by acquaintances or colleagues who are not working on geeky things themselves, however, I am likely to offer awkward or cryptic answers – at my most definitive, “Sure,” with a dismissive shrug. If there is one thing I have learned from talking to both self-identified geeks and those who actively refuse the

“geek” label, it is that the term means different things to different people. I am unwilling to commit myself to someone else’s definition before knowing what it is.

Therefore, it is somewhat tricky to identify myself as a “native” member of a population that has no clear boundaries or membership criteria. I may not be a computer geek by the standards of someone who tinkers with open source operating systems, but I may be a computer geek in the eyes of those who have never installed their own RAM, programmed in Java, or worked in tech support. When I tell my colleagues that I am a geek, they sometimes reassure me that I am not, as if I’m afraid of being seen as such. Had I been living in the U.K and polled by the aforementioned SciFi survey, however, I would have been among those aforementioned 6.9 million. Here are some points that may help explain why:

I started playing video games at age four, when my neurologist prescribed an Atari 2600 to help repair the temporary brain damage done to my fine motor skills from spinal meningitis. (I think it worked.) I grew up the only comic book reader and avid science-fiction fan in a family of sports fans and car enthusiasts. I got bullied in elementary school, and got called ‘geek,’ ‘nerd,’ and ‘weirdo’ well before I was comfortable with the terms. I befriended other nerds by middle school, and spent the next several years playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, attending the MIT Anime Club while still in high school, editing a fantasy and science-fiction e-zine at the dawn of the web, and studying computer programming and ancient mythologies in college. Somewhere along the way, I quit playing with action figures, deciding it might hurt my chances of getting a girlfriend. The “Nerd, Geek, or Dork?” test on OkCupid.com says that I am a “Pure Nerd,” more characterized by general academic curiosity than by obsession with pop-

culture (geekiness) or by social ineptitude (dorkiness). It once said that I was a “Modern, Cool Nerd,” but that was sometime before I started working on a dissertation about geeks and nerds. That said, I can tell you the number of the trash compactor from *Star Wars* off the top of my head (3263827), the comic book in which Wolverine first appeared (*The Incredible Hulk* #180), or the code to start the original Nintendo *Contra* with 30 lives (it’s long, so I’ll spare you that one).

The way I understand myself in this way has changed over the years. As a teenager, I once corrected my parents when they called me a nerd, pointing out that I was a *geek*; the crucial difference, I explained, was that “geeks get dates.” Nowadays, I tend to use the terms interchangeably, but I use ‘nerd’ more frequently to describe myself in casual conversation, preferring the term that would’ve been more unassuming where I grew up. I may be enough of a “stealth nerd” to fool my colleagues, but I’d rather not forget my roots.

I don’t tell these things to most people I meet. I have wondered whether I was *not a geek* while I am around them, and questioned whether that means I am not really legitimate native in this native ethnography after all. I have learned, however, that this is more common among geeks than I had realized. Many geeks, like many ethnographers, recognize the value of simultaneously possessing several identities (J. L. Jackson, Jr., 2004; Narayan, 1993). This may be especially relevant in my ethnography, in which I am a researcher and several different kinds of geek, with varying levels of “geek cred”: a comics aficionado, experienced video game player, beginning typography nut, and so on.

By the same token, I cannot claim to completely feel the same political imperative that some native anthropologists have felt, that my project is ultimately about working to



combat the oppression of the native group (D. Jones, 1970). This may come as a surprise to some of my interviewees, who have at times thanked me for doing this work on behalf of geeks everywhere. But the truth is this: I believe geek identity can serve people positively as individuals and in communities, acting as a way to correct crippling injuries to self esteem, questioning norms for “appropriate” behavior in public spaces, and advocating for greater inclusiveness in historically exclusive fields and communities. Geek cultures do these things sometimes, and sometimes they do just the opposite: encouraging people to turn inward with their own bitterness, to retreat from public spaces, to actively exclude and harass those imagined to be enemies. I would rather see more of the former set of behaviors than of the latter, but I don’t mean to emphasize either over the other in relating what I have observed. Nevertheless, given the intellectual bent of those geeks I have spoken with at length, I think I have not betrayed the most sacred of geek ideals by prioritizing open-minded observation and analysis over any specific political agenda.

Ultimately, to those who think that ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ are just insults, I hope to illustrate that this is only the beginning of the story, that these are terms central to many people’s lives today. On the other side of the spectrum, to those who think that ‘geek’ is now ‘chic,’ I hope to demonstrate that geek cultures have only been partially rescued, and to point out how much geeks still hide and deride about their own – our own – cultures. And for those of us who study the way identity is constructed today, I hope to demonstrate that whatever Bill Gates did for the geek image, it’s the symbols we exchange both online and off – through comics, games, movies, blogs, nerdcore hip-hop,

and more – that have spread awareness of a shared sense of geekdom that was already in the making, though often out of sight.

#### Notes for Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Generally, this dissertation purposely uses a lowercase “i” in spelling “internet.” Following Turow and Kavanaugh’s (2003) lead in *The Wired Homestead*, I am opting to eschew the still widespread stylistic convention in this matter. Some of the exacting nerds I’ve interviewed may still demand the uppercase I for historical precision, but the ubiquity of the online world in geeks’ lives compels me to describe it more like an open environment than a branded product. See Schwartz (2002) for further information.

<sup>2</sup> David Anderegg (2007) has offered anecdotal evidence from a colleague suggesting that geeks are a uniquely American concept. We can see additional evidence in how the geek is constructed in some European nations: In France, the documentary *Suck My Geek!* betrays its influence in its English title; in Spain, the regional equivalent of geeks coordinated the establishment of Geek/Nerd Pride Day (*El Día del Orgullo Friki*) over the internet, now celebrated annually on the anniversary of the release of an American film, *Star Wars*. As I describe in Chapter 2, I have actually done some research on geek concepts abroad, including informal talk and limited participant observation in Lisbon, Paris, and Madrid. I determined it was beyond the scope of this dissertation to get into greater detail here, however, particularly as this argument may be incomplete without consideration of the construction of the ‘otaku’ in Japan.

## CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

Where did ‘geek culture’ come from? We have a popular understanding of ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ as schoolyard taunts, but little sense of how this connects with how people use this term as adults, if at all. Among adults, ‘geek’ is still often presumed to be little more than an insult or a bit of gentle self-deprecation, but when it does come up in research, it may be conceptualized as a product of gender, race, class, or the individual “relationship” with the computer itself.

I’d like to suggest understanding ‘geek’ in another way: as an term of identity in its own right, which implies membership in an entire geek culture. While there is value in conceptualizing geekiness as a denigrated or liminal form of masculinity or of whiteness (Bucholtz, 2001; Kendall, 2000), we should also understand it as a collective identity springing from a complex set of historical, cultural, and technological conditions which built up over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Geek identity intercepts and interacts with race/ethnicity and gender/sexuality in important ways, but it has become too broadly claimed, too deeply redefined, to discuss without drawing in additional discourses. Geek cultures challenge us to consider how we approach studies of collective identity as well as the scope of our investigations of the social uses of media.

Despite that millions of contemporary adults self-identify as geeks, the literature relating to geek identity is relatively sparse and disjointed. Studies of children and adolescents in school often deal most directly with the labeling of ‘geeks’ and ‘nerds,’ though this literature offers little insight into media use or the experiences of adults. Research on the use and perceptions of personal computers helps to illustrate the (sometimes) changing image of geeks and nerds in contemporary culture, but tends to

gloss over other traditionally nerdy media interests and ideals that may be central to many geeks' identities. Fan studies, meanwhile, frequently ignore or briefly explain away the overlap between tech enthusiasts and media enthusiasts, and often narrowly focus on not widely representative fan practices even in discussing stereotypically geeky media fandom. Nevertheless, taking stock of these diverse perspectives lays the groundwork for tying these concepts together, concluding with an examination on how 'geekiness' may be conceptualized more holistically as a dimension of collective identity. Before proceeding further, however, it may be useful to address the question of where terms like 'geek' and 'nerd' come from to begin with, as these definitions offer some insight into their present trajectories.

#### Origins and Basic Definitions

'Geek' and 'nerd' are terms with highly contested meanings that have shifted dramatically over time. Unfortunately, there is no authoritative history of 'geekdom,' or even of most of its component subcultures and stereotypes. As such, attempting to explain how we conceptualize geeks and nerds today requires some conjecture and reliance on oral and nonacademic history.

Before 'geek' or 'nerd' had anything to do with media or technology interests, these terms were associated with negative personality traits. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* ("geek," 2003), the word 'geek' appeared in print in its present form as far back as 1876, in F.K. Robinson's *A Glossary of Words Used in the Neighborhood of Whitby*. "Geek" was listed alongside "Gawk," "Gowk," and "Gowky" to refer to "a fool; a person uncultivated; a dupe." Its etymology may trace as far back as 16<sup>th</sup> century

Britain, to the word 'geck' or 'gecke' (sometimes apparently incorrectly transcribed as 'geeke'); as used in one source from 1515, "He is a foole, a sotte, and a geke also." By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term referred to circus performers known for biting the heads off live animals, as in a 1919 billboard advertising a position for a "Snake charmer or geek man." By the 1950s, 'geek' picked up connotations for being "an overly diligent, unsociable student" or "obsessively devoted to a certain pursuit," comparable to 'nerd.'

'Nerd' appears to have been coined at about the same time that 'geek' was taking on meanings associated with studiousness ("nerd," 2003). Its origin is disputed, but it seems to have first appeared in its current spelling in Dr. Seuss's 1950 book *If I Ran the Zoo*, referring to "a small, unkempt, humanoid creature with a large head and a comically disapproving expression." The term may have already been part of spoken language, however. As early October of 1951, *Newsweek* acknowledged, "In Detroit, someone who once would be called a drip or a square is now, regrettably, a nerd." The 1980s saw more specifically science- and tech-oriented uses of the terms in print, though again, it is possible that these usages were common in spoken English earlier.

Other suggested origins for these words crop up from time to time, but tend not to be popularly regarded as reputable. In my own interviews and on websites such as Wikipedia, some have suggested that 'geek' comes from a military acronym referring to general electrical engineering expertise (G.E.E.K.), and that 'nerd' comes from pronouncing 'drunk' backward ('knurd'), referring to nerds' supposed unwillingness to relax and have fun. As Wikipedia notes, however, such definitions are likely being offered retroactively to fit their evolving meanings. In their pejorative sense, 'geek' and 'nerd' have also often been used as synonyms or are considered closely related to number

of other terms used to refer to bookish or unsocial individuals, including ‘drip,’ ‘square,’ ‘dweeb,’ ‘bookworm,’ and ‘wallflower,’ though these have largely fallen out of common parlance, and tend not to have been “reclaimed” by geeks today.

Though there’s nothing in the standard dictionary definitions or etymologies about these terms to suggest racial, ethnic, or gendered connotations, ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ are frequently understood to be coded as male (Kendall, 1999c; Turkle, 1995), white (Bucholtz, 2001; Eglash, 2002; Kendall, forthcoming), Jewish (potentially also as ‘nebbish’; see Baskind, 2007; Kendall, 1999b), and/or of Asian descent (Eglash, 2002; Kibria, 1999; Min & Kim, 2000; Pyke & Dang, 2003). As we’ll see in the following review of research literature, these connotations can be a significant part of how geek/nerd stereotypes are understood.

With so many connotations connected to these words, it may be unsurprising that the most frequent question I am asked is about what the difference is between a geek and a nerd. The short answer, of course, is that it depends whom you ask. Lori Kendall notes that ‘geek’ seems less derisive to many people than ‘nerd,’ though also concedes that some feel that it’s the other way around (Kendall, 1999b, p. 264). Reviewing some of the more nit-picky definitions and distinctions surrounding these terms through Wikipedia, Lars Konzack suggests that the difference is “not that interesting – unless of course you are a part of these ongoing murky debates about geeks vs. nerds” (Konzack, 2006, p. 2). He thus chooses to use the words interchangeably, like many other writers and many self-identified geeks and nerds.

I tend to use the terms interchangeably myself, partly for stylistic reasons (so as to avoid using ‘geek’ 50 times in one paragraph), but also as a way of reminding us that

these terms have no essential definitions.<sup>1</sup> As will come up again more than once in this dissertation, the distinctions that people make between these terms are part of the process of defining what it means to be a geek or nerd for themselves, often serving to compartmentalize the stereotypes people want to claim from those they would rather do without. This is such a common debate that some have been inspired to expound upon why the debate itself is pointless and divisive (Z., 2009). And that, of course, raises another question: Since when was there a 'geek culture' to be divided at all?

It isn't clear when these terms began to be used not just in the context of insults, but as terms of pride and endearment, or even of collective identity. As I'll review here, some estimate the origins of geek culture by suggesting various plausible predecessors throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, well before terms like 'geek' and 'nerd' took on their present usages. Which groups represent the forebears of geek culture depends largely on how one defines the geek today. Did geek culture stem from science-fiction fan communities? From amateur technology enthusiasts? My own study is not a history of the geek, but I posit that the emergence of 'geek' as a collective identity stems from these developments and more throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including not just the histories of these groups, but even the effects of consumer capitalism on students' social cultures in American schools.

### Schools and Student Cultures

Research on education and the social structure of schools tends not to deal as frequently with the experiences of adult geeks and nerds, though it provides the best clue as to how most people are likely to initially encounter these concepts. The terms 'geek' and 'nerd' typically appear in this literature among other pejorative terms, such as 'wimp'

and 'sissy,' mentioned in passing as part of a broader discourse on bullying and peer abuse that began gaining traction in the US and Europe in the 1980s and 1990s (Olweus, 1995). Some more in-depth considerations of geek labels and identity, however, have suggested that a specific attitude of "nerd disdain" pervades student culture. As those who are labeled geeks get older and transition to a more fragmented social environment, some of these students even accept the nerd label for themselves and wear it as the banner for a local crowd or subculture.

### *Characteristics of Peer Abuse Victims*

Early peer harassment literature focused on what identifiable characteristics bullies might have in common, though the idea that victims might have common characteristics led academics to propose two categories of victim: passive (or submissive) victims and provocative victims, with the former being the more common category by far (Bernstein & Watson, 1997; Bishop, Bishop, Gelbwasser, Green, & Zuckerman, 2003; Olweus, 1993c). Nearly all students face some degree of harassment, though surveys illustrate how common repeated harassment is for both boys and girls:

In surveys in 1998/1999, 13.1% of boys and 6.7% of girls were "teased, insulted, or made fun of to my face" "almost every day." Another 19.5% of boys and 13.3% of girls were insulted to their face "about once a week." In addition, 16% of boys and 12.7% of girls indicated that "almost every day" they were "insulted or made fun of behind your back." If these rates of peer harassment in EEA schools represent the nation, 2.3 million secondary school students were directly insulted just about every day they came to school that year. Another 3.9 million students had about a one in five chance of being insulted to their face on any given day. Physical confrontations are less common. Almost 4% of students (an estimated 890,000 students) report being "pushed, tripped, or hurt by other students" almost every day. Another 4.3% report it happens about once a week. (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 237)



Victims' unwillingness to retaliate, and even apparent toleration of harassment in the hope of attention or acceptance, has been recognized as the most important factor in most peer abuse (Bernstein & Watson, 1997). Olweus explains:

the typical victims are more anxious and insecure than students in general. They are often cautious, sensitive, and quiet. Victims suffer from low self-esteem; they have a negative view of themselves and their situation. If they are boys, they are likely to be physically weaker than boys in general. (Olweus, 1993c, p. 197)

It is difficult to say whether the self-esteem and insecurity issues of victims resulted from bullying or were preexisting characteristics, but in either case, exhibiting these personality traits does "exacerbate the problem" (Bernstein & Watson, 1997). Moreover, the effects of victimization can be long-lasting (Bishop et al., 2003). Olweus (1993b, 1993c), for instance, found that more victimized children were more likely to be depressed and have lower self-esteem as adults, even after no longer being victimized and no longer displaying the typical personality and physical characteristics associated with victims. As we will see in later chapters, this is potentially crucial to understanding how many come to identify as geeks and nerds into adulthood.

Contrary to the popular stereotype of the physically unattractive child as bullying victim – glasses-wearing, acne-ridden, poorly dressed – Olweus (1978) has also reported that most physical characteristics tend not to be statistically significantly related to peer abuse. Those physical characteristics that are relevant are size, in that smaller children, especially boys, are likely targets, and gender, in that boys are more likely to face physical bullying, though both sexes are equally likely to face indirect bullying such as social group exclusion (Olweus, 1978, 1993a). Nevertheless, participant observation research and students' own reports suggest otherwise, noting that attractiveness, race, and style of dress can also influence who gets picked on (Ambert, 1994; Chin & Phillips,

2005). Even if such factors are not the main causes of victimization, victims may still come to develop insecurities about what they believe to be the cause, blaming their appearance or other characteristics for their persecution.

### *Describing Geek/Nerd Students*

Most literature on peer abuse refers to physical and emotional bullying in broad terms, though certain characteristics associated with the ‘nerd’ stereotype – physical weakness, passive nature – are still plain. Some research offers a more detailed understanding of geek/nerd labels, considering other factors commonly associated with the nerd image, such as studiousness and unusual interests. As this literature indicates, students first encounter the ‘nerd’ and ‘geek’ labels in elementary school; the terms continue to carry negative connotations into middle school, though potentially begin to take on positive meanings in high school.

In one longitudinal, ethnographic study of 90 fifth, sixth, and seventh grade students, Tiffani Chin and Meredith Phillips (2005) explore how adolescents cultivate an attitude of “nerd disdain.” This study somewhat contradicts common beliefs that students establish an “oppositional culture” that devalues learning so as to maintain popularity and, for some students, ethnic authenticity. Rather, Chin and Phillips find that students generally valued good grades and – when they knew the material well enough – even class participation, regardless of ethnic background. Students’ oppositional culture denigrated not academic success, but openly appearing to *try* to get good grades. Student social norms involved “effort avoidance techniques” and “authority thwarting behavior,” and those students who did not practice such behaviors were derided as nerds and geeks.

One interviewer engaged a sixth grader in a “rather nuanced debate about just what constitutes a nerd”:

Interviewer: So, what is it that makes a nerd? I mean, do you think that someone who reads a lot...?

Mark: Who reads a lot, who’s really into school... I dunno, who just... they’re... *in* with school and they’re smart, like... you know, they’re *completely* smart.

I: I see. So like... would raising your hands make somebody a nerd?

M: NO, anybody can raise their hand.

I: I see, what about getting good grades, does that make a nerd?

M: No. Like Mara’s not a nerd, right? Yea.

I: But why is that? Why wouldn’t Mara be a nerd?

M: Because she doesn’t... ‘cuz she’s not like a nerd you know, she’s not... she doesn’t dress like a nerd, she’s not a nerd, she’s not geeky. Like she knows... she knows stuff. But she’s not... like she’s not like REALLY into school you know. She’s not like David, she doesn’t know *everything*... she’s still learning.

I: So David’s a know-it-all kind of guy?

M: Brett’s like a know-it-all. He’s kind of a nerd but he doesn’t dress like one. So you can’t tell he’s a nerd but really...It’s someone who doesn’t really have a social life. They’re really wrapped up in studying and reading and stuff. Like Brett’s not a nerd because I guess he listens to music and stuff. A nerd wouldn’t listen to like music and stuff, they wouldn’t you know... they wouldn’t watch TV and stuff. Well, they’d like watch TV but they’d probably watch the news or something, trying to get education *all the time*. (Chin & Phillips, 2005, pp. 19–20)

Again, the issue is what students perceive one another to be doing.

“You can act smart in class,” one student explained in a conversation with researcher.

“But not on the playground,” the researcher responded, and had confirmed by the group (p. 21).

This implies that young students’ understanding of social context may be key to understanding how they conceptualize nerdiness. Based on her own research on talented students, Tracy Cross suggested that negative, intelligence-oriented stereotypes around

terms like ‘geeky’ and ‘nerdy’ may be dropping away as children see make an active choice to “be nerdy,” recognizing desirable outcomes. Even in Cross’s example, however, the child quoted specified that she was going to be nerdy for “today,” only as long as needed to catch up on work (Cross, 2005, pp. 26–27).

Beyond academic investment, students’ conceptions of nerds reflects a broader stereotype of social deviance. In some cases, this amount to unusual appearance or behavior, as reported by students themselves: having a “strange voice” (Chin & Phillips, 2005, p. 19), wearing “weird clothes” (Chin & Phillips, 2005, p. 20), saying “stupid things” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 249), or sporting glasses and a short haircut (Kinney, 1993, p. 28).

Certain markers of race, gender, and sexuality may also mark one as deviant. Mary Bucholtz (2001) concludes from her own linguistic analysis and participant observation of high-schoolers that nerds affect a deliberately intellectual, “hyperwhite” style of speech, eschewing the black students’ slang that normally gets co-opted by the trendy white kids. Bucholtz does not explore whether black students find this to be a racist posture, but suggests that it may make nerds appear to be purposefully deviant “traitors to whiteness” among popular white students. Similarly, C.J. Pascoe’s (2007) ethnography of high school culture explores how nerdy deviance is further constructed by the popular kids in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. Pascoe describes a pageant for “most popular senior boy,” involving a “Revenge of the Nerds” skit that depicts white, awkwardly-dressed guys in taped-up glasses getting their girlfriends stolen by guys dressed as “gangstas”; by bodybuilding and (literally) casting off their miniskirts, the heroes shed their “fag” ways to become the epitome of white male heroism, just

heterosexual and strong enough to emerge victorious, somewhere between the (white, weak, sex-deprived) “nerds” and the (black, brutish, sex-crazed) “gangstas.”

Though some students also vaguely state that nerds have “geeky interests” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 249), no research has indicated that this actually relates to the media and hobbies commonly considered geeky among adults; more frequently indicated is simply a *lack* of participation in activities and interests marked as acceptable by the popular group. As noted above, listening to music exempts one student from nerd status, and seemingly even more relevant is lack of ability in (or even opposition to) sports (Bishop et al., 2004). As one student reported, “nerds” are “really geeky and they don’t like sports. They’re not really good at any sport. They hate sports” (Chin & Phillips, 2005, p. 20). Sports, presumably, would serve the dual purpose of demonstrating the nerd’s willingness to conform to the popular crowd’s ideals, and to assert some claim to masculinity/heterosexuality.

Though this review focuses on recent literature, it is worth noting that the attitudes discussed here – particularly those relating to studiousness, athleticism, and popularity – dates back several decades. As early as 1960 – within a decade of when ‘nerd’ and ‘geek’ took on their current meanings’ – high school students’ responses on questionnaires indicated what they thought to be the most positive combination of athletic involvement, intelligence, and studiousness:

1. Athlete – Brilliant – Non-studious
2. Athlete – Average – Non-studious
3. Athlete – Average – Studious
4. Athlete – Brilliant – Studious
5. Non-athlete – Brilliant – Non-studious
6. Non-athlete – Average – Non-studious
7. Non-athlete – Average – Studious

8. Non-athlete – Brilliant – Studious. (Tannenbaum, 1960, quoted in Bishop et al., 2004)

Although terms such as ‘nerd’ and ‘geek’ did not appear in this study, school culture still presents an environment where students find it preferable to be any kind of athlete over any kind of non-athlete, where brilliance is only acceptable if not accompanied by effort.

The characteristics associated with the nerd image noted here may offer a clue as to why students get stigmatized by their peers in the first place. Nevertheless, it is difficult to say whether students get labeled as nerds for possessing these characteristics prior to harassment, or whether they take on these characteristics because their peers force them into narrow roles. This presents a “chicken and egg problem”:

Students identify nerds in the first weeks of middle school. Once singled out, they are subjected to harassment intended to wear down their self-esteem. Is it any wonder they lack self-esteem, leave school at 3 pm, and hang out with other geeks? Perhaps they started out being a little different then the harassment and ostracism turned them into the stereotypical nerds. (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 249)

One question left largely unaddressed in much of this literature, however, is how well the students identified as nerds actually fit or recognize such stereotypes. The transition to high school complicates a simplistic (though not entirely unfounded) understanding of nerds and geeks as isolated, unhappy victims.

#### *Crowd Membership*

Before high school, geeks and nerds typically have no core, “geeky” social group, and are simply excluded from activities with other students. School life is typically unhappy for these students, who tend not to date, go to parties, or attend events with fellow students (Kinney, 1993). High school, however, introduces students to a more complex social terrain, in which students organize into small cliques and somewhat more

diverse crowds, maintaining subcultural identities largely associated with various interests. Among these groups, one or more groups collect the social outcasts and/or the stigmatized studious teens, identified by others – and potentially by themselves as well – as “the Nerds,” “the Geeks,” “the Dweebs,” “the Brains,” or any of a number of regional equivalents (Bishop et al., 2003; B. B. Brown & Lohr, 1987; Kinney, 1993; Larkin, 1979; Milner, 2004). Typically, the “Nerds, Geeks, Dorks [...] and other studious, nonaggressive, socially unskilled students” are in the minority, and are considered fair game for insults and social exclusion by other students (Bishop et al., 2003, p. 154).

In most high schools, popular students, often including athletes and cheerleaders (a crowd often referred to as Jocks, Preppies, or Populars, or Trendies), are the “dominant” crowd that sets the norms (Bishop et al., 2003; Kinney, 1993; Milner, 2004). With the rise of consumer capitalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, those who seek to gain or maintain membership in the popular crowds tend to be involved in a continuous process of jockeying for status through wearing the “right” clothes, keeping up with popular music styles, and other means of conspicuous consumption (Larkin, 1979; Milner, 2004; Palladino, 1997).

The Nerds, meanwhile, tend to share the lowest rung of the high school social hierarchy with the “Goths, Freaks, and Punks” who “publicly challenge the norms and mock the identity of the school’s popular crowds” (Bishop et al., 2003, p. 153). The presence of these other crowds can sometimes direct harassment away from the nerd group, diffusing it among other groups who may seem more threatening to the “popular kids” or “trendies” (Kinney, 1993). As victims of harassment, the Nerd group is typically comprised of passive victims, whereas the Goths, Freaks, and Punks are often

provocative victims, whose mockery of popular students can incite physical violence (Bishop et al., 2003).

Beyond these groups, the presence of other social groups depends largely on school region and, to some extent, economic class composition, and may include such groups as Greasers, Hayseeds, Heavy-metal kids, Burnouts, and, in the middle-ground majority, a number of cliques of “normals” who take their social cues from the popular elite, but do not associate with them directly (Kinney, 1993; Larkin, 1979; Milner, 2004). Though some “normals” and higher-status students may sympathize with the Nerds, publicly acknowledging this untouchable class can risk one’s own social standing, and the Nerds tend not to defend one another from harassment by higher-status peers out of concern for teachers’ esteem and their own safety (Bishop et al., 2004; Milner, 2004).

Nevertheless, schools’ systems of crowds and subcultures are not completely fixed, and some members of the Nerd crowd do not entirely reject their geeky/nerdy status. Kinney’s (1993) ethnographic study of students making the transition from middle school to high school explores the former, suggesting that some students shed the ‘nerd’ label and come to identify as ‘normals’ by high school. Many of these former-nerd students recalled that they were unhappy as nerds in middle school, but became happier in high school. Kinney largely attributes this shift to the former nerds’ new membership in small, accepting groups of friends (especially among girls), and greater participation in a variety of school activities (especially among boys). Moreover, as Kinney notes, even as these students come to identify as “normal,” interacting with others who share a sense of past exclusion may be a source of camaraderie. Discussing these experiences together



and successfully socially interacting with one another in general, “they continually assign positive meanings to themselves,” boosting their self-esteem (Kinney, 1993, p. 35).

Interestingly, though somewhat unexplored by Kinney, some of the “former” nerds exhibit interests long associated with nerd and geek identity in the adult world. One male, who gained much self-confidence from a growth spurt and his interaction with female upperclassmen on the yearbook staff, got involved with this activity largely through his computer skills, referring to himself as “sorta a hacker” (p. 31). Another student stated that he would still be considered nerdy if it were not for his “interest in sports” (p. 32), which constitutes participation in a computer baseball league and wearing a Major League Baseball jacket like the school athletes. In examples such as these, we can see how the norms of the popular crowd still influence norms of appropriate behavior (participation on yearbook staff, interaction with girls, interest in sports, norms of fashion), though a shifting attitude toward the uses of computers marks potentially nerdy interests as more acceptable.

Kinney does note that some students came to value “confidence” and “independence” despite the mockery of the popular crowd, and one girl noted that students do not have to worry about appearance and being trendy. He does not account as directly, however, for those students who embrace the nerd label in high school. Though no research to date has explored the adoption of stereotypically geeky media interests (such as computers, comics, or science-fiction) among students in the nerd crowds of high schools, the limited literature on this topic to date has suggested two ways that students might attach a positive valence to geek/nerd identity: being in an environment where “nerdy” activities such as studiousness or club participation might seem

encouraged (in which cases the geek/nerd label might actually not appear), and developing a Nerd group with resistive character analogous to that of the Punk/Goth/Freak crowd.

In schools with a strong academic culture, the extra-studious group may even be a social elite of intellectuals, not “the stigmatized ‘weirdo’ who might have been described as the ‘egghead’ of the 1950s,” though this is extremely rare (Larkin, 1979, p. 72). Some schools also feature tiers of nerd/geek groups, such as the moderately more respected Brains versus Nerds, or studious Nerds versus socially inept Geeks and Dorks (Milner, 2004, p. 40). In an essay on her own high school structure, one student reported to a researcher that her school had a group of science- and engineering-inclined “teckies” who were generally respected for their motivation and academic achievement, and a separate group called “Nerds by Choice” who presented themselves online as a refuge for mocked students, but came off to nonmembers as insular and standoffish (Milner, 2004, pp. 227–230). Many schools also house a diverse and separate crowd for “band nerds,” sometimes derisively referred to as “band fags,” though the literature is not clear on whether members refer to themselves as nerds/geeks. Nevertheless, the members of these groups can be socially and sometimes even draw students from a variety of other crowds, perhaps being less concerned about stigma because of the perceived benefit of gender commingling. This crowd is still stigmatized, however, most likely because its existence is predicated on teacher supervision and previous years of adult tutelage, running against the anti-adult-authority culture of the popular students (Milner, 2004, pp. 76–77).

Bucholtz (1999), meanwhile, illustrates how self-identified geeks and nerds construct a positive identity for themselves in high school rather than simply attempting

to become “normal.” Focusing on the linguistic practices of a group of high school girls, Bucholtz argues that “nerd identity, contrary to popular perceptions, is not a stigma imposed by others, but a purposefully chosen alternative to mainstream gender identities which is maintained and achieved through language and other social practices” (Bucholtz, 1999, p. 204). As Eckert (1989) points out, seemingly diametrically opposed groups such as the Jocks and the Burnouts may each pursue their own respective notion of what is “cool,” the Nerds may define themselves by standing in opposition of the quest for coolness itself. Thus Bucholtz criticizes Kinney (1993) and Tolone and Tieman (1990) for defining Nerds as “a failed Burnout or an inadequate Jock,” insisting that Nerd identity is not “social death” but a distinctive community of practice and “an especially valuable resource for girls in the gendered world of the US high school” (Bucholtz, 1999, p. 211). Bucholtz describes nerd identity as constructed through an emphasis on individuality, intellect, and rejection of “cool” students’ interests, clothing, and slang:

Nerd girls’ conscious opposition to this ideology [i.e., hegemonic femininity] is evident in every aspect of their lives, from language to other aspects of self-presentation. Where cool girls aim for either cuteness or sophistication in their personal style, nerd girls aim for silliness. Cool girls play soccer or basketball; nerd girls play badminton. Cool girls read fashion magazines; nerd girls read novels. Cool girls wear tight T-shirts, and either very tight or very baggy jeans; nerd girls wear shirts and jeans that are neither tight nor extremely baggy. Cool girls wear pastels or dark tones; nerd girls wear bright primary colors. But these practices are specific to individuals; they are engaged in by particular nerd girls, not all of them. (Bucholtz, 1999, p. 213)

Such behavior casts the Nerds as somewhat aligned with other “alternative” groups like those described earlier, in that they “flaunted their deviance” (Milner, 2004, p. 41).

Bucholtz’s claims are quite relevant to this ethnography, though limited in their scope. Her study focuses only on a single group of nerd girls, and her participant observation research took place only over a single day. Her observations strongly suggest

that nerd girls and nerd boys (as described in other studies) go through very similar experiences in high school, though nerdiness is described as an expression of gender resistance. And, as with other studies, we cannot say from this whether those who were nerds in high school carry their nerd identity into adulthood, or whether the Geek crowds in high schools see themselves as part of a larger geek culture.

### *The Role of Teachers and Parents*

Research on the sources of high school students' unhappiness implicates relationships with peers more than relationships with parents (Ambert, 1994). It is worth noting, however, that the school culture that gives rise to geek/nerd harassment and stigma is at least partially an adult creation. What teachers and administrators promote as significant community participation in schools may line up more with the interests of the most popular students. One student, quoted at length by Murray Milner, offers a specific example:

Teachers also inflated the status of athletes by asking about particular plays from games over the weekend ... [W]hen our football team made it to the quarterfinals of the state competition ... the hype surrounding this success was nearly unbearable. For an entire week straight, on the morning announcements we had to listen to the [song] ... "We Are the Champions" – and again in the afternoons. In the case of our men's basketball team we heard the same song twice a day everyday beginning with district play all the way through until we lost the quarterfinals ... This type of recognition ... and encouragement was never given [to] our state champion forensic team nor [to] our nationally ranked [drill] team ... I recall a student [who was] actively involved in these clubs pointing this issue out ... [T]he principal of our school said that it was not intention [and] that they did not have a theme song or battle cry for science oriented teams. But as [the principal] put it, "It goes much further than just the individual team. We have got to get the whole community excited about these next couple of games." (Milner, 2004, p. 45, brackets and ellipses in original)

In addition, parents may discourage students from nerdy behaviors or seem disapproving of geek identity. As of 1997, 60% of American parents responded to a poll by saying that “if forced to choose, they would prefer their sons or daughters to make C grades and be active in extracurricular activities rather than make A grades and not be active” (Rose, Gallup, & Elam, 1997, quoted in Bishop et al., 2004). No research has yet been conducted, however, on parental support or disapproval of geeky or nerdy behaviors and group participation.

One potential avenue of influence by parents could come in the form of educational reform, which has suggested a variety of ways to reduce peer harassment and encourage normative pluralism rather than normative hegemony (Bishop et al., 2004; Milner, 2004). Nevertheless, such reforms are slow to come to public schools, and the underlying problem would not necessarily be eliminated entirely by simply trying to elevate the status of the nerd/geek groups: “If suddenly it was cool to be a Geek, other groups would still be targeted for harassment, and the Nerds would likely participate in the harassment with everyone else” (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 239). Though nerds and geeks make for likely targets in part because of some characteristics they frequently share (e.g., non-aggressiveness), a greater issue may simply be the context of American educational institutions themselves. As students are largely left to form their own social groups and status hierarchies to exert some limited degree of control over their otherwise structured school existence, geeks occupy a particular role in a “caste system” of sorts, indicative of larger systemic issues (Milner, 2004).

### Computers and Techno-Fetishists

“A good history of the American nerd has yet to be written,” Ron Eglash writes, “but its starting point might be in the radio amateurs of the early twentieth century, starting with teenage ‘wireless clubs’ in the 1920s” (Eglash, 2002, pp. 50–51). This roots our concept in the nerd as a science and tech enthusiast, a concept that has largely come to be associated with a particular machine, the personal computer.

In the adult world, ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ retain some of their negative connotations, but have also taken on more positive connotations in recent years in conjunction with technological expertise. Not all computer users are necessarily geeks, of course. Some researchers, such as John Gershuny (2003), have actively disputed the antisocial “net nerd” idea of internet users, suggesting that internet use has either no effect on sociability or even a positive effect. Moreover, as early as 1984, Sherry Turkle wrote:

In the early days of personal computation, the world of the hobbyist came close to being a distinct and homogeneous computer culture. But as personal computers enter the lives of wider groups of people, this culture has been overwhelmed by centrifugal forces: an increasing diversity in who participates and why – and “participation” can come to mean no more collective activity than attendance at an occasional meeting. (Turkle, 1984, p. 194)

Even if we were to limit ourselves to the most engaged computer enthusiasts, of course, we could discuss a fairly broad number of computer-oriented geek cultures: volunteer open source programmers, professional coders, bloggers, online gamers, and more. Thus, rather than scrutinizing the writing on every corner of the computer-mediated world where one might find a geek, I focus here on academic literature that has specifically referred to “geeks” or “nerds” and technology. Perhaps surprisingly, this research and writing suggests that academics have conducted little empirical exploring geek identity and imagery as these concepts relate to computers. Writers often assume a

common understanding of what a geek or a nerd refers to, and cite popular press books (which I will return to in later chapters as data to be analyzed) as the only reigning authority on the changing image of the computer geek.

### *Stigma Versus Pride Among Computer Nerds*

Among young students, nerds and geeks tend to be considered maladjusted rejects by nearly everyone (sometimes even including themselves). The modern adult computer geek presents a more complicated image, however, suggesting conflicting roles as both a free-thinking, marketable genius and an unattractive, antisocial freak. These conflicting notions permeate popular culture at large as well as the attitudes of computer enthusiasts and professionals themselves.

Since the 1980s, popular culture images of nerds have simultaneously reaffirmed and challenged stereotypical notions of masculinity and computer use. Kendall (Kendall, 1999b, 2000) makes sense of the nerd's "non-hegemonic masculinity" by understanding it as a result of what may seem like an inappropriately intimate relationship with computers (described by Turkle, 1984), which have themselves taken on a broader relevance to our society even among those who are not "computer people." According to Kendall, the nerd is a "liminal figure," both policing and threatening the boundary between human and machine for those who are less technically inclined: "The continued negativity of the nerd stereotype reveals a persistent uneasiness with computer use and computer users" (Kendall, 1999b, pp. 263, 280). As Kendall points out, movies like *Revenge of the Nerds* affirm that nerds have some claim of masculinity through their

active libido, but they remain stigmatized as vaguely effeminate for their inability to participate in sports or defend themselves physically.

Kendall (Kendall, 1999b, forthcoming) argues that nerds have more recently also earned a modicum of masculine power thanks to their associations with personal wealth and marketability, but the negatively coded nerd images may indicate a continuing unease surrounding computer use in culture at large. Consider, for example, a study by Robertta Barba and Cheryl Mason (1994), in which students (K–12) were asked to draw a picture of “a computer user” to be analyzed in a content analysis. While elementary school students apparently had no preconceived stereotype in mind, adolescents frequently imagined stereotypical male nerd with glasses and ill-fitting clothing, occasionally labeled “nerd” or “Urkle,” after the popular nerdy character from the 1990s sitcom *Family Matters*. At a relatively young age, then, students are socialized to understand that computers are for antisocial males.

Such stereotypes present a very real choice that some particularly engaged computer enthusiasts may need to grapple with. Turkle describes how computer science students at MIT have seen themselves as having a choice between diverging paths of isolated computer intimacy and normal human interaction. Those who most embrace the role have sometimes been discussed with a focus on their self-deprecating attitude, such as in Turkle’s description of MIT’s “Ugliest Man on Campus” competition. This began in the mid-1950s as a wry celebration of the negative stereotypes associated with engineers; said the founder, “To be at MIT is to be a tool, a nerd, a person without a body” (Turkle, 1984, p. 196). Writing specifically about hackers – in the original sense of the term as programmers and tinkers, rather than as a security threat – Turkle notes that some resent



the freak image as of the early '80s, though "many of the computer-science students accept this reflection of themselves as archetypical nerds, loners, and losers," flaunting their outsider status (Turkle, 1984, p. 200). Similarly, Wright says that "Hackers take pride in being 'nerds' and being antisocial, not needing women in their lives" (Wright, 1996, p. 89).

However, it is not just the hackers, but any heavy computer users, who may simultaneously resent and boast about their stigma. In Lori Kendall's ethnography of an online forum, she explains that "Men on [the forum] are well aware that the extent of their computer use places them within the definition of the nerd stereotype," experiencing this stereotype as a failure to be traditionally masculine (Kendall, 2000, p. 81). One male participant, for example, explains to the researcher that when women come up in conversation and the men jokingly ask whether the speaker had sex with the woman in question, it "wouldn't be funny if there was any chance in hell that anyone ever would"; the other men in the conversation agreed (p. 86). The forum participants even take (or fake) some degree of pride in their abstinence, declaring that they refuse to court women if it would require them to treat women more like how sexually successful "jerks" do (p. 91). Female nerds are also ultimately dragged down in the deprecation of nerd culture among male nerds; the forum participants agree that female nerds are unattractive, and refer to them as "nerdettes," indicating that the default coding of 'nerd' is male (p. 88). In Kendall's words, such banter "reproduces the image of the sexually frustrated, and therefore perpetually adolescent, nerd" (p. 87). The regular female participants on the forum, meanwhile, comprise about a quarter of the total visitors, and these women "have

histories of participation in male-dominated groups,” enabling them to fit in as “just one of the guys” (p. 95).

Stereotypical though they may be in some ways, these forum-goers can hardly be called antisocial, as Kendall points out, based on their own extensive interactions online. In fact, while some who might be labeled computer geeks recognize and resent these stereotypes, others may accept the positive aspects of nerdiness over the negative, and still others may reject nerd stereotypes altogether. Computer enthusiasts and professionals often use technical jargon to set themselves apart, and in some cases, fairly openly express feelings of superiority over other technology users (Guzman et al., 2004). Research led by Jeffrey Stanton indicated similar attitudes among IT majors and interns, with “23 out of 27 participants” recognizing that they were “Stigmatized as geeks/nerds” (Stanton, Guzman, & Fagnot, 2006, pp. 296–298). Some recognized negative behaviors associated with these terms, though not all reactions were negative, and some indicated other geeky interests:

“They’d say ‘you computer geek’ because I would play around and try little things on my computer that people would find a waste of time.”

“I am kind of a geeky person. For example I’ll try to install Linux. People do it in the classroom but nobody wants to go home and try it out. I’ve tried it a few times.”

“There’s the obvious nerd thing, or that you’re gonna throw out acronyms and jargon that people aren’t going to understand.”

“[Playing] videogames is one of my hobbies. In some ways I am the standard geek. I role play, I play video games.” (Stanton et al., 2006, p. 298)

Reactions also differed on whether respondents’ hobbies primarily involve IT, which might leave one labeled a nerd:

“I’m a big online gamer. It’s something you have to spend a lot of time around.”

“No, not at all [my hobbies are IT related]. I think that’s mostly why I’m not labeled a nerd. My free time is mostly going out and shopping. Staying outside. Not in the computer lab at all.” (pp. 297–298)

Here we see a parallel with the literature described in the previous section on “nerd disdain” in earlier schooling. In each case, a perceived narrowness of interest brands a person as a nerd. By adulthood, some might claim a geek identity, though others may be less interested in welcoming the nerd label and the social environment associated with it.

### *Nerd Minorities*

Perhaps more so than in any other area of inquiry into nerd stereotypes, research about computer use is concerned with what it means to be in the minority among white, male computer geeks. In the above study regarding novice programmers’ attitudes toward geek/nerd stereotypes, white male respondents “tended to report fewer concerns about being stereotyped as a ‘geek’ or ‘nerd’ than members of minority groups” (Stanton et al., 2006, p. 300). The authors do not speculate as to why, though a few possibilities come to mind, based on other literature described above.

For females and members of minority groups, geek identity may particularly signal gender/ethnic/racial inauthenticity among peers, as suggested by Bucholtz’s above-mentioned study invoking “traitors to whiteness.” The anti-dating attitude of geeks described in this section may be off-putting to women in particular. White men, meanwhile, may see geek identity as an alternative to what they may perceive as a relative lack of cultural identity and ethnic pride, as well as an alternative to traditional, hegemonic masculinity and trendy whiteness. This example, of course, may only represent a particular study’s relatively small sample, though it still offers a glimpse at how geek/nerd images may be particularly off-putting or problematic for those not as typically associated with such groups.

To some, the stereotypes associated with heavy computer use may represent a “geek mythology” that maintains a gender imbalance in the IT field. Jane Margolis and Allan Fisher (2002) studied Carnegie Mellon’s competitive and highly-ranked computer science program, which only had seven women in a first-year class of 100 students in the first year of the research. The majority of the students in attendance were white or Asian. The halls were full of robots and students sporting wearable computing, and, like Kendall (2000) notes, “This is a world in which humor seemingly mirrors adolescent male sensibilities” (Margolis & Fisher, 2002, p. 64). Some students’ accounts of themselves did support prevailing stereotypes of geeky computer obsession, but of the computer science students Margolis and Fisher interviewed, 69 percent of the women and 32 percent of the men said that this image does not describe them. Some students complained that the culture of the department did revolve around computer obsession, and that they were frustrated that conversation continually returned to such topics:

Sarah exclaims, “I’m like, ‘I don’t care! Can’t you people talk about anything but computers?’ And the thing is, some people here are so happy for the fact that they finally have these friends that just talk about computers! It’s like, ‘Hey, we can go out to dinner and talk about computers, and people won’t laugh at us anymore because computers are hip!’” (p. 68)

Margolis and Fisher come to a similar conclusion to Stanton, Guzman, and Fagnot (2006): Women were much more (and more frequently) disturbed than men by the computer nerd stereotype and the generally geeky atmosphere. Being around so many people for whom computing is a professional interest and the only apparent hobby “shapes the assumption of who will succeed and who ‘belongs’ in the discipline” (p. 71).

Some have argued, however, that geek mythology has enough room for change to accommodate those who have not traditionally been seen as geeks. Ron Eglash

recognizes that “Normative gender associations are not the only restrictions that nerd identity places on technoscience access,” also pointing out that “much of the ability of white software entrepreneurs appears to derive from their opportunities to form collaborations through a sort of nerd network” (Eglash, 2002, pp. 49–50). However, based on women’s increasing participation in computer-related fields paralleling increasing use of the ‘nerd’ as a cultural trope, he also concludes that “nerd identity seems less a threatening gatekeeper than a potential paradox that might allow greater amounts of gender and race diversity into the potent locations of technoscience, if only we could better understand it” (p. 50).

Eglash explores how figures such as Jaleel white’s Urkle character, Malcolm X, and Samuel L. Jackson (a self-avowed science-fiction fan who has played several nerds and one Jedi) practice a “reversal” by presenting an image directly opposed to the “primitivist” stereotype of black men. While Eglash sees some value in such black nerd images, he contends that they promote the idea that “the need for change is purely internal to the black community, rather than seeing a need to challenge the ways in which nerd identity itself is constituted or to loosen the geek grip on technoscience access” (p. 59). Ultimately, Eglash offers Afrofuturism as an alternative, whose proponents “blur the distinctions between the alien mothership and Mother Africa, the middle passage of the black Atlantic and the musical passages of the black electronic, the mojo hand and the mouse” (p. 59). Afrofuturism itself is not typically referred to in other literature on nerds, but the point in invoking it here is to suggest that tech access does not necessarily require wholly dispelling or adapting to the geek image, but adapting the geek image to something more welcoming to newcomers.

This potential for adaptation has similarly been explored among female geeks: “for some women, nerd identity provides a critique not just of hegemonic masculinity, but of femininity as well” (Kendall, 1999b, p. 276). Researchers such as Lori Kendall (1999b) and Nina Wakeford (1997) have described how self-identified nerdy and geeky women have used web sites to outline a different understanding of femininity and computer use. Several such groups make an explicit connection to punk culture in their names – such as the NerdGrrls! site analyzed by Kendall and the Cybergrrl site analyzed by Wakeford – to challenge the idea that women on the web are not necessarily victims in a hostile land or selling their image for pornography. Such sites, the authors explain, often also express resistance to feminine ideals represented in fashion magazines. Kendall points out such feminist concerns relate to a fairly specific demographic group – “young, white, middle-class women” (Kendall, 1999b, p. 277) – though, arguably, the concerns voiced by the Afrofuturists represent a similarly narrow group. In either case, these may represent ways that the understanding of what it means to be black or feminine has room for change, and so too does what it means to be a geek.

This shift in attitudes may come more easily to high computer users than to those who do not face nerd stereotypes themselves. Consider a study by Gareth Schott and Neil Selwyn (2000) which rejects the “‘male, antisocial’ stereotype of high computer users,” and suggests that some of the twelfth graders they studied reject this notion as well. Students who were oriented toward computer use were just as likely to be female as male, and were no less sociable or self-assured than their peers who were less interested in computers. Stereotypes regarding antisocial, male computer users persisted among the

low computer users, but the high computer users seem to have a more positive assessment of their activity that does not cast them in an unwelcome gender role:

I think it may be levelling out a bit. Its [*sic*] because all the people who started off the computer companies like, Bill Gates is it? Mr. Microsoft, it stems from that. He started it off and it was generally a geeky boys' thing and now it's become such a big thing now its starting to change. (Daffydd, High ICT [i.e., a high information and computer technology user])

I'm a girl and I use computers all the time. Its [*sic*] all to do with power, men have always liked having power, so that's why computers were originally seen as a "man thing." (Sumara, High ICT) (Schott & Selwyn, 2000, p. 299)

These may represent two disparate yet convergent opinions: one, that computer use was previously thought of as "geeky" and "boyish," and is now associated with money and power; and the other, that computer use has always been associated with power, a traditionally masculine interest that is now open to females. The end point for each rationale is the same: Computers are not geeky and available only to a select few, but powerful and available to all. In both this case and the case of the Carnegie Mellon program, these shifted attitudes are shared among those who find themselves in heterogeneous environments of high computer users; attending a professional convention that may be dominated by men might leave one with a different perception of the "antisocial, male nerd" stereotype, but some signs do indicate that this image is shifting.

Even more recently, Leonore Blum and Carol Frieze (2005) presented follow-up research at Carnegie Mellon's computer science department. They suggested that the department's culture has changed since it shifted the focus of its admissions process: "With changes in the admissions criteria and subsequent changes in the overall student body, the manifest dichotomy observed by Margolis and Fisher is considerably less apparent and becoming less so" (Blum & Frieze, 2005, p. 120). The new admissions process emphasizes diversity of interests rather than an overriding interest in computers

above all other interests. As one male student explained, “[The geeks] give a bad rap for everybody else,” and another said that he and his friends “were as interested in things that had nothing to do with computer science” (pp. 113–114). The researchers summarize:

The picture of a narrowly focused computer science student did not emerge. To the contrary, we found students with a variety of interests and social circles both inside and outside of computer science, students who were involved in outreach activities and community service, students who enjoyed humanities as well as science classes, and students who were aware of the old “hacker” stereotypes and determined not to be like that. Our cohort included students who played the violin, wrote fiction, sang in a rock band, participated in university team sports, enjoyed the arts, and were members of a wide range of campus organizations. We found that men and women alike appear to be moving toward a more well-rounded identity that embraced academic interests and a life outside of computing. Students described themselves as “individual and creative, just interesting all-around people,” “very intelligent, . . . very grounded, not the traditional geek, . . . ““much more well rounded than people five or six years ago.” (Blum & Frieze, 2005, p. 114)

The adjustments to the admissions process for Carnegie Mellon’s computer science program may thus result in an environment with fewer hardcore, “traditional” geeks, though the authors also briefly comment that females in the program “seemed to be constructing a new identity that was both ‘geeky’ and feminine” (p. 112). Some quotes in this study imply that the revised admissions process has done away with geek culture at Carnegie Mellon, but a “geeky feminine” identity potentially indicates a space for non-traditional “geeks” opening up in the computing world.

### *Computer Geek Idealism*

In addition to a broadening notion of the gender, race, and personality of nerds, the changing image of the computer geek is connected to concept of geeky idealism that may have recently begun to permeate American consciousness at large. Arguably, the idealist bent of computer geekdom predates even the spread of personal computers and



the internet, and has as much or more to do with the people who pioneered technology as with the properties of the technology itself.

Fred Turner (2005) traces the history of “virtual community” to ‘60s counterculture – specifically, to the *Whole Earth Catalog* as the antecedent of the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (WELL). The *Catalog* was inspired by members of the counterculture who were moving out to New Mexico and northern California, and featured items “ranging from books by Buckminster Fuller to a \$4,900 HP desktop calculator and a one-man saw mill” (p. 488). The *Catalog*, Turner explains, was more than just a collection of goods; it did not actually directly sell the items inside. Rather, it gave contact information for the increasingly dispersed members of the counterculture, and so helped to establish a sort of mediated social network. Years later, the WELL would be modeled on the *Catalog* and the ideals of the New Communalist movement; thus, according to Turner, “the countercultural celebration of small-scale technologies as tools for the transformation of consciousness and community came to undergird popular understandings of early computer networks” (p. 489).

Douglas Thomas (2002) similarly traces the ideals of contemporary hacking to amateur computer researchers, programmers, and tinkers in the 1950s and ‘60s, who professed that “information” should be “free,” authority should be mistrusted, and computers could help the world. Thomas also offers the Yippies antiwar movement of the ‘60s and ‘70s as a direct ancestor of modern hackers, as their *Party Line* newsletter evolved into a journal titled *Technical Assistance Program* and gradually shed its overt political leanings in favor of articles on the distribution of information (Thomas, 2002, p. 16). Moreover, the computer enthusiast culture of the 1970s that grew into the PC

industry of the '80s was largely composed of and inspired by the members of '70s hacker clubs, such as the Homebrew Computer Club, which was founded by antiwar activists (Streeter, 2005a; Thomas, 2002; Turkle, 1984).

The personal computer, then, has long been steeped in the countercultural ideals of its developers. This presents a backdrop for understanding how the internet has come to be romanticized as a utopian, if somewhat unpredictable "cyberspace" or "frontier." Streeter (2005a) explains how this image can be attributed to quite intentional efforts to describe the phenomenon with terms inspired by '60s counterculture and romantic ideals. *Wired's* co-founder admits that the magazine was inspired by the early, pre-ironic *Rolling Stone*; it cast science and technology as beautifully culturally transformative in the same way as music, and treated the leaders of the new digital age like the gods of rock-n-roll. Streeter credits nerd-oriented publications such as *Wired* and the web site Slashdot ("News for Nerds, Stuff that Matters") with a tone of frustrated dismissal of the economic and political elites who seemed so out of touch, akin to stating: "You are one of us, the mammals, and those powerful people are the dinosaurs" (Streeter, 2005a, p. 768). Netscape's publicist cast the company's lead programmer as a barefoot nerd revolutionary, developing "a strategy that carefully cultivated media attention framed in terms of 'geek chic,' deliberately taking reporters into the back rooms to show the chaos of the programmers' cubicles, programmers sleeping under their desks, and so forth" (Streeter, 2005a, p. 774). Streeter concludes:

This atmosphere was precisely a fusion of the desire for wealth with romantic dreams of freedom, self-expression, and the dramatic overthrow of the powers-that-be. Without the romantic visions of freedom and revolution, there would have been nothing to get excited about; there was no gold in this gold rush, no valuable raw material, just castles in the air made of projections onto immaterial digital bits; something had to make those projections seem valuable. Yet without

the hope of getting rich, the enthusiasm would never have had the energy it needed to spread. Change the world, overthrow hierarchy, express yourself, and get rich; it was precisely the heady mix of all of these hopes that had such a galvanizing effect. (Streeter, 2005a, p. 777)

While McLuhan might argue that it is technology that shapes culture, in these examples we can see how a particular cultural tradition shaped how we think about, use, and set policy concerning the internet. People saw a certain fantasy in those first glances at a graphical internet interface, “and for that fantasy to take flight, *written* romantic tropes were required” (p. 778), such as casting the computer elite – in other words, the geeks – as heroic agents of revolution.

American culture at large was ready to pick up these tropes. Online access diffused first through “those who did their own word processing” before reaching the political and economic elites (Streeter, 2005a, p. 765). This provided an ideal ground for a widespread sense that the common people felt more “with it” than the people in charge, even to the point where those attempting to set information policy in the early 1990s may have seemed as out of touch with reality as politicians seemed to the general public during the Vietnam War.

These idealized notions have real implications for geek identity and the rhetoric of technology use. Following up on her own earlier research on geeky computer users, Turkle proclaims that “the machine no longer has to be perceived as putting you in a world apart. [...] The hacker is no longer necessarily only a ‘nerd’; he or she can be a cultural icon” (Turkle, 1995, p. 61). Open source programmers view this revolutionary spirit in their own practices, publicly espousing the virtues of “open disclosure,” “freedom of choice,” “cooperative work,” and “informal management,” among others, in the development of software (Elliott & Scacchi, 2005, pp. 160–161). John Barlow –

founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and the man responsible for bringing the term “cyberspace” from science-fiction into common speech – rivals Bill Gates in terms of cultural cachet in some circles of self-identified geeks (Kelty, 2005; Streeter, 2005a). The vaguely-understood ideals and ethics surrounding movements and figures such as these make up (one version of) geek culture. Upon interacting with self-identified geeks in his own ethnographic work, Christopher Kelty states:

[T]hese geeks are self-addressing and self-organizing. Although they all work for particular organizations, corporations, governments, or small businesses, they nonetheless identify with something beyond their local situation. There is no formal organization that binds them together, other than the Internet itself. (Kelty, 2005, p. 196)

This activist idealism still arguably has a self-serving purpose, Kelty explains. Because the internet in a certain formation is what allows geeks to exist as a culture, they must use the internet to discuss and influence internet policy if they are to continue to exist at all.

It remains to be seen how these sorts of “geek ideals” may overlap with other politically progressive idealistic movements, though Christina Dunbar-Hester’s (2008) study of a self-described “Geek Group” of low-power FM radio activists provides an apt example of how techies may conceive of their pursuits within the radical DIY spirit described by Turner (2005) and others noted here, but also view such efforts as parallel with goals of improved gender inclusiveness. Dunbar-Hester’s ethnographic work with the group showed how practices like “barnraising” (a term borrowed from the Amish) blend goals of gender politics in with media politics: When setting up a new low-power FM for a local community, “no one is allowed to do anything they already know how to do” (Dunbar-Hester, 2008, p. 11). Tensions still remain, given the uneven distribution of

prior experience, but this may represent one more way to understand truly open access to technology as a typically geeky ideal.

### Science-fiction and Other Fandoms

Geeky interests, of course, are even broader than might be implied in the preceding pages. Even as nerds and geeks have long been characterized as studious victims and technical wizards, they may have been understood for just as long as entertainment fans. Not just any fan is a geek; rather, representations of geeks in popular culture suggest a common understanding about which media are geeky, even if academics are mostly mum on the subject. Though some researchers have noted that certain subcultures and fan groups seem to overlap with other subcultures and fan groups, this has yet to be considered as a “geeky” phenomenon for the most part.

In fact, such a holistic approach to geek culture – giving equal consideration to multiple media fan groups as well as to computer use – is uncommon in academic publishing. Henry Jenkins (1992) has pointed out that readers and fans are “textual poachers” who cannot be pinned to any one consumption practice or medium of interest, but William Svitavsky (2001) takes this a step further in “Geek Culture: An Annotated Interdisciplinary Bibliography.” A rare example of academically-published material suggesting geek-interest overlap, Svitavsky’s bibliography features only few works even referring directly to “nerds” or “geeks” per se, yet it still makes a claim that “geek culture” ought to be examined as a broader phenomenon. The list focuses specifically on role-playing gamers, science-fiction fans, comic book fans, and “the culture of those strongly interested in computers,” noting:

When a study profiles a group engaged in one of these activities, it is not unusual for the group's participation in the other activities to be mentioned as well. In popular culture (as opposed to studies of popular culture), this overlap has been recognized all along. Each of these groups has been ridiculed as “geeks” or “nerds”, and each has subverted those terms into proud self-identification. (Svitavsky, 2001)

To reiterate Svitavsky's assertion, the assumptions here – that geeks are both stigmatized and proud, that these groups do in fact have overlapping audiences – represent a matter of growing common understanding rather than empirically-oriented research and writing. It may be worth considering further, then, how some of these interests may be connected, and how they fit into geek culture more broadly.

#### *Traditions of Geeky Fandom*

Most histories of science-fiction fandom rely heavily on fan accounts – or are, in fact, fan accounts themselves, printed in fanzines. While the history of science-fiction literature can potentially be traced back much further than the history of organized science-fiction fandom (Landon, 2002), the latter phenomenon may be traced back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century genre fiction magazines and the fanzine community that arose from this industry. Hugo Gernsback, founder of the pulp magazine *Amazing Stories*, was “Influenced by the ‘cult of the engineer’ prevalent in some intellectual circles at the time,” and so “turned to scientific fantasy to attract the young male readers of magazines like *Popular Mechanics*” (Bacon-Smith, 2000, p. 9). Gernsback was the first editor to refer to his magazine's letter-writers as “fans” and print their letters in the magazine, which led correspondents to coordinate their fiction-hunting and writing activities in “clubs” in the 1920s and organize the publication of the first fanzines in the 1930s (Moskowitz, 1994, pp. 27–28). Fans' names and addresses were even printed in some

letters pages, allowing them to communicate and coordinate activities directly (Coppa, 2006).

Histories of fandom identify this tradition as the one from which other related fan traditions were born (Bacon-Smith, 2000; Coppa, 2006; G. Jones, 2004; Moskowitz, 1994; Siclari, 1981). Gerard Jones describes the boys behind this original fandom as having “an indifference to clothes and appearance” and “an amused disdain for the drones who didn’t understand them,” marking their subculture as “the birth of geek culture” from which “every subsequent geek culture – comics, computers, video games, collectible figures” has grown (G. Jones, 2004, p. 37). The network of conventions and fanzines was eventually supplemented by an explosion of webzines, which no longer faced the same overhead and effort presented by print and “snail mail” as barriers to production (Coppa, 2006; M. J. Smith, 2004).

Echoing this fandom’s origin in attempting to tap into science and tech culture, researchers of computer cultures have long recognized an overlap between technological pursuits and an interest in science-fiction. Frequently, this interest in science-fiction has been treated as a brief side note, a byproduct of a more primary interest in technology and science. Sherry Turkle’s early research on hacker culture, for example, included reading two years of “science-fiction-lovers mail” online, but science-fiction series such as *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* only see brief mention in her ethnography (Turkle, 1984, p. 200). In this work, she explained interest in science-fiction as part of a somewhat isolated and “ever deeper immersion in the world of machines” (p. 201). Lori Kendall similarly notes that characteristics of nerdity “include fascination with technology, interest in science fiction and related media such as comic books, and perceived or actual social

ineptitude and sartorial disorganization,” though it is the first and third of these characteristics that receive the most attention (Kendall, 2000, p. 81).

Some other authors acknowledge science-fiction as playing a more active role in computer culture. Those who study science-fiction as a genre and a community, such as Brooks Landon (2002) and Camille Bacon-Smith (2000), credit science-fiction with nothing less than pushing scientific and technological progress, including reinventing old roles to offer new ways of thinking about computer cultures; in science-fiction, “The computer nerd becomes the romantic-leather-clad hacker cowboy determined to bring the virtual world into existence” (Bacon-Smith, 2000, p. 1). Douglas Thomas’s research on hackers lends some credence to this perspective, noting that “Internet culture has its roots in the first e-mail discussion list that emerged early in the life of ARPAnet (the precursor of today’s Internet). That list was SF-LOVERS, a list of people devoted to the discussion of science-fiction” (Thomas, 2002, p. 20). Thomas argues that science-fiction provided a utopian vision for optimistic hackers in the 1960s and ‘70s, and a pleasingly dystopian vision for resistive hackers in the 1980s and ‘90s, practically offering the roadmap for the ideals of a subculture.

These connections between science-fiction and computer science are fair, but only useful to a point. As it turned out, “Gernsback’s readers didn’t, for the most part, want to become engineers. They wanted to be writers of the fiction published in his magazine and in those magazines that published ‘weird’ fantastic literature” (Bacon-Smith, 2000, p. 9). That was quite some time ago, of course, but this statement seems a fair representation of the fact that science-fiction fandom exists as a phenomenon related to but not solely entangled with computer culture. Just as Gernsback’s readers were more interested in



genres and media that seemed related to *Amazing Stories*, fans of science-fiction today may be just as interested – if not more so – in science-fiction in its own right as they are in actual computer wizardry.

Moreover, those computer users and science-fiction fans are also somewhat likely to belong to other fan groups, or at least to count other, seemingly related media and genres among their interests. Considering the fan interests associated with geek culture means reaching beyond the typical boundaries of science-fiction and media fandom research. Studies of these fandoms have often focused on some of the least common forms of fan practice and the most narrow of conceptions of “science-fiction fandom” and “media fandom.” Science-fiction fan research has largely been concerned with the core group of fans circulating fanzines and attending Worldcon, the longest-running science-fiction fan convention. This research, and research on “media fandom” springing from it, includes a large and growing body of work on fan production practices such as fan fiction and cosplaying (i.e., designing and wearing costumes based on characters from television, movies, or games). Nevertheless, fan writer rich brown concedes that “Core fandom has almost always been a minority within the SF community” (brown, 1994, p. 92), and Matt Hills also points out that “we cannot assume that all fans are busily producing away” on fan fic and the like (Hills, 2002, p. 30).

It is fair, however, to describe other sorts of organized media fandom as descended from science-fiction fandom. Researchers and insiders of science-fiction fandom typically regard other media fandoms, such as comics, as spin-offs or outcroppings (brown, 1994; Coppa, 2006; Siclari, 1981; Trimble & Trimble, 1994). Some have described this diversification as a “barbarian invasion,” in which the “core” fans

perceived themselves as outnumbered at their own conventions by fan cultures which sprang from their tradition, such as comic book fans and sci-fi film fans (brown, 1994, p. 92). To some who count themselves among the core, these “other-media” fans represented a dilution of the purity of what fandom once was, “more enamored of nifty special effects than of imaginative ideas in literary form” (brown, 1994, p. 93).

The influx of these fans has visibly changed the structure and program offerings at many conventions, as convention committees “plan tracks of programming for anything even remotely connected with SF,” such as “SF/fantasy role-playing games, costuming, filksinging [singing fan-written lyrics to familiar tunes], SF academics,” and more (brown, 1994, p. 94). Some of the major, long-running conventions that attract such diverse fan groups are still referred to as “science-fiction conventions,” such as Dragon Con, even if sometimes to the consternation of the old guard. Ed Kramer, Dragon Con’s organizer, has admitted to considering a broader definition of “science fiction convention” than some:

you have to include all facets of science fiction and fantasy. You also have to include all the modalities in which you see them, which is not only in books, but you also see them in graphic novels, which are pronounced “comics” by people, you see them in computer games, you see them in movies. (Bacon-Smith, 2000, p. 167)

Science-fiction fan conventions thus provided a springboard and a model for the establishment of other communities that seem less obviously connected to “science”: the Society for Creative Anachronism (medieval/renaissance recreationists), the Mythopoeic Society (Tolkien/neo-traditional fantasy fans), “old time radio” fandom, and so on. Those from the original “core” might call this “megafandom,” as one glossary suggests (Sanders & brown, 1994, p. 268).

This broadly-defined “fandom” continues to diversify, incorporating new, overlapping subcultures. Bacon-Smith, for example, describes learning of a “vampire hacker crowd,” some hybrid of goths and computer nerds. (The combination should not be entirely surprising, as research on schools and peer harassment cited earlier note that Goths and Nerds occupy the bottom of high school social hierarchy side by side.) Attempting to explain the group’s character and image, one of Bacon-Smith’s informants guesses, “hacker-type people, well, they’re antisocial because they spend a lot of time at home with their computer, and ... they have a personality type [...] that would gravitate toward a more gothic kind of, [...] black, [...] person”; another informant, a self-identified goth, seems to agree (Bacon-Smith, 2000, pp. 157–158). Even the goths may have a hard time determining the edges of their own subculture, however; the latter informant states, “I guess I am counterculture. But to me some of the identifications [...] [are] very fashion conscious. [...] And I don’t identify very strongly with one group. [...] I think that’s the reason why I am so aggressively alienated” (p. 159).

### *Marginalization, Stigma, and Fan Practice*

The linkages and boundaries between traditionally “geeky” fan groups may be blurry, but one thing that they may all have in common is a shared sense of marginalization and stigma. For popular media forms, to be stigmatized is more than simply to be considered low-class: Stigmatized media are feared to be harmful, even to require intervention or regulation on the part of “normal” society. Country music may be considered low-class, but rap music is stigmatized due to its supposed harmful effects and dangerous or deviant subculture (Lopes, 2006). Academic research of fandom long

characterized it as a pathology (Jenson, 1992); since the 1990s, however, academia has seen a number of researchers (often fans themselves) acting as defenders and celebrators of fandom, dismissing and attempting to explain why certain fan groups are stigmatized as they are.

Henry Jenkins is one of the most recognized writers on fan stigmas and practices. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins (1992) identifies a number of common “nerdy” stereotypes of *Star Trek* fans. According to portrayals in popular culture, fans devote their lives to “brainless” consumption, give inappropriate attention to “devalued cultural materials,” are “social misfits” whose fan interests preclude other forms of interaction, are “feminized and/or desexualized” and “intellectually immature,” and fail to “separate fantasy from reality” (pp. 9–10). Similarly, in a content analysis of video game articles in mainstream journalism, Dmitri Williams (2003) pointed out that “moral panic” frames associated with computer games come and go with time. Some articles “focused on the high status of ace players, but, with the vilification of arcades, the ace gave way to the ‘computer nerd’ stereotype or the awkward boy who turned to machines because he was unable to connect with other human beings”; these frames diminished in turn as games became more broadly accepted in society (Williams, 2003, p. 537). Many articles also cast boys as violent (either by nature or socialization) and adult men as “deviant” (p. 544).

Such stigmatizing associations can serve purposes both within and outside of fan groups themselves. Consider the example of comic book fandom: Matthew Pustz refers back to Jenkins’s description in describing the stereotype of comics “fanboys,” “comic book readers who take what they read much too seriously” (Pustz, 1999, p. 71).

Nevertheless, as Paul Lopes explains, “As much as the subculture of comic books becomes a way to legitimate comic book readers, ironically the stigma theory of fanboys and fangirls seems to arise more from inside the subculture than from outside” (Lopes, 2006, p. 410). This allows fans, particularly readers of alternative (i.e., non-superhero) comic books, to “distance themselves from what they see as the worst aspects of comic book culture” (p. 76). The director of the Organized Readers of Comics Associated (ORCA) told Pustz, “The tag name of ‘fanboy’ is demeaning,” though he still acknowledged some belief in it by applying it to those who “don’t actually read their comics” – that is, misguided comics speculators (p. 78). Pustz credits such stereotypes and the general marginalization of comics with fans’ general feeling of separation from mainstream culture at large, claiming that the divisions between fans are not nearly as great as the division between fans and the mainstream – and some fans want in.

Outside of fandom, however, such stigmas can potentially cause lasting damage on a broad scale. Science-fiction as a genre may be sufficiently grounded in the positive ideals of the “engineering culture” to escape much resistance from conservative cultural guardians, but other geeky media have sometimes faced active attempts to regulate their uses and distribution. Comic book stigma came to a head in the 1950s when a Senate Subcommittee Hearing on Juvenile Delinquency convened to discuss the matter of horror comics, which led to the development of an industry-run Comics Code Authority (Nyberg, 1998). The only titles that could be distributed via newsstands were those that were deemed safe for adolescent boys, and so more sophisticated (and offensive) adult titles only started appearing in the 1960s and ‘70s with the underground comix movement, which saw issues distributed through drug paraphernalia shops and at fan

gatherings. This system eventually led to a network of primarily fan-run comics specialty stores, which for years was the only sort of retail outlet where one could purchase comics. As such stores are not always considered welcoming by outsiders to the comic book subculture, such developments arguably stunted the growth of comics as a medium for decades (Lopes, 2006; Pustz, 1999; Sabin, 1993). Some see a similar moral panic occurring now surrounding the video game industry, which had its own Senate Subcommittee Investigation and subsequent self-regulatory body in the 1990s, and now faces a barrage of legislation aimed at restricting game sales (Aitkin, 2001; Hill, 2001; Jenkins, 2000; Tocci, 2008b).

This all presents the question of how it is that some fan interests get stigmatized while others are merely marginalized. The answer may seem quite straightforward for media such as comic books, video games, and the non-geeky example used earlier, rap music: The content of these media that garners news media attention is often the most violent and offensive content available in those media. However, while a comparative content analysis has yet to be conducted, it is possible that most violent comic books and video games may be no more gruesome than the most violent horror movies (see Schiesel, 2007). More important is the fact that stigmatized media represent the unknown, as new media and cultural movements are alien to so many (Cohen, 1972).

Geeky media and fandom, however, may continue to seem alien to non-fans even after they are no longer novel. Some authors have attributed this to something inherently different about fan practice and the use of the media themselves. Some researchers have suggested, for instance, that one needs to have a certain “comics literacy” in order to decode the meaning of panels as a visual language (Cohn, 2005) and a system dense with

allusions to and reflections upon earlier comics (Klock, 2002; Pustz, 1999). Landon (2002) suggests that science-fiction requires readers to adopt a certain mode of “science fiction thinking,” recognizing how the utopian ideals associated with the literature may necessitate considering it by standards unlike those used for classic literature. Jenkins (1992) further suggests that fannish practices are not only seemingly alien and inaccessible to some, but asserts that such practices are actively threatening to existing taste hierarchies in culture at large. Rather than consuming media and attributing cultural value in “appropriate” ways, “Fandom involves a particular mode of reception.” This mode employs “a mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance,” experienced through multiple repeated viewings; it “involves a particular set of critical and interpretive practices,” including playfulness and speculation beyond the text; and it “possess particular forms of cultural production, aesthetic traditions and practices” (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 277–279)..

This view of fandom does present some potential problems, however. Defining fandom by these practices clearly works to redeem fans according to values that resonate as more admirable among academics (and, presumably, mainstream culture at large). These practices emphasize that fans are not mere (passive, stupid) consumers, but (active, even admirable) producers, makers of meaning (Hills, 2002). Fans are also cast as heroically countercultural, much as hackers, as noted earlier; researchers such as Jenkins (1992) and Fiske (1992) have associated with fans an anti-capitalist aesthetic, emphasizing how fans value emotional experience over materialism and profit. Arguably, such approaches have led to a disproportionate focus in fan studies on the most unusual fan practices, such as fan fiction, cosplaying, and machinima. This is not to suggest that

such phenomena are not worthy of study, or even that such self-understandings are not discussed among fans, but that these behaviors cannot adequately account for a great deal of fan experiences, even among those who actively participate in geeky fan cultures. This becomes even more apparent when we consider “fan cultures” as not only encompassing fans of serial television, as Jenkins considers, or traditional science-fiction fandom, but also comics fans, role-playing gamers, video gamers, anime fans, and so on.

Hills rightly criticizes the “one-sided academic view of fandom, in which fan identities are typically viewed against consumer identities,” concluding that “the best we can hope for is a theoretical approach to fandom which can *tolerate* contradiction without seeking to close it down prematurely” (Hills, 2002, pp. 28–29). Thus, while Jenkins, Hills, and even Adorno (see Hills, 2002, p. 30) celebrate the childlike nature of fannish – or, we might say, geeky – reading and play, fan researchers must recognize that childishness itself has marginalizing associations of its own, and that fandom and geek stigma represent multiple potential contradictions and unanswered questions. Thus, a wholly integrated concept of geeky fandom has yet to be offered.

#### *Geek Pride and the Mainstreaming of Fandom*

Despite fans’ and fan scholars’ concerns about the marginalized status of certain genres and media, the outsider status of fandom is not entirely undesirable. Some research indicates that fans acknowledge, if not revel in, their own geekiness – or, as in computer cultures, may be recognizing geeky associations becoming less important and dropping away.



Even as Jenkins (1992) expressed fans' dismay at being stereotyped as geeks, he also recognized that fans exaggerated their own stereotypes, "celebrating their transgressiveness rather than accepting them as rebuking, redefining them in terms which proclaim the pleasures and idealism of fandom" (p. 261). One filk song titled "Science Wonks, Wimps, and Nerds," for example, "challenges the categories thrust upon fans by the 'stereotypical minds' of 'all the mundane and Philistine herds,' evoking instead an image of fans as 'prophets, inventors, and movers,'" with direct comparison to "physicists, researchers, astronauts, programmers" as figures with some overlap with science-fiction fandom who possess more culturally respectable titles (p. 261). Here, the fan songwriter reclaims "nerd" as a label and places it in opposition to "mundane," a term often used among fans to refer (somewhat derisively) to non-fans.

Oftentimes fans refer to themselves with geek and nerd labels semi-ironically, identifying their interests but indicating less investment than non-fans might assume. Writing of comic book fans, for example, Pustz posits that examples of the stereotypical "fanboy" do exist, but:

At the same time, not every comic book reader of any type takes the term completely seriously. In recent years, many people have come to use the term *fanboy* with self-deprecating irony, particularly when mainstream [i.e., superhero] comics readers are admitting to an unfashionable way of interacting with their favorite titles. (Pustz, 1999, p. 76)

This behavior, Pustz explains, is sometimes practiced by alternative readers as well, and sometimes even as "almost a badge of pride" (p. 78). Fans speak of "tapping the inner fanboy" (p. 79) to evoke feelings of childhood nostalgia and connect with other fans.

Similarly, Steve Bailey's (2005) description of fans of the animated science-fiction program *Futurama* as adopting a "geek identity" as a simultaneously ironic and

genuine projection. In a segment that bears quoting at length, Bailey explains that the term 'geek'

has been transformed into a largely positive model of a kind of cultural subjectivity. While it would be tempting to understand this transformation as a less politically charged variation on the practice of reversing and/or reclaiming words evident in the use of slurs such as 'queer', 'dyke' and 'nigger' as a means of creating group solidarity, there are important distinctions here. The transformation of the geek involves at least a partial acceptance of many of the existing connotations of the term such as the estrangement from conventional norms and the obsessive dedication to the seemingly insignificant; these aspects of 'geekdom' are not so much reversed but rather defended as legitimate avenues of self-investment. However, this immersion is tempered both a self-consciousness regarding one's status – a true 'geek', it would seem, would be incapable of self recognition as one – and through a kind of ironic splitting of the self such that an individual can entertain the monomaniacal passions of the geek while retaining a meta-identity which contains this aspect of the self. Of course, the Internet is the ideal for the cultivation of geekdom in that it allows for a particularly easy deployment of multiple personas, as Turkle, Jordan and many others argue. (Bailey, 2005, p. 194–5)(Bailey, 2005, pp. 194–195)

According to this conceptualization, geek identity is a means of mediating between conflicting desires and points of awareness. I would argue, however, that we don't even necessarily need to see the internet as a place where identity-as-self-understanding (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) is "fragmented" (Turkle, 1984), so much as a place where individuals can adopt this geeky stance with a bit less embarrassment than usual.

Fans' willingness to adopt this 'geeky' stance may be related to a perceived rise in the cultural relevance of entertainment media commonly understood as 'geeky' themselves. Henry Jenkins, a publicly self-proclaimed geek himself, has suggested that *Textual Poachers* (1992) was about marginalized fan practices, whereas *Convergence Culture* (2006) is about those same fan practices as now practiced by mainstream culture at large, such as through YouTube (Jenkins, 2007). Elana Shefrin (Shefrin, 2004),

meanwhile, explains how Hollywood may have a vested interest in being fan-friendly, which includes showing receptiveness to the interests of the hardcore.

The dissolution of geeky associations with media fandom can be problematic for fans who wish to maintain their cultural identity in the face of the mainstream's advance into its territory. Kristina Busse (2006) has expressed concern that 'fandom' as a concept among academics may be becoming too mainstream to even consider as its own phenomenon, thanks to the "fannish" involvement encouraged by games and web content tied into network television programming: "how can we define fans without invoking a category so expansive that it includes all media audiences or one so narrow that it excludes large numbers of individualist fans?" Noting that members of fandom self-define as different from individual "fans" in the broader sense of the term (mirroring the distinction described by Sandvoss, 2005), Busse considers a "Geek Hierarchy" (see Chapter 5) describing who thinks themselves less geeky than whom. This implies that a greater degree of "involvement" and "investment" are major factors in fan identity and community membership. The "geek" label, in this case, helps particularly committed long-term fans to draw a line between themselves and those in the "mainstream" who share their formerly esoteric interests. Despite its negative connotations, geek identity remains relevant and even desirable for fans of traditionally marginalized media interests.

### Combined Approaches

Approaches that consider the nerd and geek culture more broadly, taking into consideration more than one of the above general areas of consideration, remain rare in

peer-reviewed research. These, too, however, leave open broad questions about how to integrate seemingly disparate concepts of ‘nerds’ and ‘geek culture.’

Some published perspectives elaborate further on linkages between the “entertainment enthusiast” and “technological pioneer” sides of geekdom. Kevin Kelly (1998) and Jay Clayton (2002) suggest that the overtly nerdy and geeky represents a “third culture” (drawing upon Snow, 1959) between the sciences and the humanities, capable of widespread innovation and alliances between long-estranged knowledge communities. Kelly, a writer on technology and culture and co-founding editor of *Wired*, argues that if science pursues the truth of the universe and art expresses the human condition, “nerd culture” is about the pursuit of novelty. It’s “a pop culture based in technology, for technology,” seeking experiences that elicit wide-eyed wonder; “While science and art generate truth and beauty, technology generates opportunities” (Kelly, 1998, p. 993). Clayton, meanwhile, sees “geek culture” spreading through literature and popular culture at large: “Techies, hackers, and geeks have become prominent figures in our cultural imagination” and science-fiction moves “from the margins to a central place in the entertainment industries” (Clayton, 2002, p. 811); this, in turn, teaches people how to think about technology in the new economy. These accounts remain generally speculative or theoretical, however, with ‘nerd’ or ‘geek’ invoked more as conceptual constructs than as evident in social realities.

Offering a research-based perspective to link geeky media interests with technological expertise, J.A. McArthur (2008) describes geeks as a digitally-located “youth subculture.” According to McArthur, this group expresses its style not through music or dress, but through online avatars and discussions of various traditionally geeky

media including sci-fi, anime, and comics, as well as the celebration of their own tech-savvy in matters such as hacking. Organizing on the web thus presents “a solution to their lack of affiliation” (McArthur, 2008, p. 69). Nevertheless, locating geeks entirely as an online subculture raises questions about whether this actually represents a “lack of affiliation” in their offline lives, whether their identity as geeks continues after the usual limited term for youthful “resistance,” or whether they do in fact practice any of the classically recognized stylistic or behavioral tropes of subcultures typically recognized in interpersonal interaction.

Some relatively recent books have explored multifaceted linkages between different concepts of geeks in greater depth, though still suggest room for additional theoretical consideration. David Anderegg’s (2007) *Nerds: Who They Are and Why We Need More of Them* suggests that anti-intellectualism among kids not only subjects nerds to harassment, but dissuades those who are determined not to seem nerdy from technical and scientific careers, putting the U.S. at an economic disadvantage. It is a connection worth exploring, though Anderegg stops short of suggesting that geek identity could last into adulthood, implying that those who survive high school probably just go on to be rich anyway.

In some ways, the closest that has ever been offered to a comprehensive, multifaceted history and examination of geek culture is Benjamin Nugent’s (2008) *American Nerd: The Story of My People*. Nugent traces the history of anti-intellectualism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century gentry, locates certain nerd interests in terms of Asian stereotypes, describes the appeal of stereotypically nerdy fashion among “faux-nerd” hipsters, and offers his own memoirs of life a young nerd in Amherst, Massachusetts, to lend a

personal dimension. It represents a wide-ranging and often insightful analysis, though as a work presented for popular-press distribution, it lacks some of the theoretical precision (and extensive citation) that academics are more likely to obsess over. Notably, defining “nerd-dom” and “nerd subcultures” in general as characterized by (the affectation or inherent quality of) “systemic thinking” (p. 149) and a common attraction to “the appeal of a heavily rule-bound universe” (p. 184), from *Lord of the Rings* to computer programming and beyond, collapses a diverse range of audiences, subcultures, and professionals into a rather narrow personality characteristic. Moreover, assuming that the hipster represents a “faux-nerd” closes off inquiry into how the new conception of the geek as ‘chic’ may be a relevant aspect to how many self-identified geeks negotiate their own identities as “authentic” today.

Between these and the other various perspectives considered in this chapter, we see a few different cultural constructions feeding into the contemporary notion of the geek. As early as elementary school, people are labeled as nerds and geeks, but have no ‘geek culture’ to draw upon for positive identity meanings. Some remain stigmatized into high school, though a diversified system of crowds and resistive subcultures offers a place to find social belonging and personal meaning. Meanwhile, the broader cultural understanding of computer geeks has slowly begun to shift from the “ugly” techie to something more inclusive and positive. This group also sees substantial overlap with fans of science-fiction and other stereotypically geeky media, though this overlap is more than just an extension of geeks’ involvement with machines. Fans experience similar stigmas and share similar values, but find sources of pride and a shifting understanding of geek

identity as their media interests find more mainstream relevance and success. This wider relevance and success attributed to science-fiction by the authors cited above may appear to be simply an extension of the rising status of the computer geek, though this does not account as neatly for those who do not see technological pursuits as central to their geekiness. From all of this, however, we can understand geek culture as something that cannot be unproblematically tied to a single medium or demographic (whether computers, sci-fi, games, etc.); as contextually performed rather than constant or essential (such as in “tapping your inner fanboy”); and as potentially rife with contradictions (e.g., enthusiasm vs. shame), which geeks may even be aware of themselves.

#### Geek Culture and Collective Identity

As we see here, the figure of the geek has been conceptualized in multiple different ways, with occasional recognition of the varied connotations behind this concept. A student can “be nerdy” for long enough to catch up on homework, and office workers can set up their “geekospheres” of stuff they love around their cubicles (McCarthy, 2004). As ‘geekiness’ becomes more associated with normalized (or even admirable) behaviors, it is more commonly accepted as a category of activity – not just a reject, a fan, or a techie, but a way of performing.

But what about those who don’t stop seeing themselves as geeky, even when they’re not *acting* geeky? In the research discussed above, we see some people describing themselves and their social circles as geeks, implying a category of self identification that may last longer than the moment of “being nerdy” or “geeking out.” There is no one correct way to define ‘geek,’ but on top of the idea that anyone can exhibit

characteristically geeky behavior, a key way to understand this concept is as a basis for collective identity commonly described by members as “geek culture,” “geekdom,” or “the geek community.”

### *Terms of Collective Identity*

Why not just describe geek identity in terms of other categories of identity? It may seem possible, even desirable, to define geekdom based on any of the “holy trinity” of identity discourse (Appiah & Gates, 1995, p. 1): gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, and class (see also Cerulo, 1997). And, indeed, these are useful categories of identity to consider when considering geeks and geek culture, as they link up with the geek image in ways that color the way people understand geeks and stereotypically geeky pursuits, such as work in IT. Nevertheless, ascribing narrowly essentialized definitions to ‘geek’ according to just one such dimension – even as we recognize that the identities it is supposed to be based on are culturally constructed – potentially muddles our analyses and narrows our likely scope.

Consider some issues in coding ‘geek’ as male. It’s true that groups like NerdGrrls! (Kendall, 1999b) imply that geeks are popularly understood to be male, but when kids and teens mock each other as nerds without much apparent regard for gender (Bucholtz, 1999; Chin & Phillips, 2005; Kinney, 1993), we (and those who respond by claiming the term for their own use) ought to consider what non-gender-specific characteristics and/or points of identification inform this. Popular crowds may denigrate nerds on the basis of their dubious heterosexuality (Pascoe, 2007), and this likely influences geeks’ self-confidence and self-understanding, but accepting this definition as



the analytical basis for geek identity reifies the construction of those who first apply the term over those who ultimately accept it.

Consider, too, how equating 'geek' with "white" or even "hyperwhite" can be problematic (Bucholtz, 2001; Eglash, 2002; Kendall, forthcoming). For one thing, grounding the discussion of nerds' whiteness in their portrayals in popular culture (e.g., Kendall, 1999b, forthcoming) may tell us more about media industries and marketing than about nerds. Noting that most of the cast of *The Big Bang Theory* may not reveal much about the construction of the nerd compared to other cultural figures when just about everybody is white on *Friends*, too. More to the point, however, the nerd image is also strongly aligned with Asian American and Asian immigrant portrayals in American stereotypes and popular culture (Eglash, 2002; Kibria, 1999; Kim & Yeh, 2002; Min & Kim, 2000; Pyke & Dang, 2003). It is fair to point out that Asian Americans are considered the "model minority" by mainstream white standards and thus theoretically aligned with a certain kind of whiteness (Bucholtz, 2001; Eglash, 2002), but by relating all racial stereotypes back to whiteness we run the risk of codifying that as the "default" value in our own theoretical discourse. It is crucial to recognize that the historical construction of geek identity presents a greater potential for conflict with some racial identities than others, but to define it solely as a subset of 'race' presents us with more analytical issues than solutions.

Might it be wiser, then, to define geek cultures in terms of a specific media consumption habit or preference? Again, this misses certain complexities. Fans and media audiences are worth studying in their own right, and geeks' media consumption habits are worth studying as well, but geek identity is not essentially based on any

particular medium. Some kids come to call themselves geeks well before they learn to use a computer (and at least one of my interviewees never bothered to get a computer at all). Moreover, as stereotypically geeky media become more commonly used, there is likely a great deal of overlap between the products used by geeks and the products used by those who would make no claim to the term. The media enthusiasts characterized as geeks in fan studies have frequently been characterized as particularly active audiences – not just “consumers,” but “producers” of their own media and meanings. But not even the majority of self-identified geeks are likely to be involved in this kind of fandom on a regular basis. The development and use of media are key, I believe, in understanding geek cultures, but perhaps not in defining geeks as particularly “productive” consumers.

Defining geeks in terms of a close relationship with computers and machines (Kendall, 1999b; Turkle, 1984) presents its own problems. Not only are nerds not all necessarily technically inclined – a sufficiently relevant point in itself – but, as Kendall (forthcoming) concedes, we might be surprised to see that ‘nerd’ has actually grown more commonly used and retained some negative coding even as computers become more ubiquitous. Rather than suggesting that this represents a persistent discomfort with machines themselves, a more holistic view of how the nerd/geek is constructed can shed more light onto these stereotypes and identities.

To be clear, I don’t mean to suggest we should ignore any such gendered, racialized, or media-specific dimensions of the ‘geek’/’nerd’ concept; we should certainly continue to analyze how such popular understandings influence how people understand their identity. Rather, I want to argue that none of these meanings may be sufficient in and of itself to represent the entirety of this identity. As I will show throughout this

dissertation, gender, race, and other personal and cultural identifiers powerfully inform what it means to be a geek, or a certain *kind* of geek, in interaction with other experiences and cultural identifiers.

### *Conditions of Geek Culture*

Within all this, we might see a set of conditions that have enabled the emergence and gradually more widespread visibility of 'geek culture,' largely coincident with the changing usage of the terms 'geek' and 'nerd' themselves. While 'geek' dates back well before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it only took on its connotations of bookish un-fun in the 1950s, around the same time 'nerd' was appearing in print, coincident with the boom in postwar consumerism. Again, the comprehensive history of the geek has yet to be written, but we do know that certain developments in economics and communication correspond with the development of 'geek culture.'

High school attendance came to be seen as a necessary in the Depression, and teenage markets began to be tapped in earnest in the period following the Second World War. Prior to this, the expenses of entertainment kept most teens from "running with the crowd" (Palladino, 1997, p. 10). But as everyone (theoretically) came to be able to follow popular music and afford stylish dress, this may have kicked off the prevailing characteristics of high school life that continue today: a consumer-culture driven caste system, with freedom from exclusion and harassment only guaranteed through listening to the right music and wearing the right clothes (Bucholtz, 1999; Kinney, 1993; Milner, 2004).

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw the emergence of specialty publication markets and fan conventions devoted to science-fiction, amateur engineering, and comic books. As noted earlier, comics came under intense scrutiny in the 1950s (Nyberg, 1998; Sabin, 1993), but even SF fans considered themselves sufficiently apart from the “mainstream” by the ‘50s such that not long after ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ came into their present usage, science-fiction fandom coined ‘mundane’ (no later than 1959) to refer to someone outside fandom (Coppa, 2006, p. 43). The term later percolated into “media fandom,” which is considered to have formed as an offshoot from science-fiction fandom in the ‘60s, as *Star Trek* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* brought in a waves of new members. The zine writers and convention leaders driving media fandom at this time tended to be women who were “better educated than most, heavy readers, and scientifically literate” (Coppa, 2006, p. 45). Fan cultures continued to grow (and divide) as comics publishers introduced new superhero titles in the ‘60s and science-fiction and fantasy increasingly found their way onto television and into film.

Meanwhile, around when ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ took on their present connotations in the ‘50s, MIT students initiated an “Ugliest Man on Campus” tradition in self-deprecating recognition of stereotypes of engineers. Over the course of the next decade, the ideas for what would become ARPANET and eventually the internet came to be formulated, giving rise to (almost first of all) a place to discuss science-fiction (Thomas, 2002; Turkle, 1984). As use of the internet and its predecessors has become more normalized over the years, going online to connect to people with shared hobbies and interests has become one of its most popular uses (M. Griffith & Fox, 2007) – but the geeks were there first, and maintain a strong presence.

In addition to the more broadly claimed uses of ‘geek’ as a purposeful kind of performance, the result of such conditions may be understood as leading to the development of geek cultures as “imagined communities,” to use Benedict Anderson’s (1983) term, of more deeply self-defined geeks and nerds who recognize a sense of collective identity and shared values. Anderson used this concept to describe how nationalism could develop: as a particular “style” of imagined community, made possible by a convergence of certain factors, including the technological and communication development of “print-capitalism” and resentment toward European elites. Technically, according to Anderson, any group of people you imagine yourself to be a part of, but aren’t in direct contact with, constitutes an “imagined community,” and so this term has been commonly (perhaps even sloppily) applied to virtual environments in general (Brabazon, 2001). Such applications of the term lose some analytical utility in their vagueness, and may even be better understood as “local” communities given that people are “regulars” in the same spots on the net, who come to recognize each other (Bury, 2003). I refer to geek cultures as imagined communities quite purposefully, however, specifically to recall this distinction between the local and the “imagined,” and to remind us that a variety of social, historical, and technological conditions have made geek cultures possible.

Firstly, having a geek identity does not necessarily imply membership or participation in *local* geek communities. Plenty of people are happy to identify as part of a “geek culture” and to interact with the material objects of geeky media regularly, but may not necessarily want anything to do with other geeks outside of their immediate group of friends. Quite simply, many geeks are happy not seeing each other most of the

time. They understand other geeks to be a combination of smelly losers and potentially friendly strangers. This means that the establishment of collective identity (and not just an individual's personal identity) relies on some other mode of inferring commonality and drawing upon shared sources of meaning.

This brings us to the second reason I invoke imagined communities in describing geeks' collective identity, which is the role that communication media play in spreading and maintaining a sense of shared culture. Anderson describes nationalism as dependent on newspapers in a common language, spreading the sense that all members exist together in time. James Carey echoes this sentiment in his description of the "ritual view of communication," which is "directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (Carey, 1989, p. 18). As with Anderson, Carey offers the example of the newspaper, whose content "changes little but is intrinsically satisfying" (Carey, 1989, p. 21).

Geek cultures have been able to spread thanks to revolutions in communication media, with a sense of commonality boosted by resentment not toward European elites, but the construction of 'the jock,' 'the cheerleader,' and other imagined enemies belonging to 'the mainstream.' The rise of fan markets and communities, drawing on symbols associated with youthful fantasy, has given geeks a way to maintain their society in time (so to speak), both on the macro level (through the 20<sup>th</sup> century) and on the micro level (from a geek's childhood into adulthood). And while the economic import of the internet has often been proclaimed (with some truth) to have rescued the *image* of the geek, the way in which it has helped develop the *collective identity* of the geek is to show

nerds that they are not alone. Fan conventions and tech hobbyist groups have long served this purpose, but the internet has allowed enthusiasts to circulate symbols more widely, more quickly, more cheaply, and from further apart than ever before. One no longer even needs to be the especially involved enthusiast who goes to conventions in order to feel a part of geekdom, and those who do frequent such gatherings can be deeply engaged in geeky pursuits on a daily basis.

Seeing comments on certain blogs, seeing particular websites as commonly driving hyperlinked discussions, even seeing search traffic stats for your own website – are all analogous to seeing your fellow Americans reading the same newspaper as you, knowing that we share a sort of common timeline. Moreover, the discussions of popular interests in online environments confirms and lends validation to the suspicion that plenty of other geeks are reading just as nerdy comics, watching just as nerdy shows, and playing just as nerdy games as you. The symbols of geek culture become a sort of language of their own, defining a common basis for this imagined community in a way analogous to how Anderson suggested that a language, spread through mass media, helped establish a sense of a nation. Nerds tell a story of themselves as smart, creative, playful, stigmatized, but worthy of rescue (or even “revenge”).

But geek cultures are not nations, and so geek identity is not nationalism. It is a different style of imagined community. Particularly relevant is the fact that geek cultures are presumed to be geographically dispersed, and potentially united not just by comradeship, but by a shared sense of “otherness” in local space; not everyone on the train or at the office is going to share your geek identity, and even if any do, they may not show it. Therefore, a more contextually bound understanding of identity is helpful, of the

sort explored by Erving Goffman (1959) and the symbolic interactionist tradition (as suggested by Kinney, 1993). This is an approach that recognizes that a person may have access to multiple, coexistent dimensions of identity – African-American, mother, database programmer – but that certain aspects of the self emerge or recede depending on what is considered contextually appropriate.

This matter of context is key, as I will demonstrate throughout this dissertation, because the way people participate in geekdom today is strongly dependent on socially insulated contexts – that is, spaces where people can “geek out” with relatively little chance of encountering those suspected to be less geeky. By “insulated,” I don’t mean to imply “insular.” As I mean it, an insular context is one in which visitors are actively kept out, such as in the common practice of video game companies who hire only people who have developed completed games already, systematically discouraging involvement from other talented artists and designers from outside gamer subcultures. An insulated context, however, is one which provides some sense of “protection,” almost privacy, such as an event or site known or promoted to only a segment of people. Socially insulated spaces don’t necessarily exclude outsiders, but they don’t necessarily invite outsiders to join, either.

I realize that in describing ‘geek’ as a category of identity, I run the risk of reifying that which is constructed, that which is not essential or inherent to those who call themselves geeks. To be more analytically precise (in terms suggested by Brubaker & Cooper, 2000), ‘geek’ is a form of *categorical self identification* which frequently springs from *external identification* by one’s peers as a child, and implies a sense of *commonality* with other geeks, if not necessarily a desire for *connectedness* beyond one’s own group of



geeky friends. I believe it is important to describe geek cultures in terms of “collective identity,” however, potentially butting up against other dimensions of identity rather than (or in addition to) growing out of them, because this reflects how so many geeks see themselves and make sense of one another.

As such, I refuse to give a straight answer to “what’s the difference between a geek and a nerd?”; I’ll name my dissertation “geek cultures” in the plural. I’ll remind my reader (and myself) that the boundaries self-proclaimed geeks draw between one another may represent more than one “imagined community,” and that ‘geek culture’ is no more accurately totalizing than ‘Christian America.’ I believe that to back away any further from the way my subjects understand themselves, however, would obscure the purpose of my analysis in drawing attention to the multiple factors involved in constructing a sense of cultural belonging that exists alongside the “holy trinity,” and potentially transcends more limiting or temporary concepts such as “tribes” (Maffesoli, 1996) or “youth subcultures” (Hebdige, 1979; McArthur, 2008).

In approaching geek cultures in this way, I hope to suggest more broadly relevant implications for how we study collective identity and the potential role of communication in its formation. How can media, for instance, inform the way we understand identities in terms of constructions of masculinity, femininity, and also – as will turn out to be relevant in the chapters that follow – *maturity*? And while we know that the news (B. Anderson, 1983) and internet technologies (Miller & Slater, 2001) may be particularly suited to constructing and maintaining a sense of national identity, even in diaspora, what other sorts of imagined communities and collective identities might be arising in the wake of the internet and the (potentially insulated) contexts it allows? How else do media

cultures display their interests when their intent may not be resistance or conspicuous consumption, but assimilation, or even sort of *inconspicuous* consumption?

This doesn't mean giving up the ways we have studied identity, but expanding upon them. I would be remiss in ignoring these in making my own arguments, as there are indeed geek subcultures/tribes (as we'll see in the example of nerdcore hip-hop discussed in Chapter 6), and the media we understand to be geeky can be described as having personal or psychological benefits for audiences (as we'll see in the examples of games suited to "geek thinking" in Chapter 4). I refer to geek cultures in the terms of collective identity, however, to show how they can be deeply established, years in the making, potentially enduring, and "bigger" than any one medium, product, or demographic.

Geek cultures, then, represent great, unwieldy things, but as we will see, they describe sincere feelings among those who call themselves geeks. In the next chapter, I will attempt to explain the methodological process that led me to look at geek cultures in this way, and how I attempted to follow 'geek' and 'nerd' through multiple social contexts and sites of meaning.

#### Notes for Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> As part of an exercise in demonstrating this and keeping track of the many different variations people use to distinguish between these terms, I started a web page just to keep track of (and link to) different definitions of geek and nerd. It is presently one of the most frequently visited pages on my site, primarily from keyword searches for variations on the phrase "geeks vs. nerds." I suspect it leapt up in search rankings after a link from one of *Financial Policy's* bloggers.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

Where does one find geeks, and how should one study them? Geeks have no permanent settlements, and even resist simple definitions that would make it easier to choose specific sites or individuals to study. As specified in the previous chapter, not all who interact with a “geek culture” (as an imagined community) necessarily want much to do with “geek communities” (as local formations). Even those who do interact with other geeks do so in a context that takes them to a number of sites and media in their daily lives. “I’m a classic geek,” one interviewee told me, identifying a range of media interests that seem to have no formal association to one another whatsoever, and which lead him to dozens of different websites, conventions, and activities. The internet makes it particularly easy for geeks to both become more constantly immersed in the discourses of a particular branch of geekdom day in and day out, and to sample novelties from a vast array of sources. Blogs like Boing Boing and Slashdot assume their readerships potentially include hardware hackers, comics fans, gamers, data privacy activists, open source developers, and more.

Determining where to locate “geek culture” thus presents certain challenges. Some locations do come to mind for particular place-based ethnographic opportunities, such as Silicon Valley workplaces, or certain notoriously geeky computer science departments (Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Turkle, 1984). I worried, however, that such locales would give a skewed sense of geek identity, focusing on how the phrase is used in technical or professional contexts. Moreover, most self-identified geeks are unlikely to spend their whole lives living in areas with such a high concentration of other geeks. Locating a study entirely online presents another option (McArthur, 2008), though may

run similar risks of selecting only certain technically inclined individuals, and raises questions of whether geek identity and membership in geek communities begins and ends on the internet.

The classic assumption that ethnography ought to be practiced in a single location over an extended period of time is well suited to populations that can actually be co-located in physical space for a substantial duration. Not all populations and phenomena, however, can be described as such. “Sites of modernity” can present particular problems for the traditional ethnographer; as Ulf Hannerz asks, “What do you do when ‘your people’ spend hours alone at a desk, perhaps concentrating on a computer screen?” (Hannerz, 2003, p. 211). George Marcus thus identifies an alternative mode of investigation, which “moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (Marcus, 1995, p. 96). This is not to say that traditional participant observation has no place in such ethnographies, but simply that it is sometimes necessary to question certain assumptions about effective research practice and integrate additional modes of experience into the ethnographic project.

At the outset of my study, I had not made up my mind about what I was looking to find, preferring an approach more characteristic of “grounded theory” that would allow for a gradual narrowing of focus and solidifying of objectives (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The sole defining characteristic of the study was to be the use of the terminology in question itself – ‘geek,’ ‘nerd,’ and the increasingly common implication I kept hearing and reading that these are somehow bonded through a ‘geek culture’ or ‘geek community.’ These terms have long been vaguely defined, and I have since found them

to also be highly contested, even as (or perhaps largely because) many who use them aren't aware of such disputes. I was searching for a "narrative of the geek," if one was to be found, to corroborate or challenge our popularly understood ideas of this figure: one who is picked on at school, reads about spaceships and superheroes, and may ultimately get "revenge" through financial (and thus perhaps sexual) success. This popular narrative is even recognized in our academic literature, in a sense, as the 'geek' and 'nerd' themselves have so rarely been the stated object of critical and/or empirical study, but rather have come up mostly in passing on the way to describing other matters (as we see in the previous chapter). My plan was to "follow the metaphor" rather than select an individual group or place of focus (Marcus, 1995, p. 108).<sup>1</sup>

To get a sense of a broad range of geek experiences, I thus chose to pursue a long-term, multi-method, and multi-site project. I have studied within and between conventions and campuses, bars and blogs, by blending the online with the offline, lingering from anywhere between a few minutes and a few months. Rather than representing an attempt to get at the totality of the 'geek/nerd' concept, I believe this is a method that explicitly acknowledges my own subjectivity as a researcher – not strictly an "auto-ethnography," per se, so much as an attempt to make sense of a phenomenon that may benefit from consideration beyond the level of locally-sited community, rather than imposing my own boundaries for the sake of manageability or tradition.

This approach should not be understood as a comparative analysis as has often been historically conceived in anthropology; it is not a cross-cultural study between discretely defined objects of comparison, such as two potentially comparable locales away from one's own home (Wolcott, 1999). That said, a certain degree of "comparison"

is inherent to a multi-sited approach that attempts to grapple with an object whose observable dimensions are not presumed to be known in advance: “any ethnography of such an object will have a comparative dimension that is integral to it, in the form of juxtapositions of phenomena that conventionally have appeared to be (or conceptually have been kept) ‘worlds apart’ ” (Marcus, 1995, p. 102). Ulf Hannerz describes multi-site ethnographies as characterized by drawing on “some problem, some formulation of a topic, which is significantly *translocal*, not to be confined within some single place” (Hannerz, 2003, p. 206). In his own study of the practice of foreign news correspondence itself, for instance, Hannerz could note how work differed for foreign correspondents in Tokyo versus Jerusalem. In my own study, I was able to observe how the readers of multiple different blogs constructed and reacted to the same bit of news, or what specific activities constituted “geeking out” – a common phrase for visibly indulging in geeky interests – between fan and professional conventions.

In addition, a physically dispersed approach may be more effective in some ways at getting direct access to subjects who belong to professional and cultural elites. Along these lines, Gusterson advocates an approach characterized by “polymorphous engagement”: “interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, not just in local communities, and sometimes in virtual form,” as well as “collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways” (Gusterson, 2008, p. 116). Geeks, potentially constituting a technological elite, may allow for both more manageable and more rich interaction if allowed to communicate through mediated channels other than face-to-face interaction.

There are drawbacks to this multi-site, polymorphous engagement, of course. I face an unavoidable limitation of the depth with which I could examine any given site, especially those which only “existed” in physical form for a short time every year, if even that frequently. Would that I had more time to get to know Bob, the self-described “invalid” whom I met while auditioning for *Beauty and the Geek*; Rosemary, the South by Southwest volunteer who admitted that she’d always thought of herself as a geek, but didn’t usually describe herself as such; or the fellow whose name I never even learned, who sat down on a beanbag chair beside me at the Penny Arcade Expo and asked if he could join in on a game of *Tetris*. Had I chosen a single site, however, I believe it would have reduced the likelihood of getting the diversity of perspectives on ‘the geek’ that I got. This is especially a concern in studying phenomena like geek cultures, as selecting a single site runs a greater risk of disproportionately encountering the geeks who are more isolated (as with certain insular online communities) or the geeks who are especially outgoing (as with “Nerd Nite” gatherings in bars).

Choosing to study such broadly defined phenomena from multi-site approaches implies another drawback in the potentially reduced claim to totality: I cannot purport to explain the entirety of “the geek life,” perhaps for my inability to implant myself in a geek settlement for five years and learn its ways inside and out. Nevertheless, I should also make clear I make no claim to “trying to study the ‘entire culture and social life’ ” of any of my sites (Hannerz, 2003, p. 208). My goal was to get a sense of how the concept of the ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ fit into social and cultural life more broadly, suspecting (by common sense if nothing else) that ‘geekdom’ is unlikely to comprise any given person’s entire social reality. As in other multi-sited ethnographies, this represents my own “built-

in assumptions about segmented life, where some aspect (work, ethnicity or something else) is most central to the line of inquiry, and other aspects are less so” (Hannerz, 2003, p. 209).

Finally, in discussing the limitations of my methodological approach, I must acknowledge that there’s still a lot of “geek culture” that I’m not touching upon, largely due to practical concerns of scope (and budget). An analysis of how geeks see themselves and one another (more so than an analysis on how geeks are popularly understood, perhaps) could incorporate additional consideration of American fascination with Japanese pop culture, for instance, and the construction of the American “otaku” (Allison, 2006; Schodt, 1986, 1996). Moreover, this is not a *history* of geek culture so much as one snapshot of what it looks like now, with some reflection on relatively recent developments that may indicate how it got to where it is. (As discussed in the previous chapter, the comprehensive, multi-interest history of geek culture has yet to be written.)

Despite such limitations, I believe that this dissertation presents the most fully conceived conception of ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ culture and identity in academic research. I believe it also offers potential implications for the study of dimensions of identity whose performance may vary strongly based on context, acknowledging that while different modes of communication are not necessarily equivalent in the ways they enable socializing, culture and interaction may take place within and between mediated and physical sites alike. I will now explain in greater detail the combination of methods utilized in this study: participant observation between multiple sites, including “thick description” of everyday events (Geertz, 1973); interviews and by phone and email; and



additional analysis of the cultural texts consumed and produced by self-proclaimed geeks, including “virtual” observation, participation, and textual production online.

### Participant Observation

My approach to participant observation was to select a handful of sites for physically grounded research, in addition to treating serendipitously discovered situations as research sites as appropriate (with field notebook quite nearly always on hand). The initial sites and objects I selected to study were chosen as often as possible for being explicitly described as “geeky” or “nerdy” by a substantial portion of their members or founders, but I also approached some events and materials that I suspected may be described as geeky but could not know until getting a closer look. These included events and materials related to science-fiction, video and hobbyist gaming, comics, and computers and electronics broadly speaking. Even if not everyone in attendance at Comic Con International openly subscribes to a sense of “geek identity” (and not all of my interviewees did), for instance, those who do understand themselves as such still consider this a major event of “geek culture.” My purpose in attending, then, was partly to get a sense of how these concepts are constructed more generally, but also to give me a chance to interact with people to get a sense of whether (and in what ways) they considered themselves geeky.

### *Conventions & Festivals*

I have occasionally found it appropriate to rely on my own understanding of geek cultures in choosing sites for study. This means going to places where I suspect that

people will be “geeking out” especially openly: conventions and festivals dedicated to fandom, technology, and gaming. At such events, self-identified geeks may feel like the majority, showing off their geekiness for one another and for themselves, as suggested by the typical attire of t-shirts bearing pop culture references and esoteric jokes. I focused especially on conventions hosting more than just one stereotypically geeky interest, actively seeking conventions that were billed as “geeky” or “nerdy” whenever possible. I also attempted to attend events representing a range in sizes, from small, local gatherings to national events with crowds in the hundreds of thousands, ensuring that I was not focusing entirely on anomalous social phenomena.

Conventions and festivals can often be fruitful sites for participant observation and informal talk. Having background knowledge of fandom and having paid all my registration fees, I did not need to deal with guides or gatekeepers as might be expected in other ethnographic settings. I attended dressed like any attendee, in jeans, sneakers, and casual shirts. At conventions, I split my time between attending scheduled panels and events, wandering through well-trafficked hallways, waiting in line for long periods of time, and circling the entire exhibitor hall, which can range from a small room to about three miles of booths. I kept field notes by hand in small notebooks, then transcribed them and elaborated on them on a laptop computer, typically within 12–48 hours. I used a small, point-and-shoot digital camera to take pictures of crowds, exhibitors’ booths, ads, people in costume (both passing by and posing), and anything else that seems either particularly common or particularly noteworthy. These photos were meant to help jog my own memory later, and appear occasionally here in the dissertation itself as examples of geek culture in action.

My process of choosing panels, events, and games to attend at different events was not an exact science, but I did approach with certain goals in mind. Two events I attended – Comic Con International and the Penny Arcade Expo – were so large that I was able to attend twice and focus on entirely different content each time. I particularly sought out events noted as “geeky” or similarly labeled. The time between panels and other scheduled happenings offered opportunities for informal talk with people nearby, while the panels and events themselves offered a glimpse at how fans interact with pros, what sorts of questions enthusiasts want answered, and how various media professionals approach their businesses. In some panels, I asked questions I wanted answered for my own analysis. I don’t think that the responses people give on stage during a panel necessarily represent their innermost feelings, but smaller panels in particular present a more intimate atmosphere, and even publicly given responses sometimes offer insights in terms of how people understand ‘geekiness’ as it applies to their cultural context.

I visited some events by myself, and some with a friend or colleague who had been briefed as to my purpose in attending to act as a “second set of eyes,” calling my attention to things I may have missed (and reminding me to take breaks to eat). I found that I also had better luck striking up conversation with convention attendees when I had someone else with me, perhaps because just having a companion at all was a way of vouching that I was not a super-nerdy loner. Even when attending alone, however, I was sometimes able to make connections with other attendees with whom I spent an extended portion of the day. Most of the people I had extended conversations with were the people standing next to me in line, sitting next to me between panels, or bumping into me at more social events. These forms of interaction are valuable in their own right, but also

offer a number of opportunities to seek potential interviewees to follow up with after the convention.

In all, I attended eight events over ten visits between 2006 and 2009, which included revisiting two of the larger events for a second visit.

*Comic Con International.* The San Diego Comic Con (or just “Comic Con,” as it is commonly called) is widely known among attendees as “Nerd Prom” or “Nerd Vegas.” Recent years have seen an increasing number of media products represented alongside comics at the con, such as panels and booths for video games, models and action figures, Lego, and television shows and movies with cult followings, such as *Snakes on a Plane* and *Transformers* (even before the recent film adaptations). Posters for Comic Con 2007 advertised it not as comics-specific, but as “Celebrating the popular arts.” Comic Con International attendance has increased as it has evolved, and 2006 saw the con’s first sell-out day on Saturday with 114,000 attendees. I visited the con in 2006 and 2007; it is so large and diverse that I was able to attend completely different panels on each visit (focusing primarily on comics, video games, and small fan meetings in 2006, and television, movies, and major headlining events in 2007). This offered me access to a wide variety of interviewees and opportunities for observation.

*The Penny Arcade Expo.* PAX is a video game convention hosted by the creators of Penny Arcade, an online comic strip about video games and geek culture. As noted in the introduction, the creators refer to it as a convention for geeks, drawing musical acts who rap about *Star Wars*, sing about zombies, and play covers of songs from old games. One of the earliest webcomics to survive the 1990s with a major following, Penny Arcade draws a readership of about four million readers, and PAX continues to grow

each year. By 2005, it had 9,000 attendees; by 2006, the first year I attended for research, it had 18,000 attendees. For 2007, it relocated to a larger convention center, and again roughly doubled in attendance. That year's keynote was delivered by Wil Wheaton, a former *Star Trek* actor turned blogger, video game reviewer and voice actor, and memoir writer of books such as *Just a Geek*. This convention is also large enough that I attended for two years (August, 2006 and 2007), seeking panels and interviewees related to different genres of gaming and science-fiction interests.

*South by Southwest Interactive.* SXSWi is an offshoot of the well-established South by Southwest Music and Film festivals that happen around the same time each year in Austin. The SXSWi "Frequently Asked Questions" page notes that the event is for "uber-geeks and digital creatives," hosting panels on web development, graphic design, and business technology, with a new special track for video games. Panels included such topics as "Self-Marketing for the Freelance Web Geek" and "Political Activism for Geeks." The 2007 Interactive Festival saw about 6,500 paying attendees for panels, and the Film/Interactive trade show saw about 12,000 attendees.

*The Consumer Electronics Show.* CES is a professional event showcasing a wide array of electronics and entertainment systems, such as televisions, gaming systems, and cell phones. I selected CES as a site to visit because I had read about events that presumed a sort of geeky overlap between audiences, including a nerdcore hip-hop show and a parody of the television show *Lost* screened to an audience of "hundreds of appreciative nerds" (Chen, 2007). I attended in 2008. Annual attendance is estimated at about 140,000 visitors.

*Regional fan conventions.* I also attended two smaller fantasy and science-fiction conventions in 2007 and 2009, each located in large, Eastern cities in the U.S. To protect the anonymity of attendees, these are not referred to specifically by name in this dissertation because of their smaller attendance figures and more intimate nature. One of these events was nominally a comic book convention, though featured dealers and panels related to science-fiction television shows such as *Star Trek* and cult horror films. The other event, renamed “TerraCon” in one anecdote featured later in the dissertation, was nominally a science-fiction convention, featuring very similar content but also some explicitly “geeky” offerings, such as an entire track of panels categorized as “Geekery.”

*The Come Out and Play Festival.* Come Out and Play is one of two events I attended that deviates from the typical convention structure of a panels, exhibitors, and parties. An annual festival of “street games,” “pervasive games,” and “ubiquitous games,” its games take place in physical space but are often based on rule sets and aesthetic approaches more akin to computer games than sports. I attended the Festival to shoot an ethnographic film on the event itself (figuring that footage of people running around the streets dressed as Pac-man<sup>2</sup> would be worthwhile in itself), and found many attendees describing themselves and their involvement as “geeky.” I attended in 2006, the first year of the Festival, when attendance was estimated by one organizer as at least 500.

*The MIT Mystery Hunt.* The Massachusetts Institute of Technology is arguably a more permanent location for “geek culture” than many other sites described here. The campus store sells t-shirts, pocket protectors, and decals for car windows emblazoned with the MIT seal and the words “Nerd Pride.” A local bar, the Miracle of Science, features stools, tabletops, and chalkboards of the sort one might find in a science lab. The

university has a long-standing tradition of pranks (often called “hacks”) celebrated for their cleverness and whimsy, such as placing a replica of a police car on the roof of a campus building. Dating back to 1980, the MIT Mystery Hunt offers one annual tradition that is open to participants beyond the campus community. Several hundreds of participants gather in teams on campus and telecommute to solve puzzles hosted online, and the winning team is charged with planning the following year’s Hunt. I attended in 2008 as part of a team of about 20–30.

### *Local Sites & Gatherings*

In addition to planning visits to relatively large cultural events held annually, I encountered opportunities to attend events affording interaction with geeks on a more local level. As with the events described above, I brought along a small field notebook and pen, and transcribed notes afterward as I was able.

*CommuniDIY.* An irregularly scheduled local gathering for tinkers and hardware hackers, CommuniDIY is (a pseudonym for) an event that combines guest speakers with hands-on projects. This represents burgeoning and a relatively widespread scene for such events across the country, such as those associated with Dorkbot and *Make* magazine. I attended CommuniDIY once in 2007, though encountered other attendees informally at other geek-themed parties and events on other occasions not described here.

*Nerd Nite.* Founded by Harvard graduate students and hosted by a bar in Jamaica Plain, Nerd Nite sees attendees sipping beer and watching presentations about other attendees’ nerdy occupations, followed by a performance by a rock band. (To my surprise, most people didn’t stick around for the band.) Attendees can stay apprised of

the next irregularly scheduled meeting by an email list. Unlike other small-scale events described here, I did not rename this event because it is so rare as to be practically impossible to anonymize, but attendance for many is nevertheless more transitory; many attend in small groups, rather than in the small community of familiar faces represented by TerraCon and CommuniDIY. I attended Nerd Nite twice in 2007 and 2008.

*Courses.* In 2007, I learned of two first-year writing courses for undergraduates which explicitly mentioned “geeks” and “nerds” in their course titles. I asked their instructors for their permission to sit in occasionally, and to ask their students if this is something they would be comfortable allowing. Each class happily invited me to visit, where I sat in at least once (and for several more sessions, in the other class’s case), discussed my research topic with students, and took notes on presentations and class discussions about their own “geeky” hobbies and interests.

*Concerts.* I attended several concerts for performers commonly known or promoted as part of “geek music” scenes, such as Jonathan Coulton, Freezepop, the Minibosses, Uncle Monsterface, and Harry and the Potters. In addition, I also attended the evening concerts at the Penny Arcade Expo, which included performances by nerdcore hip-hop artists and video game music bands.

*Geek culture abroad.* In addition to the sites described here, I also had the opportunity to visit comic book, gaming, and sci-fi stores in Lisbon, Paris, and Madrid, and have established contacts with self-identified geeks and fans from Spain, Germany, and Japan. My experiences through these sites and individuals have informed my analysis here, but these represent ongoing research interests for me rather than major sites of investigation for this dissertation. For practical reasons of scope, my focus here is on the



construction of 'geek' and 'nerd' in Anglophone cultures, and especially in the United States.

To the extent that I was capable, I attempted to study sites and events as much for their diversity as for their similarly identified audiences. Comic Con is something of a Geek Mecca, practically necessary to attend. SXSW Interactive is more professionally oriented, and has a vague air of hipness about it due to its association with the independent film and music festivals. CommuniDIY is a much more locally driven, more hands-on, and less commercial event. And, as noted above, each of these events hosts a variety of geeky media interests. Even given this broad scope, I ran the risk of missing out on people who may have useful insights into the concept of the 'geek.' What about those who were labeled as geeks and nerds as children, but are not involved in geeky interests as adults, nor self-identifying as geeks? I considered this an unavoidable limitation, but I believe the breadth of my overall approach still represents a diversity of perspectives on geek culture.

#### *Additional Observations*

In addition to the sites which I selected in advance for research, I ended up finding several impromptu gatherings, performances, and objects of geek culture. Some of this was thanks to being actively directed by friends, colleagues, and informants, such as when I happened to be in the right place at the right time to witness a huge, not-quite-officially scheduled gathering of fans of a particular webcomic (see this dissertation's conclusion), or when I auditioned for *Beauty and the Geek* (see Chapter 3). Some encounters were merely a matter of serendipity, leaving myself open to seeing geekiness

in the world around me. I understood this to be a necessary component of a methodology that was truly committed to observing geek cultures in their contexts.

What does it mean to be always willing to slip into researcher-mode? Consider how I sometimes see the café where I spent most of my days working on my dissertation: The clientele not only includes the local college students, LGBT groups, and trendy hipsters that the place is known for locally, but people I might see if I were to go to an event explicitly promoted as geeky. There's the group of gamers that seems to meet on the couches every week; the shaggy-haired and ponytailed programmers with stickers on their laptops that say "Free your code," "Come back with a warrant," and the URL of the Electronic Frontier Foundation; the elderly man with a cane, glasses, and a baseball cap reading, "E=mc2 (Energy = morning x 2 cups of coffee)"; the guy with the thick glasses who works at the comic store around the corner and does a webcomic about fan culture. The bathroom graffiti has featured notes correcting one another's spelling, accusations of pedantry, a subtle joke referencing Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*, and an exchange between three styles of handwriting:

"Star Trek is back!!! Fuck Picard!!!"

"PICARD WILL FUCK YOU UP"

"*Scotty will beam you up*"

Walking around, I see people occasionally wearing black shirts featuring jokes about programming, and once I saw someone wearing the 8-bit necktie – flat and blocky, as if taken straight out of an old Nintendo game – that ThinkGeek originally designed as a joke product on April Fool's Day. I once found myself next to a couple rolling dice for some complex trading card game. On another occasion, I found myself behind a smelly

guy in thick glasses, reading manga on his laptop, who would occasionally remove his hat and rustle his hair, dusting me with his dandruff.

Some of these signs I had a sense for from before I even started my dissertation. Sometimes something might only vaguely register as geeky in the back of my mind – to put it in especially nerdy terms, like Spider-man’s “spider sense tingling,” a sort of intuition based on previous experience that sometimes pays off upon further investigation. Some signs are especially obvious to anyone who has a common-sense understanding of what’s ‘geeky,’ however; you know you can comfortably use the term ‘geek’ with a stranger who’s willing to be seen rolling dice for a fantasy card game in public. And some signs I wouldn’t recognize at all if I didn’t occasionally speak with the other regulars; after all, anybody can wear thick glasses and use a laptop in a café, not just those who write comics about geeks.

This café wasn’t a place where I went specifically to do research, but describing it offers a chance to show how certain performances of geek identity can potentially happen in a semi-public place in everyday life. This is why I felt the need to be continually vigilant as I sought out geek culture, to make sure that I wasn’t just looking in the places I knew I could expect to find something. By the same token, I have been cautious in this study not to rely entirely on my own sense of what (and who) should be coded as ‘geeky.’ Being more interested in how others defined themselves than in how I could define people from the outside, I tried not to apply labels to those who might not have accepted them. I endeavored to describe people as geeks or nerds only when they described themselves as such, or when they were in contexts that strongly implied everyone in attendance was comfortable with such terms. When I came upon adults swinging around

lightsabers in a park (as described in Chapter 5), for instance, I felt it was pretty safe to assume they considered themselves nerdy. Nevertheless, I checked out the website for the group they belonged to (PAJedi.com), and found that several of their members noted that they were happy to be (and to meet) other “geeks” and people with “geeky interests.”

### Interviews

In addition to my participant observation research, I conducted over 30 recorded interviews and engaged in a significant amount of informal talk. My focus shifted over time toward the latter, for practical reasons which I will describe. Overall, conversing with people was invaluable in getting a sense of how people understand the many connotations layered upon ‘geek’ and ‘nerd,’ and how these are personally relevant in the way people understand their own interests and perceived place in society.

My initial goal in interviewing was to probe into areas which seemed less likely to be revealed through my other methodological approaches. I saw people calling themselves geeks at conventions all the time, though usually with a laugh; how serious was this term to them, though? And I knew that research indicated that kids are harassed as geeks and nerds, but I wasn’t doing any research at schools with minors myself; are those the same kids that grow up to call themselves geeks and nerds as adults? And if it’s now cool to be a geek thanks to Bill Gates, that implies that geeks are characterized by their ability to parlay their skills into wealth; so is it common to be making a living off one’s geekiness? These were the sorts of questions I wanted to be sure to get at in interviews, though I aimed to be subtle enough to not insult people (“Geeks are supposed to be rich; why aren’t you rich?”).

I was initially very careful not to bias people toward calling themselves geeks or nerds, avoiding the terms myself even to the point of being very vague about my dissertation topic in the early stages of my research. Among the first groups of people I invited to be interviewed, I described my work as studying “interests” and “media use” of “things like computers, comics, and games.” If I used the real terms in question, it was generally in the context of, “you know, things that might be stereotypically understood as ‘geeky’” – no indication of valuation one way or another. I didn’t call myself a geek or nerd or ask people until late in interviews if they applied the terms to themselves. I was concerned about the “Heisenberg uncertainty principle” as it often gets applied even to social science research: Would I create the phenomenon I sought to study, perhaps even magnify it, simply by looking for it at all?

After spending a year or so actually studying this and feeling pretty confident that people actually talked about such issues themselves, however, I loosened up a bit, and became less guarded about my own use of these terms. This was an important shift in my work, allowing people to open up to me more, and allowing myself to actually participate in what the geeks were up to more directly.

### *Seeking Potential Interviewees*

At certain conventions I attended, I gathered contact information from people for structured, recorded follow-up interviews.<sup>3</sup> Refusal rates varied between conventions and days of each con, but I typically heard back from only a fraction of those who agreed to chat later. At Comic Con 2006, I collected 38 individuals’ contact information, and interviewed 13. At PAX 2006, I collected 35 individuals’ contact information, and

interviewed 11. At SXSW Interactive 2007, I collected 60 individuals' contact information, but was only able to conduct interviews with seven. This low response rate is likely a result of the culture of SXSW as a convention, which sees a lot of young creative professionals eager to hand out business cards for business networking opportunities.

Each day that I attended a convention, I set a quota for how many people I would ask for interviews. Early in my research process, I set the number around 10 a day. Some of those I asked to interview were people with whom I actually had been conversing, though I also went out of my way to find people to meet my daily quota. I sought people sitting in rooms before panels began, resting in hallways or stairwells, or waiting in very long lines. I offered my business card, introduced myself as a grad student studying media use (and/or comics/sci-fi/ games, depending on the context), and asked if they would like to chat after the convention for an anonymous interview by phone.

As I described earlier, in the I conventions attended prior to summer 2007, I usually only specified that I was studying geeks/nerds if asked for more specifics of my study, or if it was relevant to the context (e.g., having just attended a panel about geeks). I did not want to insult people by presuming too much about their preferred terms of self-identification, and I did not want to present any kind of researcher bias for potential interviewees who might not bring up the term if not invited to do so. When I did mention "geek cultures" or "nerdy media," reactions frequently included instant camaraderie ("Great, I'm a geek!"), mild indignation ("Oh thanks, so you're saying I'm a nerd?"), and defensiveness or deflection ("I'm not actually a big fan, you want to talk to my boyfriend"). Around the summer of 2007, I started introducing myself by saying that I

was “sort of randomly looking for interviewees,” and that I wanted to find a wide range of interviewees, geeks and non-geeks alike, which reassured some that they were not being targeted as geeks, and resulted in fewer rejections.

My process of selecting potential interviewees was not entirely random. I attempted to work around my own potentially unrecognized biases by deciding to talk to the next person I saw as I turned a corner, or by picking three different spots in a room and chatting with whomever I find at them. Nevertheless, I also qualified this kind of searching at times by deciding to actively seek groups who are stereotypically (or just typically) underrepresented among geeks: women, nonwhite people, and people who appear over 40. (All of the recorded interviews I conducted were with people at least 18 years of age, and most were with people in their 20s.) Most of the attendees at many of the events I attended were white males in their 20s, and I wanted to make sure that I got interviews with other people as well. I also attended some panels specifically to seek interviewees representing certain minorities, such as when I attended the panels on Black Representation in Comics and Gay Representation in Comics. Such purposive elements in my sampling may have resulted in a disproportionate number of women among my interviewees (about half). While uneven, these odds seemed acceptable to me, particularly for older interviewees, whom I might not have found at all if I were not inviting so many.

### *Structured Interview Process*

Most of my structured interviews with convention attendees were conducted by phone, though I also communicated with a few interviewees by email or instant

messenger. I conducted my interviews at least a week removed from the convention where I met people, as I wanted to give people time to get readjusted to daily life outside the carnival of geek gatherings. If conventions presented me with an opportunity to chat with geeks in a geeky context, recorded interviews presented me with an opportunity to chat with geeks in a more neutral and mundane context.

Most of my phone interviews lasted about 30 minutes, though a few interested interviewees continued the conversation for 45–90 minutes. At the start of each call, I asked the interviewee for permission to record; I started the recording software on my computer, which audibly announces “*recording conversation*” to both parties on the line; and I asked again for the interviewee to indicate whether I had permission to record. I notified each interviewee that our conversation was anonymous; pseudonyms are used in this dissertation if any name must be identified, and no employers were named.

I informed my interviewees that I had a few basic questions I want to discuss, but I wanted the interview to be open-ended. I welcomed interviewees at the outset of each interview to go off on tangents and ask any questions they might have. The conversations that result from the unexpected turns introduced by my interviewees were often even more productive than those that result from my questions.

Up to this point in the conversation, I had not mentioned to some interviewees that I was specifically studying geeks or nerds, though I did address this directly in every recorded interview. As noted above, I wanted my first batch of interviews to leave room for interviewees to identify themselves as (or as not) geeks/nerds, and many did so within the first few minutes of conversation. I did explain that I was studying geek cultures to anyone who asked for more specifics about my study. Once it had come up, I



occasionally sensed that it might be wise to subtly reassure geeky interviewees of my own geekiness in order to set them at ease. One interviewee who knew I was studying geeks, for example, was initially reticent with me. When he mentioned Neal Stephenson's science-fiction novel *Snow Crash* in passing, I casually mentioned that the author had originally intended to do it as a graphic novel, which related back to a line of conversation we had about the presumptions of shared audiences between different stereotypically media. My purpose in this case, however, was less to bring us back to that topic, and more to drop a bit of nerd trivia to prove that I wasn't out to make geeks look bad. It seemed to work; he relaxed, even explained a bit of his earlier paranoia, and was quite forthcoming by the end of the interview.

Given the flexible nature of these interviews, I did not necessarily get to every question written down before me. Here, I offer some examples of common threads of questions that came up in some of my recorded interviews with convention attendees, based on the notes I had in front of me during phone calls:

1. The convention:
  - a. What brought you to [*the convention*]?
  - b. How did you spend your time at the convention?
  - c. Did anything in particular stand out about the convention [*this year*]?
  - d. How did you find the exhibitor hall [*or other noticeable marketing efforts*]?
2. Interests:
  - a. What are some of your major hobbies or interests [*whether represented at the convention or not*]?
  - b. How did you get involved in [*any of*] those interests originally?
  - c. Were there any hobbies represented at the convention that you're actively not interested in? [*This often elicited opinions on which interests are "too geeky."*]
3. Career:
  - a. What's your occupation?

- b. Is your occupation related to your personal interests?
  - c. *[When people indicate that they are not doing what they want to be doing...]* What kind of career are you angling for?
4. Open-ended reflection on geek culture:
- a. *[If not yet addressed...]* My project is about why certain people and interests get labeled as “geeky” or “nerdy,” and why we commonly assume that certain interests have overlapping audiences....
  - b. *[Express interest in how con implicitly or explicitly markets itself to geeks. For example...]* I attended South by Southwest Interactive largely because its website says it’s for “uber geeks and creatives....”
  - c. *[Express interest in examples from the con to provoke an open-ended response. For example...]* I thought it was interesting that South by Southwest Interactive put anime magazines in our freebie bags even though the con had nothing to do with animation directly.
  - d. Is there a difference between how you think of the term ‘geek’ and the term ‘nerd’?
5. Personal relationships:
- a. *[If person identifies self as a geek...]* Are a lot of your friends geeks, too?
  - b. *[Follow up on gender breakdown of friends.]*
  - c. How did you get involved in that group of friends?
6. Personal history:
- a. A lot of the research I’ve seen on this topic suggests that people first encounter terms like ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ as kids. Do you recall how this was used when you were a kid?
  - b. How did you get along with your peers? *[This can lead to conversations about bullying and harassment. In the interest of sensitivity, I have allowed that line of conversation to be particularly interviewee-directed.]*
  - c. What kind of interests did you have as a kid?
7. Research directions:
- In the reading I’ve been doing academic research mentioning geeks and nerds, I come across a few common themes. Mostly it fits into stuff on how kids get picked on in school, how particularly engaged media fans get stereotyped, and how people’s interest in (or avoidance of) computers is tied into their feelings on “nerd culture.” Does anything seem missing from that that you think ought to be covered?
8. *[After all questions I feel are relevant have been addressed in some fashion, or as we are within no less than five minutes of when the interviewee expects the call to end...]* Do you have any questions for me?

While some interviewees did go onto tangents (and frequently apologized for it, despite my invitation for them to do so), most did not interrupt the flow of my questions to ask their own until I said I was done. At this point, however, after another explicit invitation to ask their own questions at the “end,” nearly all interviewees did so. The resulting conversation was often longer than the part of the chat based on my planned questions. Most simply asked for more details about my research to date and my publication plans, which in turn often led to more comments from them. My interviewees have offered their own extended theories on the development of geek culture(s), thoughts on the purposes and pitfalls of academic publishing, and questions that I should consider asking (some of which were part of my usual roster but never came up during our conversation), among other comments.

To give an idea of how an interview might go after the structured portion, consider this example: I got 20 minutes into an interview with one woman, going through the standard questions, getting some thoughtful but reserved responses. I ended, however, by asking if she had any questions, and that was where the real interview began. She had one question immediately, as if holding it on the tip of her tongue the whole time: “Do you consider yourself a nerd?” I replied, “Me? Oh yeah.” That got her asking about whether I recognized a distinction between ‘geek’ and ‘nerd,’ what terms I grew using, what my own interests are, and so on. She asked if my girlfriend was a nerd, and we got into a much more reflective conversation about why there are so many more male than female nerds. In a way, allowing her to “interview” me elicited more informative responses than for me to ask questions of her; it put her more at ease, reassured her that

she was not being judged for her own nerdiness, and encouraged her to divulge more personal and sincere details in this confidence.

### *Informal Talk*

I had initially been concerned that conventions were not an effective context for interviews in situ. It wasn't practical to record interviews during conventions themselves because of noise, space, and scheduling issues, so instead I recorded interviews weeks later. Moreover, some events presented particular obstacles to actually socializing. At the Consumer Electronics Show, for instance, many people were there to do business, not to chat with an academic researcher. Parties at CES, meanwhile, offered a more relaxed and social setting, but were not as widely publicized as at other conventions, such as South by Southwest, and sometimes required inclusion on a guest list. I managed to get into one party and one social press event; the former required simply asking the right person at a convenient time, and the latter required standing in line for over an hour to produce journalistic credentials.

Nevertheless, starting in late 2007, I focused more on truly participating in my participant observation: actually playing games at games festivals, partying at parties, meeting people as people and not as momentary encounters on the way to filling a quota for potential interviewees. I had a drastically lower response rate among potential interviewees as a result of spending less time enforcing my own quotas, and so ended up foregoing additional recorded interviews in favor of other sources of data.

My approach to interviewing thus shifted toward the "interviews as participant observation" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 139), conducted spontaneously and

without recording devices on and around my sites. Even at CES, one of the less socially-oriented events (for those not already plugged into certain professional communities, at least), I was able to conduct one of the more illuminating interviews of my research in one of the Blogger Lounges, with an attendee who I just happened to run into two days in a row (see Chapter 4). Such spontaneous conversations even managed to touch upon some of the same topics that I suspected would only be approachable in more private, structured interviews, such as personal experiences from youth. As indicated earlier, I began more openly indicating that I was a nerd myself (though, I hope, in a sufficiently disarming friendly way so as not to seem like the socially maladjusted nerd that one would want to avoid). This opened up even more opportunities for open conversation than my previously reserved approach had allowed for, as many who did consider themselves geeks were not likely to say as much to someone who didn't give some similar clue first.

That said, perhaps the greatest benefit of having conducted so many structured interviews with my reserved approach, however, was that I got to talk to many people who did *not* self-identify as geeks or nerds, and who did not worry about offending me by giving me frank opinions about geeks and nerds. In many cases, they confirmed that the ways that some suspect others see them are in fact true, even within their own communities of enthusiasts. Thus, my structured interviews gave me some sense of how geeks see themselves, and some sense of how others see geeks; later, informal talk offered greater opportunities to understand the former.

### Virtual and Media Ethnography

As previously acknowledged, a traditional understanding of ethnography holds that “being there,” in body and over time, is the real strength of the method. By the same token, I had to recognize that my face time with people at “geeky” events was necessarily limited by the weekend-long duration of a convention or festival (if even that long). Moreover, for all I knew, the geeks who go to festivals might have been completely unrepresentative of self-identified geeks more generally. If, however, we can understand ‘culture’ as constructed through symbolic gestures, forming “webs of significance” we spin ourselves, as Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 5) suggests, we must consider other sites of symbolic expression besides those best witnessed in person. As Christine Hine argues, “If culture and community are not self-evidently located in place, then neither is ethnography” (Hine, 2003, p. 64).

Particularly key was my research on the internet. Lacking a large and truly permanent gathering space, and frequently possessing a degree of computer aptitude, the material culture we commonly associate with geeks can largely be found on blogs discussing tech policy, webcomics about gamers, YouTube videos of nerdcore performers, and so on. Virtual observation and interaction thus allowed me to analyze geeks in a more day-to-day context than conventions, and to approach interviewees on their terms rather than my own, as a researcher. While it may be convenient for me to be able to see how geeks comport themselves in their everyday lives, in person, “Many inhabitants of cyberspace [...] have never met face-to-face and have no intention of doing so” (Hine, 2003, p. 48). This may be particularly important when considering subjects who are likely to be shy, or may simply be more comfortable through certain mediated

channels of communication than others. While it may be misleading to assume that all geeks regularly engage in online interaction, in some cases it is safer to assume that the number of self-identified geeks available for interaction online is greater than the number appearing at certain conventions. Penny Arcade, for instance, had about 3.5 million readers in 2006, according to a statement made by business manager Robert Khoo at a Comic Con International panel; only 0.5% of those readers (18,000) attended PAX that year.

Moreover, virtual ethnography arguably “involves intensive engagement with mediated interaction” which “adds a new dimension to the engagement with the medium in context” (Hine, 2003, p. 65). In other words, if I am to make any claim to study groups who are known for their interaction with digital media, my own interaction with media becomes relevant to that approach. Of course, I make regular use of a variety of stereotypically geeky media in my own personal life, digital and analog alike, including video games, comic books, and my television set (e.g., to watch downloaded episodes of *Battlestar Galactica*). I also attempted to supplement my analysis with writing typically understood as textual and critical analysis of cultural objects as appropriate. I subscribed to *Wired* and *Geek Monthly*, listened to free compilations of nerdcore hip-hop, snapped photos of people wearing geek-oriented apparel. In some cases, my methods converged around these objects, such as when I had the opportunity to watch the pilot to an explicitly “nerdy” TV show at Comic Con and gauge the audience’s reactions to it in person.

I hope that this sort of ethnography of media challenges any notion (if any such concerns remain this far into my methods chapter) that “interactions” not situated in

space do not require a deep understanding from the ethnographer of local cultural codes and contexts. Despite the absence of certain verbal and physical cues in online conversation, alternative methods of communicating tone have made their way into instant messaging, email, and text messaging. Notably, simple emoticons – such as the Western :-)) and the Asian ^\_^ – have become practically commonplace in text-based communication online. Geeks have also developed a variety of online text-based slang terms and syntaxes, which include the use of numbers for letters (commonly known as “leetspeak” or “133t”); deliberate misspellings (e.g., “pwn” for “own,” a verb used by hackers and gamers to indicate dominance); HTML-style bracketed comments to indicate the speaker’s intent (e.g., “<sarcasm>Oh, I think that’s a great idea</sarcasm>”); and, borrowing from programming languages or text-based gaming, a slash preceding parenthetical comments or the description of physical actions speakers might make or pretend to make if they were present (e.g., “/waves at visitor”). Searching on Google will clear up a number of points of confusion, but some sites are so steeped in jargon and in-jokes that the tourist may need a second window open as a glossary. Fortunately, this is where my “native” background (and typing skills) served me well.

### *World Wide Webs of Significance*

Many other ethnographies with an online component have focused on particular communities that offer more obvious parallels to physical space, drawing on metaphors of spatial embodiment: chat *rooms*, multi-user *dungeons*, virtual *worlds*, and so on (Hine, 2003; Kendall, 2000; Turkle, 1995). The results of such work often remain quite relevant even as technologies change; Lori Kendall’s *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub* (Kendall,



2000), for instance, presents results that are no less observable today but for being conducted in the text-based “multi-user domains” of yesteryear. My ethnography of geek cultures, however, had a broader scope in mind, attempting to draw from many perspectives in exploring the widespread cultural shift behind the meaning of ‘geek’ and ‘nerd.’ I wanted make use not just of relatively isolated pockets of highly self-selected internet users – mailing lists with users who voluntarily sign up, massively multiplayer games charging subscription fees, obscure chat rooms and venues requiring semi-expert knowledge to access – but also the most openly accessible and easily stumbled upon areas, scattered across the entire web. This, of course, can be potentially overwhelming, as Matt Hills warns:

Confronting the mass of data which is available online, it becomes immediately clear that no *a priori* meaningful or internally coherent corpus can be identified: one can only extract artificially bounded sets of information (such as my own focus here on a temporally fixed corpus of postings) which even then may remain virtually unmanageable in terms of the sheer weight of communications traffic. Posing seemingly intractable difficulties of selection and generisability, Internet research may presage an academic crisis in confidence, provoked by the very “massification” of Internet discussion and interpretation. (Hills, 2002, p. 174)

One way to address the embarrassment of riches offered by online data, then, is to bound one’s scope within a particular set of information from which to draw data. This is not necessarily only an issue related to research online, however. As indicated before, any wide-ranging, multi-site ethnography committed to “following the metaphor” faces the challenge of defining where to locate the object of interest, and when to stop looking. Having already refused to declare a bounded physical site for my study, I similarly approached my online research without boundaries, but with a few simple starting places.

To provide an origin point for my virtual wanderings, I selected specific websites to follow regularly during the period of my field research. These included sites such as

Boing Boing (boingboing.net, 1.6 million readers), Slashdot (slashdot.org, 3 million pageviews on weekdays), and Gizmodo (gizmodo.com, 5.23 million readers), and Penny Arcade (penny-arcade.com, 4 million readers).<sup>4</sup> I also discovered a number of other websites that I had not known about before; some I added to my regular roster of sites to check as appropriate, and some I simply bookmarked for later retrieval. My examples throughout the dissertation thus draw upon a good deal of freely accessible online content, with addresses in my references list whenever available.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than limit myself to focusing deeply on an arbitrarily limited subset of internet locales, I attempted to experience the online materials that geeks might traverse in a way more or less like how they would traverse them: that is, by reading some pages in depth, by scanning thousands of headlines, and especially by following hyperlinks and taking opportunities to contribute to discussions myself, leaving comments or keeping track of things to share through blogging or other means.<sup>6</sup> It may seem directionless and potentially overwhelming, though it represents a means of engaging with the media from a user's perspective rather than a researcher's limiting gaze.

Common features of many blogs imply that this approach of scanning, following links, and contributing constitutes a typical mode of traversing the web. Consider the "link post," a feature of many blogs that collects hyperlinks to various sources such as YouTube videos, comic strips, free music downloads, and funny or insightful pieces on other websites. Many highly-trafficked blogs are practically little more than collections of links to other blogs that audiences may find interesting, such as Metafilter, while others regularly blend linking with commentary and additional content, like Boing Boing. Z., the blogger at Hipster, Please!, for instance, commonly puts up posts with "Nerd News in

Brief,” alerting readers to geeky musicians’ upcoming tour plans, new track or album releases accessible online, music videos hosted online, and so on. In the course of my research, such link posts frequently led me from one site I knew well to other sites I had never heard of at all, and which I may never return to again if they presented no further seemingly relevant expressions of geek culture and identity. Moreover, one of the major uses of social networking software such as Facebook and Twitter is to share links with other people, with Facebook even surpassing email in frequency of use for this function (Carson & Angelova, 2009). And so I turned to other media over time to direct my search for geek culture, receiving links from friends and informants through email and Twitter. The space traversed through these linkages is not just online, but offline as well. Following such referrals led me to real-world events, such as when I found out about CommuniDIY from one blog I started reading regularly part way through my research process.

Though I selected specific blogs to act as my “starting points on the internet,” the most relevant location for me turned out to be my own blog. Gradually, I came to see my own site as a way to “ground” my studies in a virtual place, if not in a physical one. Through my blog, I came into regular contact with a number of active and self-identified geeks and nerds online, contributed to various virtual communities, and attracted feedback from strangers (which sees frequent citation in this ethnography). I have developed relationships with informants, and have come to regard some as friends, even as I have yet to ever meet most of them in person. In a sense, I did operate within a (“localized”) community of geeks in conducting my research, specific people I connected with regularly, though it was beyond anything I could have planned.

### *Ethnographic Blogging*

One afternoon in early 2008, ChurchHatesTucker sent me a link to an ongoing conversation spread between the comments on *Hipster, Please!* (Z., 2007a) and the GameMusic4All forum (“Hipster, Please!,” 2008). He does this kind of thing a lot, actually, and not just for me; in my browsing of the various geeky blogs I read, I see a lot of “Thanks, Church!” with a link back to his YouTube page. Just a few days before this event, in fact, I’d noticed that he tipped off Boing Boing – one of the most trafficked blogs on the web – on Z.’s new tattoo, a picture of a 20-sided die of the kind traditionally used for *Dungeons and Dragons*. I’ve also seen Church credited by Lev Grossman (of *Time*’s Nerd World), the bloggers at TechDirt, and, of course, Z. himself, the blogger behind *Hipster, Please!*

Nevertheless, on this particular afternoon, the link was a bit of a surprise for me. Normally, I assumed, Church was reading all this stuff anyway and likes to be helpful, so he sent along a link when he thinks someone might find it interesting. This link was different; it was meant specifically for me. While skimming through a pretty interesting and lively conversation about why nerdcore hip-hop seems less community-oriented than Wizard rock (a.k.a. Wrock), I saw this note by Matt S:

Now, this doesn’t fully address Soc’s comments, it just shifts the question to what those shared commonalities are which bind the nerdcore scene together. That’s a whole other conversation entirely. May be Church needs to pull Jason from Geek Studies into this discussion and see what he’s found in his research. (matts, 2008)

I put down my laptop and spoke aloud in mild shock, “Hoo hoo.” The next thing I thought was: *They want to know what my research says about this? Man, is my research.*

By this time, I was well into the research for my dissertation on geek cultures and identity, but I was still getting a handle on the dynamics of nerdy music scenes. The conversation I was reading seemed chock full of interesting viewpoints potentially to be mined later: Matt's notes on Hipster, Please! seemed parallel to statements made by comics fans about promoting their interests more broadly; a member of the Whomping Willows musing on the do-it-yourself ethics of Wrock was getting me thinking on parallels and connections between musicians, literature fans, and techies; and the underlying thread about nerdcare being more competitive, and Wrock being more cooperative, raised questions of whether such dynamics had more to do with form, market, or other cultural baggage. I was particularly interested to read it suggested that Wrock is so diverse musically that it's more of a "movement" than a "genre." Being called on for expertise here blew my mind a little, as I had seen this discussion as the exercise of *their* expertise as members of the culture, upon which *I* would draw.

The next thing to occur to me was how important it was that I make a record of this incident. To me, this represented how blogging could work as a key component of a virtual ethnography. I was invited to this conversation not because I had published extensive research on nerdy music scenes, but because I had been writing regularly and informally at Geek Studies ([www.geekstudies.org](http://www.geekstudies.org)) since March of 2007.

The main impetus for starting Geek Studies was actually my interviewees' and acquaintances frequent request to be kept updated on the progress of my project. It is difficult to keep in touch with so many people on a one-by-one basis, and I was wary about maintaining a mailing list or sending messages that might be perceived as spam. Starting a blog seemed a practical alternative, as the format offered me the ability to keep

others updated on my progress, but also welcomed interaction and discussion in comment threads. Over time, however, Geek Studies became an important component of my research itself.

Maintaining a blog may seem like an odd way to contribute to an ethnography. On the face of it, blogging seems to be a top-down method of communication, more about writing than observing and participating, especially in the case of a single-author blog like mine. And if all the writer is doing is inserting messages into bottles and casting them into the sea, blogging would make a poor ethnographic method indeed. As the above example should help to illustrate, however, blogging can be a way to establish a persona as a researcher in online spaces, which in turn can gradually lead to accessing communities and discourses that picking a single online venue would not enable or encourage us to reach. At the outset of this ethnography, I probably would not have looked into the GameMusic4All forum – a venue ostensibly focused on video game music covers, remixes, and original compositions using game technologies – because it would have seemed a peculiarly specific place. In fact, it became a place for a broader-reaching discussion about movements and genres openly described as geeky.

Moreover, establishing a more general online researcher persona through my blog has allowed me to experience geek culture online in a manner likely somewhat akin to how the geeks I'm studying explore it. As I described earlier, the discourse around geek identity and practices of geekdom aren't just located in a single, fixed forum or mailing list, but move through multiple channels. The nerdcore/Wrock conversation noted above started in the comments on Z.'s blog and moved to Genoboost's forum when it became apparent that another format (with easier means to quote earlier contributions) might be

more conducive to a long discussion. Oftentimes, my conversations with geeks online start with blog posts before moving into comments, emails, more blog posts, instant messages, and so on. This is, again, another form of polymorphous engagement.

To those concerned about the relative depth of a virtual ethnography compared to a long-term, place-based ethnography, it may come as some reassurance to know that achieving this sort of integration into online communities actually resulted from a long-term commitment to maintaining online interactions. (To be honest, I hadn't really started blogging with this expectation in mind, but it's rather clear in retrospect that this is how I found myself with informants I never asked for.) In the early months of writing on Geek Studies, the blog served mostly as a personal tool – a way to keep track of websites worth citing later, and to get my thoughts down in writing. More obviously social functions emerged very gradually, such as getting occasional feedback on my thoughts from friends and past interviewees. It was still nearly a year before I had established enough of an online “presence” in geek communities online to be invited to such conversations as the one described above, and longer still before I got into even deeper interactions. Eventually, Matt, Church, and Z. let me in on their daily emails for link sharing, friendly banter, and long-winded intellectual conversations (which often led Matt to curse me for giving him too many interesting things to think about when he was supposed to be getting real work done). Of course, I never started Geek Studies with the intention to muscle my way into anybody's personal emails, but making connections with “natives,” seemingly “*deus ex machina*, like a fairy godmother,” is precisely the sort of happy turn of fortune that ethnographers rely upon (Rock, 2001, p. 34).<sup>7</sup>

Establishing a research persona online and inserting oneself into ongoing discourses is not just a matter of writing posts on a blog, though of course that is likely the biggest part of it. Write interesting things, and people will link to your site. When people link to your site, others may come and leave comments. Hoping to encourage responses, Geek Studies allows for wholly anonymous comments (save for IP address, I believe, though I don't know what I'd do them with even if I did look at them). I also specify that all of my posts are available under a Creative Commons license, to encourage distribution and quoting for non-commercial purposes.

Another, no less important kind of response, however, comes in the form of posts by other bloggers on their own websites. This is how I "met" Z., Matt, and Church. On Hipster, Please!, Z. included a link in "Nerd News in Brief" to a post I had written on Geek Studies, calling my site his "new favorite blog" (Z., 2007b). I found out about it because I use Google Analytics to see how users are finding my site, and noticed that some visitors had followed Z.'s link. I began following Hipster, Please! regularly, commenting occasionally, and listening whenever I had the chance to Z.'s eclectic geek music podcast, Radio Free Hipster. Eventually I had full discussions with other blogs, going back and forth post-by-post, including with Z.'s friend Matt. And, one day, someone just decided to invite me to join their regular email exchanges with funny links the occasional mp3 music file. Now we all follow one another on Twitter as well.

Following the linkages between one's posts not only helps a blogger to become "established," but also helps to show how posts can have a long-term life of their own, potentially leading the cyberspatial flaneur in new directions. I made some open-ended musings about geeks and sexism over a few posts, for instance, and people still return to



comment on them months or years afterward. Seeing other people's comments on other sites, such as in a link on Metafilter, means that my original post worked as something like a catalyst for an asynchronous focus group of sorts – an unfocus group, perhaps? – scattered over multiple sites and months of discourse. Even if no one were to come and comment on my original post, I still see others discussing a topic of interest to me on another site. Plus, that Metafilter post linked to two other sites discussing geeks, feminism, and misogyny, leading me to even more reading material. Suddenly I found myself getting additional traffic from a Geek Feminism Wiki (which I'd previously had no idea existed) because someone saw my post linked on Metafilter, leading me to even more information.

My blog also represents an odd nexus linking the dispersed sites of my various methods. I managed to reconnect with a former interviewee via email, for instance, when he saw that we were both commenting on the same blog, and he followed my name back to Geek Studies. On another occasion, I wondered aloud whether the “coolest” person from my *Beauty and the Geek* audition could ever be found in the same room with the “nerdiest” person from Nerd Nite, the hip bar gathering I attended on the same day. I don't know about the same room, but one person from each ended up commenting on Geek Studies within a few days. These examples offer a sense of how a blog isn't just a website, but a way of maintaining a consistent research persona that carries between different sites on- and offline.

Admittedly, people commenting on and linking to Geek Studies don't necessarily offer a representative “sample” of nerds on the internet – the ones who speak up are self-selected, just like anyone else who peeks out from behind the veil of anonymity online.

The ones who link to my posts may be the ones most inclined to agree with me. Even so, I do occasionally find Geek Studies entangled in networks of linkage with other sites that don't necessarily reach the same conclusions, and I have had more than a couple commenters post to disagree with my opinions.

In addition, keeping track of traffic and incoming links using Google Analytics gives me a sense of the diverse range of people who have stumbled upon the site through actively searching, via links, or by accident. The resulting group is a mix of media fans, tech nerds, feminists, and people foraging for porn. In June of 2009, for instance, Geek Studies had 2,851 visits by 2,491 "absolute unique visitors" (i.e., different IP addresses from which visitors arrived).<sup>8</sup> Of these, about 20% looked at more than one page on the site, and 86% were first-time visits (so, about 400 repeat or regular readers). That was a busy month, considering I hadn't been doing much blogging – most months hover around 1,000 unique visitors, with occasional spikes when Geek Studies receives a link from an influential blog, like *Financial Times* offering an offhand mention of my "Geeks vs. Nerds" page. In June, much of that traffic came from the aforementioned Metafilter link.

By the same token, I notice that a hefty portion of Geek Studies traffic comes from people who are simply unskilled at finding pornographic websites. I once went through the keywords that visitors had used to find Geek Studies through search engines, tallying up how many were looking for "nerd girl sex," "young girls sex," "girls on girls sex," or other sexual terms that seemed not specifically related to the content I write about. I estimated that such traffic may have accounted for as much as 40% of Geek Studies's lifetime traffic, and was surprised to see that not all of these visitors leave the site immediately. In June, for instance, 10 people came in search specifically for "nerdy

sex”; most left immediately, but one read multiple pages, resulting in an average of about five and a half minutes spent on the site between them. (Of course, that visitor may have just left the window open while attending to something else.)

The base of commenters and regular readers of Geek Studies is indeed “self-selected,” then, but the general openness of websites, fickleness of search engines, and dispersion of commentary between linked sites have offered me a useful way of traversing the web by using my own blog as a sort of “headquarters” for my official persona on the net.

### Summary

My methodology thus represents a combination of purposely selected sites, objects, and individuals; a “snowball sample” of sorts from informants and cyberspatial flaneurie; and arbitrary, serendipitous encounters. I cannot say that it represents a totalizing scope on the figure and culture of the geek, but I do believe it represents a wealth of perspectives and introduces us to a set of important ideals and tensions. It represents such a variety, such a grand collection of tensions, in fact, that I felt the need to call this dissertation *Geek Cultures*, in the plural, to reflect the fragmentation of a phenomenon that many claim as their own.

For me, this raises the question of how geeks themselves will evaluate this in terms of its generalizability. One ongoing concern I have had while writing this dissertation is that some geeks would read this and say, “That’s not like me,” and conclude that it’s all wrong. (Even if I were only to distribute this to those interviewees I have promised to show it to, I know geeks will find it. They can be wily and determined

lot, and many are quite at home in dealing with libraries.) One of my main arguments, however, informed by my multi-site, polymorphously engaged approach, is that there is no single, universal geek identity, no one geek culture that is more real or authentic than the others. Rather, there are some shared experiences, cultural contexts, and commonly invoked symbols that have allowed ‘geek’ to develop in some broadly recognizable (even if sometimes quite contradictory) ways. It’s my hope, then, that self-professed geeks and nerds could read this, identify certain characteristics and behaviors in their own lives and experiences, and respond to the rest by acknowledging, “That’s not like me, but I think I know what he’s talking about.”

#### Notes for Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> In his discussion of multi-sited techniques, Marcus (1995) identifies several different ways that the ethnographer can define an object of study: follow the people (e.g., during migration); follow the thing (e.g., a product’s journey from production to market); follow the metaphor (e.g., how medical ‘immunity’ has been conceptualized in different local and mediated contexts); follow the plot/story/allegory (e.g., conceptualizing an incident according to a more classically narrative framework); follow the life/biography (e.g., a life history constructed through interviews and personal documents); follow the conflict (e.g., the sites and personalities behind the abortion controversy); and the strategically situated, single-site ethnography (e.g., a study of working-class boys at school which offers multi-site implications).

<sup>2</sup> No one at Come Out and Play was actually dressed as Pac-man, but this does describe Pac-Manhattan, a game hosted by another festival in the area whose online videos may have helped popularize similar sorts of offerings at the Festival.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to interviewees sought at conventions, I also conducted a few interviews and some informal conversations with some individuals purposefully selected for their special involvement in geek-oriented businesses, such as in apparel design, music composition, and webcomics. Most of those I asked for interviews happily granted them, though some refused. These were the minority of interviews I conducted for a number of practical reasons, however. For one thing, it was harder to guarantee such interviewees anonymity if their especially unique business was a focus of the interview. Moreover, my interviews

with semi-randomly selected convention attendees even included some media professionals and people who marketed things to geeks, so going out of my way to find more might have overrepresented certain kinds of geeky producers. And, admittedly, I was concerned with maintaining a reasonable scope for this project, and having productive results with informal talk and other methods. I thus chose to focus more on interviews and informal talk with people at geeky events.

<sup>4</sup> I followed these sites as RSS (really simple syndication) feeds in Bloglines at first, and then NetNewsWire, to make my online routines more manageable.

<sup>5</sup> Because the research for this dissertation was done over a multi-year period and included a substantial number of web sources, some sources were no longer available – or had moved to other URLs – by the time the dissertation was to be defended. I have included original, working web addresses whenever possible, but please note that some addresses point to archived versions, retrieved by entering the original addresses into the “Wayback Machine” at Archive.org. In all cases, the earliest archived version of a page is used in citing the year of publication, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>6</sup> I like to think of this methodological approach, a sort of snowball sample of websites constructed through flaneurie, by a term coined by my colleague Paul Falzone that has yet to appear in published research: “surf sampling.”

<sup>7</sup> It’s worth reflecting on why my informants sought me out and let me into their group. The easiest and most honest answer, I think, is that they agreed with the version (or vision) of geek culture I described, and were interested in seeing me succeed. That’s not to say that we always see eye to eye; Matt, for instance, once enshrined a days-long debate between our two blogs (on the risks/benefits of broadening the market appeal of stereotypically geeky media) as “The Geek Culture Debate.” But our disagreements have been genial, the links they send me have portrayed geeks both positively and negatively, and, of course, they were not the sole source of data for my dissertation so much as helpful guides who pointed me in new potential directions. My method was sufficiently multi-sited (if even seemingly scattered) to sufficiently qualify as “triangulation,” I believe.

<sup>8</sup> To give some additional context around how people visited Geek Studies, between March of 2007 (when I started Geek Studies and began keeping track with Google Analytics) and June of 2009, Geek Studies saw 30,874 absolute unique visitors who visited a total of 39,713 times, with an average time spent on site per visit of 1 minute, 28 seconds. The two most visible spikes in traffic occurred when I blogged about a “meetup” of fans from the xkcd webcomic and got linked to by that webcomic artist’s blog (which saw 448 visitors on its busiest day), and when I received a link from Metafilter on the topic of geeks and feminism (which saw 312 visitors on its busiest day). Overall, 15.4% of traffic to Geek Studies was from people coming to the site directly

using their own bookmarks or address bar; 37.3% were referred from other sites; and 47.3% came from search engines.

Most visitors only come by once; one-time visits comprise about 78% of traffic in this period (30,889 visits), while visits by those who have been to Geek Studies before comprise the remaining 22% of traffic (8,824 visits). A portion of those who do return have done so regularly and repeatedly, with 1,886 visitors having visited Geek Studies over 200 times. It is not a large audience by professional blogging standards, but neither is it a small group from the perspective of a researcher looking to establish an “online persona.”

## CHAPTER 3: THE GEEK AS MISFIT

*Beauty and the Geek*, a reality game show on the CW network, pairs intelligent (but ostensibly weird) young men with lovely (but ostensibly ditzy) young women. The teams live together in a mansion for a couple weeks, periodically competing to see how well the geeks can teach the beauties to use their smarts, and how well the beauties can teach the geeks to dress and act like they care about others' opinions of them. In the end, the team that bonds and cooperates most effectively walks away with several thousand dollars in prize money.

According to one newspaper interview, representatives of *Beauty and the Geek* polled people on the street to get a sense of what they associate with the term 'geek.' The overwhelming answer was "socially awkward" (Eisenberg, 2007). Thus, the show seeks contestants with some areas of intellectual expertise, but who also fit the common understanding of geeks as guys who can't read social cues, don't bother with normal behavioral patterns, and, perhaps above all, haven't had luck with dating. It is important to remember that, no matter how far the geek image seems to have come in our popular understanding, Americans are still convinced that geeks are, above all, misfits. And, to some extent, the geeks subscribe to this understanding themselves.

This chapter explores how people come to be identified – and to identify themselves – as geeks, with particular attention to the stereotype and perceived reality of geeks as social outcasts. While the misfit image tends to be unwelcome among schoolchildren, it often becomes a point of identification by adulthood. This can be a formative experience in terms of how many people adopt systems of personal and social value, actively distancing themselves from what seem like the arbitrary and shallow

values of those who reject them. By the same token, even those geeks who see themselves as misfits may still prefer to be seen as more or less normal, given the chance. Feeling like a social outcast can be mitigated through the construction of “geek culture” – both in the sense of shared meanings and experiences, and in the sense of media and material culture.

### Popular and Personal Constructions of the Geek

I had learned about the *Beauty and the Geek* casting call from a local comic store’s email newsletter. I enlisted my friend Dan to accompany me. He was my second set of eyes, and the guy with Google Maps on his iPhone for when we got inevitably lost on the way to the trendy-looking night club where the casting call was being held. I expected I was unlikely to be picked for the show, figuring I lacked sufficiently interesting neuroses for television audiences, but I decided to show up and give it my all anyway. After all, this program largely represents the contemporary face of the geek in pop culture, much as *Revenge of the Nerds* did in the 1980s. By peeking behind the scenes as a participant in the show’s production process, I thought I could get a good sense of how geeks identify themselves, and how the geek image is constructed in American culture at large. As I’ll illustrate in this section, the popular construction of the geek remains rooted in notions of a lack of social skills, gender and sexual conformity, and savvy in the ways of consumer culture, portraying geeks as a product of (or stuck within) their high school experiences. Geeks understand this about themselves, but that doesn’t mean that all geeky misfits are alike.



Being a nerd myself, I still thought I might have some shot at the audition – after all, how much geekier do you get than spending years analyzing geeks? If they actually offered me a spot on the show, I figured, I would cross that bridge when I came to it. When I arrived about an hour into a seven-hour casting call, however, I realized that I had not committed to this casting call as much as I could have. Walking into the lobby, I caught a glimpse of a guy dressed in full Ghostbuster regalia, proton pack and all, hunched over an application with a pen. An attractive woman at the door directed me upstairs to get my photo taken and to fill out my own application. I filled in short-answer questions on academic achievements, current and recent occupations, hobbies, insecurities with women, problems with dating, what I'm passionate about, what category I'd pick first on *Jeopardy*, and what I could teach another person, among other things. I was suddenly very conscious of the possibility that even having a serious girlfriend might disqualify me outright.

Once I finished the application, I was directed to sit at a semicircular booth with the other geeks on deck, separate from the beauties' table. I was the first geek at a new booth, just as another group of geeks was being interviewed at a table on the dance floor, with a small crew shooting video from a short distance.

After a moment of conferral, one member of the geek group currently being interviewed stood and set up a karaoke machine and laptop that he had brought with him. He was a white guy in his twenties, wearing a do-rag, a belt buckle with red LED lights, and faux-gold chains, including an oversized "MIT" necklace (where he's a rocket scientist, he said). He started rapping his own customized version of Weird Al Yankovic's "White and Nerdy" (to the tune of Chamillionaire's "Ridin'"), adjusting the

lyrics to boast of his own geekiest achievements. The whole club quieted to behold this spectacle. Everyone clapped and smiled, though I wasn't sure whether their glances and whispered comments indicated impressed amusement or a profound sense of the surreal.

Gradually, other geeks filtered into my booth. First came Bob, a fellow in his early twenties (I guessed) with a thin mustache. Bob was genuine and friendly, and, I gradually learned, very aware of his own social awkwardness. He had a sort of wavering, nervous edge to his voice, though he was enthusiastic about chatting with the other geeks at the booth. He called himself an "overall" geek, having interests in a wide array of the nerdy arts. We talked about video games (he preferred PCs over consoles), anime (he'd been watching since before high school), operating systems (he'd tried them all, even the much-maligned Windows Millennium Edition), and portable music players (he bought his PlayStation Portable specifically for this purpose).

I asked Bob if he hung out with many other geeks, and he said no, launching into a detailed narrative about his high school social hierarchy. His school, he explained, was broken down into Jocks, Preps, Alternatives, and Geeks/Freaks, with Goths mixed into that last group to some extent. I wasn't sure how that answered my original question, but I took his answer to suggest that he didn't have an extensive social network. At the time, he said, he was doing "grunt work" for a water company, and otherwise spent his free time in front of the computer.

Eventually we were joined by another guy, Avi. He was a thin fellow from Israel, born of Russian and Moroccan parents, and dressed in khakis, shirt and tie. Bob seemed excited to meet someone else who was Jewish, and launched into a tangent about religion. When Bob finally asked Avi what was geeky about him, Avi explained he

preferred the term “*super nerd*” to describe himself: He had two dual degrees, each including some engineering (one including dance), and he also did martial arts. He brought a giant portfolio full of photos of himself in different poses, doing martial arts, cooking, and so on. He explained that he was a “cool nerd,” and asserted that he sometimes goes clubbing. We weren’t the ones he needed to convince, of course, but he seemed very determined to make his case all the same.

A short time later, a woman joined our table. Typically, *Beauty and the Geek* pairs male geeks with female beauties, but one season featured a reverse-gender pair – female geek, male beauty. Karen showed up figuring they might try that again. She was tall and somewhat heavysset, wearing a flannel shirt over a black t-shirt from xkcd, a science-oriented webcomic. She seemed at ease with us, making jokes and friendly conversation. Dan and I found her the easiest to talk to of the table. We shared a few glances from time to time – an amused but sympathetic “Oh, boy” written on our faces when Avi and Bob made occasional strained, unfunny jokes.

Karen explained to us that she had originally been seated with the other women until she asked whether she should really be seated by gender. (I learned more about this experience later, when she contacted me via email to show me her blog post on the event.) It was obvious to her from the outset that she was at the wrong table, but this was further reinforced by the questions her peers asked about the application, including “What’s a category on *Jeopardy*?” and “How do you spell ‘genuine’?” According to Karen’s blog, “Ms. What’s-A-Category-On-Jeopardy kept giving me the up-and-down ‘Oh. My. God. Is she really wearing *that*?!’ look.”

Back at the geek booth, we all chatted awhile about typical geeky subjects – games, movies, the annual Anime Boston convention – and about the event at hand. I was the only one there who hadn't printed out the application online prior to arrival. Bob even had his mother help him write it out, as he has poor handwriting and trouble typing. (He mentioned his dyslexia a few times.) When they finally called us up to the table to be interviewed, the casting people spoke up to get Karen and Bob's attention because they were still debating the merits of different gaming hardware.

At the table with us were a tall man with a beard, wearing a black hat that I suspected was purchased from either H&M or Urban Outfitters, and a petite, attractive woman who looked like she could be on the show herself. She ran the interview, starting with Avi.

As with each of us, the interviewer began by asking Avi what made him a geek. When he gave his "super nerd" pitch, complete with portfolio at his side, the interviewer responded by asking, "Are you a geek or a performer?" He seemed momentarily thrown off balance, suddenly shifting into playing up his academic achievements. He still seemed oblivious that the casting people actually wanted awkwardness – otherwise, what's left to polish on the show? The interviewer asked if he had ever had a girlfriend; Avi responded, somewhat nervously, "Ha ha, too many." She moved on to Bob shortly thereafter.

Bob spoke for the longest, visibly shaking the entire time. This was different from his chattiness back at the booth: Now, he was throwing out everything he could think to say, terrified, staring down at the table as he spoke. He talked at length about his interests, his job, and a long scar on his arm. He answered a question about why he keeps

his mustache (“If I didn’t have it, I’d look like a preteen”). He stumbled over his words at one point, and admitted, “Sorry, I’m a little nervous.”

“Don’t be nervous!” the interviewer reassured, offering a broad smile and sympathetic expression. “Or you can be nervous,” she said, “but trust me, they get a lot of nervous people, it’s fine.” When the interviewer turned to me, Bob interrupted her and talked about himself some more. She flashed a sidelong smirk at me, not too unlike the glances I shared earlier with Karen.

When it came to my turn and the interviewer asked how I’m a nerd, I gave the answer I might have given at an academic job interview: I study new media and visual communication at Penn, my dissertation is on geek culture, and so on. Karen interrupted excitedly – “That is so cool! How can I read some of your research?” I mentioned I had a blog, and Bob jumped in to suggest that I attend Anime Boston. I thanked him and said I’d check that out. The interviewer looked a little stunned by the derailed conversation, but quickly regained control.

I suspect that her next question was my undoing. She expressed surprise about me living in Philadelphia, so I explained that I was in town to do research, and that I was staying with my girlfriend.

“Are you here to do research or because you want to be on the show?” she asked.

I paused, and, unwilling to choose one question over the other, said, “Yes..?” She jotted something on my application and said, “I might call you,” and then moved on. She chatted with me for a fraction of the time she spent on the others.

The interviewer continued with Karen, who went on describe herself as “a literary geek,” though computer culture was familiar to her as well. The interviewer asked why

she had majored in Women's Studies, and she responded that she is a "social chameleon," seeking out environments where she can comfortably blend into the background. Also, though she has been in a relationship with another woman for some years now, she reassured the interviewers that things could potentially happen with other cast on the show; she, like many geeks, she said, is polyamorous.<sup>1</sup> The interviewer explained that the next season won't have any gender-swapped pairs, but future seasons might. Karen got somewhat flustered – a friend of a friend is on the show now, she said, and he heard from the executive producer that they're removing all gender restrictions in upcoming seasons – but the best the interviewer could do was reassure her again that they might be able to get back to her in the future.

She thanked us for our time, and we dispersed. I lingered to offer my business card to the interviewer, and told her I'd like to hear more about the casting process. ("Well, you basically just saw it!" she said.) She told me she'd like to talk later about where they might find more geeks, though I never heard from them again.

My friend Dan had been sitting back at our geek both for the whole interview. When I met up with him again afterward, he mentioned something Bob said on his way out, while I was chatting with the interviewer: "That was probably the bravest thing I've ever done. I'm basically an invalid."

I offer this extended anecdote because the *Beauty and the Geek* casting call offers a glimpse at how a range of self-identified geeks grapple with their sense of being social outcasts. Some, like Karen, may accept this with cheer and perhaps even some pride. Her sense of geekiness may fit more broadly into an identity as a free-thinking person –

romantically and sexually open-minded, actively interested in literature, happy to embrace new technologies, and dismissive of the fashions and values she attributed to the women at the beauties table. Despite prevailing stereotypes of geeks being socially inept, she struck me as friendly and sociable (and, for what it's worth, indicated that same impression of me on her blog). Other geeks, like Avi, may perhaps fail to recognize some of their own geeky quirks even when it's quite called for, awkwardly asserting intellect and dating experience in front of a group that's actively looking for social outcasts. Still other geeks, like Bob, may feel practically crippled by their peculiar social behaviors, and may be well aware of it. Even among the misfits, there is no single, universal answer to the question of what a geek is.

And me? Apparently, I'm just nerdy enough for the geeks to recognize me as one of their own, but not so much that I can let it show for the hip and fashionable even when the situation warrants it. When I got back to Philadelphia after the casting call, several of my friends reassured me, "Oh, you couldn't be on that show. You're not geeky enough!" I'm not sure that's true, though. In a way, I had the opposite problem from Avi. He never realized he didn't need to act like the "cool nerd," that the misfit makes for better television. I, on the other hand, am so used to burying my nerdy quirks that I couldn't *not* hide it when confronted with attractive, stylish people, even when all signs indicated I should flaunt my own weirdness.

Being able to act "normal" doesn't necessarily disqualify you from being a geek. I once met the winner of the show's first season at a dodgeball tournament. He was a pleasant, sociable fellow who hadn't realized what he was auditioning for. "I just got

really tongue-tied that day,” he explained. It’s easier to hide the misfit in ourselves on some days than on others.

### *The Face of Geekdom*

I once found myself explaining my research interests to a group of Portuguese graduate students and faculty. I wondered: Do they even have a concept of geeks in Portugal? Will they know what I’m talking about when I say, “I study geeks and nerds”?

I said it, and they knew, and they all laughed gently. I smiled, a little relieved. “I wasn’t even sure you had a word for that here,” I said.

“Oh, we know it from American television!” one professor explained. And over the course of my visit, I realized she wasn’t joking. Later in my trip, another of our hosts asked, “Is American high school really like what we see in the movies?” I replied that I think it’s a comedic exaggeration of something that is real.

The most commonly understood images of geeks in American culture may be the ones we know from popular high school and college movies of the last few decades. The ‘80s brought us plenty of outright farce (in the *Revenge of the Nerds* series), comedic dramas (*The Breakfast Club*, *Sixteen Candles*), and science-fiction fantasies of nerdy guys who beat the jocks and win the girls (*Weird Science*, *Better off Dead*). The coming-of-age movies and family sitcoms of the ‘90s introduced us to characters such as Urkel, the spectacled, snorting, suspenders-clad genius of *Family Matters*, and William, the nerd in *Can’t Hardly Wait* who, we learn at the end, goes from the jocks’ punching bag to a millionaire with his own computer company and a supermodel girlfriend.



In addition to the dorky student, our popular imagery now increasingly includes the nerdy adult. It's still quite common for television crime dramas to see the cast visit the local sci-fi convention or the comic store to interact with out-of-touch nerds who live in their parents' basement, get flustered around women, and sometimes commit murder with props from sci-fi TV shows (e.g., Hanson, Reichs, Donlan, & Martin, 2009; Yost & Rasmussen, 2007; Zuiker, Shankar, & Weddle, 2009).<sup>2</sup> Advertising, meanwhile, promises that geeks are here to serve us, or that we don't need geeks at all. Best Buy's Geek Squad tech support staff, for instance, "was established to protect society from the assault of computer technology gone awry. (That, and to give us something to do, since we can't land dates.)" ("Geek Squad Services & Prices," 2009). Online banner ads for Vonage's phone service proclaimed "no nerds needed," showing a gangly guy in broken glasses and a graduation robe crossed, frowning and crossed out (Vonage, 2008).

And, of course, there are those portrayals that aren't presented as fiction. Columnists declare that grown men who play video games and go into their thirties unmarried are "child men" (Hymowitz, 2008), and some wonder aloud, "Who knew that the generation who first became addicted to Pac-Man and Super Mario would turn out to be boys who never grew up?" (Muir, 2008). Fans have come to expect mainstream news sources to maintain a habit of dropping by science-fiction conventions to marvel about people presented as weirdos in costume. "Sorry, Comic-Convention attendees!" one blogger writes in complaint of news coverage of one local con. "If you didn't want to get made fun of, maybe you shouldn't have attended a convention that was ostensibly designed to let you indulge and celebrate your slightly fringe subculture amongst other like-minded fans in a safe, semi-private environment" (T. Levin, 2008). And, as

described earlier, *Beauty and the Geek* is conceived as a “reality” show, and is entirely predicated around the popular understanding of geeks as socially inept.

Not all of these media portrayals of geeks are negative, of course.<sup>3</sup> Recent TV shows and movies have even depicted nerdy guys (and they’re almost always guys) becoming veritable heroes, such as when a tech support guy becomes a secret agent with a computer in his brain (NBC’s *Chuck*), the local high school dork comes to the aid of giant robots from space (Michael Bay’s *Transformers*), and a slacker gets enlisted as the devil’s bounty hunter (CW’s *Reaper*, which followed *Beauty and the Geek*). Such portrayals represent a sort of nerd fantasy and an implied promise of how to redeem oneself: find hidden strength; become important; gain confidence; win girl.

#### *Freaks on Geeks*

This isn’t simply a matter of “outsiders” promoting a certain image of geeks as misfits, however. The people behind *Beauty and the Geek* may be stylish and beautiful, but the geeks who show up to audition buy into the same notions. They come in the hopes of self-improvement, or the chance to parlay their oddities and anxieties into some cash. Moreover, some nerdy media producers contribute to this broader cultural understanding themselves.

Television sitcoms like *The Big Bang Theory*, which features brainy but socially clueless guys trying to interact with their sexy neighbor, has been described as “a series laughing with geeks, not at them,” thanks to the geek pedigree of the show’s creators (Collins, 2009). *The IT Crowd*, a British sitcom about system administrators who live in a dingy basement and work for a clueless boss, brought in science-fiction novelist and geek

culture blogger Cory Doctorow to do consulting for the series, which he described as “a truly geeky comedy” (Doctorow, 2006). Judd Apatow – the writer and director behind *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and *Freaks and Geeks*, dubbed by *Wired* as “the god of the geeks” and “patron saint of misfits” (Capps, 2007, p. 157) – was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, “I always felt like a nerdy guy”:

The feeling has apparently never gone away, despite the fact that Mr. Apatow, 39, is now married to an attractive actress[...] “We’ve been married for 10 years in June, and he’s still really uncomfortable with me sometimes,” said Leslie Mann, Mr. Apatow’s real-life wife[...] “He still spills things before giving me a kiss. He’ll knock a glass over and get flustered by it. Sometimes it feels like we’re on a first date. He didn’t outgrow the geeky boy he was. It’s still there in him.” [...]

Mr. [Paul] Rudd, who contributed to the “Knocked Up” script, said: “We were all pretty nerdy dudes. I had horrible skin. I was Jewish, living in the Midwest. And I don’t think we’re alone. [...] They’re not on the first string of anything. They’re varsity nothing. That’s just us, and we’re older now, with the studio giving us a little bit of money.” [...] (Waxman, 2007)

These examples should help illustrate how ingrained our collective understanding the category of a geek is, how *real* it is to us as Americans, and to geeks themselves. The geek is a figure marked by social ineptitude, an inability to grow up, and a need for parental oversight into adulthood. This portrayal suggests that it’s now okay to be this geek as long as you make money off computers, let someone teach you how to dress, find that hidden power, get that girl. It’s not clear where the female, queer, and nonwhite nerds fit in, or how to find personal value if one never learns to program, never becomes a famous filmmaker, or gets super powers from a radioactive spider. People still claim ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ for themselves into adulthood, however, often finding some common ground in the experiences that led to these labels’ original, unwanted attribution.

### Initiation Into Geekdom

“Being called a geek in school is a pejorative term,” Lindsay told me. I interviewed her and her sister on the phone after Comic Con International. They are now adults with creatively fulfilling jobs in the entertainment industry, and they proudly describe themselves as nerds. This was not always the case, however. They were firm on this point.

All the proclamations we commonly see of how we have seen the “revenge of the nerds” or come upon the “year of the geek” (O’Brien, Wong, & O’Brien, 2008; Stewart, 2008) may distract us from the fact that these terms are introduced into our vocabulary as insults, and remain insults among kids even today. Understanding this is key to understanding how geek identity is constructed. In this section, I will sketch out a common (though not by any means universal) narrative of how many come to identify geeks in the first place. Being branded a nerd doesn’t necessarily come from having “geeky” interests per se so much as not conforming to the status hierarchies expressed by dominant crowds’ styles and entertainment interests, if for any reason at all. This, in turn, can lead some into the stereotypically juvenile and “solitary” media interests and nonconformist ideals that come to be associated with geekiness in adulthood.

As I related back in Chapter 1, the concepts of ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ are often first applied to many in the context of social exclusion – potentially accompanied by insults, bullying, and other harassment – among school children and high school students. And, much in the style of Bob’s comment related above, several of my interviewees and people I’ve spoken to informally at geeky gatherings have noted, usually without much elaboration, that they were regularly taunted as geeks, nerds, or dorks in their youth.

It has struck me at times that the people I've chatted with have been very forthcoming with anecdotes about their personal experiences as geeks, but have had relatively little to say about the details of their experiences as kids. Perhaps part of that is just that I interviewed adults, and childhood experiences are tougher to recall; perhaps another part is that some would rather not recall the details of that period of their lives. Nevertheless, many I've spoken to have briefly acknowledged the tribulations of "nerd disdain" as kids (Chin & Phillips, 2005), and many more have turned to the web to find common ground with other geeks who will relate to such experiences.

#### *Being Branded a Nerd*

Common wisdom may suggest to us that geeks are mocked for stereotypically childish interests, like reading comics and playing games. Perhaps unsurprisingly, though, this doesn't seem to be the case among young kids, when these labels are often first applied. A couple of my interviewees even noted that video games were a mark of social distinction and popularity, as other kids could come over to enjoy games socially. Overall, then, my interviewees did not indicate that they were labeled as geeks, nerds, or dorks for having "geeky" media interests in elementary school, nor for being smart, in and of itself.

Rather, kids can potentially get labeled as geeks or nerds for anything that sets them apart as "different," such as clothing or physical appearance (Bishop et al., 2004). One of my female interviewees, for instance, noted that she had always found it hard to fit in because she was the shortest girl in school, and had not made many friends before meeting people in eighth grade who had similar interests. Another attributed her label to

having been very quiet as a kid. Another interviewee said that he was only considered a geek after moving and becoming the “new kid” in school.

Though these labels are often applied without much consistency, one particularly common characteristic of kids who are labeled as geeks in elementary school and middle school is a lack of participation in group-oriented social activities, particularly sports. Most of my interviewees who played sports or otherwise engaged in outdoor activities tended not to have been derisively labeled and picked on as children, though that doesn’t necessarily mean that participation in sports is an automatic pass for social acceptance: One male geek I interviewed mentioned that he did play soccer as a kid, but hated it.

In an essay titled “Why Nerds are Unpopular” (2003b), programmer and entrepreneur Paul Graham explains, “Nerds would find their unpopularity more bearable if it merely caused them to be ignored. Unfortunately, to be unpopular in school is to be actively persecuted.” This is, to some extent, a social defense mechanism for everyone else in school; mocking the nerds is a way of maintaining one’s own popularity, and shunning them is necessary to not be mocked oneself (Bishop et al., 2004).

In agreement with previous research on nerd persecution, the experiences described by my interviewees indicated that verbal harassment was most common, but some kids (most commonly the boys) were occasionally physically bullied as well. This shouldn’t distract us from the fact that social exclusion and verbal harassment can be problematic in their own right, however. A man quoted in one study recalled, “The other boys used to pick on me, hide my coat, steal my lunches.... [M]y mother had to keep me home because I’d start throwing up. I became scared shitless ... and to this day I feel insecure around other guys” (Bishop et al., 2003). As other writers have pointed out, to

kids in school, the school environment seems as if it is the entirety of the world, and the cruelty of one's peers can be deeply disturbing and depressing in ways adults have trouble grasping (Graham, 2003b; Milner, 2004). "When I was in school," Paul Graham writes, "suicide was a constant topic among the smarter kids." And while self-styled geek musicians tend to offer catalogs more typically dedicated to cheery celebration of math, video games, and science-fiction, some artists occasionally mix in themes of rejection, humiliation, exclusion, and suicide, such as MC Lars's "Twenty-Three" and Jonathan Coulton's "The Future Soon" (when "the things that make me weak and strange get engineered away").

Less commonly recognized by researchers has been the role that adults play in singling out geeks as somehow socially deficient. In American culture at large, non-conformist kids are still major targets for stigmatization based on presumed media effects. GOP strategist Mike Murphy reportedly quipped in the wake of the Columbine High School shooting, "We need Goth control, not gun control" (quoted in Jenkins, 2000). Unlike the debatable effects of video game play on real-life violence, however, widespread moral panic surrounding non-conformist behaviors can have immediately observable effects on the lives of kids who don't belong to popular crowds in school.

One of the more evocative demonstrations of this principle comes from Jon Katz (1999b), Slashdot writer and author of *Geeks: How Two Lost Boys Rode the Internet out of Idaho*, who collected messages posted to fan mailing lists by high school students in the aftermath of the Columbine tragedy. News media response to the event was quick to suggest a connection between the violence and the killers' interests in gaming and hardcore music. Across the country, kids reported incidents of what Katz described as

“Geek Profiling,” in which they were bullied even more by fellow students, and arbitrarily punished by school teachers and administrators. To offer one example:

I was stopped at the door of my high school because I was wearing a trenchcoat. I don't game, but I'm a geekchick, and I'm on the Web a lot. (I love geek guys, and there aren't many of us.) I was given a choice – go home and ditch the coat, or go to the principal. I refused to go home. I have never been a member of any group or trenchcoat mob or any hate thing, online or any other, so why should they tell me what coat to wear? [...]

I was called into the principal's office and he asked me if I was a member of any hate group, or any online group, or if I had ever played Doom or Quake. He mentioned some other games, but I don't remember them. I'm not a gamer, though my boyfriends have been. I lost it then. I thought I was going to be brave and defiant, but I just fell apart. I cried and cried. I think I hated that worse than anything.

Adults' actions can be less obviously harassing while still implying support for school's social hierarchy, favoring the traits and interests of more popular students. As mentioned in Chapter 1, a majority of parents have reported that they typically prefer their kids to be athletic, non-studious, and of average intelligence than non-athletic, brilliant, and studious (Bishop et al., 2004), and school administrators may play a role in supporting some extracurricular activities over others (Milner, 2004).

In time, being harassed can affect some students' personalities and style of social interaction, teaching them to avoid extracurricular activities and other contact with peers just to avoid further persecution. Many of my interviewees indicated that they had few friends in their early school years, and often spent time alone. Some conceded that this isolation was partially self-imposed: Feeling unwelcome made them withdraw from others, even if they were not physically threatened in any way, and a few simply preferred being alone to being with other kids. This response “makes things worse” (Bishop et al., 2004), of course, because it reaffirms the stereotype in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy: Mock kids for being antisocial, and they will avoid socializing.



*Connecting Around Interests*

As some researchers have pointed out, the upshot of this isolation, whether self-imposed or for lack of any other social options, is often that those who get labeled geeks really do end up studying instead of socializing (Bishop et al., 2004). Another, not commonly recognized result, however, is that these students also spend more time getting more involved with the solitary media that we tend to think of as geeky. These are the years that most nerds, including the majority of my interviewees, become attached to the interests that they carry into adulthood: their first computer, an introduction to science-fiction novels, the beginnings of a comic book collection, and so on.

Feeling relatively isolated can give these relatively normal hobbies a special sort of personal importance. One interviewee, for instance, explained to me that he had been “socially the top dog” when he got Nintendo’s second console system, the Super NES, though his social status – and the way he related to gaming – changed after switching schools in the fourth grade. “I played games a lot when I was a kid in Tennessee, but didn’t really consider myself a gamer until I moved to Washington,” he said. Seeing himself as a gamer geek only came after he “was pushed into that sort of outsider group.”

Years after these interests have been established, they may become the basis for social interaction. For many, this is made possible by a new school environment with new opportunities for social interaction. Bringing together students from multiple elementary schools into one middle school, or multiple junior high schools into a single high school, means that a more diverse collection of cliques and crowds forms, often around shared activities such as sports, music, or drug use. The kids who have been labeled nerds can

get involved with more popular social interests, distancing themselves from unwanted attention, and come to be regarded (or simply ignored) as “normals” (Kinney, 1993). Or, they can find others who have been branded as geeks, nerds, and outsiders, and actively accept this label to identify themselves.

To some extent, the basis for this geek crowd relates to its members’ sense of social rejection, but not all socially rejected students are geeks. No less important is the bond of shared – or even just similar – interests. One interviewee, for instance, explained to me that she had gotten into Japanese animation, or anime, as a solitary interest, as she had few friends before eighth grade. One day, however, a group of boys saw her reading an anime magazine at school, and invited her to join in with some other things they thought she might enjoy, such as video games. Not everyone gets interested in comics, computers, anime, and video games all at once, but through involvement in geek crowds and communities, interests that might have had personal importance in solitude end up sharing some overlapping audiences. “You have a tight social circle because you tend to be an outsider,” Eddie, an interviewee who described himself as “definitely a nerd,” told me in our phone interview. “So when you find someone who has sympathetic interests, you tend to tightly bond with them. Once you have them, you look for anything that kind of conforms to those interests.”

Among my own self-identified geek interviewees, several belonged to the “Geek” or “Nerd” clique at school, which often overlapped with other cliques rejected by (or rejecting) the most popular students, such as “Goths” and “Druggies.” One woman reports that she was one of the “Freaks,” which included some overlap of geeks, goths, and kids who hung out in the wood shop making miniature race cars. (She admitted that

some people said she was not just a straight-up geek, however, because she smoked marijuana.) Several people indicated having been part of a crowd of “outcasts.” The terms, then, sometimes vary, but the common element tends to be a hobby or interest to bond around.

In addition to (or, for some, instead of) meeting other geeks in school, the internet provides additional avenues for those who might have trouble forging social bonds in person. Ever since the emergence of Prodigy, AOL, and local bulletin board services, meeting people online has become nearly as common to geeks’ personal coming-of-age narratives as tales of high school cliques (e.g., Schoenewies, 2006). In a typically geeky bit of calculation, a commenter on my blog, Matt S, once mused:

The early life of a geek usually involves a certain degree of isolation from one’s peers. In the past, this dictated a certain degree of social isolation over all. It wasn’t until college, or at least post-high school, that geeks began to find a social network that they fit into.

Today’s young geeks though have the internet as an outlet where they can minimize that sense of social isolation by connecting with other geeks online. Since humans are typically social animals who crave a certain degree of social interaction, it makes sense that those of us who are unable to find that social element in our day to day lives fill that void through using the net. (Matt S, 2007b)

Being able to connect with other geeks online is especially important for those who might not have any other access to a geek clique. Some of those I interviewed noted that online interaction can be more comfortable and less stressful than interaction online, which might not be so surprising given how reserved someone might be who has been widely rejected in daily life. Nevertheless, many geeks meet people online that eventually develop into friendships built around shared interests and experiences. One of my interviewees, for instance, described how he used to frequent local bulletin board services to become acquainted with people who would later meet in person to play *Dungeons &*

*Dragons*. Once people get connected with others according to one or more geeky interests, it can lead to others; one blog commenter notes: “I know computers, and html, and what proxies are, and anonymizers and torrenting and social bookmarking software [...] --and I got all of that from being a fan and hanging out with geeks as part of my fannish activities” (cofax7, 2008): This may help account for why geeks are so widely believed to be computer wizards: Even though plenty of geeky interests have more to do with stereotypically juvenile escapist fantasy (such as superhero comics, science-fiction movies, fantasy novels, video games, and so on), with no apparent connection to computer expertise, a certain degree of facility with the internet is practically required to partake in some interests. After all, if you’re the only one in town who wants to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, where else can you look?

#### *An Education in Nonconformity*

In these experiences, we see the ingredients for not just a social group, but an entire dimension of social identity built around one’s role as a geek. Being labeled a nerd may be an entirely arbitrary and nearly inexplicable source of shame and humiliation at a young age, but it is a label that can take on meaning as connections are built between the rejected.

In a school environment, the various cliques have their own standards for “coolness,” either in line with or in opposition to the norms set by the popular crowd. Geek cliques tend to be formed around an active rejection of popular notions of cool, even though it may welcome harassment and invite stereotypes of juvenility. Coolness is marked by establishing oneself as not a kid anymore, but also signaling some rebellion

from adult authority. But as David Anderegg, a psychologist who works with children and teens, explains, kids describe nerds based in part on their desire to suck up adults: seeming overeager to answer questions in class, to do homework, or to ignore fashion in favor of practical clothing and accessories (Anderegg, 2007, p. 36).

So, while geeks do often tend to recall high school with a sense of dread or bitterness, this could be seen as a formative period of learning alternative ideals, where geeks established value around pursuits contrary to the interests of the popular crowds. While other students were engaging in behaviors representing their own groups' markers of "coolness," depending on the crowd – sports, dating, skating, drinking, smoking – geeks commonly rejected such social markers in favor of finding social common ground through media still typically thought of as childish. Even my adult interviewees sometimes reflect this, such as one interviewee who told me that "my whole group is real nerdy," specifying that she and her friends don't drink, smoke, or do drugs. She later told me, "I'm not the most sociable person," but this is only by the standards of the social groups she rejected; she and her friends all get together to play board games at least once a month.

Moreover, while putting visible effort into work is the mark of the uncool and juvenile for other groups in school – again, because that's what adults supposedly want, and being seen following their wishes marks you as juvenile – being beyond the reach of cool freed many geeks to get good grades and learn new technologies with genuine enthusiasm. "You grew up not caring what other people say," Rosalita, a self-described geek, told me in our phone interview. "It kind of leaves you open to explore different things without being judged."

Not all follow this precise path to geek identity, of course, and not all connect with other geeks as early as high school. Nevertheless, there is a reason that the school environment figures so prominently in the popular narrative of geeks and nerds: Those are the years when being a geek start to become part of an actual identity, and not just an unwanted label.

After high school, it may seem that geeks are in the clear: no more jocks, no more popularity games, and nothing holding them back from reinventing themselves. And indeed, some people abandon geek identity at this point, liberated from the arbitrary popularity castes of their youth. A couple of those I interviewed said they saw no point in identifying as geeks after high school: “Mature identity should be arrived at individually,” one interviewee told me in our chat after a fan convention. “You are who you are.” Some might even parlay their geekiness into success as adults. In *Nerds: Who They Are and Why We Need More of Them*, for instance, David Anderegg (2007) suggests that the main problems with nerd disdain are either temporary (until nerds can graduate and make loads of money) or actually more problematic in terms of economics (because anti-intellectualism means fewer American scientists and engineers).

Nevertheless, even as nerds grow up to be surrounded by coworkers and colleagues who are quite unlikely to openly and earnestly harass them, the popular image of geeks – and geeks’ image of themselves – tends to remain associated with a sense of rejection, marginalization, awkwardness, and more deliberate nonconformity well into adult life.

### Alienation and Exclusivity

As discussed in my first chapter, the image of computer professionals as an insular community of white men continues to dissuade many from getting involved in computers. The concept of the ‘nerd girl’ (or ‘girl geek,’ ‘geek chick,’ ‘nerd grrl,’ etc.) that emerges around high school suggests that a modifier is needed to distinguish from the default masculine coding of the term (Anderegg, 2007; Kendall, 1999a). Accordingly, geek culture is often conceptualized as a land of male appeals for the unmasculine – computer skill as substitute for physical prowess, escapist fiction as power fantasy, etc. – where the men who fit in are presumed to be puny, and the women who fit in are presumed to be somewhat boyish. Similarly, some have argued that the idea of the nerd as a pale-skinned recluse may dissuade people of color from taking on the term for themselves (Kendall, forthcoming), or may encourage nerds of color to simply define themselves in terms of “race reversal” rather than constructing their own sense of nerdiness (Eglash, 2002). More broadly speaking, then, one of the reasons that geeks remain stereotyped as misfits even into adulthood may be that geeky communities can indeed feel – and are sometimes clearly seen to be – inhospitable to those who don’t fit the stereotypical mold.

It’s probably not a coincidence that the examples of alienating and exclusionary behavior I’ll describe here come primarily from online interactions and secondhand anecdotes. Sexist, racist, and homophobic sentiments may be amplified by the somewhat anonymous and depersonalized format of internet venues – an “online disinhibition effect” (Suler, 2004)<sup>4</sup> in psychological terms, though popularly known to geeks under more colloquial terms, such as “the Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory” (Kruhulik &

Holkins, 2004).<sup>5</sup> My interactions with geeks in person have typically been much more genial and inclusive than the examples here might suggest, and the interviewees I've met in person haven't complained of much beyond issues of representation – e.g., the lack of positive portrayals of women in comics and video games. The lack of overt hostility in many physical contexts may be a good sign; that's not to say that such behavior doesn't exist in person, however, and the relative prevalence of alienating behavior online indicates more deeply underlying issues, especially considering how central internet venues are to the construction of geek communities.

### *Gender and Sexual Frustration*

The high school crowds of Nerds, Geeks, Freaks, and Outcasts that my interviewees described to me were predominantly male – even the ones described to me by female interviewees. That's not to say that female nerd groups don't exist, as Bucholtz's (1999) study of “a community of nerd girls” demonstrates, but they may be less common than cliques of geeky boys, perhaps because boys are somewhat more likely to be labeled as geeks by their peers in high school (Bishop et al., 2004). Plus, many of the interests that we think of as geeky, and which form the social backbone of many geek cliques, are typically marketed more to young boys.

Oftentimes, the girls who fit into male-dominated geek groups are those who feel they fit in better with the boys; several of the female geeks I interviewed noted that they had been “tomboys” or considered “just one of the guys” in school. In a response to a blog post about sexism in geek culture,<sup>6</sup> for instance, one visitor explained that she often felt more welcome among geeky guys than among other girls:



When I was growing up, I was a tomboy and was not interested in most toys aimed at girls. I liked action figures and *Thundercats* and despised dresses. [...]

Thing is, when I was a young misfit girl who likes kids' stuff and comics and action movies, I wasn't afraid that boys wouldn't let me be involved with their pursuits, or anything like that. I was afraid that other girls would dislike me/find me weird and laughable for being a geek (though it was a long time before that word was common currency, let alone a positive thing, where I live), and by and large *I was right*. (pandorasblog, 2008)

Geeky cliques, then, end up hosting teens regarded as rejects according to standards of both normative masculinity and femininity alike, drawing together timid, non-athletic boys with unfashionable, comic-reading girls. It would be reductive to describe geek identity entirely as a function or subset of gender identity, but widely recognized gender roles do figure into how geeks understand themselves and are branded as misfits more broadly. As noted earlier, when kids are first marked as geeks in the "social outcast" sense of the term, it can be for practically any reason – but after the onset of adolescence, our notions of geekiness become linked to our norms for proper "adult" behavior.

Following from this, the ability to date and to be in a romantic relationship are among the rubrics most commonly referred to in determining whether someone is the "socially acceptable" sort of geek. In a segment about those geeks who are okay to date, the *TODAY Show* tells us that "Geeks are sensitive because they have been made fun of before," though warns that they "Are not for all women" and "Can require time and effort" ("Why women love geeks," 2007). One woman commenting on an accompanying article in *Tango Magazine* sums up this attitude neatly: "There are two types of male geeks: redeemed and unredeemable. The redeemed ones actually know something. The unredeemed ones can go back to WarCraft<sup>7</sup> and rot for all I care. Who put them on the list of chic??" ("Why geeks are the new chic [comment]," 2007).

For many, one of the more problematic and visible types of fallout from growing up a geek is a lack of interpersonal socialization with those who aren't also geeky, and especially an atypical association with the opposite sex.<sup>8</sup> A lack of romantic experience – or even any contact with the opposite sex at all – was a defining feature of many nerds' high school experiences. Even in a mixed-gender group, if the guys outnumber the girls, there may not be much dating going on. This is an oft-remembered (and oft-joked-about) disappointment among geeks. On Slashdot, a website offering “News for Nerds,” a post about research demonstrating that “smarter teens have less sex” draws the comment: “Well, then I must have been ultrasmart... :(” (SuperDre, 2007). And on the flipside, one of my female interviewees suggested, “When I do deal with someone [in dating], it's always a problem [that] I only have guy friends.” Issues of dating and sex, however, aren't just problematic for their own sake, but are more widely representative of insecurity and resentment about gender roles and imbalances in geek cultures.

### *Constructing Men as “Jocks”*

One of the co-creators of Penny Arcade, the popular webcomic for gamers and geeks, once recalled a visit to a fan convention on his website:

I saw young kids there with their super hero t-shirts and arms full of comics. I just wanted to hug them and say “it'll be okay kid, some day you'll have a high paying job in the technology industry and those fuckers on the football team will be living in trailers and beating their wives.” (Krahulik, 2002)

If this sentiment sounds familiar, it may be because it echoes somewhat the anecdote that opens the introduction to this dissertation. At the Penny Arcade Expo, the gaming convention associated with said comic, an attendee pitched a “grocery bagging simulator,” disguised as a football video game, depicting geeks dating the “chicks” who

used to date “jocks,” as a way to humble former high-school athletes. This paints a picture of geeks not just proud to finally be gainfully employed, but thirsting for vengeance upon the groups they’ve constructed as their natural enemies. The example betrays an attitude (which met with much applause) that those who would muscle in on the geeks’ turf – with their football video games – deserve a life of low-paid servitude, and that women are the unwitting props used to indicate the true victors. This is the first half of a relatively common construction of gender among male geeks: The downtrodden versus those thought of as the powerful, with sexual legitimacy as the perceived stakes of the game.

When I once reflected on my blog about the way that geeks denigrate jocks, one commenter conceded that this is potentially just as much about the construction of stereotypes as it is about resentment over real past experiences:

I may be completely atypical, but when I think of “jock-hate,” the first reason that comes to mind is a lack of respect for their intelligence. Entry into geek culture is gained, if I may say so, through enjoyment of the cerebral aspects of life, be it games, math, science, language, etc. So when we come up to someone that puts in our face that not only did they choose to embrace the physical aspects, but are “living the life” because of it, it could cause resentment. Throw in a heaping handful of torment, and voila, hatred is born.

In my case, the dislike of jocks is based entirely on stereotypes. Yes, I know that they are often wildly inaccurate, but when you’re a timid home schooler, all you really know about high school culture is what everybody knows. Geeks are smart, jocks are dumb, jocks are bullies, geeks hate jocks. And while cheerleaders are basically female jocks with less brains, they are hot, and thus okay to want.

Looking back, it saddens me how much of that I hold with. Even what I disagree with is because of another stereotype. Drat. (icarus, 2009)

To some extent, sports fandom and athleticism may appear to simply stand in for a broader resentment that geeky guys feel toward masculine norms in general – hating jocks as a problematic side-effect to a broader rejection of dominant norms of

masculinity. In the comments following an online magazine's story about how geeks are now "chic," acceptable dating material, "Rodney" comments to express confusion over why "strange" geeks are getting all the love, while "normal" guys are left out in the cold.

Another commenter replies:

Yo Rodney, that's the point...you just don't get it...while you are spending your time lifting weights, fixing your hair, and applying too much cologne, smarter people are trying to cure diseases and make the world a better place...if you are such a great guy why dont you help these geeks you work with, be more fashionable etc? maybe they will help you realize that when you are 70 years old and all you can talk about is your old sports stats and how buff you used to be, your wife will be looking for her ear plugs or worse a pistol to end her misery. ("Why geeks are the new chic [comment]," 2007)

While there may be nothing inherently wrong with ascribing more social value to curing diseases than to memorizing sports statistics, comments like this one betray a sense of hostility born from an oversimplified caricature of males constructed as either geeks or jocks. One might infer that Rodney identified himself as a sports fan, athlete, or jock. But actually, according to Rodney's follow-up, he's not a sports fanatic at all. Rather, it was the other commenter who assigned certain stereotypes to Rodney based on his default construction for the "enemy of the geek." In a world where sports fandom is quite normal, wishing suicide on people's spouses may not exactly be the most effective way of demonstrating that geeks are now "chic."

There's a particular kind of resentment common to many of these examples of jock hate that's worth untangling: resentment toward some men for having been romantically and sexually successful with women when geeks were not. This hints at a lingering and widespread insecurity about manliness, and hints at some resentment toward women as well – who, in the above examples, end up imagined as trophies in a video game, abused by washed-up athletes, or shot through the head.

*(Un)welcoming Women into Geekdom*

Resentment toward “alpha males” is often more directly and overtly hostile and violent (at least in the way it is expressed) than open resentment toward women, but sexism and misogyny are arguably even more common in geek cultures. This may stem somewhat from the circumstances of how geeks are harassed as kids: Most of the persecution kids experience as kids may come from their own gender, and among male geeks, it’s more common to be physically harassed by other males than by females. Even so, women face a number of different kinds of alienating behavior in geek culture, ranging from deliberately exclusionary practices to unintentionally discomfoting fawning.

Women in geek cultures are a minority, but are far from scarce. They may, however, sometimes seem invisible, avoiding some kinds of geeky gatherings in person, or choosing gender-neutral names online. One woman, reflecting on a Metafilter comment thread about geeks and feminism, offers a number of specific examples from her past illustrating some of the challenges of fitting in and feeling welcome:

1992: My first [*Dungeons & Dragons*] game. The guy sitting next to me leans over and asks if my character wears chainmail underwear. Every time I inch away from him ever so slightly, he inches closer again. I grow increasingly uncomfortable. A few minutes later, after I ask him politely to cut it out, he says with mock indignation, “Quit yer squawkin’, I’m just stalkin’.” Everyone chuckles. Soon afterward, I stop playing D&D.

1995: My boyfriend makes a big deal of the fact that he’s attracted to me because of my mind. He geeks out with me over Star Trek, board games, libraries, Commodore 64 games, philosophy, microbiology, calculus, you name it. Glorious geek girl bliss. Then, over time, I realize that - geek camaraderie notwithstanding - somehow I always seem to end up making coffee, doing all the cleaning, and getting the groceries while he plays games. We discuss it. Nothing changes. We break up.

1999: Linux user group meeting. I walk in, excited because I have just finished reading Eric Raymond's *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*. Quickly I become hyper-aware of the fact that I'm the only woman there. I spend an hour fidgeting awkwardly and trying to think of something to say. It has to be the perfect mixture of witty, thought-provoking, technically savvy, and impressive; otherwise, I fear, these guys won't take me seriously. I end up commenting on the fact that there aren't many women there. Everyone laughs. I decide to stick to Linux forums, where I can hide behind a non-gendered username. (velvet winter, 2009)

Some of the “clubhouse” mentality of excluding women from geeky pursuits (Margolis & Fisher, 2002) is actually quite purposeful, explained away in resentment by those who blame women for their dating history (or lack thereof). Slashdot, a website featuring “News for Nerds,” has something of a reputation for sexist comments and heated debate whenever a discussion arises regarding women in information technology fields, as recognized even by its frequent readers and contributors (e.g., CmdrTaco, 2007). For instance, when Tim Berners-Lee, credited as an inventor of the web, proclaimed that women are often alienated by “bits of male geek culture and engineer culture that are stupid,” Slashdot linked to the story under the category “misandry.” Some Slashdot readers wrote comments attempting to justify gender exclusion based on resentment over their own feelings of rejection, while some others chimed in to poke holes in their arguments (Comments on Zonk, 2007):<sup>9</sup>

**What about stupid fashinista culture?** (Score:4, Insightful) by gurps\_npc  
I get discriminated against by stupid, pretty female culture a LOT more than women get discriminated against by stupid male geek culture. I am willing to bet that most geeks feel the same way.

You want a cease fire? Fine. start playing fair with us and we might play fair with you.

**Re:What about stupid fashinista culture?** (Score:5, Insightful) by ccccc  
So... your premise is that the pretty, stupid female community is the same as the capable, skilled female engineer community? Does the set of “male” gets subdivided into “geek” and “non-geek” but all women just go under “women”? I'm not either female or what would be called a feminist, but come on. Someone

needs to work with more women, but I guess that's probably the crux of the problem. [...]

**Re:What about stupid fashinista culture?** (Score:5, Insightful) by Sj0  
Every women I've ever met is incredibly sexist. They'll tell you all the terrible stereotypes they hold about men in a heartbeat. In fact, it's THEIR terrible sexist stereotypes that are to blame for the lack of women in trades and engineering.

Perhaps no less common than overtly “locking the clubhouse,” however, is the habit in many online venues of greeting women with crass sexual comments. When the heavily-trafficked gadget website Gizmodo posted a link to a story of a “Nerd Girls” science group at Tufts, for instance, readers responded with comments like, “no thank you” and “I'd hit #2, #6 and #7” before the entire post was pulled offline (see Tocci, 2008a).<sup>10</sup> Women openly identifying themselves by their gender often meet with doubtful comments from the male regulars, demands to see photographic proof of their claims, and often even demands to see nude photos (see Butts, 2005 for anecdotal examples).

To a certain extent, we might be able explain such behaviors as a microcosm of sexism and misogyny in American culture more broadly, and not necessarily particular to geek cultures (see comments on Tocci, 2008c). Interestingly, such conversations on Slashdot in particular have been offered as examples of a “locker-room atmosphere found in some IT shops” (CmdrTaco, 2007), a phrase that connotes an atmosphere of boorish athletes (constructed as ‘jocks’) rather than the stereotypical ‘geek’ image.

Nevertheless, even when male geeks aren't actively trying to be exclusive and hostile, women often face unwelcoming behaviors in geek cultures. The uneven gender distribution in most geeky groups means that women tend to get extra attention – some wanted, and some not. Some women receive this as a positive thing, such as in articles and online writings explaining “reasons to date a geek.” One writer on Craigslist suggests

that, “Due again to their neglected status, they’re more attentive than guys who ‘have more options,’” and that geeks’ “awkward” friends “will, 9 times out of 10, treat you with the utmost respect and, more than likely, a note of awe” (Anonymous, 2005). Another writer echoes, “Your geek will worship the ground you walk on. He’ll be so happy that a pretty girl like you paid attention to him that he’ll be at your feet” (Ghaemmaghani Scoble, 2005). This kind of humility and attention can be quite welcome in certain contexts, but an atmosphere that places women in a separate, semi-sacred social category has some obvious complications of its own.

Consider, for instance, the conversation surrounding the short-lived “Open Source Boob Project.” There has been some dispute about what this “project” entailed (see comments on Ann, 2008) – who knew it was going on, what the likelihood was that people could be made to feel pressured – but suffice to say, it involved a group of convention-goers asking for permission to touch the breasts of consenting women. It was described by one of its founders, “The Ferrett” (2008a), as a sort of exercise in cutting through social taboos in order to just get to do what some people wanted to do. It was all quite informal at first, though buttons were printed up to distribute at a later convention, reading “YES, you may” or “NO, you may not” (The Ferrett, 2008b). The project seems to have been abandoned, however, following a write-up on Feministing, a well-trafficked feminist blog. Over a thousand comments later, with some in defense of the project, The Ferrett conceded defeat on his blog, acknowledging: “Women *should* feel safe. [...] Hell, it’s already made women feel less safe by me mentioning it, and that makes me feel like shit. As it should” (The Ferrett, 2008b).



As any reader of Feministing could tell you, it's not exceptionally hard to find examples of sexism in American culture. What makes this incident particularly worth considering in a study of geekdom is that the fellow behind it didn't even realize that behavior he saw as practically worshipful – "And lo, we touched her breasts" (The Ferrett, 2008b) – could be seen as discomfoting, even predatory.

Coverage of the Open Source Boob Project led to a broader discussion online about how women have a particularly difficult time feeling welcome in male-dominated geekdom. One commenter on Feministing, musing on this event and how it fits into geek culture more generally, wrote:

I definitely get that whole devalued feeling a lot, and this particular proposition [of the Open Source Boob Project] isn't helping at all. I do think conventions are a place where people generally feel like they can lose the rules for a few days; I mean, you're 25, wearing a full-body costume, and people won't make fun of you for it (better yet, you get prizes for good work). Surrounded by people who have a like-mind, you feel a little less shy about approaching someone, because hey, you know that cute guy over there will actually be impressed instead of laughing when you tell him how many comic books you own.

Hm, but it doesn't make [asking to touch strangers' breasts] ok. What I guess I'm trying to explain is how people who normally seem nice would suddenly come up with a bullshit idea like this, and how people who normally have more sense to "just say no" would fall into this trap. I never had a date in high school, and I'm pretty sure if I didn't have anyone to back me up, I would've said yes at that point in my life too. College has helped a lot with that, but even I can't get past the fact that my opinion about Halo 3 just isn't as valued at these places as a lot of men's. (thestrue, 2008)

This comment helps to illustrate that women face different circumstances in geek culture from men, but the ways in which they understand themselves as geeks is often quite similar. The poster notes feeling embarrassed about revealing an interest in comics around cute people of the same age, not having dated in high school, and feeling vulnerable out of desire for acceptance. Another commenter's note similarly indicated:

If Tech-Dudes come away from high school feeling stigmatized, devalued and socially awkward – can you then imagine how most geeky girls feel? We aren't even considered normative in our social niche of choice! (Vodalus, 2008)

Despite this niche-within-a-niche status, women tend not to be regarded as the most authentically nerdy of all nerds, but nerds who require some special explanation.

Some attempt to respond to such behavior by giving geeks the benefit of the doubt for simply being dangerously ignorant, such as in “A Straight Geek Male’s Guide to Interaction with Females,” a Livejournal post by a man who explains common-sense notions like “Thou Shalt Keep Thy Hands to Thyself” and “No. Means. No.” (timjr, 2008).<sup>11</sup> A few occasionally openly criticize others for blatant sexism, as in a Kotaku post about an attractive female game producer that prompted one man to comment, “[to] everyone else on this thread that wants to ‘spooge’ or ‘hit it.’ [...] Please, for the love of intelligent conversation everywhere, shut the fuck up” (Cogito, 2008). Polite debate and discussion on such matters can sometimes be hard to find.

Exclusionary, sexist behavior is obviously problematic for the sake of those who are excluded. It’s also worth noting that it likely plays a role in upholding the stereotype of geeks as socially maladjusted boys, which is a label even many of the male geeks would like to escape. Attempting to explain “Why Geeks Get a Bad Name,” shilsen blogs at Feminist Geeks about how fantasy games alienate women by portraying female characters as scantily clad, physically vulnerable magic users (rather than warriors), and then fantasy gamers come up with convoluted explanations to defend such portrayals. By way of example, he quotes a gamer who posts on one forum, “make my females magical and put em way back in the rear. [...] I’d hate to see one eaten alive or crippled up in combat just to prove a point. Just call me old fashioned that way.” Over at Cinematical, a

commenter responds to a contest to send a fan to Comic Con, which is only open to men. The commenter similarly suggests that such offerings play a role in perpetuating geek stereotypes, even reflecting poorly on the men: “Do geek guys enjoy the image of themselves as pathetic virgins? Because that’s exactly the image perpetuated by freezing out women and their opinions” (Rappe, 2009).

### *Resenting and Representing Whiteness*

One other notable way in which geeky communities may be alienating to outsiders is in the way that many members react to and refuse to acknowledge issues related to race. This isn’t as commonly discussed among geeks themselves as the gender issues prevalent in geek cultures, perhaps in part because geeks’ insecurities around dating provide a much more centrally recognized discourse in explaining their role in American culture. Nevertheless, when such topics do come up in discussion, the resulting unease suggests an atmosphere in which issues of race are widely considered off-limits for discussion.

By way of example, it’s useful to consider how geeks online reacted to a *New York Times* piece on the work of linguist and nerd researcher Mary Bucholtz, written by *American Nerd* author Benjamin Nugent (2007). The article summarized Bucholtz’s argument that nerdy behavior can be described as “hyperwhite” in its pointed rejection of the styles of speech and dress that “cool kids” appropriate from urban, black youth cultures. Bucholtz’s argument portrays nerds as somewhat admirably rejecting white privilege, but in a way that potentially excludes nonwhites from nerd culture.

As I addressed in the first chapter of this dissertation, Bucholtz's argument is open to discussion, even disagreement; some commenters on Geek Studies (Tocci, 2007), for instance, offered a bit of methodological critique and some practical considerations. The reaction from many nerds, however, seems too vitriolic and hostile to be described as simply rejecting Bucholtz's argument: Many were clearly offended by the very suggestion that nerd identity could have anything to do with race whatsoever. One unfavorable post analyzing the *Times* article (Click, 2007), for instance, is followed by comments such as one that paraphrases Bucholtz's argument as "all honkeys are bigots," and suggests that "I doubt that a better or more eloquent response can be framed than 'shut the fuck up, you stupid cow'" (Merovign, 2007). Another commenter responds to the idea that nerds are characterized by "racially tinged" behavior by stating, "I'd quite like to see Mary Bucholtz tinged with something. Probably fire" (cwxyzallen, 2007).

Meanwhile, Bucholtz's claims came under a different sort of critique in venues more trafficked by self-described "nerds of color." A Livejournal (a.k.a. "LJ") writer named Nora, posting under the alias nojojojo, says that Bucholtz doesn't actually go far enough in critiquing nerds' "hyperwhiteness":

[A]s a geeky black person who runs in typical geek circles – anime/manga, yaoi/slash, video gaming, science fiction, roleplaying (though a long time ago), science topics in general – [there] is an entirely different manifestation of this hyperwhiteness which is nowhere near as positive or admirable as Bucholtz makes it out to be. Not only have I seen rampant rejection of black language and cultural trappings, I've seen a vehement rejection of black *people* and their concerns. I've also seen vigorous, racially tinged defenses of these nerdy circles which, IMO, are designed to establish them as "white spaces" ... and keep them that way. (nojojojo, 2007a)

By way of example, this writer offers personal experiences involved in the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America LJ community, which dismissed diversity

concerns as a “racial issue” of little interest to a group with “few members of color,” and notes how Harry Potter fans got angry when they discovered that a certain character described as “pretty” turned out to have been black all along. Other LJ members posted to offer their own examples and experiences, and the original post was reprinted in full at a “Twin Cities Nerds of Color” blog.

We can also observe some hostility and exclusivity in those instances when the icons and tropes of geek culture get repurposed and offered to predominantly black markets and subcultures. Consider, for instance, when gaming blog Kotaku reported on the “Nintendo by Torrel” line of “urban” clothing. Comments from readers represented a mix of grudging approval on the one hand, hostility and mockery on the other:

**arcana**

5:43 PM on Wed Oct 17 2007

nerd clothes for thugs in training :\  
 \

**Okari**

5:43 PM on Wed Oct 17 2007

Me and my homies r gonna look so kewl wearing those clothes. Any1 who don't like that is a fool. Ugh, do we really need more kids wearing baggy clothes thinking that it's cool?

**eternalplayer2345**

5:44 PM on Wed Oct 17 2007

wow i sure hope my mario shirt doesnt get me shot now!

**Ignatius**

5:52 PM on Wed Oct 17 2007

[...] The sad thing is, [...] as long as I'm not associated with the “STREET THUG WIGGA 4 LIFE” crap that seems to be prevalent nowadays, I'd gladly buy the Bowser and Mario Bros. sweatshirts. (Comments on McWhertor, 2007)<sup>12</sup>

These comments may seem particularly ironic when one remembers that one of the most popular genres of niche music among geeks is “nerdcore hip-hop,” which self-consciously parodies rap music and culture alike (see chapter 6).

These examples represent an adamant refusal to acknowledge that race could be worth discussing at all as it may relate to geek cultures – not so much being “race blind” as maintaining eyes clenched shut. When Bucholtz invokes race as a way of coding certain styles and mannerisms, she is vilified for it. When Kotaku commenters joke that wearing Nintendo shirts might get them shot and equate baggy clothing with “gangsta” style, they do so without acknowledging the cultural origins of such tropes, and even explain away hostility by describing as directed more toward “the mainstream” or “wigger” style.

As with the discussion of sexism earlier, this attitude may simply represent a microcosm of tensions and defense tactics as American culture at large struggles with “racial paranoia” (J. L. Jackson, 2008). I wonder, however, whether the very acknowledgement of other historically oppressed categories of identity is somehow particularly threatening to a group that belongs to privileged categories – whether in terms of whiteness, masculinity, or both – but whose members have always felt like the underdog. For those who have long seen themselves as downtrodden, dimensions of identity which are traditionally thought to confer cultural dominance may feel invisible, or even unwanted, rather than things to be actively claimed. Especially in polite, politically progressive discourse, one does not discuss “white cultural heritage” or “white identity.” A “geek identity,” however, is an identity that may feel safer to be proud of. Introducing conversations about racial and gender disparities and stereotypes to some geeky groups may thus be received as an unwelcome accusation. The irony of this, as I will explore further below, is that many geeks themselves may be quick to describe their own experiences in the terms of historically oppressed groups.

*A More Inclusive Geekdom*

There are, of course, geek grrls and nerds of color. To some extent, anyone can indeed be a nerd, regardless of race or gender – but to fit in, many are expected to erase, deny, or ignore some of the traditional markers that identify them according to these other cultural categories. Women are commonly expected to be tomboyish, and nerds of color are often expected to distance themselves from cultural trappings associated with their racial groups. One female computer engineer notes on Slashdot, for instance:

The one other female in our group (of 20-30 people) doesn't really see any discrimination against us, but she's quite a bit of a tomboy, and she's willing to tell people to just shut up, and take a back seat. When I do that, I'm told by my boss that I'm demanding. (snowgirl, 2007)

In a dialog with other “nerds of color” following the aforementioned critique of Bucholtz’s work, the original blogger describes a similar discomfort some geeks seem to display among those who display signs of nonwhite racial identity. For some people, Nora explains,

nerdy behavior becomes a kind of code for “I’m a friendly [insert race] person, I’m ‘one of the good ones’, see, I’m just like you, please accept me.” (I know that’s how people have reacted to me over the course of my life – there’s always a certain wariness until I suddenly squeal, “Oooh, Elfquest!!” or something and then they relax. Then they look shocked when I later do something that codes as black to them.) (nojojojo, 2007b; bracketed phrase in original)

Even so, despite relatively widespread behavior encouraging the notion that geek culture is the domain of white guys and exceptions who don’t try to stand out, many self-identified geeks still maintain that their geek identity can exist alongside other aspects of identity beyond the traditional geek stereotype. Moreover, even these “non-stereotypical”

geeks often still explain their geek identity in ways that would sound familiar to any other geeky misfit.

As indicated in the earlier quotes written in response to the Open Source Boob Project, many women who identify as geeky misfits come to this definition through similar paths to men. Not all, however, insist that only a certain kind of woman can be a geek. A woman commenting on a post about whether “geek girls” are inherently “less feminine” than other girls offers, “In my oppinion [*sic*], you are what you see yourself as, and geeks can be girly or tomboyish. But in part, I may be seeing myself as a geek since I’ve been called that or nerd since I was a child” (Irrlich, 2009). And in response to a post on Geek Studies about Mary Bucholtz’s research on “hyperwhite” nerd identity, an anonymous commenter similarly noted:

as far as im concerned a nerd is a person that is made fun of for being a smart indivual and likes to play videogames alot so I guess that makes me a nerd lol.  
and a far as the blackness and whiteness goes. im black and I love [white nerdcore rapper mc chris’s] music whats wrong with that? id shouldnt matter if you black or not its about the music and life style any body can be a nerd [*sic*]  
(Anonymous, 2007)<sup>13</sup>

Despite the unease displayed in some contexts, then, there remain those who reject the notion that geek identity should require the negation of other dimensions of identity. I interviewed a man I met at Comic Con, for instance, who mentioned, “I actually like being a geek, you know? It’s a label that I really enjoy.” It’s also a label that apparently does not conflict with his Latino roots or his association with Prism Comics, an LGBT advocacy group for fans.

Writer and filmmaker Raafi Rivero has further contemplated how nerdiness now coexists with racial identity, suggesting that “the proliferation of media voices and sources enabled by the internet has allowed (surprise!) a more nuanced and (bing!) less



gangster voice of young black America to emerge, untempered by market concerns and sensationalism” (Rivero, 2007a). I confessed on Geek Studies that I would have to do more research before I could say whether I could comment on “the black nerd” as anything other than a subset of “the nerd”; commenting in response, Rivero neatly summed up his sentiments. The implication is not necessarily that one’s racial identity is central to one’s nerdiness, but more comfortably displayed as coexistent with it: “a nerd who is black does not cease to respond to black cultural norms but for the fact that s/he digs on World of Warcraft” (Rivero, 2007b).

Beyond personal proclamations of identity, there have been some concerted efforts to broaden the geek image. The Nerd Girls at Tufts, for instance, is a group “encouraging young women to pursue engineering and science” that insists “Smart is sexy. Not either or” (“About the Nerd Girls,” 2009). *She’s Such a Geek!*, a book of essays from women on their geeky interests, similarly attempts to wrest geekdom away from its masculine connotations, or even from the idea that there’s only one way that women can be geeky. The Black Nerds Network works to do likewise for black audiences, blogging and making apparel promoting “book-reading, fashion-thinking, kite-flying” behaviors as an “antidote” to the “ghetto lifestyle” celebrated by “African/Caribbean people” (“BNN PressPack,” 2009). Ron Eglash (2002), meanwhile, describes Afrofuturism as a way of repurposing the nerd image for African-American culture. More broadly speaking, these efforts could be said to represent an effort to redefine what it means to be a geek through the creation of a “geek culture” itself – new materials, new social organizations, and new symbols to associate with these concepts. “If I do call myself a geek, I say it with a tinge of shame and discomfort in my voice and in my heart,” Amber (2009) writes on a blog

called Feminist Geeks. “What keeps me using the word, however – especially in conjunction with ‘feminist’ or ‘socially conscious’ – is that I want it to mean something different.”

According to these perspectives, geekiness and nerdiness are not inherently white, nor boyish, nor even tomboyish, and the way that these identities are being constructed may be leaving more room for those who don’t fit the usual nerd stereotype. In the meantime, geeks remain popularly understood as misfits in part because many behave in ways that can alienate some who may be constructed as beyond the stereotypical norm – and also, as I’ve noted already and will now explore in more detail, in part because they subscribe to the idea that they are misfits themselves.

#### Identifying Around Alienation and Marginalization

Being used to rejection, and having over the years forged a strong traditional response to society based upon the expectation that rejection would continue, many of them have come to feel that alienation is the only appropriate and honorable stance for them to take. What they have come to fear is not so much rejection or overt hostility, with which they have learned to cope and which they have almost come to regard as their proper fate, but the loss of alienation. Many of the most spirited younger intellectuals are disturbed above all by the fear that, as they are increasingly recognized, incorporated, and used, they will begin merely to conform, and will cease to be creative and critical and truly useful. This is the fundamental paradox in their position – that while they do resent evidences of anti-intellectualism, and take it as a token of a serious weakness in our society, they are troubled and divided in a more profound way by their acceptance. (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 393)

When Richard Hofstadter wrote this in 1963, he was not referring to the attitude of geeks following the dot-com boom, but the attitude of scientists and intellectuals finding a new sense of social acceptance thanks to the Space Race.<sup>14</sup> This observation might help us understand why so many carry a sense of misfit identity out of high school and into the

adult world, despite the apparent recent trends in geeks' broader social acceptability: To some extent, that stigma is the badge of nonconformity and shared struggle, reflected in the ways that geeks talk about themselves in person and online.

### *Cultivating the "Lovable Loser" Image*

As one of my interviews suggested, a sense of community and comradeship arises around "a certain awkwardness that I think geeks [...] all share." The exact form that awkwardness takes varies from geek to geek, and has been explained in a number of ways – a love of rules and rationalism (Nugent, 2008), a control-freakish need for mediation, multitasking, and projects to solve (Rands, 2003, 2007), and an apparent ignorance of basic social norms not unlike (or even related to) neurological factors such as Attention Deficit Disorder or Asperger's syndrome.<sup>15</sup> Geeks embrace their social quirks and embarrassments with some combination of pride, humor, and occasionally, humility.

Geek Prom, for instance – the self-professed "best nerdfest in the Midwest" – is a concert and dance event for adults that makes light of high school awkwardness by encouraging goofy dress in a social atmosphere. "For those who were too geeky to attend their high school prom, it's a chance to finally be accepted," its website notes. "For those who were too cool to properly enjoy their high school prom, it's an opportunity to finally let that inner-geek out" ("Geek Prom," 2008). And at Dork Yearbook ("The way we wish we weren't"), visitors submit photos from their youth in full nerdy glory: dressed in Star Trek uniforms, presenting at science fairs, playing on bulky computers. It's a project of self-mockery and reassurance alike. One photo's caption, submitted by the inventor of the

Apple computer, reads, “Some guy named Steve Wozniak sent in his Bay Area Science Fair project. Dorks always mess with these things in school but it never goes anywhere in real life” (“Dork yearbook,” 2009).

These examples represent an inclusive view of geek culture – anybody can show up and proclaim him or herself a geek, and we can all identify with the lovable loser. It’s also quite common, however, for people to draw distinctions between different kinds of geekiness, proclaiming one kind as somehow more authentic or acceptable than another. Some even actively resent that terms like ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ have started to take on positive connotations to the point where they might be claimed by those who don’t meet with some sort of geek authenticity. Just to offer one of many examples (with more to come later in the dissertation), consider this call for a “nerd army resurgence” by one college newspaper writer:

I’m a nerd. Not the “I was pretty popular in high school, but I loved those ‘Lord of the Rings’ movies” faux-geek, but the real-deal-Holyfield “I’ve seen every episode of ‘Stargate SG-1,’ and I openly dislike the taste of beer” Duke of Nerds.

I’m nearsighted, have terrible hair and get creepily good grades for comparatively little effort. Attractive girls still (kind of) make me nervous. I’m pretty sure my inner monologue is unabridged insanity.

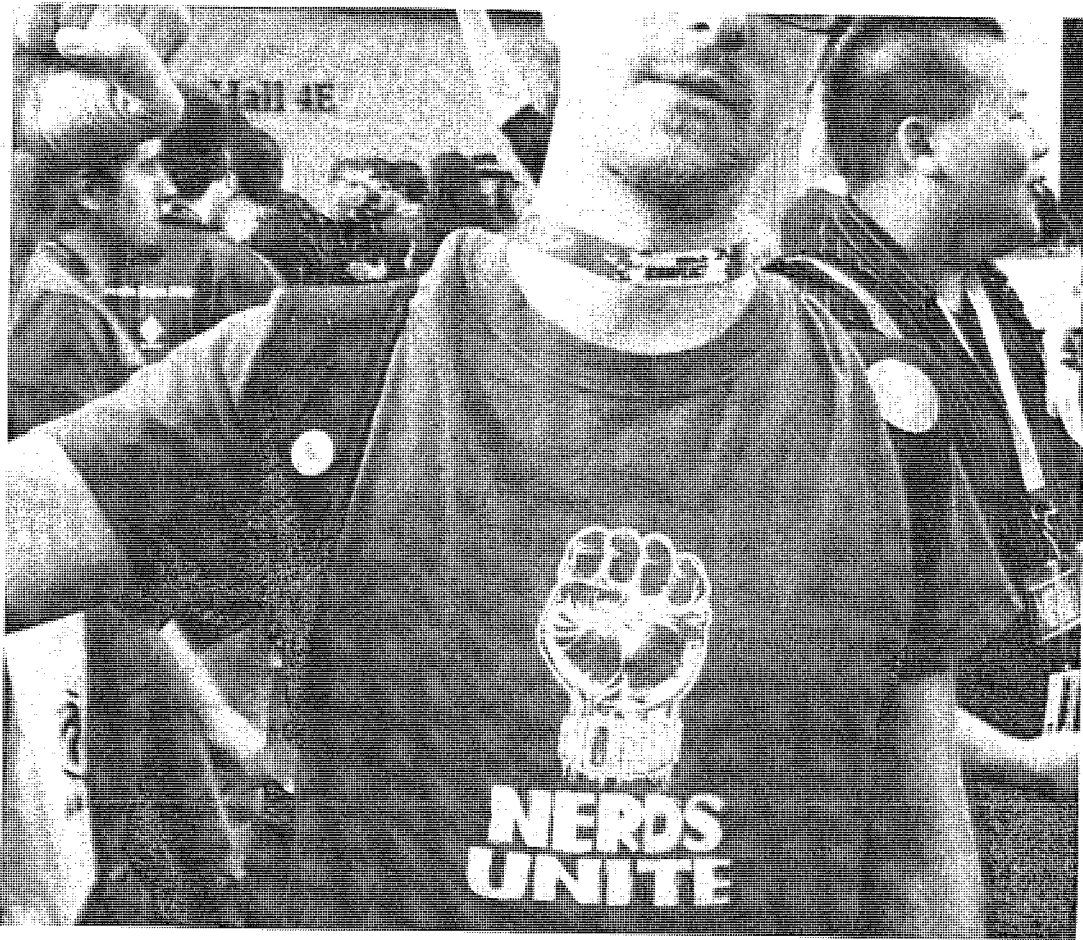
I am, as my former kindergarten teacher put it, an “independent thinker.” (Petrušek, 2009)

The article doesn’t explicitly define what divides a real geek from a faux-geek, but it does offer some characteristics that the author considers self-evidently authentic: The real geek can’t achieve or actively dislikes that which is considered popular, mainstream, or adult (beer, ability to talk to the opposite sex); s/he embraces that which is denigrated (*Stargate SG-1*, “creepily” good grades); and s/he sees some (undefined) connection between these characteristics and being “an independent thinker,” echoing Hofstadter’s reasoning about intellectuals.

If 'nerd' is to be used as a badge of pride, such writers might have us believe, it must also acknowledge a sense of otherness, even a sense of weakness. And this may hint at another side of the misfit image that some geeks cultivate: not just socially awkward, but socially stigmatized; not just weird, but wronged.

*Drawing on Discourses of Oppression*

Though nerds may recognize that they are different and strange, most would still agree that the persecution they faced in their youth was unjust. "Geeks are a very tight knit group," one interviewee told me. "We've all suffered the same indignities in high school, the same problems with the mainstream, the same stigma in society." In describing this, many draw upon terminology associated with groups much more commonly recognized as oppressed (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Photo taken by author at PAX 2007.

One of the most common distinctions I've heard to distinguish between 'geek' and 'nerd' suggests that one of these terms is supposed to be more well-adjusted than the other – e.g., “a geek is a nerd with social skills.” Much as in the media portrayals described earlier, however, there's still an assumption that both groups suffer rejection. Some even go so far as to define the term 'nerd' as carrying a similar weight and usage to an ethnic slur – “the n-word,” as some refer to it (e.g., OW-Holmes, 2009). “If a non-geek calls a geek a nerd, that's offensive,” one of my interviewees said, in a distinction others made as well. “But we can call each other nerds.”

To some, meanwhile, there's a sense that those who attempt to distance themselves from the negative connotations of 'geek' or 'nerd' are practicing a sort of self-denial. One regular commenter on *Hipster, Please!* offered, "I hesitate to generalize, but often those who distinguish themselves as geeks and not nerds are harbouring some lingering shame about their nerd-geekdom (nerk? neek?). They're not fully out of the closet" (Snake Eyes, 2009).<sup>16</sup> Along similar lines, I met a pair of friends at a gaming convention who agreed to be interviewed, one claiming to be a geek, the other not. I was able to catch up with the geek, who said his friend is still somewhat concerned with being cool:

Personally I think [my friend's] a bit of a closet geek [...] but he won't admit it outwardly. I think the difference between the difference between someone who's interested in geeky stuff and someone who actually embraces the whole geek stereotype is just that: embracing it.

To some extent, using terms evoking other groups' struggles with prejudice and discrimination may suggest that certain terms coined as part of social and civil rights movements have become genericized to refer to anything that seems even a little embarrassing. We can even read as a woman comes "out of the nerd closet" in the pages of *The Washington Post*, for instance, simply in admitting to singing Broadway musicals and tying her shoelaces in bunny ears (Kravitz, 2009). Nevertheless, the implied parallel to other groups' issues is in many cases quite intentional. Some draw an overt and purposeful connection between geeks and historically oppressed groups. The *New Hacker's Dictionary* (known originally as the Jargon File), for instance, describes the word 'geek' with greater precision: "Cannot be used by outsiders without implied insult to all hackers; compare black-on-black vs. white-on-black usage of 'nigger'" (Raymond,

1996). And in a documentary about nerdcore hip-hop, *Nerdcore for Life*, a young rapper named Monzy proclaims:

Ladies and gentlemen, it's hard out there for a pimp. But it's even harder out there for a nerd. Us nerds are the oppressed and the downtrodden. [...] In the '20s we had women's lib, in the '60s it was civil rights, in the '90s gay pride, and in the new millennium, bitches better fear the Nerd Revolution! (quoted in Kendall, forthcoming)

Monzy's statement was meant (at least half) humorously, of course, but certainly reads as claiming that racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of bigotry are behind us, with the geeks next in line to receive their due, but without even realizing how the "pimp" statement might sound unintentionally ironic in this context. It's also particularly ironic that geeks would repurpose the terminology of oppressed groups they don't necessarily belong to even while many decry the co-optation of 'nerd' by those who have never felt the sting of schoolyard taunts.

I have often wondered myself, both personally and publicly on my blog, about the implications involved in describing nerds – a group largely composed of straight, white men with class mobility – as if they were a minority group. Adult geeks do not face anything like the same sorts of oppression (as a result of their geekiness, at least) that other groups have historically faced. They are not routinely denied jobs because of their geeky interests,<sup>17</sup> paid less than their non-geeky counterparts, or denied the right to marry. For the "closet geek," realistically speaking, the stakes of coming out of the closet are considerably lower than for the closet gay or lesbian. For those who recognize the brutal and violent history and present behind "the N-word," equating such a term with a schoolyard taunt is disturbingly insensitive to say the least.



It would be something of a mischaracterization, however, to suggest that geeks are actively trying to publicize and present themselves as making a bid for the “status” of a minority group.<sup>18</sup> Monzy’s proclamation of the “Nerd Revolution,” for instance, was delivered to an audience who showed up for songs about math, not at a rally on the steps of a government building. These sorts of statements may be better understood as part of a process of self-definition between geeks – a way of reassuring themselves and one another that they can be proud, instead of ashamed, of their geekiness, and that they recognize and share certain meanings and experiences because of children’s labels. And, perhaps most importantly, instilling these labels with more obviously dreadful connotations suggests something about how problematic they remain for many children today.

‘Nerd’ is no fair comparison to ‘nigger,’ and to even juxtapose them may be mind-boggling for many adults. It’s worth recognizing, however, that while ‘nerd’ may be more commonly innocuous, it may also be more commonly flung among children today for use as a purposely hurtful insult. At Racialicious.com, for instance, one writer recounted an anecdote of a biracial boy explaining to his mother that, in his multicultural group of friends, “the N-word” is no longer considered problematic; it’s much worse, he said, to be known among the other kids by the “other N-word” (Peterson, 2007). This context may help explain why geeks and nerds feel that they have “reclaimed” these terms as other groups have done with ethnic and homophobic slurs.

The ‘closet’ that nerds speak of, meanwhile, is not a means to hide from threats of disownment, violence, or the negation of civil rights. It may, however, still represent a refusal to engage or admit to behaviors or interests that are attached to a sense of shame

or fear of judgment. As the above quotes indicate, when geeks say things like, “A geek is nerd who’s still in the closet” (dsankey, 2009), it’s an acknowledgment that the stakes of “coming out” actually *aren’t* very high for the adult nerd, but spoken in a way that may suggest empathy with those who still feel the need to “hide.”

This represents an understanding that the impulse to “hide” could have some basis in real experience, given the isolating experiences many nerds have as children and teens.<sup>19</sup> Consider the response, for instance, to one blog’s review of *Nerds: Who They Are and Why We Need More of Them*, which criticizes David Anderegg (2007) for his decision “to compare anti-nerd stereotypes to bigotry, particularly racism,” explaining that it “bothered me since the stereotype of the nerd so very often gets attached to people who are relatively privileged people, even if they weren’t popular in middle school” (Marcotte, 2009). One regular reader, quoting this point directly to in his comment, writes:

I think you’re too quick to dismiss this. As I know you already know (because honestly, I think I learned it from you!), having one type of privilege doesn’t protect you against other types of discrimination. Certainly a lot of the same language applies:

- harassment (including physical)
- being “The Other,” especially feeling like in the eyes of everyone else, my nerdiness made me a *non-person*. (And yes, sex played a big part in this.)
- most damaging of all, *internalizing* the viewpoint of my ‘oppressor’, especially feeling great buckets of *shame* for my preferences, and for who I was/am

You can say that my experiences were cushioned by my other privileges (white, male) and that’s true, but the difference is more of degree than kind. (MH, 2009)

Being a straight, white, male geek myself, explaining why geeks feel marginalized remains challenging for me even after years researching the topic professionally spending time among geeks personally. I reached out via email to some of

the online informants I've come to regard as friends in search of a fuller explanation; one, a frequent commenter on Geek Studies and blogger at his own site, replied:

I can tie a lot of things about who and what I am today (good and bad) directly back to my childhood. Furthermore, I think the whole concept of a "closet geek" is directly tied to the oppression (yeah, I'm going there) that we suffered under in school. We were taught to hide these things about ourselves. Who can blame folks for still being reluctant to let their freak flag fly after 12+ years of having it drilled into them to hide it? [...] For me though the whole geek culture thing is that healing process.

For adults, that means providing a place where we don't have to pretend to be normal. A place where we can be the freaks we are. A place where we can begin the process of unlearning all these coping strategies that we were forced to adopt to make it through the trenches of school.

For the kids, it is the realization that they are not alone. That others out there grok<sup>20</sup> what they are going through. As well as realizing that there are those of us who not only don't hide our geek nature, but celebrate it. [...]

Kids don't kill themselves because [they're] being marginalized. They do it because they're being emotionally, psychologically, and/or physically tortured. [...] So, we spend X number of years keeping our head down and trying not to make eye contact.

To talk of geeks understanding their "misfit" identity is to talk of grown women and men still making sense of their existence with a phrase internalized as children. It means finding some familiarity in phrases like "they're varsity nothing."

Going beyond the terminology of high school marginalization, geeks use terms borrowed from discourses of oppression because they understand themselves searching for pride in the face and in the wake of ridicule and shame. The way these terms are sometimes used can be ignorant and offensive, but to object to the underlying idea being expressed – that geeks have some right to claim a sense of identity around marginalization – is to deny that bullying, social exclusion, and stereotypes around media use could have a long-lasting impact on personal and social development. Despite the implications of Monzy's proclamation of "Nerd Revolution," understanding young nerds' experiences as a sort of marginalization does not necessarily imply a dismissal of other

groups' ongoing struggles. As one geek suggested to me in another email discussion in which we dissected the appropriateness of the 'closet geek' phrase, "If I reference the GBLT struggle, it is because I am in awe of both what they have accomplished and how they have gone about accomplishing it." Identifying geeks' marginalization as less galling than other social problems does not mean it ceases to be a problem, or remove its meaningfulness for geeks.

### Geek Culture as "Healing Process"

On the same day as the *Beauty and the Geek* casting call, I made my way across town to a bar that hosts "Nerd Nite" about once a month. Locals gather to sip beer and listen to (or playfully heckle) short presentations about nerdy topics like ornithology, robotics, and postmodern architecture; a portion of the crowd sticks around for a rock band afterward. I met a fellow at my first Nerd Nite named Ben, a grad student who found out about the event from the coach of his high school chess team. He was pretty excited to talk about my dissertation, as he'd long hoped to write such a book himself (and I was fortunate to catch a presentation he gave at the next Nerd Nite about the image of geeks in John Hughes movies). Ben dropped by Geek Studies to comment on my posts about *Beauty and the Geek* and Nerd Nite, offering a thought that bears relating here:

I submit that true nerdhood always carries with it some element of shame. It's a shame that's instilled and reinforced time and again from childhood to adolescence by those who put us down. Usually, I think, by the time college comes around, we learn that the world isn't really out to get us, and in fact looks quite favorably on smart people, as long as you have a modicum of social skills (which can be learned.) When this realization happens, you start to grow up, and while you may still maintain your nerdy interests, you no longer feel the particular pain which is at the core of a nerd's identity.

Unfortunately, some people are unable to make this transition, and they become the kind of nerds that *Beauty and the Geek* is probably looking for: those who need serious help with their lives. (Ben, 2007)

Ben's understanding of geek identity acknowledges social awkwardness, but presents it as a surmountable problem. In this final section, then, I'll illustrate how some geeks attempt to address that issue for themselves through mediated and interpersonal interaction with other geeks.

I've certainly encountered geeks, online and off, who are so invested with remaining the outcast that any concession to standard social conventions seems an affront to asserting their freedom from "the mainstream." Much more frequently, however, I've interacted with geeks who want to hang on to the aspects of geek identity that they enjoy most – a playful hobby, a love for numbers, a quirky sense of humor – but shed the hang-ups that make them feel like misfits. Some find this balance relatively easily in adulthood; others may need to work at it more.

In searching for the "serious help with their lives" that Ben alludes to above, geeks who'd rather not appear on television may turn to the sources of information where they feel comfortable and unthreatened: conventions, books, the internet, and those other geeks who "have a modicum of social skills" already. Moreover, these sources are not necessarily just for those who need "serious help." As the earlier quoted email suggests, the project of creating "geek culture" – the quirky music, the niche-focused blogs, and obscure get-togethers, the idea that geeks have anything in common at all worth celebrating – can be conceptualized as a way of building "safe" contexts for people who might feel ashamed of their interests, or just more generally socially awkward and

reserved. These things are fun and social, but they are also, in one geek's words, a sort of "healing process."<sup>21</sup>

The online world provides countless examples of how geeks manage personal awkwardness in everyday life – self-reflective essays, forum threads from advice-seekers, self-help books and reviews of same. Consider, for instance, a poster writing to Slashdot under the name "JustShootMe," who asks:

I have a question for my fellow Slashdotters, and yes, I realize I am entering the lion's den covered in tasty meat-flavored sauce. I have never been a very social person, preferring to throw myself into technology; therefore, I've been spectacularly unsuccessful in developing any meaningful interpersonal relationships. Lately I have begun to feel that this situation is not tenable, and I would like to fix it. But I really don't know how and haven't the faintest idea where to start. I know that I am in the minority and that there are many different kinds of Slashdot readers, most of whom have more experience in this realm than I do. So please tell me: how, and more importantly, *where* do you meet fellow geeks – preferably including some of the opposite gender – in meatspace?<sup>22</sup>  
(kdawson, 2009)

JustShootMe knows that he's going to be mocked mercilessly for this question, and he is. Nevertheless, he also receives a good deal of sincere input. The comments following the post also give some more detail about his own interests and clarify that he is indeed male, but also reveal that he was vague and general in the terms used in the original question in the hopes that these responses would constitute a resource that others could utilize later.

The internet is not the only place, however, where geeks can find a socially insulated context to work on social skills (and events in person have less risk of ruthless mockery). I attended TerraCon,<sup>23</sup> a science-fiction and fantasy convention, to witness this process firsthand. Every year, attendees pack into a hotel to attend panels on fantasy and science fiction, chat with fellow fans in the convention suite, and browse comics, novels, DVDs, chain mail, and other goods from a variety of vendors and artists. TerraCon has a

relatively high ratio of women to men for a geeky event, and a very high proportion of people with long hair. In the elevator, I overheard a conversation about geocaching, a sort of GPS-aided treasure hunting activity, between a couple bearded and polytailed men. As they left, a mother and young child got in to the elevator, the latter wearing a cloak. This is a place for lifelong geeks, people who start young and carry it into adulthood.

I got out of the elevator soon after, destined for a panel called “Social Interaction for Fans.” The description in the program promised to address such questions as how to politely move someone out of your personal space, how to avoid falling into the “Geek Social Fallacies,” and how to get through the “SEP field” – that is, the sense that a situation is “somebody else’s problem” and safer to ignore<sup>24</sup> – to aid people in uncomfortable conversations. This description gives a clue as to how common these sorts of concerns are in geek culture more broadly. Consider the aforementioned “Geek Social Fallacies,” a phrase referring to a widely circulated essay, posted online some years ago, that attempts to deconstruct some common problematic social behaviors among geeks. The first “fallacy,” for instance, critiques the notion that “Ostracizers Are Evil”:

[This] is one of the most common fallacies, and one of the most deeply held. Many geeks have had horrible, humiliating, and formative experiences with ostracism, and the notion of being on the other side of the transaction is repugnant to them. [...]

As a result, nearly every geek social group of significant size has at least one member that 80% of the members hate, and the remaining 20% merely tolerate. [...] [P]rotocol permits you not to invite someone you don’t like to a given event, but if someone spills the beans and our hypothetical Cat Piss Man<sup>25</sup> invites himself, there is no recourse. You must put up with him, or you will be an Evil Ostracizer and might as well go out for the football team. (Suileabhain-Wilson, 2003)

I recognized the phrase “Geek Social Fallacies” the moment I read the program (and related to the rule quoted above from social groups I’ve belonged to as well). I was very

curious to see such matters discussed in person for a change – at least, among people whom I haven't known since high school.

The panel included three men and a woman. The first panelist to introduce himself, Nate, said that he plays board games and card games, but wouldn't necessarily call himself a geek. "So maybe I'm the sort of person people want to approach," he reasoned. The second panelist, Emmett, introduced himself as "a computer programmer who's under the delusion that I have social skills." The third panelist, Isaac, showed up late, eventually introducing himself as the Vice Chair for another science-fiction con; "And apparently I'm here because someone in programming thinks I'm pretty good at talking to people." The fourth panelist, Miranda, introduced herself as a licensed social worker, and stepped into the role of moderator. She repeated the description of the panel from the con schedule, emphasizing that this was a participatory workshop, both to help attendees work on their own social skills and get better at dealing with the deficient social skills of others. There were eighteen of us in attendance – seven women, eleven men, in addition to the panelists.

The audience was slow to start asking questions, but eventually warmed up. The panelists and a few scattered audience started by offering a few general pieces of advice and floating some general questions: "Never attribute to malice what can be explained by anything else," a woman in the front row noted. A man asked how to be sensitive, echoed by a woman who asked, "How do I reach out?" Others around them nodded. Another man asked how to deepen a friendship without seeming to hit on someone. More nodding.



Seeing the opportunity to address such issues with a specific story, an attendee in the front row spoke up. Dale – a middle-aged man with graying hair and a manner that reminded me of Steve Buscemi’s nerdier roles – related a tale of talking to a friendly female fan that same weekend. He expressed concern that she seemed miffed at him for leaving during what he thought was a lull in the conversation when he had a panel to go to. Isaac offered some general advice for leaving conversations: “Be very apologetic, very gracious. ‘I’m really sorry, I had a really good time talking to you.’” He held up a business card, explaining, “There aren’t for any business I belong to – they just have my contact info so I can keep in touch with people I meet at cons.” Other attendees chimed into suggest inviting a person to the next panel, suggesting to meet in a couple hours, or other tactics to avoid bruised feelings. Dale took all of this in, nodding, offering thanks, softly speaking up occasionally to clarify that he didn’t *think* he did anything wrong.

When a man in the audience noted that conversation is all about interpreting the signals from people, a woman sitting behind him asked, “But what *are* those signals?”

Isaac replied with a laugh, “There are a lot of cues. We’re the crowd that misses them, that’s the thing!”

“What are they?” the woman pressed.

“Well,” Isaac ventured, “unless they have Asperger’s, they’ll be making eye contact with you.” Although, as Miranda reminded us, cons are a little more distracting than other contexts – “Ooh, shiny thing!” she exclaimed, looking off into space and drawing laughs. Isaac added, “Just be honest: ‘I’m sorry, I’m really enjoying this conversation, but I have ADD.’”

He and Miranda launched into a series of tips about reading body language, pantomiming actions such as crossed arms and leaning away from conversation partners. “Watch not just for one signal, but for multiple signals,” Miranda added. The panelists called up audience members at one point to roleplay specific scenarios.

The lessons on being an attentive conversation partner were eventually followed by a discussion how to extricate oneself from uncomfortable conversation. One woman noted, “People who are very geeky – especially those who are Aspergery – tend to monologue.” The group discussed how to get friends to bail you out, using sign language, pretending to get phone calls, and one fellow followed up with, “Other end of this: You just got one of those signals. How do you show, I got the message, graceful recovery?” A fellow who entered late followed this up with the same question Dale asked earlier, about how to exit conversations. I suddenly wondered how many in the room avoid starting conversations at all just because they don’t quite know how to end them.

Apparently sensing a common theme, Miranda asked, “How many people here are actually comfortable making small talk?” A few hands went up, including one from a lawyer who exclaimed, “By *training*, not by nature!”

We went on to talk about some awkward social scenarios specific to conventions, like how to make sure the guys sound avuncular (and not creepy) when complimenting younger fans on their hand-made costumes. Isaac began to offer, “Anyplace where there are a lot of ... of geeks, for lack of a better term –”

“Hey, I’m a geek!” a woman in the audience interrupted.

“Oh, I don’t mean it in a bad way, I’m a geek too,” Isaac said. “Just, anytime you see people dressed up in costume, it’s possible that’s just how they dress!”

Our time for the panel eventually grew short, so each panelist offered a few words in conclusion. Emmett said, “Don’t be one of those geeks who sits alone at the table.” Nate recalled Shakespeare: “Brevity is the soul of wit.” Isaac suggested a book for the men in attendance, *How to Be a Gentleman*. And Miranda reminded us: “Context is key. Here, the context is not the same as outside.”

### Conclusion

This chapter should help lay the groundwork for understanding geek identity as multifaceted, not easily reducible to a single set of behaviors and beliefs, and coexistent with (and comparably significant to) other dimensions of identity. Geekiness, in this understanding, is not just a collection of behaviors, but something more deeply ingrained, an identity often originally imposed by external social forces, but one which can later be personally reclaimed and reconstructed. This chapter also means to begin painting a picture of the idea of “geek culture” – both the shared sense of belonging held by those who identify themselves as geeks, and also the spaces and objects, material and virtual alike, that circulate the symbols of what it means to be nerdy today.

Many still have some discomfort around using the term ‘geek’ to describe themselves or others, either for fear of offending others or “outing” themselves. Because many adults maintain lingering discomfort around the stigmas of their interests and behavior – whether imagined or perceived – the comfortable display of geek identity happens in contexts considered safe, among one’s fellow nerds, and in the exchange of material culture. Special events like conventions offer one such context, but the semi-insulated environment of online venues offer an especially broad and accessible inroad to

geek culture, even for those who feel a need to connect with like-minded individuals at a younger age, when fewer options may seem available. The contextual specificity of geek culture, and issues of perceived stigma and carefully managed presentation of self, will remain important concepts in the chapters that follow.

While awkwardness is a shared part of geeks' social identity, and alienation helps build a sense of community, most nerds I meet don't want to identify as the losers so much as the *former* losers, the downtrodden underdogs, rather than as those truly deserving of outcast status. The desire is still there to be accepted, even normal to some extent – or, even better, to make the rest of the world just a little bit geekier. There's a widespread understanding that there are good things about being a geek and bad things about being a geek, and the good things can be cultivated over those that we associate with social awkwardness. "Anybody can be a geek nowadays," I often hear people suggest in conversation and online – but not everyone is so invested in this term for their sense of self. The flip side that geeks see for themselves, perhaps, is that a geek can be anyone, not just a loser.

### Notes for Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> Polyamory is a philosophy of consensual and informed open relationships (as opposed to swinging, which is arguably more about recreational sex). Polyamory is common in some geeky circles; most poly geeks I've known have been encountered at science-fiction conventions. As a movement, polyamory has been inspired by science-fiction, notably Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (which posited that sexual possessiveness is a root cause of war), and by feminism, as polyamorous relationships offer a wider variety of romantic permutations than male-centric polygamy (Echlin, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> To be fair, the murderer in one of the episodes cited here was not a nerd at the sci-fi convention, but a jilted academic who teaches literary theory and popular culture. She

proclaims of her victim, “Killed by one of the signifiers he sought to subvert!” (Zuiker et al., 2009).

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion about portrayals of geeks as heroes considered from the perspective of efforts to actively market to geeks.

<sup>4</sup> John Suler (2004) suggests that the online disinhibition effect – acting out more intensely or revealing more personal detail than one might in person – can be described by six factors: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority. Some of these factors are immediately apparent in considering how Slashdot operates, such as how commenters post under pseudonyms (dissociative anonymity) and how editors cede comment management largely to the community of readers (potentially accentuating the minimization of authority symbols).

<sup>5</sup> “John Gabriel’s Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory” was first presented in a cartoon by Penny Arcade as an equation drawn on a green chalkboard: “Normal person + Anonymity + Audience = Total Fuckwad.” (“Gabriel” is the online handle of the strip’s artist, Mike Kraulik.) I have often seen and heard the “theory” cited in discussions between gamers and geeks about behavior on the internet, suggesting that the idea that (normal) people act somewhat differently on the internet is a pretty broadly accepted facet of online interaction.

<sup>6</sup> The blog post in question was sparked by links to two posts I had written on Geek Studies about the roles of women and the possible origins of sexism in geek cultures. My original posts got a handful of responses, but this livelier discussion sprang up on a Livejournal blog with a more active readership, and I found my way there via trackbacks (see chapter 2).

<sup>7</sup> The *Warcraft* series is a fantasy/strategy computer game franchise. *World of Warcraft*, a massively multiplayer online game somewhat in the tradition of *Dungeons and Dragons*, is in some cases replacing *D&D* as the go-to reference for unacceptably nerdy activities.

<sup>8</sup> I could see dating and gender issues as potentially even more complicated for LGBT geeks, but I’ll have to concede here that such relationships simply did not come up enough in the course of my observations and interviews for me to offer an informed analysis on this. The admittedly heteronormative focus of this section is part of the point, however, in that this reflects how the geeky misfit image is understood in relation to hegemonic ideals of gender and sexuality.

<sup>9</sup> Again, I decided to replicate these quotes somewhat as they would appear in a list of comments, to give a sense of how one might read them one after another. I did edit out quite a bit of other information that seemed likely to distract and confuse readers who might not be familiar with Slashdot commenting conventions. In each of these cases, take

note that the “Score 5: Insightful” means that other Slashdot readers rated these comments so highly that they rose to the top of the discussion; lower-rated comments can still be read, but you need to click on the titles to access them. Readers may also be interested to note that some of the screen names shown here allude to other, non-computer-related geeky interests; “gurps\_npc,” for instance, is a reference to a specific roleplaying game system.

<sup>10</sup> The comments on that particular Gizmodo post were particularly abusive, which may explain the story’s disappearance, but they were not atypical of the site in general. Consider the comments on a video-embedded post that was not pulled, “Art Peaks Forever as Two Chicks Lightsaber Battle in Their Underwear Without Irony” (Wilson, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> I came upon “A Straight Geek Male’s Guide to Interaction with Females” not through my regularly followed websites, but through a link on a Geek Feminism Wiki’s page for “Resources for Men.”

<sup>12</sup> I attempted to preserve to some extent the sense of what it might feel like to read these in a list of comments, though this sample does admittedly trim out some of the more positive responses and links to commenters’ profiles.

<sup>13</sup> Capturing the “voice” of a commenter online sometimes requires leaving in some pretty confusing typographic conventions and errors. I did take the liberty of interpreting and correcting the phrase “pc chris,s” as “mc chris’s” for clarity’s sake here.

<sup>14</sup> Credit for this quote goes to Anne, who brought it to my attention in a comment on Geek Studies. She wrote: “Hofstadter is referring to the new acceptance of intellectuals in the wake of Sputnik; I think one could argue that the current increasing acceptance of geek culture by the mainstream, spurred by the increasing importance of technology, parallels this in many ways” (Anne, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of how neurological conditions are conceptualized as a part of “geek thinking.” It’s worth noting for now, at least, that I do not devote much space here to discussing the overlap between the misfit image and neuropsychological conditions for at least two reasons. From a theoretical or paradigmatic standpoint, the newly widespread visibility of geek identity is too broad a phenomenon to be solely or best explained as a psychological condition; the methodological and theoretical tools of cultural analysis are, I believe, more suitable for this study, at least. The kids who torment other kids as geeks are not so precise as to be “diagnosing” them. And, from a practical standpoint, I don’t really have a good way of determining whether those I interact with have been diagnosed with ADD or Asperger syndrome anyway, especially as many with these conditions likely remain undiagnosed as it is. Moreover, I am wary about what seems like a trend in conflating quirky behaviors by the socially maladjusted (or, perhaps, differently adjusted) with

neurobiological/neuropsychological factors. See Anderegg (2007) for an extended discussion of this.

<sup>16</sup> See Kendall (Kendall, 1999b, p. 273) for further discussion of how oppressed groups' discourses have been used in conjunction with nerds in popular culture, such as in the line "It feels so good to come out of the closet" in *Revenge of the Nerds III*.

<sup>17</sup> Some might argue the point that geeks are not denied jobs due to their geekiness. Rumors have circulated, for instance, that some employers instruct recruiters to deny interviews to players of online games like *World of Warcraft* under the assumption that it is a sign of divided focus and poor sleep patterns (McCauley, 2008).

Beyond situations of systematic job discrimination, there may also be a widespread sense that certain extracurricular activities are more professionally appropriate to list on a resume than others. A friend of mine (and frequent Geek Studies commenter) related to me a personal anecdote in which a career services counselor at his university suggested that he remove from his CV the line in the "Personal Interests" section that indicated an interest in puzzle-solving games, like the MIT Mystery Hunt (see Chapter 4). The counselor said, "You might as well put that you played *Dungeons & Dragons* for 4 years!" He suggested sailing or yachting instead.

Nevertheless, I believe that one would be hard pressed argue that such practices are comparably commonplace, systematic, and deeply troubling as discriminatory practices based on race, gender, nationality, religion, or sexual orientation. To the best of my knowledge, no one is openly hanging up signs that read "No nerds need apply." Meanwhile, even recent research has indicated that a black man with a high-school education and no criminal record is about as likely to be called back for a follow-up job interview as a comparably-educated white man *with* a felony conviction, whereas being a black man with a felony conviction means having little chance for interviews at all (Pager, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> It may also be tempting to describe nerds' use of discourses of oppression as appropriation by the straight and white, but this isn't entirely accurate either. As noted earlier in the chapter, it's not just white, male nerds understanding themselves as marginalized. Even Monzy – the nerdcore rapper calling for "Nerd Revolution" now that other groups have supposedly had their day – self-identifies not just as a nerd, but as Persian (Monzy, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> As adults, many geeks feel the need to hide specific interests. Which interests – and why – are described in greater detail in Chapter 5, "The Geek as Fan."

<sup>20</sup> 'Grok' means to understand someone else's life and circumstances deeply and intuitively. The word comes from Robert Heinlein's influential science-fiction novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The term is relatively commonly used among geeks, and may have particular resonance as Matt describes understanding geeks' outsider status. The novel is about a man who was raised on Mars, and returns to earth with an almost

magical understanding of physics and some utopian philosophies, but finds it hard to understand the attitudes of his fellow humans.

<sup>21</sup> Geeky music and other materials of the “healing process” of geek culture are described in greater detail in Chapter 6.

<sup>22</sup> Many commenters mocked JustShootMe for using the term “meatspace,” a term that describes the physical world as someplace more disgusting or less perfect than the clean, virtual world. I suspect, however, that JustShootMe was being intentionally self-mocking by painting a satirical picture of himself as the hyper-nerd who is that cut off from reality.

<sup>23</sup> I use the original name of most events I attended for my field research, but the experiences reported at the local event pseudonymously referred to here as “TerraCon” primarily focus on a single panel with a small group of people. In the interest of protecting the anonymity of the panelists and attendees, I have opted to change the name of the convention, the title of the panel, and some of the wording in the description of the panel (which might otherwise be easier to locate and identify via online search).

<sup>24</sup> The phrase “SEP field” is was coined by science-fiction author and humorist Douglas Adams in his *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* series.

<sup>25</sup> The phrase “Cat Piss Man” refers to a geek who is especially rank-smelling and unkempt. It’s a generic term used to refer to a sort of geek archetype, I suppose, which seems to be particularly commonly known among comic book fans and tabletop gamers.



## CHAPTER 4: THE GEEK AS GENIUS

I hurriedly flipped through my notes while the room applauded after “Social Interaction for Fans,” the panel on building interpersonal skills at a local science-fiction convention. I had missed “Geek Psychology”<sup>1</sup> the previous night, and wondered if anybody around me had caught it, so I asked as much out loud. One young woman turned to stare at me for a moment before responding. She wore thick glasses, straight hair pulled back in a ponytail, and a blank expression. After glancing at her program and placing it down on a chair, she began enumerating on her fingers the basic points made at the panel.

“One,” she started, “geeks are smarter than the general populace.

“Two, geeks are less hierarchically organized than the general populace, more resistant to authority.

“Three – “ she continued, but I cut her off, suggesting we head into the hall, as the room was emptying out to make room for the next panel. She picked up her program from the chair, seeming unperturbed and quite willing to keep talking elsewhere.

I remarked on the way out of the room, inferring from her flat tone that she was mocking the other panel: “Sounds like this last panel was the more humble of the two, huh?”

She paused. “That one was just more abstract/theoretical.” She spoke in a deliberate manner that led me to believe I could actually hear the slash between her last words. I realized that she was not mocking the other panel, but simply spoke with precise enunciation and level intonation. I got the sense that she was being friendly to me, but

wasn't quite sure. Months later, a friend of mine (another self-proclaimed nerd) would assure me that this woman had Asperger's syndrome.

Out in the hall, the woman continued summarizing the panel: Geeks are non-linear thinkers, but the educational system is geared toward turning linear thinkers into "good little factory workers" – which, she said, made more sense a hundred years ago. Also, to geeks, it's considered polite to correct one another on things like facts or the proper pronunciation of words, "because we want to know"; to non-geeks, she recalled, this is considered insulting.

I asked if she had enjoyed the panel. "Yes," she said, "it was interesting."

I thanked her very sincerely before continuing on my way. I have read many informal definitions of geek psychology suggested online and in books, but this matter-of-fact summary of the combined musings of a roomful of nerds represented a tidy encapsulation of how many understand intellectual acuity as central to their own geek identity.

This chapter explores the idea (and ideals) of geek intelligence and thinking styles, including the technological mastery that we commonly assume has delivered the nerds their revenge. This is the version of the image that academics and journalists typically discuss when describing how 'geek' and 'nerd' can now be positive terms, potentially free from the negative stereotypes discussed in my previous chapter. The way geeks and nerds construct their own identities around intelligence, however, is more complex than the common wisdom proclaiming that geeks are now cool because Bill Gates showed geeks can be rich. While it is certainly possible to find computer wizards basking in dot-com-era decadence, the most extravagant of such rewards seem to remain

either incidental, unavailable, or even undesirable to many self-proclaimed geeks. The newly perceived professional and economic need for techies has certainly increased the visibility of the geek image, and seems to have boosted self-avowed nerds and geeks' willingness to proudly identify themselves by these terms.

Nevertheless, geeks have their own systems of values structured around rationality and intelligence whose intersection with more broadly recognized standards for "success" may be incidental at best. Geeks who subscribe to a "genius" image or stereotype often understand their identities in terms of idealized and "meritocratic" political and intellectual ideologies, rule- and system-based thinking skills, and a playful sense of technical curiosity. Through interaction with media and technology for purposes such as puzzle-solving, programming, and tinkering, geeks find personal pleasures in thinking very hard, approaching work as play, or play as work. This understanding of geeks as geniuses also serves social functions: sometimes, defining the boundaries of geekdom and reassuring some of their own perceived superiority; but other times, celebrating technical pursuits with an eye to encouraging the stereotypically nerdy and complex as something worthwhile and potentially more broadly inclusive.

#### Assessing the Revenge of the Nerds

The flight from Boston to Las Vegas seemed pretty packed with fellow attendees to the Consumer Electronics Show, flipping through convention schedules and issues of *PC Magazine*. I noticed that the two men sitting next to me were going over some papers displaying the CES logo, so I asked if they were exhibiting anything.

"No," one explained, "We're just going to see stuff. You?"

I awkwardly explained my dissertation topic, stumbling over something about digital media and identity, trying to figure out some way to explain how electronics might fit in, finally concluding with the words, “pretty much anything you’d consider ‘nerdy.’”

“Oh, you’ll like it there,” the other fellow said. “You just walk around and see a bunch of stuff you’ll want.” I nodded, and we each went back to our respective reading materials. The guy directly next to me eventually shuffled away his CES program and spent most of the rest of the flight poring over pages covered in bolded dollar amounts.

The first conversation of a new research trip is always the hardest for me. A major reason our conversation was so brief and strained, however, was that I didn’t get any sort of “geek vibe” from them at all. I was still having a hard time at that point explaining what I was writing about to people who didn’t seem immediately responsive to the idea of a geek dissertation; Comic Con attendees and *Beauty and the Geek* hopefuls had been pretty vocally interested in my research, some even thanking me for writing it. The style of my seatmates’ collared shirts, sweaters, and haircuts, on the other hand, reminded me more of Wharton than the Engineering School. I talk quite comfortably to a variety of people in the course of my research, but it’s relatively rare that I go to an event marketed as “geeky” and find myself chatting with high-rolling alpha males. As I hope to illustrate in this section, locating the long-foretold “revenge of the nerds” in a new-found respectability in the professional world largely misses the point that many geeks are not “in it for the money,” as it were. Rather, to some, this new-found success feels more like “gentrification.”

It’s tough to call whether the Consumer Electronics Show could even be said to be marketed as “geeky”: The geekiness is more something that is implicitly assumed and

occasionally referred to by name, but is also somewhat buried beneath the event's other purposes. At CES 2007, the year before I visited, Disney's Bob Iger showed a parody of the popular fantasy/mystery TV show *Lost* at his keynote (filmed with the actual actors) to an audience of "hundreds of appreciative nerds," according to one gadget blog (Chen, 2007). The short video even included some friendly mockery of attendees, as one of the show's female protagonists jokes that she looks forward to returning to civilization so she can go to CES and meet hot men. On another occasion I had not been present for, CES featured a nerdcore hip-hop concert. I've heard from nerdcore insiders that the performers were asked to leave because the post-show partying included some illicit substances and mingling with performers from the Adult Entertainment Expo, held concurrently in the Las Vegas Convention Center.

My own experience at CES was less action-packed, though still gave a taste of the convention's customary opulence. I attended with a "blogger" badge, giving me access to the Blogger Lounges, which hosted blue couches with glass coffee tables, circular tables sprouting Ethernet hookups, and flat-screen televisions showing music videos on VH1. In addition to my badge and my breakfast, I received an exceptionally complex backpack, featuring a detachable messenger bag, a felt-lined iPod pocket, a removable phone holder on the strap, and a number of embroidered logos.

Traversing the show floor itself felt like a giant, walk-in infomercial. Someone doing a cheesy game show host shtick had attendees spinning "The Wheel of Real" for prizes from Real Software. A Sandisk representative gestured over a giant, mysterious box, promising "FREE stuff for everybody!" Most free stuff in the room seemed to include cheap bags and oversized t-shirts, but perhaps I went to the wrong booths. Signs

at the Seagate booth promised an appearance by the Frag Dolls, an all-female gaming team sponsored by Ubisoft. A young woman offered to enter me into a drawing for a PlayStation 3, swiping my badge through a card reader to collect my personal information. A man brandishing a microphone at another booth welcomed attendees to challenge their pro gamers at *Counter Strike*, announcing, “We’ll be kicking ass here all day!” He handed out green t-shirts to passers-by, asking, “Does anybody here like *Counter Strike*? ... Does anybody here like *green*?” I never caught what they were promoting. Different buildings at the convention center hosted different wares; in the TV pavilion, for instance, I saw a demonstration of a flat-screen HDTV bigger than my living room wall.

The spectacle of a show full of things I would never afford turned out to be pretty overwhelming for me, so I made my way to another of the Blogger Lounges. I helped myself to some lunch from the buffet and made my way to a table occupied by one other blogger. I asked if I could join, and he said yes.

Ethan was a stocky fellow with a short beard and puffy hair. I guessed from his wedding band and the strands of gray in his hair that he was around my age, perhaps a few years older. (Thirty-six, I found out later.) When I sat, he asked, “Are you going to any parties?” I admitted I didn’t know of any, so he pulled out a list of parties he collected from PR companies’ websites. We got to chatting, and he described the Bill Gates keynote to me in great detail. He smiled nervously, occasionally. By this point, I was pretty confident that Ethan would describe himself as a geek, but I didn’t bring up my research topic yet. Perhaps I was just relieved to see a friendly face in an overwhelming place, and hesitant to scare him off.

After lunch, we made our way through the exhibition hall together, and Ethan told me more about his interests. He had attended CES as an industry exhibitor in previous years, back when he was doing digital graphics. When we met, he was doing robotics stuff professionally, but was attending as a blogger because of his writing about retro games for the PlayStation Portable. “Mostly homebrew?” I guessed. Ethan nodded, smiling briefly. I knew you could get remakes of classic ‘80s games for some portable gaming systems, but I figured that a computer guy would be interested in the scene of people making their own games from scratch and hacking the system’s firmware to run them.

As we walked, the sign for “The Star Trek Experience” at the Hilton was clearly visible in the distance. Ethan recalled the time he went with friends and they were chastised for not acting enough in character – the Enterprise had unexpectedly come under attack, and they were supposed to act scared when they evacuated before it got destroyed. “Because it always gets destroyed, right?” he said in reflection. I bid Ethan farewell at the end of a line for a panel titled “The Top 10 Technologies You’ve Never Heard Of.” I made my way toward “The Mutual Influence Between Science-Fiction and Science/Technology.”

It was only by chance that I encountered Ethan again at lunch the following day, this time in a different Blogger Lounge. When he asked how the rest of my day had gone after we parted ways, I didn’t have much to say. I had gone to some other events, like “Taking the Blogosphere Seriously” and an “Artists Talk” panel about online media distribution, but for some reason, I felt like I wasn’t getting much that seemed very useful for research about geek identity. I asked Ethan how his day went, and he told me about a

panel in which venture capitalists discussed where they're investing money (including robotics, hence his interest).

"The highlight of my day, though," he said, getting more animated, "was getting to ride in the car GM made to win the Urban Challenge – which was driverless. Also, Intel was doing a thing with a racing team. What do race cars have to do with consumer electronics?" he asked with a quiet laugh.

"Yeah, what?" I asked.

He paused thoughtfully. "Uh, I had a good answer last night. I think it was to promote WiMax, which they were using on the show floor to control wireless toy cars." We chatted awhile about how we spent our evenings and how the show was organized. He also told me about how his goal the previous year had been to visit every booth (he got maybe 2,300 of the 2,700), and he showed me a map of how the booths were organized.

I was getting to be comfortable enough with Ethan finally that I thought could get away with complaining, which I'd been itching to do for some time. I explained my dissertation topic and expressed that CES wasn't turning out to be as useful for my research as I had expected it to be. "I'm just going through the motions," I said. Geek culture just wasn't as clearly on display, I felt, the way it is at places like Comic Con International.

Ethan nodded. "The professional side of it is so big that it overpowers the convention side."

This concisely explained something I had been feeling, but hadn't quite been able to identify myself. The panels were on topics of potential interest to geeks, but seemed



more geared toward business people who hadn't already been following such discussions for months (or even years) in the news, online, even in back issues of *Wired*. It's not that there weren't geeks there: There were plenty of geeks, but most weren't really *acting geeky*. Still, Ethan seemed to have a pretty good sense of what I meant, so I we got to talking about my dissertation topic a bit more. When he mentioned that he grew up in a small town in Canada, I asked if he'd had the same geek stereotypes that we have in cities and suburbs in the States.

"I think it might even be worse in small towns," he said.

"Because it's the same people into high school?" I asked. Some escape their geek stereotypes once they move into a larger high school from elementary or middle school.

"Because you're the only one." He paused, looking off into space. "Because I was a geek, I didn't really have many friends. But I guess maybe that's common everywhere. Maybe kids don't have as much a problem with that now, now that you can make friends anywhere over IM."

"Well, it's interesting you mention that," I said, "because some people I've talked to, they said they didn't have many friends when they were younger, they were very lonely until about middle school, when they started to learn to use computers and bulletin board services --"

I probably could have rambled about my research awhile more, but Ethan cut in, looking thoughtful. "Actually, yeah, I used BBS's, but IM is instantaneous, while on a BBS, you might post something and wait four days for a response."

"I only use IM for direct, person-to-person contact with friends," I said. "Have you been able to meet new people through it?"

“Ah, now here’s the thing,” he said, smiling, speaking a little more quickly. He related a detailed account of the multi-step process of meeting collaborators for his projects online: Going to PSP modder forums, luring them away from the Super Mario knockoff projects they were working on, and coordinating them on his own projects via IM. His collaborators came from around the world, with his biggest contributor being a teenager from the Netherlands. He kept in touch with these people even long after they abandoned their PSPs, though. “The half-life of PSP users seems to be six months,” he explained.

“How did you draw them away from what they were working on to what you wanted to do?” I asked, very sincerely curious.

“Because mine was cooler,” he said, laughing softly.

We talked awhile about other games: board games like *Settlers of Catan* and *Robo Rally*, and card games like *Magic: The Gathering*, which he would have liked to have kept playing if only he could find opponents. “The problem with games like that is finding people to play with after college. I could play with my wife, but it’s like her playing chess with me: It’s not fun because I’ll crush her.”

We chatted a while longer about our mutual interests before parting ways. I went to some more panels (and even a few parties) that weekend, but never really connected with anybody else the way I had been able to chat with Ethan. One of my own personal highlights was getting to see Jonathan Coulton, former software developer turned “contributing troubadour” to *Popular Science*, play to a group of about 50 people in a side room at one party. Most sat and sipped drinks quietly, clapping when appropriate,

but one woman actually cheered a few times. “Code Monkey!” she shouted. Nobody else shouted any requests, or shouted at all, really.

I did have one other friend at CES whom I knew from before, though he was covering the show for his own employer. He sent me a text message after I’d already left, while I was in the airport, excitedly reporting that he had finally witnessed geekiness in the press lounge: He was chatting with a major newspaper’s tech columnist about the relative merits of *Battlestar Galactica* versus *Star Trek*! I had to chuckle. It took until after I left, on the last day of this event, for something like this to come up around him, and only in the relatively out-of-the-way atmosphere of the Press Lounge.

I went to the Consumer Electronics Show expecting to talk to computer geeks and gadget freaks about how the economic implications of the digital revolution had impacted the development of geek identity. What I found, however, was a business event, with geekiness tucked between the cracks here and there if you knew where to look, but largely out of sight.

There was some techno-lust, to be sure, but you don’t show up to CES expecting to walk home with that wall-sized television. At CES, it’s clear that technology is big business, but it’s unclear what “geek culture” has to do with this. It wasn’t just that people weren’t talking about stereotypically geeky entertainment media much; after all, I even went to one panel where that was the whole point. Rather, there was simply a lack of geeky enthusiasm, a lack of hyper-rigorous analysis, even a relative lack of intellectual posturing. Even the geeks were there for business. As one of the interviewees I met at another professional event explained, he can “act nerdy” when around others geeking out,

but doesn't stay in geek-mode all the time: "I'd like to think that I'm a well-rounded person, that I can hide the geekiness if I need to." Though we commonly talk about geeks now being "cool" thanks to their technological (and, by implication, financial) successes, this is a world geeks live in, not necessarily the world geeks made for themselves.

### *Gates to Success*

In the mainstream press (Kendall, 1999c), academic research and criticism (Barba & Mason, 1994; Turkle, 1995), and even my own interviews, I repeatedly hear the same claim: *Since Bill Gates showed that geeks can be millionaires, it's cool to be a geek.*

This common wisdom begs at least two questions. Are geeks indeed rich? And do geeks see that as the mark of success?

"Nerds do not cultivate the colorful ways of geeks," opines Don Rosenberg of Durham-based Stromian Technologies. "Nor do they have the outrageous geek egos that relish any personal attention paid to them."

For the most part the egos are tangled up with an unprecedented bull market due in a large part to technology stocks. Geeks, says Rosenberg, like to think their "wizardly accomplishments" have a hand in that.

David Quan can relate to geek egos. The chief technology officer and head butler at neoButler Inc. did time in Silicon Valley before relocating to the Triangle to work first at Ganymede Software and now at the Research Triangle Park-based Internet search start-up.

Quan says he used to wind-surf with hard-core geeks – a Porsche-driving, Palm-Piloting crowd that ranged from the technical to the marketing and loved to spend afternoons on the San Francisco Bay. "The people that just showed up at 3:30 every afternoon were, by definition, geeks," Quan says. "They said, 'I've got some stock options, so now I can do the Geek Thing.'" (Dyrness, 1999)

Thanks to figures like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, our notion of the computer geek as potentially wealthy was well in place by the 1990s (see, e.g., Turkle, 1995). Arguably, however, it was the dot-com boom that truly promoted the idea that geeks weren't just financially secure, but jet-setting, extravagant, even kind of cool, as the 1999 *News*

*Observer* article quoted above implies. In this view, geeks aren't just making money off hard work; they can afford to play around and show up to work late thanks to their wildly successful careers.

"If you were a geek out here, you were rich," Kevin said with a laugh. He was in San Francisco; we were doing a phone interview after South by Southwest Interactive, and he was recalling how it was to be a geek back in the late '90s, when he first came to town. "You were perceived as being rich, cool, on the cutting edge, blah blah blah, there wasn't really a negative aspect. And now, I still don't think there is." Those financial successes have helped to wipe the negative aspects away for many geeks, especially around the Bay Area – and perhaps also thanks to being able to shuffle those negative aspects under the skirt of the 'nerd'

Today, however, we remember the "dot-com boom" as the "dot-com bubble." Not every geek gets to "do the geek thing." But, then again, not every geek ever did. "In most companies, some of the most important employees, especially in terms of public perception – Help Desk geeks – have the lowest status and salaries," Jon Katz (1999a) points out on Slashdot in another article from 1999. A lot of geeks speak of tech support jobs as a sort of journeyman's rite of passage (I worked one myself back in college), but for plenty more, it's still all in a day's work. 'Geek' is still a popular way of branding tech support services and usability – Best Buy's Geek Squad, Geeks on Wheels, Vonage's "No Geeks" ads, and so on – indicating a continued understanding that the geek life includes the technically sensational and menial alike.

At events like comic book and science-fiction conventions, I tend to meet a disproportionately high number of self-identified geeks and nerds working in information

technology, programming, and engineering, but it's not necessarily the majority of those I meet (with the exception of those events that actually are geared toward tech professionals, of course). I meet geeks representing a wide range of economic statuses. That's not to say that there's no truth to the myth that there's money in tech jobs, and thus that computer geeks are well off – I've met those geeks, too. It's simply to say that the popular understanding that geeks are “cool” because Bill Gates is rich represents a reflexive cultural association between these concepts, not necessarily the majority case of those who would apply the term to themselves.

Nevertheless, let's move forward under the assumption that the new-found coolness of those geeks who are indeed making their fortunes off computers has managed to trickle down into geekdom more broadly. This brings us to our next question: Is this how geeks define their personal success? Does this help us to understand the growing sense that there is a “geek culture”?

The idea that geeks might be “cool” is relatively new, but the idea that it's based on here is pretty familiar: Pointing to Bill Gates locates social acceptability and success in economic wealth, rooted in the understanding that money is power, and power is what people want – especially men, which we expect most geeks to be. Geek identity through technical mastery has thus been described as offering an alternative route to traditional masculine appeal for men who might not be able to compete in other manly arenas, such as athletics, good looks, or, for that matter, aggressive self-confidence. Traditional masculine appeal, of course, is assumed to be that which will net geeks mates. In short: have money, earn power, find love.

“At my age, anyone who’s into computer science or has any kind of higher education than high school, that’s pretty interesting and attractive,” one woman told me in an interview. She referred to herself as a geek, rather than a nerd, because she thought the latter implied a level of intelligence she couldn’t claim. “The girls who actually get turned off by that might be kind of dumb because, you know, that’s your security in the future. It’s pretty much the revenge of the nerds thing going on, I mean, actually happening.”

Nevertheless, this notion may best be understood as explaining how the geek image has become palatable to mainstream American culture, rather than how geeks have come to understand themselves. Most of the hyper-intellectual and strongly self-identified geeks I’ve interacted with actually resist (or seem oblivious to) the notion of measuring success by the traditional benchmarks of masculinity – or what we’d even think of as mature, adult behavior – at all. Geeks have their own standards for value and credibility. As one comment points out on Geek Studies:

What economic power does is validate being geek without having to sidestep mainstream values. [...] I think there’s something to be said for geeks seeing economic success as \*some kind\* of validation, but not a end in and of itself. If your prime virtue is intellectual curiosity, then money isn’t really much validation[....] I see my own occasional accumulation of money as proof that I can play well in the non-geek world, but its only a validating signifier for people around me, and personally more of a measure of success in yet another game I sometimes play.<sup>2</sup> [*sic*] (Jacob, 2008)

This observation recalls for me a moment from the Penny Arcade Expo, at the “Pitch Your Game Design” panel. Among the entrants was someone who had actually already designed a free, open source application to stream radio from the internet using the Wi-Fi connection in a Nintendo DS handheld gaming system. The judges were so impressed that they told the entrant to leave the line so they could talk to him afterward

and get help him paid for it. “But it’s open source,” he said, “I can’t....” No, no, they insisted, they were going to get him paid. This developer was likely trying to explain that he didn’t actually have the legal right to sell his application with some of the code it utilized. Whatever the specifics of the circumstances, however, the point that the judges seemed to miss was that this fellow wasn’t in it for the money.

Ethan, the aforementioned geek I met at CES, is similarly capable of fitting the notion of the financially successful tech nerd in some ways. He shifts between working in digital graphics, robotics, and semi-professional blogging as his interests and market demands take him. He was well-off enough that when he lost his camera, he told me he was most disappointed about losing the pictures in it. He’s even living proof that geeks do grow up and get married. But he did not come to the Consumer Electronics Show for “geek culture.” Ethan found things to amuse himself at the show, but he was there for work. The business side overshadows the geeky side.

What does the geeky genius do when not hiding that geekiness? Spending some time with Ethan opened up a window into one CES attendee’s geek identity, which included an eager, playful attitude toward technical pursuits, from gaming in his spare time to excitement about riding around in a prize-winning, driverless car. He is the sort of fellow who finds out about parties by checking PR companies’ websites rather than waiting around to be invited, and who, he related to me, will happily check out a show about topless vampires despite his cab driver’s warning that everyone agrees it is awful. Ethan has connected to geek culture through bulletin board services and chats with friends via instant messaging, through shared projects on hacked hardware, and through hobbyist-oriented tabletop games – which he plays not just to dominate his opponent (and



thus presumably to reclaim some otherwise missing sense of masculinity), but for the pleasure of a complex rule set and a challenge from an experienced opponent. For him, I think, being a geek is not about reclaiming the power denied to those who aren't high-rolling alpha males, but about exercising the intellectual power one already has. This understanding of power, closer to the admittedly clichéd idea that "knowledge is power," plays a strong role in how many geeks construct a sense of personal and social value and idealism.

### *With Great Power*

On my fourth day at South by Southwest Interactive, I made my way to see a panel on new media and convergence culture featuring Henry Jenkins, serving at that time as the director of MIT's Comparative Media Studies program. He was interviewed on stage by his former student, Danah Boyd.

"By the time I got to college, I was totally into geek fun cultures," he said with a grin, describing how fan practices showed how media consumption and production could (and perhaps should) work. He praised Wikipedia over *Encyclopedia Britannica*, called *Second Life* "a new center of participatory culture," and suggested that industry leaders should recognize the possibilities of working with consumers rather than trying to sue for copyright infringement. "The media companies have already lost control," he stated plainly. His former student beamed and asked the crowd: "Can you see why I think he's God?" There was a Q&A, and we were asked to fill out cards under our seats, rating the panel. Later, when I ran into Henry at a conference and complimented him on that SXSW talk, he thanked me and happily noted that it was the highest-rated panel at South by

Southwest Interactive that year. I could see why: It was entertaining, engaging, and, not unimportantly, expressive of a number of “geek ideals” of information freedom and consumer empowerment that most of us already agreed with.

I chatted with some of the attendees on my way out of the panel and met a fellow named Benjamin, who seemed interested in some of the research on visual media I’d been doing. He was a tall, heavy man with a friendly smile and a thick Texan accent. He invited me to lunch outside the convention center, suggesting that he might have a business proposition for me.

Benjamin was a consultant for a certain major tech company. His job was basically to review plans that the company came up with and, when those plans seemed unlikely to work out, suggest a plan that might work better. In this case, that company wanted to create a virtual environment modeled on *Second Life*, a game-like interface for teleconferencing between corporate executives. Benjamin thought this idea seemed ridiculous, and I was inclined to agree. He laid out for me his alternative proposal, which involved streaming high-definition video and motion controls. All he needed from someone like me was a research proposal to measure which technology worked better, so he had some results to present back to his employers to accompany his recommendation.

“Something you should know beforehand, though,” he told me, “is that this is evil.”

I know I paused, but I honestly don’t remember what I said after that. That last word – pronounced with a long “ey” sound, “EYvil” – caught me completely off guard. Did he just say “evil”? Did I miss something in that accent? Was this a joke?

He continued, breaking it down for me. “For this project to work, you need lots of bandwidth.” Sure – HD video is big. You need to be able to move a lot of data quickly or else video will play choppily, if at all. Which means, he told me, this kind of project couldn’t “fit in the same pipes” that everyone else is using for the internet. “And that means,” he said, slowly, deliberately, “this project couldn’t really work with net neutrality.”

I started to see where this was going, and began to feel unsettled.

He laid out an argument for why net neutrality – the idea that internet use should not be subject to intentionally preferential or impaired access to bandwidth – seems great in theory, but simply isn’t realistically attainable in practice. Again, more technical stuff: how the paths taken by internet traffic are unpredictable, so there will never be legally feasible net neutrality legislation; how companies are already paying for premium internet access, so it’s not as if projects like this one would be changing the status quo; and so on.

Ultimately, I ended up not working with Benjamin on his project (I had a dissertation to finish, after all), but I appreciated his candor. In retrospect, I realized that our lunch meeting represented an interesting tension common to geek cultures. Benjamin came to the Henry Jenkins panel knowing that he could probably find some academic for his project. He also knew, however, that a person at a talk on convergence culture – or, indeed, perhaps any uber-geek at South by Southwest Interactive – might have serious ideological concerns with the ethical ramifications of working on something that actively relied on disparities in access to communication infrastructures. In warning me that his project was “evil,” Benjamin was actually doing me a courtesy. It was a somewhat

humorous way of tapping into broader discourses of some commonly held geek ethics, ideals that inform how many see themselves and decide which projects to pursue.

This represents another reason to be suspicious of the claim that the revenge of the nerds is connected to wealth: While plenty of geeks aren't averse to making money on their geekiness, there is something about outright materialism and the accumulation of wealth for its own sake that challenges some of the most commonly held geek ideals. The specifics of those ideals vary from one geeky niche to another, and are often vaguely defined or even contradictory. For some, this all simply comes down to the assertion that "knowledge is power." For others, this also implies something like Spider-man's famous credo: "With great power comes great responsibility."

The information ethics of geekdom have been constructed in a pretty broad variety of ways. In *Geeks: How Two Lost Boys Rode the Internet out of Idaho*, Jon Katz (2000) defines geeks as "Universally suspicious of authority." This may invoke an understanding of geeks as the mistreated and downtrodden, though not all come to the identity from that route; for many, geek identity is deeply informed by ideals connected to other historical subcultural and political formations. As recalled in Chapter 1, the do-it-yourself ideals of new communalism and hippy culture have inspired the development of the internet and the personal computer through formations such as the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) and the Homebrew Computer Club frequented by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak (Turkle, 1984; Turner, 2005). Journalists writing for *Rolling Stone* and the early issues of *Wired* played off such tropes, describing the virtual world as a "frontier," and the people developing it as the forward-looking, self-reliant cowboys who could make it all work (Streeter, 2005b). This anti-authoritarian, counterculture-inspired

form of DIY politics and activism informs the work of self-identified geeks today, such as the community Wi-Fi and radio activists described by Christina Dunbar-Hester (2008).

Some geeks' anti-authoritarian impulses take them in other political directions. In "Code Free or Die," Daniel Franke suggests that hackers are often libertarians because "hackers, by definition, like to do odd things, like take their DVD player apart or look up how a nuclear bomb works," and they don't want legislators who don't get why they would do such things to prevent them from doing so. Other geek ideals may seem to simply be driven by pragmatic ideals, what's needed to get the job done most efficiently: Open source projects are described as organized like a meritocracy (Fielding, 1999; Scacchi, 2004), and Russel Pavlicek (2000) suggests that "geeks" (not "nerds," he warns) working on open source projects especially value truth because false (i.e., inaccurate) information can derail a project. Tech corporations have attempted to get a vague handle on the geek ethics rhetoric, perhaps eager to seem friendly even to the idealistic geeks. (After all, isn't an idealistic worker also a passionate worker?) Google's unspecified "don't be evil" motto is one such example; at South by Southwest Interactive, I also noticed that AOL was giving away t-shirts that said "Nerd" or "Open" on them. And, of course, there was my lunch with Benjamin.

All of this probably sounds a bit muddled in its political genealogy. It should. There is, after all, no centrally agreed upon system of "geek politics." They are libertarians, anarchists, left-wingers, and everywhere else on the map. Pointing out in an essay for Slashdot that "Geeks and nerds routinely brag about their software snatches, purloined gaming and music libraries and free upgrades," Jon Katz (1999a) describes the ethics of the internet as "personal and individualistic":

Certain values predominate in some quarters – information-sharing, a common interest in protecting freedom, an increasingly rationalist approach to political and informational issues. But how to implement those values in any particular situation is left up to the individual, a hit-or-miss proposition in a culture with tens of millions of people and tens of thousands of newcomers every day.

In a more recent article at the Register, Tom Steinberg suggests that geeks seem to have certain knee-jerk reactions to consistent conclusions on particular issues, but these represent an array of sometimes contradictory ideologies:

The truth is that over the last decade geekdom has gained a baggage of beliefs about the world which are much narrower than that which used to unify us. It has become a culture which has amazingly strict boundaries on what you can believe whilst still counting as a ‘real geek’. Stranger still is the lack of consistency amongst these beliefs. Many values, such as the love of privacy and free speech come from a broadly libertarian tradition evolving from the philosophy of Mill and Locke. Others, such as the hatred of Microsoft and the loathing of Spam come from a quite reverse philosophy - a principled distain of the side-effects of capitalism, betraying socialist ancestry. Still others come from a strong defence of certain rights (notably fair use of copyrighted materials) which seem to be primarily based on rational self-interest, rather than any particular ideology. All in all, the ‘standard-issue beliefs’ of the modern geek are curious, anchored in a number of different kernels of political philosophy, spread across the history of liberalism. Worryingly, the universality of these doctrines is almost always the first victim, most Geek beliefs turning a defiantly blind eye to the worries or qualms of ‘ordinary users’. (Steinberg, 2002)

Nevertheless, some common themes do crop up rather frequently. Geeks tend to value the unrestricted flow of information and ideas for their own sake. If knowledge is power, then blocking access to knowledge is oppression. The motto “learn all that is learnable” could fit in with a number of these ideologies, though some may be willing to take it further than others: The phrase actually comes from the Collusion Syndicate, a disbanded group of anarchist hackers/crackers from the Southwest, known for acts of “hacktivism” such as overtaxing the servers of organizations they protested (sfear, 1999).

Vague though this notion of geek ideals may be, motivated netizens can be quick to mobilize when certain idealistic intrusions seem particularly heinous. Consider, for

instance, an incident in which someone leaked the cryptographic key that would allow users to circumvent copy protection on HD-DVD discs. The story was submitted to Digg, a community-driven news site in which users vote on stories to increase their visibility to the user base at large. Digg's administrators pulled the story at the behest of the company that owned the anti-copying technology on HD-DVD, which claimed its intellectual property rights were being violated. The results were surprising to many, but also somewhat predictable, given that the kind of audience that would be attracted to community-driven media likely overlaps with the audience who would react with hostility at actions perceived as censorship. Digg users "revolted," ensuring that every item on the site featured the number for the forbidden encryption key (Doctorow, 2007). Some figured out creative ways to hide the number or distribute it through other means as well, such as when actor Wil Wheaton suggested on Reddit, another community-driven news site, adding it to his Wikipedia entry as his "favorite number" (wil, 2007). The event was described with headlines and leads like "Geeks En Masse" (Buzzfeed, 2007) and "Nerd anarchy? An e-rebellion? Or mob justice..." (Malik, 2007). Digg capitulated to its users, acknowledging, "You'd rather see Digg go down fighting than bow down to a bigger company. We hear you" (quoted in Doctorow, 2007).

And so the geek revolution has come, perhaps, bad for business though it may seem at times.

### *The Earth Shall Inherit the Geek*

I interviewed a woman who had been volunteering at South by Southwest. At 54, she was the oldest interviewee to follow up with me by phone, by about seven years. She

wasn't actually involved in tech industry or culture, I learned later, but a local who just liked to volunteer for festivals and conventions.

She came relatively late to PCs, she told me, having acquired her first in 1999, but she'd really taken to it. "I'm a computer geek!" she said, laughing. I wasn't sure if she was joking; I never mentioned it to her, but the fact that she was still using a modem to connect to the internet in 2007 probably would have disqualified her in many geeks' eyes. We chatted some more, and got to talking about how the geek stereotype works in schools, how neither of us were really in the "popular kids" group growing up. She elaborated on her earlier comment a bit more thoughtfully. "You know, I always considered myself kind of a geek," she said. "In my case, I mean, outside the norm. Interested in things other people weren't interested in growing up." She really liked the woods, for instance, and other kids didn't. She knew that some other geeks might not agree she was a geek, but she was at least proud that she wasn't afraid to use a computer.

The ubiquity of personal computing and the internet have indeed partially rescued the term 'geek' for broader usage. Some who may have never thought of themselves as part of "geek culture" may now feel freer to lay claim to a word that might have seemed off limits before – too negative to be accurate, or too stigmatized to admit to out loud. For those who have long considered themselves part of geek culture, meanwhile, the decreased stigma of the word may not seem like a long-prophesied "revenge" so much as a weakening of meaning. I've felt the need to apply 'faux geek' to some people," one person commented on Geek Studies, remarking that social networking media made some people seem to think they were geeks, whereas some degree of obsession should be



implied. "I have no idea what 'regular' people do. I think they might use Facebook a lot?" (Phill, 2009).

Writing at Anarchogeek, one blogger describes a process of "gentrification" of online news sites: Hackers and "alpha geeks" set up a system for sharing links, it works for a while, and then the geeks move on when it becomes so popular that the links of interest to them get drowned out by the bigger crowd: "previous semi-private places have been lost and new places created." He hopes they aren't just "doomed" to keep moving, but also reflects:

The point is, we won. We took an idea, which said that the masses should be able to make their own media, and we did it as an example and eventually the people we were fighting against started copying us. No we didn't win all of what we wanted, we had a political agenda which we able to advance here and there, we stopped the WTO round, ended the FTAA (free trade area of the americas), but in may ways we won.

So what does that mean to online communities, generating and finding news? Well first off it turns out that we, the broader hacker community is doing a good job at coming up with models which change the world. From blogs to wikis to link voting and collaborative editing, we're coming up with ideas which other people are copying. Or sometimes the hacker community's tools become mainstream. But we also face the reality that there is a tremendous value in influencing what gets seen. (Rabble, 2007)

The geek haven't inherited the Earth so much as that the Earth has inherited the playground of the geeks, integrating some the values and practices it was built upon into its economic and communication practices. The geeks, for their part, have mixed feelings about this, but generally want to make sure that the data keeps flowing, that they get to keep geeking out. Now that the computer is no longer the defining characteristic of geekdom (if it ever was), it's worth considering some other ways in which geeks construct a sense of themselves in the exercise of intellect and technical skills.

### Patterns of “Geek Thinking”

Earlier research on computer use and stereotypes, such as by Sherry Turkle (1984) and Lori Kendall (1999b), suggest that the ‘nerd’ image represents a strong uneasiness with machines that think like people. As computers become more commonplace in everyday life, however, and electronic games get better at representing loveable, lifelike behavior – from virtual pets like Tamagotchi to *Nintendogs* – it may be worth considering that the unease isn’t with computers, but with certain stereotypically geeky characteristics themselves. The negative stereotype, and frequent point of pride among geeks, may have less to do with tinkering with machines that think like people, and more to do with a person’s ability to think like a machine. Images from science-fiction – the logical precision of the *Star Trek*’s Spock and Data, the calculating expertise of the *Dune*’s Mentats, and so on – represent a sort of rational ideal that is simultaneously utopian and dystopian, illustrative of superhuman achievement and dehumanized disconnection.

Even beyond discussion of specific technological preferences, the dichotomy between “technical” and “non-technical” styles of thinking – what we might think of more generally (if not entirely accurately) as “left brain” versus “right brain” thinking – runs quite deep as a discourse of status within geek cultures. Some understand such rule-based thinking to be at the core of what it means to be a geek, from which all other characteristics and stereotypes originate. Attempting to define nerds in general, *American Nerd* author Benjamin Nugent summarized in one interview that he “figured out what they all had in common: a love of rules, a love of hierarchies that were meritocratic and open to everybody, and in some cases the affectation of rationalism” (Loeb, 2008). And

so it supposed that the ability to think like a machine is what makes nerds so good at what they are understood to be good at – at math, at games, at programming, at Klingon linguistics, at memorizing the trivia of the Marvel superhero universe – but potentially also deficient in less rational, logical abilities, such as empathy and social interaction.

As I'll describe in this section, then, the way that geeks seek entertainment that looks suspiciously like work, and define their way of thinking as suspiciously like machine-like processing, suggests another system of value that many see as setting their identity apart from broader cultural values of worth. This view of the geek mind presents a system or a rule set to describe and understand geek identity and itself. For some, this may be used to explain or excuse unusual social behavior, even social exclusion and narrow notions of geek authenticity. For others, meanwhile, viewing the world as a system could be a way of rendering it approachable for those who may otherwise be more comfortable with machines and numbers than with other people – or, at least, with those who feel capable relying on intuition to guide social interaction.

### *The World as a System*

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology is the kind of school where the students' idea of fun involves marking a local bridge at regular intervals according to an originally invented unit of length (the Smoot), based on the height of a certain Oliver R. Smoot of Lambda Chi Alpha. (Those of us from around the area still call it “The Smoot Bridge.”) When the students aren't doing work for class and research, they can often be found doing work for fun. Back in high school, MIT represented Nerdvana to me, a sort of geeky promised land where I went to watch anime every other week. My friend stuck a

bar-coded sticker from his AP exam booklet on the *Marvel vs. Capcom* machine in the student lounge every time he beat it with a new character. When another friend spent the summer in the dorms for “Math Camp,” we stayed up all night playing *Doom* in a computer lab. But it was only within the last couple years, doing research for my dissertation, that I would be able to find a team to join for the Mystery Hunt. I attended this annual tradition not just to observe three solid days of puzzle-solving bedlam and bliss, but to try my hand (or head) at it myself.

My team – a combination of grad students, educators, programmers, writers, and others, put together just a year or two before by a friend I first met in middle school – gathered in the classroom-cum-headquarters we had been assigned on campus. We quickly filled it with laptops, surge protectors, clipboards, and one table specially designated for soda and snack foods. We discussed plans to ensure that someone would be in the room at all times so computer equipment could be left there all weekend; fortunately, one fellow was happy to pull all-nighters to solve puzzles and guard our stuff. Someone hooked up a computer to a projector, displaying info on screen about how to get onto the wireless network as a guest. Most of the information for puzzles is hosted online nowadays through the Mystery Hunt website, and many puzzles would be impossible without being able to trawl the web for data. Many teams, too, tend to have members participating remotely; ours communicated with us through instant messenger and a special IRC channel, but particularly key was the wiki page established so we could keep track of the ongoing progress of every puzzle available to us.

As organized as that might sound, I participated on one of the less competitive teams at the Hunt. We had about 20–30 members who came and went over the course of

the weekend, plus a few remote participants in faraway cities where friends from college had settled. Some teams have only a few people, but others have upwards of 50 members. The more competitive teams are often particularly large by necessity – in part because winning requires solving many puzzles quickly (potentially simultaneously), and in part because the victorious team must design hundreds of puzzles for the following year’s Hunt. Some of the smaller teams, I was told, were offshoots of more competitive teams, formed without the pressure of actually contending. Plus, given an atmosphere with a relatively high proportion of rational-thinking but not necessarily socially-oriented geeks, it is expected that some teams will include members who can be particularly difficult to deal with. Other participants related to me tales of earlier Hunts, for instance, which included a puzzle where a pair from each team was locked in a room and needed to collaborate with the other teams in order to get out. It was, in short, a bit of a nightmare, with several individuals certain that *his* solution was the only one worth pursuing, and awhile before anyone succeeded in providing some sort of leadership.

Leading up to the beginning of my first Hunt, hundreds of people gathered in Lobby 7 – a high-ceilinged, domed space – to wait for the skit that would kick off the Hunt. Glancing around, I spotted members of the Silly Hat Brigade, sporting a ram-horned cap and a striped top hat, and a few members of Central Services, carrying around silvery ductwork. Someone passed around sheets of paper marked “Puzzle Zero,” featuring a giant “8” in the style of a digital clock, with additional numbers written in each of the number’s seven segments. A couple members of my team quickly got to work, trying out different approaches of yielding letters and numbers until they derived a message informing us to call a local phone number. We called it, and a recorded message

thanked us for calling the Caltech admissions office, directing us to the web for information about transferring from MIT. In retrospect, it did seem a bit too easy to have been a real puzzle.

Finally, members of the team coordinating that year's Hunt, Palindrome, addressed the lobby. The exchange was mostly inaudible from where I stood, but I got the gist of it: Dr. Awkward had been murdered, and only he knew where "the Coin" was. We picked up address books ("From the Desk of Dr. Otto Awkward") packed with clues pointing to possible murder suspects. Something like this was to be expected from tradition, of course; the Hunt is structured as a series of puzzles, with groups of solutions making up the clues in a larger, meta-level puzzle. Solve enough meta-puzzles, and your team can start a series of puzzles that may lead to the Coin's hidden location. In the following year, the murder mystery theme was replaced with a science-fiction convention theme, where teams were given handmade board games to aid in their escape from Zyzlvaria, a special space-time phenomenon: "It draws places where there is a high average intelligence," the silver-clad organizers explained. "But it also thrives on frustration, so it prefers places where those smart people have been working really, really hard."

This is an apt description for the MIT Mystery Hunt. I found out after the murder mystery-themed Hunt that it was widely agreed to have been a particularly challenging year, due to some combination of organizational issues Palindrome faced, and that team's desire to prove that it could come up with extremely technical puzzles despite its reputation for being into language puzzles. Some obsessive work is to be expected at the Hunt, but the puzzles are supposed to be doable, to make the solvers feel clever. Knowing

that there is a real, achievable answer is a large part of what makes it fun rather than simply frustrating and despairing. One participant, an MIT undergraduate, posted updates about her team's progress and her own experience, closely mirroring much of what my own team went through:

**Friday, 16:39**

Jordan '11 just ran into her room. Then she ran back out, pausing just long enough to explain that they needed some maps for a puzzle. This sort of frantic searching for resources will be pretty common this weekend. [...]

**Saturday, 0:45**

I just got off a Skype call with our remote solvers in Boulder. We're both working on a horrendous crossword, and we're going to take some digital pictures, upload them to the Internet, and compare. I love technology. [...]

**Sunday, 8:02**

This just plain sucks. [...]

**Sunday, 20:33**

Email sent to all hunters: "We are pleased to report that the Evil Midnight Bombers What Bomb at Midnight found the coin at 8:28 pm on Sunday January 20, 2008."

Evan: You realize we don't have a chance at second, right?

Nathan: Why do you say that? Everyone else went home!

Now it's time to clean up, and go home, and CRY because I never solved the puzzle I dedicated all weekend to.

Yay for Mystery Hunt. =) (Laura N. '09, 2008)

Back at my own team's headquarters, we weren't faring much better. We broke into multiple groups, tapping at laptop keyboards and scribbling on sheets of scrap paper, working partway through puzzles and updating the wiki with what little we knew before moving on to something less frustrating. One group left to scout locations around Harvard for a puzzle that involved some map-reading and building identification. Another small group gathered around a pile of Lego blocks to construct miniature tableaux specified among the required scenes for a scavenger hunt.

I started the weekend working alone on a puzzle, a whodunit featuring dozens of logs of prison guard shifts, diagrams of the prisoner locations at different times, and images of walkways between four guard towers. I spent a couple hours editing and combining the images in Photoshop, trying to see whether overlaying the images would create a connect-the-dots pattern that somehow spelled out a message. I found out later, when solutions were posted online, that this was the right strategy, but missed a step: Each lower level of walkway had to be shrunk a certain percentage depending on how far down the floor was, simulating a sense of perspective. We never solved that puzzle.

Dejected, I wandered over to check on a teammate, a friend's coworker. She was working on a puzzle that she'd started with other people who had since wandered off. The puzzle, titled "Cluesome," gave strings of characters, like "WYVMLZZVYWSBTYVVMVWWPHUV." This is a common format for Mystery Hunt puzzles: a title plus incomprehensible letters, numbers, or images, and no other context or clue.

My teammates had already successfully guessed that these were cryptograms, running the strings through a Caesar shift mechanism on the web that showed what the strings would spell if each letter were changed to another letter some number of positions further along in the alphabet. Guessing that the title of the puzzle, "Cluesome," hinted at a theme, my teammates filled in some gaps for the translated message above, spelling, "PROFESSOR PLUM on the ROOFTOP with the PIANO." That's where they were stuck. I stared at it awhile.

"Hey," I finally said, "Christopher Lloyd played an evil cartoon character in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, and killed somebody by pushing a piano off a rooftop." I then



disturbed several teammates with an eerily accurate impersonation, screeching,

*“Remember me, Eddie? I killed your brother!”*

From across the room, someone called out in response: “Christopher Lloyd played Professor Plum in the movie version of *Clue!*”

This was “the leap,” a threshold we discussed repeatedly that weekend as the one we needed to cross. It’s the leap in logic from which you suddenly see the puzzle from a new angle, envisioning what needs to be done in order to derive a solution. There was some competitive spirit at the Hunt, as I noted before, but to a large extent, the battle is largely internal: That “Eureka!” moment, when you make that leap, is intensely gratifying. You feel smart, useful, purposeful. And seeing it happen frequently in others earns a special kind of respect and envy.

Having made the logical leap needed to proceed, the rest was just grunt work. We counted seven letters into the title of the movie (and seven letters into Christopher Lloyd’s name, just to be safe) and took note of the letter. With the aid of Google and the Internet Movie Database, we similarly derived movie titles from the other solutions, drawing a letter from each movie title depending on how many letters the original string had been shifted in the alphabet. The result was the word “EMOTIVE.” We requested online for team Palindrome to call us and check on our answer. The designated team cell rang. The room grew silent. My teammate spelled the word, paused, and thanked the person on the other end.

“We got it!” she announced, and the whole team clapped and cheered. Someone chalked “EMOTIVE” on the board we were using to keep track of clues for the meta-

puzzle, and we updated the wiki so the remote teams wouldn't start working on an already completed puzzle.

“Emotive”! We had no idea what that meant, and we never figured it out. That was one of the easiest puzzles.

We solved about 15 of more than 100 puzzles over the course of the weekend. I attempted many puzzles myself, alone or in groups, but was only involved in three that were actually completed. In the end, my team wasn't able to complete even a single meta-puzzle. Another team did eventually win, of course, on Sunday night. It amazed me that anyone at all could solve enough puzzles to complete the game, and I stated as much to a teammate. Was it just that the bigger teams worked through puzzles more quickly? Should we have had more members who were familiar with MIT history and in-jokes? Did we spend too much time sleeping and eating?

My teammate, a Mystery Hunt veteran, replied, “Some people are just really good at solving puzzles.”

The MIT Mystery Hunt is a deeply immersive event celebrating this sense of play as work, unusual in its scope but nevertheless representative of broader interests in its purpose. To geeks, even entertainment can be a kind of work, a source of pride in what it means to be “intellectual.” Playing games represents not just a way of relaxing (or, in some cases, not even a way of relaxing at all), but a way of establishing feelings of control, exercising and developing the mind, even of learning how to think about the world. Games present the world as manageable systems, with a sense of order, problems that can be solved. They offer an opportunity to secure a sense of achievement through

skills that studious nerds may be already inclined to excel at. One video game critic notes:

One thing that's always struck me about games is the contrast between the messiness, confusion and plain fuckedupness of our actual life and the clean, unfailingly rule-guided, perfectly revocable nature of a game-world. A game is the one place where everything really does happen for a reason – everything can be understood and everything can be put right. This is one reason, I think, why we become so attached to games during adolescence – as our emotional and social lives becomes exponentially more bewildering, these games offer a preserve of clarity and control. (Iroquois Pliskin, 2009)

This view contrasts games with the way the world really works, though some contend that games can actually teach effective ways of interacting with real people and situations. Consider, for instance, *Dungeons & Dragons*, a role-playing game (or RPG) which presents all human abilities and interactions as reducible to abstract systems of categorical and mathematical values: Intelligence and Strength as numbers, moral standing located on a graph between axes of lawfulness/chaos and good/evil, and so on. Adam Rogers (2008), a senior editor for *Wired*, goes so far as to suggest in *The New York Times* that *Dungeons & Dragons* taught the socially unskilled how to “role-play” normal social interaction in non-geeky company. “For us, the character sheet and the rules for adventuring in an imaginary world became a manual for how people are put together. Life could be lived as a kind of vast, always-on role-playing campaign,” writes Rogers. “[The] game allowed geeks to venture out of our dungeons, blinking against the light, just in time to create the present age of electronic miracles.”

The influence may sound hyperbolic, but the sentiment is genuine and relatively widespread. One editor of a fantasy website, for instance, writes that this is not only a “harmless, if incredibly geeky pastime,” but that there is “literally nothing better for turning a kid into a thoughtful, creative, passionate, open-minded adult” (Hartering,

2009). He too credits the game not just with spurring an interest in reading, but with teaching him how the world works: philosophy and ethics through decision-making scenarios and the system of “alignment”; argument and debate through rules interpretation discussions with “some of the most intelligent people I’ve ever met”; statistics through strategic rolls of the dice. The commenters following the article generally agree.

Games thus offer a glimpse of geek thinking in action. They offer a satisfying way to exercise rule-based thinking and pattern recognition, to get that high of deriving the answer to a problem, and also a reflection of – or, perhaps, a tool for – how many geeks make sense of the world around them.

### *Quantifying Geekiness*

In a post on Geek Studies titled “Authentically Geeky,” I ask my readers about whether they make a distinction between “real” and “fake” geeks. (I note that I don’t make such a distinction myself in my research, preferring to go by people’s own definitions for themselves.) One commenter offers a fairly specific definition based on two different methods of quantifying personality types:

I don’t think one can successfully understand what makes a person geeky without taking personality types into account. Geekyness (or nerdiness) is not merely defined by a particular set of interests or a specific fashion sense, but primarily by the possession of a “rational” temperament (<http://www.keirsey.com/handler.aspx?s=keirsey&f=fourtemps&tab=5&c=overview>).

Geek culture itself is an expression of the rational personality types (especially the introverted INTJ/INTP types), which are meritocratic and pragmatic, and value abstract problem solving skills. A faux-geek attempts to appropriate or deconstruct geek stereotypes, but lacks the technical competence and logical mindset required to be taken seriously by the rationals that make up the majority of geekdom. (Jemimah, 2009)

This commenter may be specifically calling me out as a faux-geek, as my original post focuses on someone who understood geekiness more like the “misfits” in Chapter 3.

Hair-splitting distinctions and highly codified ideas of what it means to be a geek are not peculiar to comments on my own blog, of course. Nor do such definitions always emphasize the same measures in describing what makes one inherently geeky. Despite Benjamin Nugent’s aforementioned definition of nerds as rule-oriented thinkers who affect rationalism, even some among the rules-oriented and rationality-affecting nerds have taken umbrage; as one reviewer of *American Nerd* on Amazon criticizes, “He discusses Asperger syndrome and autism, but never mentions the term, IQ, which means that he totally misses the central fact of who nerds are” (Hensley, 2008).

The way some such definitions are phrased is purposefully exclusionary, and not without a touch of disdain for those they see as less-than-nerdy. The commenter suggesting that geeks are defined by INTJ (Introversion, iNtuition, Thinking, Judgment) or INTP (Introversion, iNtuition, Thinking, Perception) personality profiles also makes clear that those who do not share such a mindset will not be “taken seriously” by the “rational” geeks. Such definitions serve to reassure some geeks – who may feel, or have felt in their youth, marginalized by their peers – that they are distinguished from and superior to other people. In *American Nerd*, Nugent himself concedes in reflection on his junior-high self:

I realize now that my fantasy resembled a traditional high-school popular crowd, with an ill-defined notion of intelligence replacing sports as the excuse for chumminess and uniforms. Nerds were to me what the Aryan race was to Hitler: a group destined to control the world through its superior natural capabilities. I knew that in junior high school I was on the bottom rung, and I wanted nerdiness to be a power that uplifted me. (Nugent, 2008, p. 190)

The attitude that a special kind of “geek thinking” confers certain special abilities can reach beyond informal debates about who does and who doesn’t count as a geek. Researchers such as Margolis and Fisher (2002) have noted how a culture of geekiness can turn away women and students who don’t have hyper-diligent working personalities from tech-related majors and careers. Introductory computer science classes at many universities are already commonly referred to as “weed-out courses,” designed to be disproportionately difficult to turn away people early in the curriculum who instructors fear won’t be capable of finishing the degree requirements.

Some advocate going even further in screening out those who don’t come to college already oriented toward rule-based thinking. A paper by Saeed Dehnadi and Richard Bornat (2006) of Middlesex University goes so far as to suggest that a predictive test of logical-thinking aptitude could be administered to would-be computer science students “as an admissions barrier,” weeding out those whom the test determines are “extremely difficult to teach programming to” because of a pre-existing inability to think like a programmer. The article never specifies that this is a means of separating “geeks” from “non-geeks,” but draws upon similar language as that used in how geeks define themselves as capable of thinking in terms of abstract (if arbitrary) rules and systems:

Formal logical proofs, and therefore programs [...] are *utterly meaningless*. To write a computer program you have to come to terms with this, to accept that whatever you might want the program to mean, the machine will blindly follow its meaningless rules and come to some meaningless conclusion. In the test the consistent group showed a pre-acceptance of this fact: they are capable of seeing mathematical calculation problems in terms of rules, and can follow those rules wheresoever they may lead. The inconsistent group, on the other hand, looks for meaning where it is not. The blank group knows that it is looking at meaninglessness, and refuses to deal with it. (Dehnadi & Bornat, 2006, p. 16)

On a blog post remarking upon this paper, some readers remarked in comments that the problem may be in the teaching methods, not the mental ability of students. Many others seemed quite comfortable with the idea, in the words of the blogger who wrote the original post, that “the act of programming seems literally unteachable to a sizable subset of incoming computer science students” (Atwood, 2006).

I offer this unpublished paper not as evidence for the argument it makes, but as an example of how some understand their technical aptitude as a special, inherent characteristic that separates them from other categories of thinkers.

### *Geek Syndromes*

The exclusionary thrust of such statements may indicate a way that geeks attempt to police the boundaries of “authenticity” in tech cultures, with potentially problematic ramifications. The core claim, however – that a certain style of thinking is central to how geeks understand their identity – runs deep for some. Taking this theory a step further than identifying “geek thinking” in personality temperaments and IQ scores, some have attempted to locate the mental characteristics of geekdom in neuropsychological conditions and disorders.

In my field research, more than once have self-identified geeks identified “geek thinking” as lying somewhere on a “spectrum” of autism or Asperger’s syndrome, potentially involving characteristics of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), or Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). These are a few different ways of attempting to find an underlying mechanism or association between some particularly common quirks that we think of as geeky, including unbridled

enthusiasm, hyper-focused attention to details and patterns, seemingly compulsive collecting and organization (whether of stamps, comic book back issues, or hidden power-ups in video games), and difficulty interpreting interpersonal and social cues. At South by Southwest Interactive, for instance, one person asserted to me that the highest concentrations of Asperger's syndrome are in the major tech hubs of the U.S., including Silicon Valley, Boston, and right there in his own Austin, Texas.

I can't speak for Austin, but this person was repeating a notion that has gained traction in some circles. Articles referring to Asperger's as "The Geek Syndrome" appear in *Wired* (Silberman, 2001) and *Time* (Nash & Bonesteel, 2002), reporting on the hypothesis that autism and Asperger's are particularly prevalent in tech hubs because the many mildly autistic computer geeks often become parents whose children are visibly further down on the Asperger's end of the spectrum (Silberman, 2001). People who have and who study Asperger's insist that portrayals like *The Big Bang Theory* and *Napoleon Dynamite* are actually portrayals of "Aspie" behavior (Collins, 2009; H. Levin & Schlozman, 2006). Dr. Temple Grandin, diagnosed as autistic in 1950 and now the author of multiple books on autism, has said, "Geek and nerd are just other names for autism" (Crawford, 2009). In *Nerds: Who They Are and Why We Need More of Them*, David Anderegg (2007, pp. 110–111) suggests that "A more prudent and humane response to the problem of the 'geek syndrome' would be to abolish it legislatively by dropping some, if not all, social-skills deficits from the manual of mental illness," which would require "enough nerdy people who rise up, as homosexuals did in the past, and demand an end to official stigmatization."



Some do understand Asperger's to be part of being a geek. One commenter on Digg, upon taking an (admittedly unscientific) "Autistic or just a Geek?" quiz at *Wired's* site, responded to the high score with a famously geeky exclamation of victory: "46! w00t, but i knew i was autistic already" (MonkeyNuts, 2007). Some others react with dubiousness or hostility to the notion. "I'm a social retard, have to add all the numbers in telephone numbers together whenever they flash on the TV, read license plates and do weird things and count how many steps I go when I walk," another Digg commenter offers. "I dont think I'm autistic....just a little weird and slightly more happy being a cerebral person" (Toshibi, 2007).

It's worth reflecting that while there may well be some truth to this connection, it also fits into a broader cultural portrayal of the "quirky genius" or "mad scientist," who display great intellect alongside other abnormal thought processes. There are arguably some historical examples of this, such as John Nash, the Nobel Prize-winning mathematician with schizophrenia who was the subject of *A Beautiful Mind*, and who wasn't able to work productively while medicated. There are also examples of those who actively play up this portrayal: Hans Reiser, a Linux programmer who was tried for the murder of his wife, drew upon this popular understanding in what journalists referred to as his "geek defense" (Kravets, 2008; Meyers, 2008; Vick, 2008). "He's a very difficult person," explained his defense counsel, who brought in expert testimony to explain that Reiser has Asperger's syndrome. "It's very difficult to represent a genius" (Vick, 2008). In court, Reiser explained his behavior by stating that "Scientists communicate by reference to data. I cannot communicate effectively," "I have a compulsive tendency to say things that I know are true that people don't want to be true," and that "I found a little niche in society where I can get away" – "working as a scientist" (Kravets, 2008).

It wasn't just Reiser and his defense promoting this notion. The *Washington Post* suggested that Silicon Valley might be the only place where Reiser would find a jury of peers, and offered quotes from a network consultant and a founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation suggesting that certain seemingly suspicious behaviors – like removing his cell phone battery and removing the seats from his car to clean it – might actually make sense to a quirky geek (Vick, 2008). Readers following the story on *Wired* offered a range of reactions, some condemning Reiser, but others suggesting empathy: “as a geek who has been persecuted because he is different, I can understand why Hans would engage in some of the behavior he did. I imagine in 10 or 15 years, Dateline could end up doing a special on Hans Reiser, like some other people who ended up being wrongly convicted” (DCX2, 2008). “This guy has Asperger syndrome. As a result he is in big trouble,” another wrote. “One of the consequence of Asperger syndrome is that ‘normal’ people don’t like you. They don’t like your tendency to tell the truth brutally” (JeanHughesRoberts, 2008). Reiser was ultimately convicted, however, after making a deal to lead police to his wife’s body.

I bring up this example not to suggest that the construction of the geek as neurologically atypical is a complete fabrication, but to demonstrate how commonly understood this construction is, such that it could even come up in court and elicit recognition from geeks. Even some of the geeks who believed Reiser was guilty identified some of his odd actions as familiar. On Slashdot, multiple people expressed that they had engaged in similar behaviors, such as taking out their car’s seats to clean and tinker, but Reiser’s particular situation made it look unlikely that that was what he was up to: “A *real* geek would have kept the seat. Even if there was something wrong with it, there were plenty of good parts on that sucker” (dubl-u, 2007).

I believe that there may be a connection for some geeks between their behavior and their neurobiology, but I believe that doesn't tell the whole story. I shy away from concluding that 'nerd' and 'geek' are simply other words for autism because I see too much variety in those who apply these terms to themselves (and, of course, kids who hurl these as insults are not really "diagnosing" their peers). Not being a neurologist or psychologist myself, I'm happy to entertain the idea that certain personality and behavioral characteristics exist on a spectrum of autism or Asperger's syndrome, though I think it's worth questioning what the purpose might be of defining this as a spectrum of "geek thinking."

By describing identity according to personality types, IQ, or even neurological conditions that tend to be characterized (or mischaracterized) as disorders, geeks define themselves according to qualities rooted in biology. I don't mean to call into question the sincerity of geeks arguing that "geek thinking" is rooted in biology, but it does bear mention that describing geek identity in terms of inherent characteristics arguably lends geek identity a certain legitimacy in the eyes of those who would claim as much. Being born a geek makes that an identity somehow on par with identities constructed with reference to skin color, sexual characteristics, or sexual orientation. Moreover, it offers a standard for authenticity to please those who are most concerned with measurement and definition.

### *The Spectrum of Visible Geekiness*

Some others, meanwhile, recognize a broader range of people and interests being characterized (and describing themselves) as geeks and nerds. Rather than tossing out

what may not seem to fit into one definition, another approach many have taken is to formulate other systems to understand and express geek identity.

“Geeks love cladistics,” Church (2008b) remarked when I posted a link on Geek Studies to a *Wired* story on six categories of geeks (as discussed back in my Introduction). Z. agreed that such categorizations may be a result of “the nerd’s unyielding need to classify and catalog” (Z., 2008b), as if such behavior represents a psychological imperative. Nevertheless, even some of those who strive for a perfectly codified definition of geekiness sometimes make room for social and cultural variability. Thus, some other definitions of geek identity seem born from a great desire to categorize and quantify, though with potentially less of an exclusionary drive.

A number of widely known online quizzes and methods of measuring geekiness further illustrate this desire to codify geek identity.<sup>3</sup> One of the longest-standing techniques for this is the “Geek Code,” established and revised between 1993 and 1996. The code’s originator, a college student in the ‘90s, suggests:

So you think you are a geek, eh? The first step is to admit to yourself your geekiness. No matter what anyone says, geeks are people too; geeks have rights. So take a deep breath and announce to the world that you are a geek. Your courage will give you strength that will last you forever.

How to tell the world you are a geek, you ask? Use the universal Geek code! Using this special code will allow you to let other un-closeted geeks know who you are in a simple, codified statement. (Hayden, 1996)

As per the suggestion of the code’s author, the Geek code was long a feature (and sometimes still appears) in many email and forum signatures. Broken down into several categories – Appearance, Computers, Politics, Entertainment, Lifestyle – the Geek code is represented as a string of characters that indicates not whether you are or aren’t a geek, but what kind of geek you are. Acknowledging that “Geeks can seldom be strictly

quantified,” the Geek code also allows for variables to be appended to values, such as “@” for a characteristic that isn’t too rigid (e.g., being into *Star Trek: The Next Generation* but not a die-hard fan of the entire franchise), or “>“ for characteristics the geek would *like* to have but has not yet achieved. The Geek code displayed on KleefeldOnComics.blogspot.com, for instance, reads as:

```
GCA d s+: a C++ U P+ L+ !E- W+++ $ N+ o K-? w--- O- M++ V- PS++ PE Y+
PGP t+ 5 X R tv- b+++ DI++ D G e+++ h+ r+++ % y--
```

This code describes a Geek of Commercial Arts (GCA) who is a webmaster (W+++ \$), enjoys *Star Trek* (t++) more than *Babylon 5* (5), refuses to use Emacs text editors (!E-), and is a male who doesn’t have much sex (y--), among other characteristics. One could use the geek code to construct other profiles, of course, including for geeks who see their geekiness as unrelated to computer skills. Most people, of course, will find these codes utterly unintelligible without checking it against the documentation or a decoder page, such as at [Ebb.org/ungeek](http://Ebb.org/ungeek). This unintelligibility, however, is less likely meant to be purposefully exclusive as to be relatively comprehensive and precise in self-definition (at least in terms of what it meant to be a geek circa 1996).

Less cryptic tests have emerged over the years as well, such as the “Nerd? Geek? or Dork? Test” on OkCupid (donathos, 2005), a social networking and dating site. This test, which has been taken by over 880,000 people as of this writing (“OkCupid.com: donathos,” 2009), was recommended to me by several interviewees and acquaintances from field research who remarked that it closely paralleled their own understanding of the distinction between these categories. (I had, of course, already taken it myself.) Answers provided on questions give a breakdown by percentage based on academic and technical interests (as nerdy), pop culture and fannish interests (as geeky), and social awkwardness

(as dorky). When I first took the test, I scored as a “Modern, Cool Nerd”; after months of research on a dissertation about geek culture, I scored as a “Pure Nerd” (86 % Nerd, 39% Geek, 30% Dork). Considering what those months of research involved, I was inclined to believe that the test was indeed measuring *something* about how I was living my life.

Though some people’s ways of categorizing geeks still emphasize the technical over other factors, measurements such as the Geek code and such informal “nerd tests” represent means of identifying geekiness as quantifiable while still allowing some room for some variation and inclusion. Regardless of whether many geeks exhibit certain innate thinking styles, or even exist on a “spectrum” of autistic thinking, even many of the most rule-oriented and rational-thinking geeks and nerds have conceptualized their identity in ways that leave the door cracked open for those with some other shared cultural interests, regardless of their “nature.”

### Production, Productivity, and Play

The topics discussed so far in this chapter represent some of the ways that geek identity is conceptualized according to thoroughly geeky sorts of ideology and systematic thinking. Nevertheless, it would be reductive to imply that geek culture is defined and socially structured wholly according to insider ideals and ways of thinking. As I’ll describe in this section, even as geeks aren’t necessarily “in it for the money” and tend to value intellect, we still see broader, underlying discourses in American culture informing how geeks understand the value of their pursuits. Though the way geeks tinker with playful abandon may be quite similar to the sort of enthusiasm characterizing other geeky pursuits, only some interests usually get to be understood as ‘geeky’ in a positive sense.

To introduce this idea, a particular example from South by Southwest Interactive springs to mind. SXSWi is an odd sort of convention because it doesn't really have a particular focus. As the vague term "Interactive" implies, the event draws together professionals from a variety of tangential fields with some shared interests: web design, software development, online marketing, game design, and so on. The year I attended, some panels were oriented toward industry and cultural trends, such as "LonelyGirl15 Case Study" and "Avatar-Based Marketing in Synthetic worlds." Others proved to be over my head. I couldn't have told you "Why XLST is Sexy," or even know why I would ask, "Web Vector Graphics: Myth or Reality?" And while I was interested in hearing about "Ruining the User Experience," the panel's subtitle, "When Javascript and AJAX Go Bad," suggested I was likely to get lost part way through. At least I knew enough typographic history and had coded enough using CSS and HTML to (mostly) follow along with "Web Typography Sucks."<sup>4</sup>

The one common point of the event, however, is that everyone can find free food and drinks after the panels if they know where to look. The entry fee even includes several drink tickets, redeemable for a plastic cup of watery beer at the end of each day. I lined up at "the beer tent" – a white pavilion outside the convention center – to mingle on more level ground with the folks from the events I couldn't follow. The man beside me in line was tall and lanky, wearing glasses and with black hair pulled back in a ponytail. I asked if he had been to any good panels.

He was a little disappointed. As a programmer, it was "a lot less technical" than the conventions he'd normally go to. More artsy. Kind of funny, I admitted, seeing as how I was finding it more technical than what I'd normally go to. But then again, I

switched out of my major in computer science years ago, and was more interested in the design offerings.

We chatted awhile, working our way up the line, talking about the kind of work we had each been doing lately. I told him I was doing research for a project on geek culture and identity.

“That’s interesting,” he said. “A lot of people are calling themselves geeks who aren’t really geeks.”

I admitted that I do hear that from people, sometimes. I hoped that sounded diplomatic and invited more discussion.

We picked up our cups of beer and found chairs, and he mused on open source software developers and hardware hackers like the people who read *Make* as examples of real geeks – people who make things, solve problems, tinker, experiment. By contrast, he explained, “Some people just write stories with other people’s characters.” He was talking about fan fiction, or fanfic, as it’s often called.

“Sure,” I said, “but a lot of those people see what they’re doing as a sort of creative activity, too.” I had noticed that he was wearing a button for Creative Commons, a nonprofit organization that offers alternative licenses to traditional copyright, so I attempted to draw a parallel, suggesting that it’s about sharing and repurposing things, they might say, like what Creative Commons is about. Some even see it as analogous to what the DIY people are doing, tinkering with ideas rather than technology.

“Yeah, maybe,” he said. He sounded unconvinced. We sipped our beer and spoke of other things.



Later, I met up with Drew, one of the guys I was sharing a room with at the hotel. I knew him through my friend Phoebe, a grad student who used to work in IT. Drew and I stood outside a certain building entrance, waiting to meet with some more of his friends, chatting while he smoked a cigarette. Drew was a software developer, about average height, with glasses, a messy hairstyle, and a tattoo of a “3” on his shoulder. He told me it was a reference to his longtime handle online – that is, the name he went by in forums and chats – “Dr3w.” He wore a t-shirt for Sex Bob-Omb, which is not a real band, but a band from a comic book about a guy who has to defeat the seven evil exes of a subspace-traveling ninja woman in order to win the right to date her. Drew and I chatted about comics a lot that week. We got along pretty well. I figured that if anybody would have something interesting to say about the blend of technical skill and pop culture interests in geekdom, it might be him. I told him about the conversation I’d had with the fellow at the beer tent – about how a lot of people are calling themselves geeks whom the technically inclined don’t see as geeks at all.

He thought about it and took a drag on his cigarette. “Actually,” he said, “I kind of agree with him.”

On the surface, these attitudes could be seen as distinguishing between facility with technology versus verbal or literary interests. That’s the old “science versus humanities” debate, the divide between the “two cultures” that some have suggested nerds might help to bridge (Clayton, 2002; Kelly, 1998). Even in making distinctions between geeks and nerds, however, many understand tech skill as a defining characteristic. One commenter on Geek Studies, for instance, suggested that “geeks are more closely tied to computers”; both, however, are presumed to be technological, as

indicated by their respective preferences in computer operating systems: “where as a geek would be more likely to run Linux, a nerd would be more likely to have Unix, or Linux with a dual boot [sic],” shared with Microsoft Windows (PaleAngelLex, 2009).<sup>5</sup> Those ignorant of Linux (let alone Mac users) have no place in this understanding of geeks and nerds.

Moreover, the concept of the “two cultures” somewhat precludes a sense that scientific and technical pursuits themselves could be creative and artful in their own ways. The technically-minded, for their part, would often beg to differ. “What hackers and painters have in common is that they’re both makers,” Paul Graham (2003a) writes in an essay reflecting on his programming experiences in graduate school. “Along with composers, architects, and writers, what hackers and painters are trying to do is make good things.” Programmers may suffer from occasional “math envy,” he suggests, but the really good hackers know that programming is a kind of creative process, an art all its own.

The basic matter at issue in discussions like those described above from South by Southwest, I think, is more one of which creative pursuits can be more easily justified as purposeful, and which seem trivial. The irony of this may be that, just as hacking resembles painting, “geeking out” over machines sometimes closely resembles doing the same over less technical materials. This represents another area in which we can recognize hierarchies of status among geeks, and understand who precisely gets to lay claim to the revenge of the nerds.

*Nontrivial Pursuits*

It's tempting to claim that the wide array of stereotypically geeky pursuits is linked by some kind of inherent intellectualism, offering a sense of equality (or, arguably, shared elitism) to all who share the term. And indeed, many geeks I speak to suggest just that. Some maintain that the intellectual complexity encouraged by much of the entertainment media that geeks gravitate toward lies not just in problem-solving and game systems, but in being able to understand the content itself in its original form. "The source material is more substantial than, say, *America's Next Top Model*," said Milo, a software developer I met at the Penny Arcade Expo. Edward, an interviewee I met at Comic Con International, similarly noted that for contemporary mystery and science-fiction serial dramas, "The audience has 10 major timelines in their heads." Keeping track of all of this information is a kind of mental workout all its own. Audiences even have the option to dig even deeper for hidden references and allusions to the series' own deep mythology: *Lostpedia*, a wiki site maintained by fans, chronicles the show's happenings, keeps track of repeated motifs, and encourages debate on specific theories as to what things mean and what revelations might be in store.

Moreover, some fans and academics alike have suggested that certain stereotypically geeky media are not more widely consumed because they may even require a special kind of "literacy." As I discussed in Chapter 1, some have suggested that comics are not fully interpretable without a comprehensive knowledge of back story and symbolic references spanning decades (Pustz, 1999), or a learned ability to piece together certain systems of signs and layout grammars (Cohn, 2005), while reading or viewing science-fiction is supposed to require "science-fiction thinking" (Landon, 2002) or "a

particular mode of reception” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 277). Geeky entertainment, understood this way, practically require intellectual and learned audiences to be interpreted at all, or may bestow such abilities upon their audiences.

This is effectively the argument promoted in Steven Johnson’s (2006) *Everything Bad is Good for You*: That television, games and other pop culture long believed to be “dumbing down” America are actually helping to increase IQ and promote more complex thinking. There are plot twists and turns, details about the back story of narrative settings, nuanced relationships between characters that may span months. The difference between Steven Johnson’s argument and those of the geeks who suggest this, however, may be the scope that each has in mind. Even popular, not-necessarily-geeky shows like *CSI* figure into Johnson’s theory. Is there really anything especially intellectual about the science-fiction, fantasy, and comics to justify the ‘geek’ label?

When Milo related to me the claim that *Dungeons & Dragons* improves players’ vocabulary, based on an article he read in *Dragon* magazine (published by the company that produces *D&D*), I couldn’t help but wonder why one couldn’t make the same argument for *any* other interest that involves a special vocabulary, or that requires a sufficient amount of reading, or even simply watching wordy movies. The most notable difference, perhaps, may be that the minds behind interests like *D&D*, *Lost*, or even nerdy webcomics are actively encouraging their audiences to *see themselves* as smart. *D&D* sourcebooks are a mess of rules and tables, its *Monstrous Manuals* a recap of a plethora of ancient mythologies. These materials require and reward research: To make your own character, you need to decide whether you want to be a fletcher, which means knowing what that even is. *Lost*’s genius is in making the series palatable to broader audiences on

television but still including enough trivia and minutiae to keep the geeks happy. Deliberately esoteric comics on the web, meanwhile, may actually want to encourage audiences to feel like a special niche, consuming something less widely accessible; in explaining how webcomics are actively constructed as material for nerds, one blogger suggests, “This is why you’ll see writers like Jerry Holkins (Penny Arcade) and Jeph Jacques (Questionable Content) using massive, obtuse words that people don’t actually use in conversation” (Wray, 2007). Products like these may be actively marketed to audiences who see themselves as intellectuals, supporting (or arguably even pandering to) that self-image.

That said, the claims that geeky pop culture in general – from sci-fi to *D&D* and comics and all the rest – is somehow more “intellectual” than other entertainment may be an attempt to justify certain interests as especially intellectual just because many geeks happen to enjoy them. It is a potentially tautological argument, given that there are other interests we do not typically think of as “geeky” but that are potentially no less capable of being intellectualized. What of having an encyclopedic knowledge of vintage cars or baseball statistics? As I shall discuss in the following chapter, there are other cultural connotations suggesting to us which interests are “geeky” in a pejorative sense. Deep, intellectual engagement may characterize the way that many geeks consume and appreciate their entertainment, but it may not necessarily characterize the entertainment itself.

By the same token, the deep engagement that geeks have with the media they love isn’t necessarily just “logical” or “intellectual.” Just as the fun stuff may get approached

as brainy, the brainy stuff gets approached as fun. It's the latter, however, that tends to be considered more worthwhile on the surface.

### *Tinker Toys*

I arrived a few minutes late to the evening night meeting of CommuniDIY,<sup>6</sup> a local group of self-proclaimed geek visionaries dedicated to do-it-yourself technology. Several cities across the U.S. have local groups for “hardware hackers” and “makers,” like the Pandora Radio Project’s Geek Group (Dunbar-Hester, 2008), or chapters of national groups, like those Dorkbot and Make. Writing of the growing interest in “amateur science” through such groups and through media, Mark Frauenfelder states, “I’m certain that *Make*, the project-based magazine I edit, would never have gotten off the ground had it not been for the resurgence of experimentation spurred on by internet communication” (Frauenfelder, 2008). I’d never been to any such meeting before, but figured I ought to spend time with *tech* geeks who weren’t necessarily *computer* geeks.

Dozens of people were already seated in the local art school’s workshop by the time I showed up, listening to a fellow give a presentation at the front of the room about a wooden toy he’d made; he demonstrated how to turn the crank and spin letters to spell words. Those of us who had just arrived queued up at a small folding table. A hand-written sign suggested that we offer a \$5 donation, so I fed my bill into a slit in a small, wooden box on the table, which noisily reeled it in through some hidden mechanical means. I wrote “Jason” on a strip of duct tape for a makeshift nametag and searched for an empty seat. The room was pretty full at about 50 men and 12 women – their fullest meeting to date, I learned later, perhaps because the local geek culture blog that referred

me to the event had a larger readership than I realized. It was a casual crowd, with attendees clad in a geeky combination of thick glasses, a few cowboyish and flannel shirts, some plain sweaters, and some tee-shirts, despite the cold weather outside.

This was the unstructured part of the meeting, when members could address the group about their ongoing projects. After the guy with the wooden toy was finished, another fellow got up to project some slides from a laptop. “I’ve been building a castle out of wood in the living room,” he explained. He guessed that it was about 4 x 9 x 11 feet, and admitted he wasn’t even sure how he got his wife to agree to it. “We got rid of our sofa.” His later photos showed a game cabinet like those featured in old arcades, custom-built to hold a computer hosting arcade game emulation software and the files for several games, and yet another game cabinet for his Xbox, with a chair and a wheel for driving games. One photo showed the two machines set up side-by-side next to a pinball machine – “Some circus pinball my wife wanted,” he explained. He also made a flashing sign with a washing machine on it to remind them when to switch loads.

When it looked like newcomers were done filtering in, a couple of the CommuniDIY organizers got up to formally welcome everyone to the event. They thanked the presenters and the guy who donated the electronics, and ceded the floor to another organizer, who gave a sneak preview of their plans for the following month’s meeting, when they would be seeing a presentation from local community Wi-Fi activists. They handed the floor over to Gary, a fellow with a beard, a black fedora, and glasses who got up to enthusiastically promote an “orthogonal” group he had been working with. The plan was to was put together a fabrication lab where members could take manufacturing classes, design specs for products, and actually create those products.

“You could print out a new case for your iPod,” Gary suggested. “Or Han Solo in carbonite on a candy bar, or whatever.” He directed us to the flyers on the table, and the organizers moved on to introduce the evening’s headlining presenters.

Chris and Jill were experimental artists and designers. They screened bits of a stop-motion film they had collaborated on, projected photos from an installation in which an old Mac LC III displayed oscillations from machines that tapped on eggs, and discussed how they tried to have a “sustainable” business model with a focus on local vendors. Describing a class they taught on making one’s own circuits and dying one’s own felt, they passed around a felt pillow resembling a calculator with a (real) USB plug dangling from it. It was unclear to me whether the thing had any actual function.

Eventually, they pulled out their new big product: a box with one side covered in an array of translucent rubber keys, programmable to do any number of things. Chris demonstrated how one could map sounds to locations, touching keys and playing them like a beat-mixing machine. The software was all open source, so a community was already at work making patches and designing new functions. The audience asked a series of specific questions about how the devices were created; the presenters talked about Jill’s tedious soldering duties (which elicited some impressed nodding and murmuring), and about how they wanted to make their own resin bases, but it turned out to be too wasteful to produce them. A friend of theirs was still back in their home state trying to meet production demands. “I don’t think we ever expected to sell out in 15 minutes,” Chris said. “We just hope to sell enough to make costs back.”

After everyone had a chance to handle the strange gadget, we applauded the presenters and moved on to the next phase of the meeting, the DIY Dare. One of the guys



in charge explained, “The Dare involves breaking into teams, finding out what general theme we’ll be addressing, and then we make something.”

The organizers had brought carts stacked high with tools and supplies – pliers, hammers, popsicle sticks, nails, duct tape, hot glue guns, and so on – and the next room over from the workshop had piles of scrap wood and metal. We had to share to build some music-making device in an hour. Inspired by our presenters, our task was to make an automated musical instrument. “All hell’s about to break loose,” one organizer said with relish. “Bonus points if the tune is recognizable!”

Following a short period of awkwardly milling about, the organizers helped shuffle us into several roughly equally-sized groups, each with its own toolbox and table. My group was the only all-male group in the room, most of us in our 20s or 30s, with a couple guys I suspected were teenagers. We introduced ourselves to one another, but didn’t bother referring to each other by name again.

My teammates dragged metal bits over other metal bits, testing to hear what kinds of sounds they could make. Gary, the guy who suggested fabricating iPod cases and Han Solo chocolate bars, came by to contribute to the brainstorming. Baffled by the task at hand, a kid on my team in a Captain America shirt exclaimed to Gary, “This is absurd!”

Gary replied with a smile, “That’s why it’s called a ‘DIY *Dare*’ and not the ‘DIY *make-something-easy*.’”

My teammates unpacked our kit and wondered aloud how we could do this. I can solve puzzles; this, however, was new to me. I’ve replaced my own RAM and installed a second hard drive, but that’s easy stuff. I’m certainly not a *hardware person*. Tools are a

traditional realm of masculinity I never got around to feeling altogether comfortable with. I lost all sense of how to be a researcher and just stood still, feeling mildly panicked.

After a few minutes of brainstorming, a couple of my teammates decided we would somehow have a spinning implement that would hang and hit things as it spun. Gary suddenly turned to me. "Can you figure out a way to make something rotate?" he asked. I softly responded, "Uh." Gary's attention was drawn elsewhere in the room for a couple minutes, and he bounded off.

When he returned, Gary asked if I wanted to accompany him to find something to hang stuff from. We went into the adjacent room to pick out scrap parts.

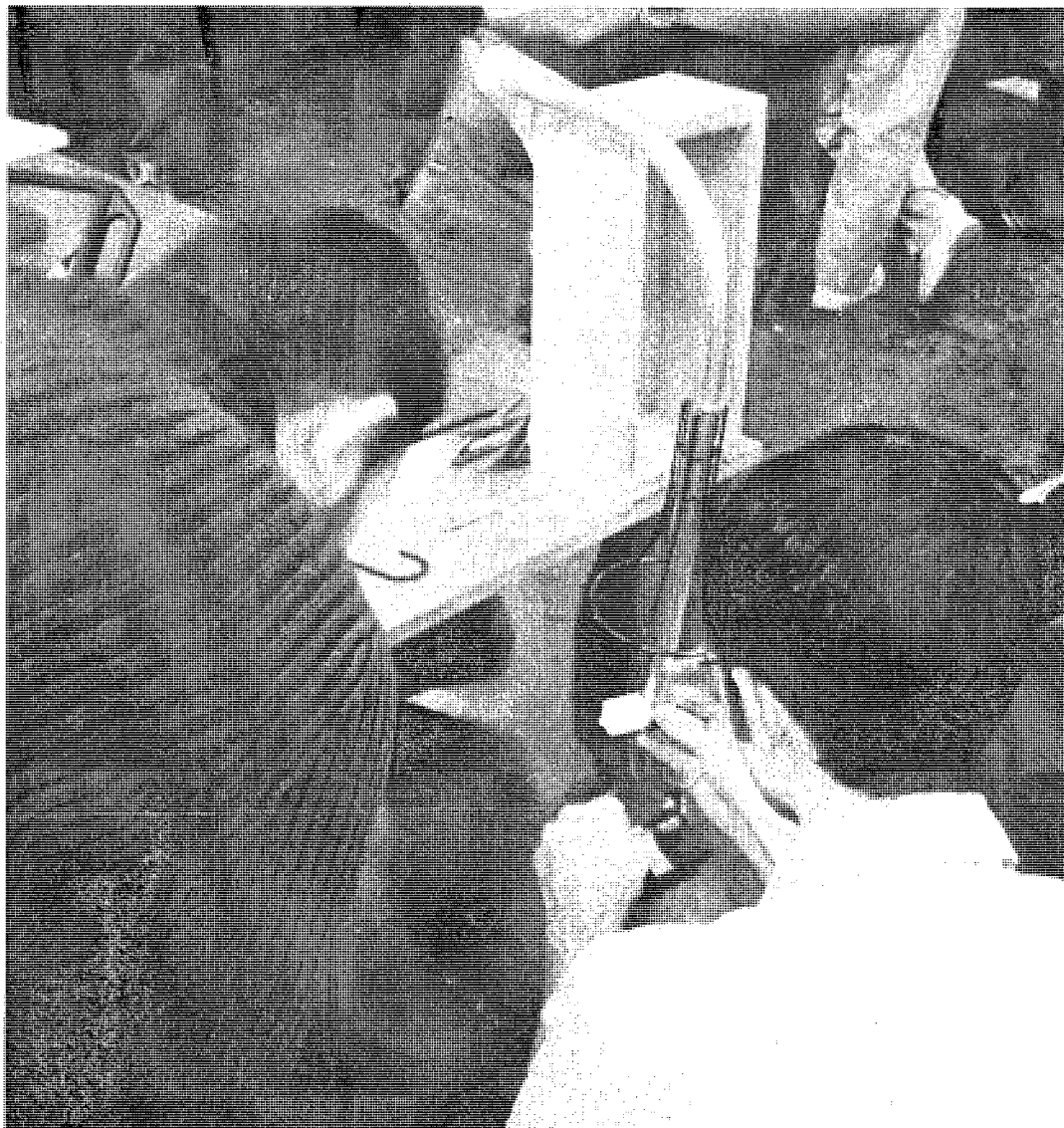
"This MacGuyver stuff is new to me," I told him as we sorted through parts. I picked out a metal pipe that is shaped like an L. "Maybe ... we could hang things from this?"

"Yes, let's do it!" he said. I had no idea whether this was actually as good an idea as he seemed to think or whether he was just trying to help me feel like I was useful. His tone did reassure me a little, at least.

We brought it back to the wooden structure that our teammates were working on; they had already glued or nailed one piece of wood to another, though for what purpose I could not say. The whole process felt guided more by intuition and hope than by any actual plan. When we arrived with the pipe, I pointed out a hole that would fit the pipe in one of the pieces of scrap wood in our structure, and Gary (again, enthusiastically) bade me to join him at the hot glue gun. He asked me if I had ever used one before, and I said, "Yes, years ago," timidly enough that he understood he should give some more instruction. I glued the pipe into the wood, trying to hold it as best as I could at a right

angle. I brought it back, feeling somewhat triumphant. Gary set the wood-and-pipe thing on the edge of the table, such that objects could be dangled off the edge; prior to this, I had no idea how it was supposed to be positioned, but everyone seemed okay to run with this.

I left most of the rest of the work to my team, but I tried to give input or at least observe what they were doing as we split into sub-groups. One worked on getting a battery-powered motor to spin a piece of metal into other bits of metal dangling around it, like a wind chime. The other group worked on getting a paperclip to rake along a couple springs, discovering they could amplify the sound by laying another strip of curved metal over the springs. A couple of us on the team looked on as they explained this, and we were suitably impressed (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Building a self-propelled music-making machine at CommuniDIY. Photo by author.

As I wandered around the room at one point, I found myself walking with my hands in my pockets. I quickly pulled them out upon realizing this and made sure to walk upright, not slouching – a reflex triggered by the workshop environment, I realized a moment later. Somehow I was brought back in my mind to when I worked on a construction site for my father, where I constantly felt out of place as the brainy kid

among the guys who *really* work for a living. “Never let anyone see you standing around with your hands in your pockets,” my father told me. I was to always remain constantly in motion, busying myself, working. Workshops are not a place for the lazy and the timid, but for men with power tools, men of action.

Eventually the allotted time was over, and we all gathered to see each group’s noise contraption. A blog writeup I read after the event suggested that one of the instruments actually worked, playing some symphony in Morse Code, but at the time, I had interpreted any comments about melody or recognizability as jokes. The things were noisy, complicated, and sometimes quite funny, including a spinning thing amplified by what appeared to be a megaphone, several more hanging devices, and a Rock-em Sock-em Robot that punched different pieces of metal. (“We finally used it!” exclaimed the designers, regular attendees who had been eyeing that robot for weeks.) Given some more time, perhaps we could’ve come up with something a little more musically functional; someone on my team even told me that he had just performed at a chiptune festival, DJing music he’d made from old video game hardware. That night, however, “musically successful” wasn’t really the goal.

I realized in retrospect how it might still feel like an awkward environment to someone who doesn’t feel personally motivated to build, fix, and tinker as the regulars there do. Certain technical and skill-based activities have such deeply coded cultural connotations that newcomers might not even want to show up in the first place. For many nerdy tech wizards, such skills may serve some purpose of giving feelings of control, power, or masculinity, which may be quite welcome especially for those who grew up feeling powerless. My experiences at CommuniDIY – and among other tech geeks –

indicated to me, however, that the joy of tech goes beyond the exercise of power or one-upmanship.

The CommuniDIY crew made me feel perfectly welcome, without any off-putting techno-nerd posturing. There's a youthful enthusiasm to their building and hacking: To them, a room full of scrap metal is like a toy box, and the fruits of their labors are often quite literally and obviously toys as well (whether in the form of Rock-em Sock-em rock musician, a wooden word-making toy, or an arcade game cabinet). The tinkering at CommuniDIY was more about curiosity and exploring – playing and working through projects – than about competition, though attendees proudly boasted of their clever achievements during the presentations. The device shown by the headlining presenters, Chris and Jill, was kind of evident of the whole ethos of CommuniDIY, I realized afterward: It's neat, and they're not sure what the point of it will be, but they want to share it with everyone they can.

The process of hacking and tinkering is thus arguably quite different from the more structured and goal-oriented process of engineering; rather, it looks rather more like play, and hackers and tinkers sometimes describe it as such themselves (Pescovitz, 2009). In *Make*, for instance, Saul Griffith (2005a, p. 47) describes the homemade windsurfing gear he works on, explaining that he'd rather the "mad scientist" stereotype be replaced with one of the "playful scientist," reflecting that "having fun is the goal and hacking stuff is the surefire route to nirvana." Recalling a fellow who sold his Porsche for a Volkswagon, Griffith quotes: "It's way more fun than the Porsche, and it carries far more failed experiments to the beach" (S. Griffith, 2005b). These are the kind of folks who fiddle for the heck of it, who value fun before form or function.

As alluded to earlier in this section, however, some kinds of creative fun are valued differently from others. Consider, for instance, *The New York Times*'s coverage of Maker Faire, an annual DIY festival, compared to its coverage of Comic Con International, an annual pop culture convention. In describing the former, the *Times* offers an encapsulation of the ideals behind the DIY movement, drawing a connection back to the Homebrew Computer Club, the Wright Brothers, and Benjamin Franklin. "We've been told by corporate America that we cannot fix the things we own," Shannon O'Hare tells the *Times*, lamenting a world where we cannot repair our own cell phones and cars when they break. "Make is about taking that back off and making it yours" (Schwartz, 2008).

By the same token, the article also paints a picture of Maker Faire that could be seen as – well, downright silly. The inventions and experiments on display include "electric-powered vehicles built to resemble cupcakes," and a "three-story Victorian mansion on wheels" in the "steampunk" style. Its builder, the aforementioned Shannon O'Hare, wears British military garb and goes by "Major Catastrophe." It is, in other words, "a real geek fest," in the words of one physics professor quoted in the article. "If I was a kid, I'd wet my pants here" (Schwartz, 2008).

Noticeably unlike other "geek fest" articles covered by major newspapers, however – which often leave it to the reader to nod in amusement or wonder in amazement over people in elaborate costumes – this article consistently leads the reader back to conclude that this is all A Good Thing. Muffin cars may be weird, but they are "green," in the environmentally-responsible sense. Not everyone in attendance is so philosophical, but the overarching messages of the festival emphasized here are of the

positive creative uses of technology for humanity, the potential effect on markets of so much community-oriented tinkering, the spirit of innovation that is uniquely American.

Is this tone a sign of greater respect for geeky pursuits? Maybe. I'm inclined to believe, however, that this is indicative of the socially acceptable geekiness accorded specifically to technology and tinkering, thanks to their widely understood economic worth. This is, as the author notes, a "high-tech, adamantly nonconformist culture, steeped in engineering and art and innovation in garages that incubate billionaires." You won't hear such praise in the *Times's* Comic Con International wrap-up, even though the attendees of each event may see quite a bit of overlap. The most positive assessment that the reporter could offer on the purpose of Comic Con was that being childish and playful was largely the point:

Granted, there's something juvenile about immersing yourself in the world of superheroes and action figures, about getting in touch with your inner Mini-Me. But that's the point and the pleasure of events like Comic-Con, which give men, women and children of all ages permission to dress up and act out. Comic-Con isn't (only) about the new culture of arrested development, about young adults still living with, and mooching off, Mom and Dad[....] Comic-Con is about play, freedom. In a word: utopia. (Dargis, 2007)

The contrast illustrated here and in my chats with people at South by Southwest reflects a broader cultural sense that playfulness and enthusiasm are considered much more acceptable to display when applied to some pursuits than to others.

"My professional life is very intertwined with my personal life," one interviewee I met at South by Southwest told me. Many of my interviewees expressed an interest in working in entertainment industries, but it may be easier to align one's personal and professional interests for the geek whose technical interests can help land technical jobs. A blogger on the Geek Girls Network defines "the amazing qualities that set geeks apart



from the rest of society” as “enthusiasm and passion” (geekgirls, 2009), though we still see a sense that some kinds of enthusiasm and passion are more respectable than others. Play is okay when it looks like work, when it can earn money or otherwise signify a “serious,” adult pursuit.

### Conclusion

Computers are commonplace, geeks skills generate wealth, and Bill Gates tells us all that every dork has his day. These popular myths are based in (some) truth, but may largely miss the point of what it means to many to call themselves geeks. Locating “the revenge of the nerds” in financial success not only requires an optimistic assumption of how well off geeks must be in general, but also assumes that money and the rewards it brings are what the nerds were after all along. The geeks may not be turning away their payday, but when we speak of the values of geek culture, we need to recognize that many aren’t in it for the money, and some aren’t getting the money at all. The word ‘geek’ may have been stripped of some stigma, but it’s still more appealing for some uses than for others.

Geeks may be divided on the specifics of whether “the information wants to be free,” but may be more inclined to agree that “knowledge is power.” Intellectual skill is a mark of distinction and a matter of personal satisfaction. In a world when anybody can feel a little more comfortable calling him or herself a “geek” by hanging out on the internet, the old guard struggles to define itself more precisely, often more exclusively, even to the point of specifying neurological traits. Geeks may appreciate that their crafts are finding a place in the world, but they also retreat from the “gentrified” corners of the

web and put on their professional face for the business world. Some will prefer to build their culture elsewhere.

To some, however, geeky genius is part inspiration, part excitement. The projects that get geeks excited are Defining geek culture in terms of intelligence is a way of reassuring geeks that they are special, but, as I will explore more in depth in the chapter that follows, many also find something special – and potentially something embarrassing – in uninhibited, childish playfulness for its own sake.

#### Notes for Chapter 4

<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in an endnote in the previous chapter, the names of panels at “TerraCon” have been changed slightly to preserve anonymity for the relatively small convention-going crowd.

<sup>2</sup> The asterisks around “some kind” are meant to denote emphasis, as with italics or bold type. Like many venues on the web, Geek Studies does not have a WYSIWYG (“what you see is what you get”) comment editing interface, so computer users find their own ways to communicate given the limitations facing them. (That said, Geek Studies does support HTML comments, so those who feel motivated to type several extra characters could write, “<i>some kind</i>,” or “<em>some kind</em>” if the writer wants to make sure that automated screen readers will emphasize the text when reading aloud.)

<sup>3</sup> Informal quizzes exist for any number of different measurements, of course, including countless “relationship quizzes” and “purity tests” online, somewhat in the vein of the regular sex and romance quizzes in magazines like *Cosmopolitan*. I see the variety of geek/nerd quizzes as similarly “just for fun,” but also worthwhile to offer as evidence of the geeky drive for categorization given both their relative precision and complexity, and their use as common references among geeks. Multiple interviewees suggested the OkCupid test to me, for instance, and the Geek code is a particularly widely recognized and long standing form of notating geek identity (Donath, 1999). For another analysis of a “Nerdity Test,” see Kendall (1999b).

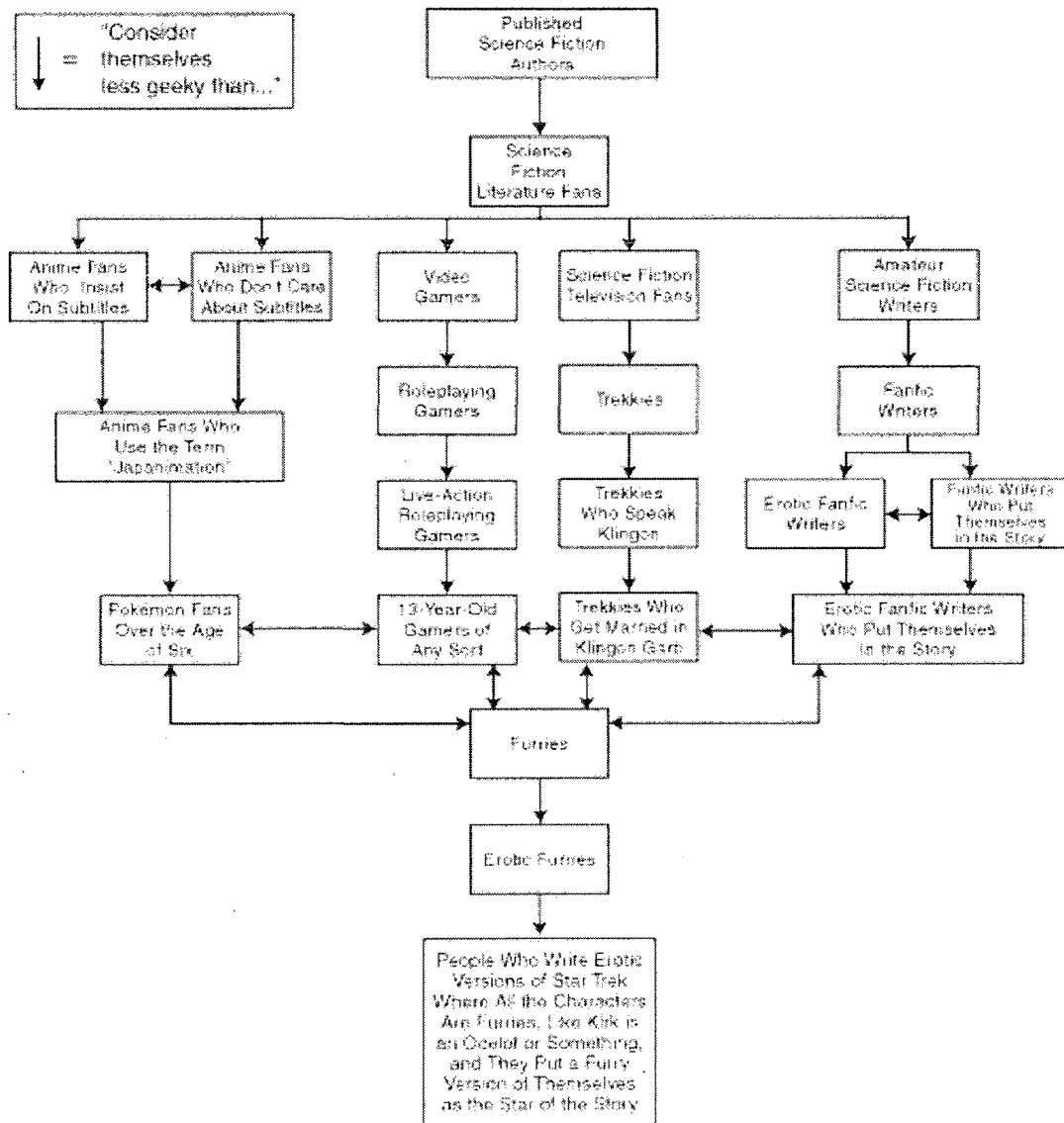
<sup>4</sup> I’ve since learned that (or learned enough *such* that) none of these topics is too daunting. I did hope to recreate the experience, however, of feeling baffled by jargon.

<sup>5</sup> I referred back to PaleAngelLex's own blog (which I found through a link to my own site) to help clarify the intent behind the comment left on Geek Studies. That blog post was written under a different screen name, however, so I have opted not to cite it directly out of respect for the author's potential desire to keep two digital "identities" separate.

<sup>6</sup> Most groups and events in this dissertation retain their real names, while individuals' names have been anonymized for privacy. I've changed this group's name to "CommuniDIY," however, because it was such a small, local event that it would be hard to protect the anonymity of attendees if the real name were used.

## CHAPTER 5: THE GEEK AS FAN

“The Geek Hierarchy” (Sjöberg, 2002b) is a chart so detailed that one may suspect it was crafted by a geek himself (Figure 4). Brunching Shuttlecocks, the humor site that hosts this chart, is long defunct, yet the image lives on in the collective geek consciousness. I have encountered it in conversation at cons, in academic discussion about a possible “identity politics” for fans (Busse, 2006), in emails from my blog’s readers, and displayed on the counter at my local comic book store.



**Figure 4.** Abridged version of the Geek Hierarchy from BrunchingShuttlecocks.com.

The chart describes how many geeks see themselves as “less geeky than” other geeks. Published science-fiction/fantasy writers grace the top of the hierarchy, redeemed by the professional nature of their connection to geek culture; science-fiction/fantasy literature fans are just beneath, as, after all, books are at least somewhat “cultured.” This branches off into numerous directions, with the interests perceived as most childish or

disconnected from reality nearest the bottom, such as “Pokémon Fans Over the Age of Six,” “13-Year-Old Gamers of Any Sort,” “Trekkies Who Get Married in Klingon Garb,” “Live-Action Role-playing Gamers,” and, beneath these, “Furries” – fans of fiction, games, and costumes of anthropomorphic, cartoon animals who think everyone else is geekier than they are. When I talk to nerds about “The Geek Hierarchy,” the consensus seems to be that it’s pretty accurate in terms of how people see themselves in relation to others.

What about programmers and IT workers? “Occupations didn’t make it in, because in the author’s experience they don’t really matter,” Lorne Sjöberg (2002a) explains on the “Frequently Paraphrased Questions” page. “Java programmers who are into LARPing [live-action role-playing] aren’t seen as any more or less geeky (in the pejorative sense) by their peers than tech writers or gas station attendants who are into LARPing.”

This chapter explores geeks’ relationship with the entertainment media and popular culture long understood as particularly geeky, such as games, comics, and science-fiction. While the previous chapter discussed some of the ways that nerds understand their technical pursuits and entertainment interests as an extension of their intellectual life – the nerdier, the better – this chapter focuses on the other side of geeky entertainment, the kind that gets enthusiasts labeled as junkies, addicts, and crazies – “geeky (in the pejorative sense),” as the Geek Hierarchy represents.

Fan studies research and criticism has done much to illustrate interaction with media as a “productive” activity, and to show how enthusiasts develop a sense of shared “community” (Bacon-Smith, 2000; Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992), in large part a reaction

against the stigmas against media fandom (Jenkins, 2007; Jenson, 1992; Lopes, 2006).

This chapter, however, seeks to consider the role of particularly common consumption and play activities, to consider those who may be interested in “geek culture” but perhaps not as much in “geek community” (see Chapter 1), and to focus more specifically on how geeky enthusiasts understand their entertainment interests *as* geeky. For many, this sort of activity plays a central role in constructing a shared sense of geek cultural identity overall, providing a shared set of personally relevant symbols, and used to measure just how geeky one may be.

Media enthusiasts have long stayed connected to their culture through fanzines and conventions. Internet access, of course, has made it much easier to constantly maintain a connection to one’s interests through fansites, forums, online video, and news blogs. Now, over 80% of Americans use the internet to stay engaged in their hobbies, and many of them do so daily (M. Griffith & Fox, 2007). Being a media enthusiast can take on a particularly special meaning for nerds, whose connection with geeky pop culture often begins at a young age: first providing an alternative to solitude or social alienation, and later providing a means to relate to other nerds. Even into adulthood, such media provide a basis for shared culture; attachment to older objects provides common points of reference, and the anticipation of and engagement with new entertainment products offers opportunities for shared experiences and the chance to engage in uninhibited, childlike play.

Nevertheless, the enthusiastic approach to enjoying such media, combined with their traditionally understood target markets, mean that certain interests are coded as “geeky” in a juvenile sense, not an intellectual sense, regardless of how much intellectual

work may be involved in play. Socially insulated contexts, such as fan conventions, offer a place to “geek out” without (much) fear of judgment, but the very practice itself of consuming and being engaged with geeky media allows a sense of geek identity and culture to be constructed even when disconnected from any localized geek community. And while some might seek to make the media interests of geek culture more palatable to mainstream interests, others would prefer to promote – or assert – the sentiments of childlike, uninhibited, geeky play itself in the world at large.

#### What Happens in Nerd Vegas...

Comic Con International is huge. Once a year, over a hundred thousand fans, gamers, and pop-culture enthusiasts descend upon and overtake San Diego. When I attended,<sup>1</sup> the sides of buses were plastered with ads for sci-fi TV series like *Stargate Atlantis* and *The Spaceballs Animated Series*. Banners hanging from street lamps showed the logo of the convention and Iron Man’s shiny face, block letters proclaiming the goal of “Celebrating the Popular Arts.” Riding over to the convention center in a hotel shuttle, a woman on the radio described how she went to the con for the last two years, but was skipping that year because she doesn’t like the crowds and the costumes. Comics journalist Tom Spurgeon (2007) has popularized the phrase “Nerd Vegas” to describe it – an apt summation of the overwhelming size, spectacle, and drain on attendees’ wallets. “It’s a gathering of tribes,” Spurgeon writes. “Strange, nerdy tribes.”

In this section, I will explore what it is these “strange, nerdy tribes” are up to in “Nerd Vegas” as they develop a sense of commonality around materials they might be less inclined to admit an interest in the rest of the year. As we’ll see, when the fans leave



the insulated space of the convention, their means of identifying as geeks and celebrating the media they love don't go away, but become less visibly performed.

For a few days a year, however, the fans are out in full force. At places like Comic Con, the convention center itself represents the con's epicenter, but the geeks still filter into the surrounding areas, claiming the Gaslamp Quarter as their own for a few days. They give a glimpse of what the world might look like if people felt free to openly indulge their passions year-round, rather than just on the internet and during con weekends. Leaving the convention center, they take off their attendee badges, but continue to wear their geekiness as its own sort of badge. They wander the streets in clothes that sport recognizable brands and logos – Thundercats, Spider-man, The Legend of Zelda. A bicycle rickshaw passed me, carrying a couple with plastic “swag bags” of freebies and purchased goods nearly half the size of their owners. Another couple, dressed as Jedi, happily posed for me to snap their photo on a street corner. Walking by Hooters, I heard the host call over the speakers, “*Zeus, party of three?*”

Thick crowds made their way into the convention center, steadily moving in unison like a colorful pilgrimage. I picked up my registration materials and made my way to the Exhibit Hall, the main attraction for many attendees. The space seemed open and endless, and yet also hectic and densely packed: a vast, geeky bazaar (Figure 5). Attendees assured me that walking up and down every aisle is the equivalent of a multi-mile trek. Many of the booths were for small, specialty vendors hawking comics, action figures, vinyl toys, swords, original artwork, and great walls of t-shirts featuring all manner of pop culture references. Major publishers and studios with upcoming movies, TV shows, and video games had structures that appeared massive and ostentatious

alongside the other booths cramped together: a giant, walk-in snake head for *Snakes on a Plane*; a great, glowing arch for the SciFi Channel; a life-sized Jabba the Hutt for some business whose name I didn't even recognize, but which appeared to sell very expensive toys. People played video games at stand-up kiosks, and a pair of teenage girls in hats resembling cartoon animal heads stamped along with the beat on a *Dance Dance Revolution* setup, arrows flying past on the flat screen TVs before them.



**Figure 5.** The crowds of Comic Con International, 2007. Photo by author.

Many attendees showed up in various levels of costume, from casual-with-props to fully-in-character. (Hence another nickname, “Nerd Prom.”) News reports of the convention probably emphasized these attendees’ presence over others; they actually

number in the minority, though they do certainly make up a noticeable contingent of the con-going population by contributing to the general spectacle. It's not uncommon to see Indiana Jones alongside a time-traveling secondary character from the X-Men, or a group shot featuring a substantial portion of the Justice League of America, or an Imperial Storm Trooper and a blue-skinned Twil'lek standing on either side of Batman, while a robed woman with a holstered blaster fiddles with the digital camera.

I also attended several panels at Comic Con International, from intimate gatherings discussing live-action role-playing to massive crowds awaiting the premier of hotly anticipated TV shows. I showed up early – or at least what I thought would be early – for a panel in Ballroom 20. This is a room for rather large panels, ones that are expected to fill the room to its capacity of 4,200. When I arrived, I found myself at the end of the longest line I had ever stood in. It followed along both walls of a long corridor, stretched outside, and disappeared down a flight of stairs. Close to an hour later, when the panel was scheduled to begin, I estimated myself to be near the middle of the line. While being ushered in, I heard one of the staff counting under his breath, whispering some number over 3,000 as I passed. As the line snaked around in on itself, I caught a fleeting snatch of a heated conversation about a time travel subplot in *Heroes*, a comics-inspired television drama on NBC, questioning whether certain events could have transpired as seen so far or whether they would imply a paradox that the writers would need to address later.

In the down time before and between panels, I turned to the people around me for conversation, to get a sense of how the con worked for them. The guy in the chair next to me played on his Nintendo DS, and the woman with him tapped away at a glowing PDA.

I turned to the people on the other side of me, asking how they spend their time at the convention.

“We used to go to the Masquerade,” a man explained, speaking of the Saturday night show when people showed off their costume designs on stage and competed for prizes. “We don’t go anymore, though. You spend half of Saturday in line for tickets, then half in line for seats. Kinda ridiculous.”

Ballroom 20, I found out from them and from others seated around me, worked somewhat similarly. If I wanted to leave, I couldn’t necessarily expect to get back in. In order to get into the popular panels later in the day, many people occupied the same room for hours. Another woman nearby explained, “I’m inching my way forward between panels so I’ll actually get to see Joss Whedon by the end of the day.” Eventually, she and her companion moved on, and others took their places.

“We’ve been in line for three hours,” the new guy said. “We wanted to be here for the *Heroes* panel, but now we’ll wait through *Battlestar Galactica* for *Futurama*.”

And so I waited for a while too, chatting with strangers, taking notes, and requesting a special ticket to get back in the room after a bathroom break. But the big panels aren’t the only kind of panels at Comic Con: The rooms with fewer celebrities had somewhat smaller crowds, but still plenty of energy. The sense of geek empowerment was especially palpable around the Browncoats. These fans took their name from the rebel soldiers in *Firefly*, a Western-themed sci-fi show by Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *Firefly* had been broadcast irregularly, out of order, and missing episodes. It was then cancelled, to be concluded in a feature-length film in theaters, *Serenity*. I attended a screening of a documentary about the Browncoats’ activist efforts

to promote *Firefly* and *Serenity*, which included such strategies as attending multiple showings to boost box office sales, buying extra copies of the DVDs to give away, and crafting homemade ads to put up in Wal Mart.

A small congregation of people formed in center aisle, all wearing purposefully dopey-looking, orange-and-yellow knit hats – “Jayne hats,” as they’re commonly known, because of the tough-guy character on *Firefly* who wears one made by his mom. As that group grew in size, drawing in more and more fans (mostly young women), slinging arms over one another’s shoulders in camaraderie, they started to sing. After a the first couple lines, a sizable portion of the room joined in, singing together.

*Jayne, the man they call Jayne  
He robbed from the rich  
And he gave to the poor  
Stood up to the man  
And gave him what for*

It was a song from the show, of course. I was kind of amazed that so many people knew the words. The fans’ commitment to the series struck me as simultaneously goofy and beautiful. I felt intensely thankful that my research required me to study people who were having such a good time.

We watched a hidden “Easter Egg” from the DVD (a video of a commercial one of *Firefly*’s cast had starred in as a little girl), and then the documentary itself, which included a reworking of the Jayne song which replaced “Jayne” with “Joss,” casting the series’ creator as the anti-authoritarian, everyman hero (“He wrote about spaceships and shepherds and whores / Stood up to the networks and gave ‘em what for”). After the documentary, its producers announced that free updates for the DVD would be made available online. Someone shouted out approvingly from the audience: “It’s because it’s

done by fans, not by an organization!” And fans, of course, are here because they love this stuff to an extent that might be embarrassing anywhere else.

“They should just call it ‘Dorkfest,’” remarked one guy I chatted with, noting that the offerings weren’t as heavily oriented toward comics as the name might have suggested. “I mean, I like it! I’m a dork.”

This chapter is not based solely on my experiences at fan and gaming conventions, but such events figure prominently simply for offering so many opportunities to observe people “geeking out” so willingly, relatively unconcerned about how their interests may be judged. I did meet many people who agreed to be interviewed at the cons I visited, but much of the value in attending events like Comic Con International was simply to witness “Nerd Vegas” itself. I tried to strike up conversations with strangers, but that can be tricky at in such a context: Many people come in couples or in small groups, eager to play with the objects of geek culture, but not necessarily interested in interacting extensively with any kind of “geek community.”

I point this out without necessarily offering it as a criticism, however. How many of us are actively looking to get into in-depth conversation with strangers in our normal, everyday lives? Gathering 114,000 fans in one place, part of the point of Comic Con International is to participate in an environment where ‘nerd’ is normal. Fandom – whether through conventions, fanzines, websites, or enjoyment of entertainment media itself – offers enthusiasts a “safe space.” As one blogger explains, “it’s just a place to escape the daily grind and geek with people who ‘get’ it, safe from being mocked as a geek/fangirl/whatever” – a place free from the concerns of the everyday world, ranging

from stifling social identities to personally traumatic memories (beatrice\_otter, 2009). It probably isn't a coincidence that the commonly-used phrase 'geeking out' rhymes with the even more common 'freaking out': it implies a loss of control, and an understanding that such an activity might not be socially appropriate in public contexts.

There are still multiple degrees of geekiness and sociability visible at such an event, different extents to which fans are comfortable getting involved. As I stood in so many absurdly long lines, I started thinking of it as a sort of "Line Culture."<sup>2</sup> Paralleling the increasing trend of enthusiasts' willingness to camp out for the newest release of some anticipated object – the iPhone, the Wii, the new *Harry Potter* – the lines offer a sort of metaphor for fan involvement in itself. The people at the front show up hours early, fans of things before there's even a thing to be a fan of – TV shows that haven't aired yet, movies that haven't even shown trailers. Somewhere in the middle are those who want to check the thing out, but not so much that the waiting itself is supposed to be part of the experience. At the very end of the line are the people who showed up on time but turned out to be late, who might be curious, but not *that* curious. Some of them might not be willing to stick around. The hardcore enthusiasts don't always leave enough room for them, but then, for some, it's not really about meeting those other folks anyway. Some show up to interact with others, while for others, it's only a "community" insofar as people appreciate their anonymous neighbors for not judging them. Plenty are just eager to celebrate their deep, personal commitment to the actual entertainment products and producers themselves.

*Geek Speak*

“The geek is a very discrete thing,” Milo told me in a phone interview. He was working as a programmer, and went on to be a game developer later. We met at the Penny Arcade Expo (or PAX), where he had been volunteering, and he was happy to follow up with me for hours on the phone some weeks after the event. “You’ll probably know what I mean, for instance, if I say, ‘I am a leaf on the wind.’”

“Watch how I soar,” I responded, as if by some Pavlovian mechanism. The line comes from *Serenity*, the film spinoff of Joss Whedon’s *Firefly*. I’m no Browncoat – I’ve only seen *Firefly* once when my friends pushed the DVDs on me before we went to see the movie together, and I’ve never had a “Jayne hat” of my own to wear – but the line came from a scene which proved quite memorable and affecting for many who had become invested with the series and its characters. Milo drew out a sort of sign/countersign from me with barely any effort.

An organizer behind one large geek convention once told me via email, “Events like [this] are just the real-world manifestation of what the Internet has the power to do, which is bringing people with similar interests together.” It’s telling how he orders these items in this comparison: Fan conventions predate the internet by quite a while, but they aren’t necessarily the primary site where enthusiasts engage with fan cultures. Media themselves are a major site of engagement, whether the DVDs, games, and comics passed around among friends, or the online venues where people can geek out as much as they want, whenever they want. Fans discuss their favorite series in forums and on blogs, dissect and remix scenes in YouTube videos, follow and create webcomics that riff on entertainment industry happenings, and make references to their favorite games and



shows in their emails and forum signatures (Donath, 1999; Jenkins, 2006). They draw heavily on their knowledge of fondly remembered entertainment media to signify “geek cred” and share in laughter.

Some terms and references have embedded themselves into geek vocabulary so deeply that they can be uttered without explanation, and sometimes even without irony or humor. When friends and interviewees use “grok” as a verb, I accept this without even a raised eyebrow; I know the term refers to a deep, intuitive sense of understanding, as used in Robert Heinlein’s science-fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*. When people use “frak” as a swear, as used on *Battlestar Galactica*, I am amused, but I also know that they’re trying to more precisely express some level of frustration between “well, darn it” and harsher swears. When conversation partners dismiss any attempt to discuss the meaning of life by referring to the number 42, offered as an unsatisfactory answer for that question in Douglas Adams’s *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, I realize they’re shutting down our hyper-intellectualized meanderings in the nicest way possible.

Many references, of course, are used precisely because they are humorous. The shared associations geeks have with these quotes and phrases is a way of conjuring positive feelings experienced once before to be relived again and again. In this way, fannish geek culture is sort of a way of sharing and staying in a good mood. Writing for The Escapist, a gaming culture and criticism website, one author shares how this “language” fits into her “Big Fat Geek Marriage”:

Any armchair psychologist will tell you that the secret to lasting marital success is strong communication. My husband and I have gone a step further, cobbling together over the years our own distinct lexicon of obscure references and incomprehensible metaphors based largely in part on the games we’ve played together. Our speech is littered with *Legend of Zelda* quotes and *Resident Evil* idioms, with *Secret of Mana* metaphors and puns ripped straight from *Grim*

*Fandango*. In many ways, our common language is so deep-end-of-the-pool geeky that I can't even begin to distill the geek from non-geek parts: When you name your car "Tifa" and your goldfish "Dogmeat," where can you even begin the translation? [...]

Laughter is more than just marital glue; it's a signal that you've successfully established a new language, a new culture – the family unit – out of two separate and disjointed lives. (Crigger, 2009)

Going beyond this, I think it's reasonable to suggest that the formation of a "new culture" happens on a macro level through shared references across many media – first experienced in entertainment, later brought up in conversation, in signature lines on forum posts, in away messages on instant messaging programs, on t-shirts (as I'll explore in more detail in the following chapter), and so on.

By establishing shared connections through "key works" of a sort, geeks build a sense of cultural belonging out of interests that are otherwise often discovered and experienced in solitude. But there are rules: *Geek Monthly* features a discussion (filed under "Nerdiquette") on the appropriateness of using 'frak,' a made-up swear from *Battlestar Galactica*, in real conversation:

Slipping "frak" into the mix, particularly in non-geek company, might make you look like the nerd most of us spend all of Comic-Con trying to avoid: the guy or gal who simply must show off his or her insider status by dropping cool kid references that not everyone will get. [...]

On the other hand, if you are amongst like-minded friends, letting loose with the frak-bomb can be a bonding thing, bringing you all closer together in your glorious pod of geekiness. (Kuhn, 2007)

Outside of the insulated atmosphere of the convention, this kind of deep familiarity with pop culture esoterica offers a way to indulge in pleasant memories and bond over shared knowledge – though this is meant for the ears of one's fellow nerds.

*Code Words*

The Penny Arcade Expo keynote speaker walked up to his podium amidst cheers and applause. “Thank you,” he said. “My name is Wil Wheaton, and Jack Thompson can suck my balls.”

The cheers were deafening. We all knew Jack Thompson, the outspoken lawyer who routinely describes video games as “murder simulators”; who penned legislation to restrict the sale of games to minors; who was picked by Fox News as its go-to guy when it needed an “expert” on video game violence; who attempted to get the Seattle Police and the FBI to investigate the creators of Penny Arcade. To gamers, he is The Adversary, the embodiment of the American people’s fear and distrust of games and the people who play them.

He continued to “throw out some gaming references,” further solidifying his geek cred, drawing appreciative shouts with each. “It is very dark. You are likely to be eaten by a grue” (from *Zork*). “You have died of dysentery” (from *Oregon Trail*). “They don’t really want you to play ‘Free Bird.’ They’re just mocking you.” (From *Guitar Hero*).

Most in attendance probably knew Wil Wheaton from his early role in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, or from his voice acting in games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series. Many might have known him from his writing, such as the memoir *Just a Geek* and blogging at WilWheaton.net. More recently, Wheaton was elected “Secretary of Geek Affairs” on one website, beating out luminaries such as Steve Wozniak and Joss Whedon for the honorific title (Paul and Storm, 2009). But on this night, at the Penny Arcade Expo, he was here to say he was one of us, and to celebrate what we were: fans and gamers since childhood. He spoke of his first experience with an arcade game, of the

kid who conned him into trading his *Star Wars* Death Star play set for a toy Landspeeder, and of the notion that our hobbies represent an “antisocial menace to society.” He tapped into the audience’s senses of nostalgia, playful celebration, and defensive resentment. “We may be from different generations,” he said, “but if your response is any indication, we have a lot in common beyond our love of Penny Arcade.” He spoke the language of geek culture, and he was adored for it.

Wheaton’s keynote included not just references for the sake of celebration, but code words indicating that he too resents the stigmatization heaped upon his interests. Judicious use of such geek speak serves some utilitarian purposes in addition to light fun: It’s a way of asserting that one “belongs” at all, as many geeks are suspicious and hostile toward those they perceive to be outsiders, those who are feared to be judgmental.

That suspicion potentially extends to anyone who doesn’t seem as socially awkward and obsessed with fannish minutiae as the geek himself, but it can also be applied overly broadly to anyone who doesn’t fit common geek stereotypes. The *Austin American Statesman*, for instance, offers an interview with Scott Porter, known for his roles as a quarterback in *Friday Night Lights* and the older brother in *Speed Racer*, with the incredulous headline, “‘Speed Racer’ star Scott Porter: Geek?” Porter describes how the Watchowski brothers, the nerdy duo behind the *Speed Racer* film and *The Matrix*, tested his geek cred:

The weird thing is now that it’s becoming popular there’s this huge backlash and everybody’s really testing each other to see if you’re a true geek or a true nerd. I passed the test – the Wachowskis kind of ribbed me for a little bit. I don’t know if it’s because of the fact that I played football in high school or the characters I play or the way I look, but a lot of people tend to not believe that I’m as into it [comics/sci-fi] as I am. (Salamon, 2008)

The wariness regarding whether athletic men could count as “real” geeks somewhat parallels the expectation that women should also somehow prove their geekiness. One web writer explains:

I’ve gotten plenty of comments about how I couldn’t be a geek because I’m a girl, or that I’m only a Browncoat because of Nathan Fillion, or I’m interested in Wolverine only because of Hugh Jackman. It’s annoying and insulting, and the automatic response is to name drop some arcane trivia, assert my cred, and downplay my femininity in order to be accepted as a Geek with a Capital G. Every girl geek does this – oh my gosh, don’t see me as a girl, see me as a geek! It’s ridiculous. (Rappe, 2009)<sup>3</sup>

This ritual of “the test” seems commonly understood, if also resented at times.

In addition to being deployed defensively, some also suggest that such tests can be used to probe someone to see whether it’s safe to geek out with someone. Such codes can help suss out a stealth geek – “a person who has many of the internal qualities of geekiness yet who does not look or act like the stereotypical geek,” according to one early and widely-circulated definition (Swendson). On *Geek Studies*, Church (2009) occasionally uses the term ‘crypto-nerd’ for this, such as when he refers to his girlfriend: “The GF is one of those people. You’d never know it on first meeting, unless you start talking TOS [‘the original series’] *Trek*. Then, prepare to be regaled with Malachai Throne’s latest doings [*sic*].” The aforementioned “Stealth Geek FAQ” suggests slipping into conversation questions like, “Which is your favorite Doctor?” (as in, favorite actor from *Doctor Who*), and the significantly less subtle, “The Prequels: Are they or are they not raping our childhood memories of *Star Wars*?” (Swendson).

For an example of this process in action, consider a comment one person left on a blog post discussing discussing whether nerds may feel a sense of “bigotry”:

Three of my co-workers and I were walking back from lunch, and one of them commented on a third co-worker’s bumper sticker- cthulufish, if you must know.

The other made a joke that you would only get if you played tabletop RPGs, two of us laughed, and the third looked at us like we were on crack. I got an email from him, sent to the other co-worker and the guy with the bumper sticker asking us if we played. Long story short, I'm DM for a True20 game for them next week.

Point of that story is, there's at least three of us in my office alone that have learned what happens when we make it known who we are, and we keep quiet. True, we (probably) won't get beaten up for it anymore, but we know enough that it would reflect badly, and we'd never live it down. So we keep quiet, communicate in a sort-of code, and take pains to keep it secret.

I dunno- maybe it's just my malfunction. But what conditioned me to feel I have to do this? (The Angry Geologist, 2009)

Much as the "Jesus fish" is popularly believed to have been a symbol that persecuted Christians used to identify one another, this commenter used a parody, referencing H.P. Lovecraft's apocalyptic "elder god" known to horror fans and gamers, for something like the same purpose. Saying that he "(probably) won't get beaten up for it anymore" is either a joke or mildly paranoid. Nevertheless, it's worth recognizing how the sense that these interests are denigrated colors so many people's identities and habits as enthusiasts.

Recalling the earlier example of the PAX keynote, it's worth considering how some of these code words are meaningful not just because of the pleasant memories they invoke, or because of their utility in identifying other fans, but because of the implied acknowledgement that anyone who knows this stuff feels persecuted simply for having accumulated that knowledge. "I paid my dues, I put up with it all, from the taunting to the name-calling to the general sense of being made to feel like I didn't belong," writes one blogger, a proudly declared geek. He laments that "jocks and teenage princesses are buying [gaming] consoles," and complains that using Facebook, Twitter, and PDAs do not make celebrities into geeks. And, tellingly, they don't speak the geek jargon: "These so-called gamers don't have a clue what a Grue is, or the significance of LOAD "\*" ,8,1 (at least, not without resorting to Google...)." He likes the relaunch of the *Star Trek* film

franchise, but dislikes how popular it is. “I can guarantee you that none of these jackasses know Trek, not like true geeks do. Why? It’s because it was people exactly like them that made our lives miserable for it not so long ago” (Stell, 2009).

Some of these examples highlight a tension within geek culture: Considering that many stereotypically geeky interests appear to be “popular” or used by “the cool kids,” it’s not clear who exactly is making whose life miserable. In hiding their interests, geeks may be wardens of their own prisons, only allowing time off for good behavior in special contexts. “I’m in the closet about it,” one interviewee confided to me about his interest in comics and science-fiction. And the sentiment isn’t just limited to those who frequent Comic Con.

At a stage talk show about comic books held in an improv theater, a *New York Times* reporter quotes an audience member who declined to give his name: “I have family and friends[....] I’m a closeted geek.” He added: “It’s great to be in an atmosphere where you can sit and discuss these things without getting strange looks” (Gustines, 2007). Along similar lines, an article titled “Games are for Kids,” on gaming culture site *The Escapist*, confesses, “Demeaning comments about my hobby used to run off me like water off a duck’s back, but the older I get the more vocal my detractors become. This means that I do most of my gaming in secret” (Patience, 2008). Yet another article on that site, “A Day in the Life of a Social Loner” (Endo, 2008), strikes a similar chord, as both describe personal experiences and examples of friends who play only when in private, when it won’t disturb or draw criticism from family and partners. Commenters offer words of empathy, of reassurance, and of rebuke:

“God this is all so damn familiar, it’s not funny” (Damn Dirty Ape, 2008)

“THANK YOU! I’ve lived this life for some time” (Lorigga, 2008).

“Solidarity, brother. You are not alone,” another adds. But also: “For someone who is articulate and insightful, you seem overly concerned about social acceptance. Who cares?” (XerxdeeJ, 2008).

### The Path to “Legitimacy”

“Interestingly enough,” Edward told me, “I bought a big Green Lantern shirt while I was in San Diego, much to the chagrin of my wife and my friends.”

I laughed, then asked, “What’s their complaint?” We were doing a phone interview a couple weeks after Comic Con International, and I had just asked whether his self-professed nerdiness comes across in his style of dress.

“Oh, you know, they don’t understand, I don’t know.”

“I know.” I laughed again, as encouragingly as I could.

“I can dress *quote-unquote* normally if I have to,” he clarified, and I believed him. He looked pretty professionally dressed at the panel where I met him; he was at the con for work, scoping out new licenses for animation adaptations, and (successfully) pitching to publishers a comic series he’d written. He continued, “But sometimes you just want to let your geek flag fly.”

“Exactly,” I said in agreement. Trying to keep the conversation going, I added, “I picked up one of the Green Lantern power rings for my girlfriend, the ones DC was handing out.”

“I wore mine for a week before my wife made me stop wearing it,” he said. He sounded pleased with this.



We chatted for a while about his own geeky interests and the state of the nerd in American culture more generally. Like most of my interviewees, Edward was very self-analytical and interested in offering hypotheses on why our understanding of terms like 'nerd' have changed.

"I think part of the issue is that, in the past 15 years especially, the world has kind of caught up to nerds," he said. "Being a nerd is a much more useful skill than it used to be. You look at JJ Abrams, you look at Sam Raimi, you look at these guys who were all outsiders who are now – well, usually wealthy, and somewhat popular because of their nerd upbringing, what have you – Joss Whedon, Bill Gates – because the world has changed. It used to be that reading comics is an insult, now it's, oh, what kind of comics do you read? And you get insulted if it's cheesy X-Men spin-offs, or deeply thought-provoking but violent manga. The whole context of what a nerd is and where they are in the hierarchy of social structure has kind of changed, because now no matter who you are you have to realize that the computer is important, using it has become a part of life, having gadgets can be perfectly socially acceptable...." He mused on this awhile, and concluded: "It's not such an insult anymore, it's not such a bad thing, and there are enough examples of how successful you can be."

"But your wife still gives you shit when you come home with a Green Lantern shirt," I said pleasantly.

"Well, sure, it's just not cool." He laughed. "Until George Clooney wears one next week, and then I'm just on a bandwagon."

My conversation with Edward reflects a broader unease among geeks about how to understand whether the interests commonly thought of as geeky are considered

“legitimate” in the eyes of American culture at large. Some see earning this label as an ongoing process to be celebrated, representing broader acceptability for being a geek oneself; some see it as representative of another kind of “gentrification” of geeky media, pushing out the hardcore to make room for the mainstream. If geeky media are to be made “sophisticated,” many geeks want to make sure the material *stays geeky*. Others, however, whether, simply want to share the stuff they love, to extend geek culture into new spaces and make it feel a little more okay to be a geek.

When people attempt to explain the relatively increased acceptability of nerds in American culture, the ubiquity of the computer and wealth of the tech geek (as discussed in the previous chapter) tend to be the most frequently offered reasons. There’s still some sense, however, that even geeks who aren’t computer nerds are still seeing some increased popularity thanks to the commercial success of stereotypically geeky entertainment industries and genres. Some point to high-profile nerds behind movies and TV with a distinctly geeky flavor, much as Edward does in our conversation above. Quentin Tarantino constructs his movies out of a *mélange* of pop culture obsessions, including martial arts, vampires, Westerns, and blaxploitation, arguably elevating homage to a kind of art. Kevin Smith found mainstream success with characters who draw comic books, or argue about the ethics of destroying the Death Star in *Return of the Jedi*. Sam Raimi made cult horror films until being appointed director of the recent *Spider-man* films and playing up Peter Parker’s social awkwardness. Peter Jackson, whose previous film credits include a risqué film starring muppet-like animals, went on to turn *The Lord of the Rings* into an multiple Oscar-winning franchise.

“It’s cool to call yourself a geek now,” a graphic designer for game magazines told me after our meeting at South by Southwest Interactive. He noted how fan conventions have grown in size and number, how video games have become more widely played, how Comic Con International has become so popular. “And why’s it popular? Because it’s fun. They’re fun industries. You’ve got a lot of people making a lot of money in all these industries.” This popular sentiment may spill over into the perception of geeks in general, though the average fan or gamer isn’t making any money in those industries, let alone riches.

Others suggest that a gradual process of normalizing certain interests is underway. “Today, a geek is regarded as nothing more than a rabid enthusiast, someone who devotes time and energy to the pursuit of one or more subjects with intense interest,” a blogger writes in a post titled “How We Became Hip” at the Geek Girls Network. “There are video game geeks, movie geeks, music geeks, board game geeks, technology geeks, literature geeks. [...] Happily for geeks of all shapes, sizes, and genders, the public is gradually starting to accept our way of life as legitimate” (lauraklotz, 2009).

“While not exactly in league with the civil rights or suffragette movements, geek acceptance has come a long way from the early days of fandom,” echoes *The Website at the End of the Universe* (Capt. Xerox, 2008). Despite that fans of science-fiction, comics, video games, and other media thought of as geeky still sometimes feel the need to describe sharing their interests as “confession” or “coming out,” this blogger suggests, such media and genres have become much more broadly appreciated by mainstream consumers in recent years.

At Comic Con International, such attitudes are voiced repeatedly, and often even more optimistically. Masi Oka, a former digital artist at Industrial Light and Magic who now plays a time-traveling nerd on NBC's *Heroes*, exclaimed on one panel, "You guys saved *Jericho*!" The audience clapped, whooped, and cheered. *Jericho* beat cancellation for one season thanks to fans who organized online to flood network executives' offices with millions of nuts.

"Police procedural shows have flooded the air," screenwriter Ira Behr added – but their audiences, he pointed out, "couldn't fill a convention center." More cheers.

And Tim Kring, creator of *Heroes*, stated, "The genre audience has become in many ways the mainstream audience." Thus the fans were praised for being special, but also reassured that they were normal.

As digital technologies make special effects more spectacular, science-fiction, fantasy, and superhero films have ascended to hit status in Hollywood. By his own admission, Will Smith's career as an alien-punching, robot-hunting, vampire-dissecting tough guy has nothing to do with any geeky interests of his own, and everything to do with the box office take of special effects films and a desire to be "the biggest movie star in the world" (Keegan, 2007). *Harry Potter* demonstrated that a kids' book about magic can be a worldwide bestseller, and the *Lord of the Rings* indicated that wizards and elves are welcome at the Oscars. Video games have become a major industry, with profits rivaling Hollywood box office takes (Blakely, 2007; Grover & Edwards, 2005), and an audience that is older and more apt to play games socially than stereotypes might have long suggested (Lenhart, Jones, & Macgill, 2008; Schiesel, 2008). Comics have seen critical appreciation in recent years from those who would normally only discuss "real"

books, suggesting that the Pulitzer Prize for Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was no fluke (Gibbons, 2001; L. Grossman & Lacayo, 2002), as well as additional financial success thanks to the popularity of manga among teens and tweens and the growing graphic novel sections in bookstores (Alderman, 2004; Arnold, 2003; Foroohar, 2005; Hatfield, 2005).

And yet, despite such developments, many still commonly describe the achievement of "legitimacy" as a gradual, ongoing struggle, which may even have battles yet to be fought. What does it mean, then, for geeky enthusiasts and media to be "legitimate," to be "mainstream"? How do we know that these pursuits are getting there, and how will we know when they are there?

Discussions of legitimacy among enthusiasts and professionals often conflate concepts like a medium's capacity for (capital-A) "Art" with a medium's mass-market popularity,<sup>4</sup> though the calls for greater legitimacy tend to fit into a few different categories. In an article for Gamasutra, a website geared toward game industry professionals, Brian Green (2009) suggests three ways to conceptualize legitimacy, following his realization that "many other creative fields [are] respected for their work, but computer games [are] still seen as a cultural blight to be blamed for society's ills and legislated." According to Green, *financial legitimacy* means that an industry can be profitable – and, perhaps as a corollary, that producers should be able to make a living off their work. *Artistic legitimacy* means that media producers see their form as capable of creativity and expression beyond (what Green calls) "mere entertainment" – and, as another possible corollary, that critics and audiences expect such work to be produced. *Cultural legitimacy* indicates "how much society respects a medium," beyond the

communities of the industry and its most fervent fans, including relatively equivalent scrutiny in the eyes of the law.<sup>5</sup>

The barriers to legitimacy facing stereotypically geeky entertainment pursuits like comics and games, many enthusiasts fear, may be the public perception that they're for children. Would video games or comic books come under so much legal scrutiny as "obscenity," for instance, if not for the widely held belief that they're still just made for kids? The irony behind this, perhaps, is that much of the media targeted to the stereotypically geeky enthusiast has been constructed from the same building blocks as children's stories, but produced with the knowledge that the geek today is an identity claimed by adults.

### *Sophisticated Juvenilia*

Another screening and question-and-answer session I caught were for the *Bionic Woman* pilot. The new take on the old *Six Million Dollar Man* spin-off was another "re-imagining" by one of the producers behind the critically acclaimed *Battlestar Galactica* series. The fans seemed pleased – rapt during the action sequences, cheering at the conclusion. Writer and executive producer Jason Smilovic assured us that each episode would be self-contained, so anyone could pick it up anytime, but there would still be a larger "mythology" so that people who keep up with it would still be able to "get more" from it. The audience murmured appreciatively; the guy sitting behind me simply said, "Good." As presumptive fans, they looked forward to seeing characters develop and plots arc, but they had been burned too many times by networks canceling their favorite shows just as they start to get into the story.

During the Q&A, the audience was quite vocal about certain commonly shared feelings. When someone asked what would be changing from the pilot, for instance, the panelists noted that the protagonist's deaf sister had been recast. A decent portion of the audience booed, somewhat to my surprise; the woman barely had any screen time. The audience was cheering again soon enough when another person asked about (and had confirmed) a cameo by Lindsay Wagner, the original Bionic Woman. People applauded appreciatively, too, at the hint that the distinctive sound of bionics in action, as heard in the slow-mo sequences in the original series, would find its way into the show somehow. Someone else at the mic requested that the series incorporate some more levity rather than being too dark, and the audience booed him back to his seat.

On another day, at the *Sarah Connor Chronicles* panel, the fans went nuts over Summer Glau. In *Firefly*, she played the bad-ass fighter-woman common to Joss Whedon productions; in this new TV series based on the *Terminator* movies, she was to play a lovely android programmed to protect the savior of humanity (and his mom) from evil, time-traveling robots. Even more exciting to the fans in attendance, however, may have been the pilot's faithfulness to the franchise's first two movies, as handled by James Cameron.

"You guys are big freakin' fans from what I can tell, so thanks for doing justice to this," one audience member said at the mic following the *Sarah Connor Chronicles* pilot.

"This is what I wanted the third movie to be," another emotional young guy offered. The audience cheered in agreement. "You got all the references, everything, all the looks, the way you did things..." The cheering continued a bit, gradually subsiding and shouting the fan back to his seat as he gushed and stammered.

There was, of course, one lingering question on many minds, which one fan finally asked: How would they reconcile the fact that the title character died in the most recent *Terminator* movie? This, one panelist answered, was the nice thing about working with a series involving time travel: The new series would employ “a whole new timeline,” unconnected to *Terminator 3*.

The room exploded in cheers and applause. A loophole! This explanation was quite welcome, consistent with the narrative rules already set out by the series. *Terminator 3* was not well loved among many fans, I’ve since been told, because it wasn’t particularly faithful to James Cameron’s earlier movies. As one reviewer criticized online, “In *T2*, we learned that there is ‘No Fate But What We Make.’ *T3* essentially said, ‘uh, yeah scratch that, we really are screwed, and there’s nothing we can do about it’” (Bray, 2007). In an online interview, *Sarah Connor Chronicles* writer Josh Friedman further explained, “I know a lot of people get very worked up about the continuity and the canon and all that stuff. What I try to do is stay very, very true to the first two movies” (Goldman, 2007).

As these panels illustrate, Comic Con crowds can be fickle with their affection, but they seem relatively consistent in their demands: Address us as sophisticated adults, but respect what we’ve already grown attached to, whether from thirty years or thirty minutes ago. Space faring robots, time traveling cyborgs, and bionic women may seem like the stuff of kids’ stories – and, in fact, some of it was – but enthusiasts expect to be able to use these as vehicles to explore existential crisis, feminine empowerment, and other issues relevant to the human condition. And it must be done in a way that stands up to meticulous nerds’ standards for the suspension of disbelief.



“It doesn’t matter if people think what you’re doing is camp,” Alex Kurtzman, co-writer of the recent *Transformers* and *Star Trek* movies, told *The New York Times*. “You have to take your genre seriously. If you write it tongue-in-cheek, the audience will see it, and they’ll feel they’re being talked down to” – and, Kurtzman warned, “they’ll kill you” (Itzkoff, 2007a).

The audience may not resort to bloodshed, but some enthusiasts’ responses imply a surprising degree of melodrama. Commenting on io9, a sci-fi blog, for instance, someone posting under the name “Cobra Commander” (2009, a villain from *GI Joe*, another point of ‘80s nostalgia) describes George Lucas as “a greedy bastard who delights in raping fond childhood memories for profit.”<sup>6</sup> The blog post that this comment responds to actually cites another article suggesting why so many fans react with such vehement bitterness to Lucas following the *Star Wars* prequels: After years of building up happy associations with memories of the original *Star Wars* movies, viewers experience cognitive dissonance thanks to the new movies, as “recalling these fond memories in the context of a negative experience begins the process of re-coding, or modifying our old memories” (Patrick, 2009) – in other words, spoiling one’s memories of childhood.

Much of the material of geek culture consists of media that fans become attached to in their childhood, and much of that which is new still draws upon the same tropes, clichés, and marketing/merchandising techniques. This is part of why some point to *Star Wars* as “the birth of geekdom” (Altman, 2007), or even *Transformers* as “the dawn of the modern nerd era” (Suellentropp, 2007). These were larger-than-life adventures for kids, but they were also something more: *Star Wars* started the Hollywood trend of

movie merchandising and action figure tie-ins; *Transformers* was a driving force in that trend for television cartoons. Kids could become invested in their favorite characters and adventures whenever they had free time, not just when an episode of their show was on the air or when they had enough time to re-watch a movie on VHS. They could create their own Transformers adventures, and be coaxed into bedtime with the promise of sheets featuring Optimus Prime, leader of the Autobots. The media they loved were even more deeply embedded in their lives than simply following a TV series would otherwise allow. Researchers of “media effects” would come to call shows like *Transformers* “program-length commercials” (Kunkel, 1988); geeks might prefer the term offered by “media studies” scholars, “transmedia storytelling.”

The adult geeks of today were the young geeks of decades past. Things that made nerdy kids happy – especially for those whose social experiences as kids may have been less than satisfying – often receive a warm welcome years later, when those fans are old enough to have their own disposable income. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the nostalgia wave hit stereotypically geeky media early: The *Transformers* comic book from the early 2000s, for instance, was a major seller despite coming from a small, practically unknown publisher. The comics industry quickly scrambled to bring back *Voltron*, *GI Joe*, and other old cartoon and toy properties. It was only a few years later that Hollywood caught up and started making blockbuster movies for that audience, such as Michael Bay’s *Transformers* movies and its video game tie-ins. Activision has since explained that there isn’t enough interest in a game based on the original cartoon series, rather than on the movies; fans on gaming blogs have responded that they would buy multiple copies just to help ensure profitability (Fahey, 2009).

To some extent, stereotypically geeky media industries have been consistently trying to keep up with their aging audiences for years. Some fans who read comics as kids do go on to read “graphic novels” of a whole different sort as adults, but many have simply expected that titles originally conceived of as for children and teens would keep up with the audience as it grows to expect more adult material. Contrary to popular belief, superhero comics have long been marketed more to adults than to kids. “Children did not abandon comics,” author Michael Chabon (2004) proclaimed in a keynote for a comic industry awards ceremony; “comics, in their drive to attain respect and artistic accomplishment, abandoned children.” After *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns* deconstructed the superhero concept in the late 1980s, the 1990s responded to fan interest in more “dark” and “gritty” stories (Sabin, 1996).

Similarly, the Entertainment Software Association claims that the average game player is 35 years old and has been playing for 12 years (“Industry facts,”). The basic content of most high-profile games hasn’t changed much, however, since the action games of the original Nintendo Entertainment System, or even since *Space Invaders*: Most such games still involve shooting every enemy on the screen, but the abstract and cartoonish aliens and monsters have been replaced by realistically gore-spouting zombies and terrorists. The *Ninja Gaiden* games of today, for instance, effectively feature the same goals as their 1988 predecessor, but with highly publicized dismemberment physics and an “M” rating for “Mature” audiences.

The result of efforts to keep up with aging geeks is entertainment that retains some of the trappings, wide-eyed wonder, and beloved clichés of the stories discovered as children, but with some updated sensibility for those who want more than a children’s

story or game can offer, such as more complex character relationships or greater thematic subtext. Some attempts at this are widely deemed as more successful than others. The run of “grim-’n’-gritty” superhero comics that followed *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight Returns* in the ‘90s, for instance, is often cursed by fans and critics who resist the notion that “more disturbing” and “more violent” simply translate to “more sophisticated” (K. Church, 2005; Hendrix, 2009). The trend in making superhero comics full of postmodern reflection for savvy, adult fans has continued (Klock, 2002).

These examples represent only a slice of the developments behind the formal “maturing” of stereotypically geeky media – the slice that represents efforts to present stereotypically juvenile content as acceptably adult, rather than efforts to explore other genre output entirely (e.g., Sabin, 1993; Tocci, forthcoming-b). “An excess of desire to appear grown up is one of the defining characteristics of adolescence,” Michael Chabon (2004) concedes in the aforementioned keynote. “But these follies were the inevitable missteps and overreachings in the course of a campaign that was, in the end, successful.” Many, perhaps even most such enthusiasts, of course, simply want such material to keep up with their own interests, for their own pleasure. Some, meanwhile, point to such development as signs of stigmatized media finally realizing their potential for sophisticated art. The only remaining barrier to broader acceptance of such hobbies (and their hobbyists) is presumed to be a matter of public perception – a “campaign,” in Chabon’s words, that many waged for years, and some continue today.

*“Let’s Get Legit!”*

A sense of duty and investment runs deep in fan cultures. Fans feel the need to promote their favorite media and do what they can to keep new installments coming. Efforts to fight for “legitimacy,” however, tend to have even broader aims: not just staging campaigns and harrying network executives to keep specific shows on the air, but engaging in activism to promote an entire medium or activity as something worthy of “mainstream” respect.

Some take an institutional approach to this, such as by supporting the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, a First Amendment watchdog group and provides legal aid to comics creators, retailers, and consumers who face charges or suits related to intellectual property or obscenity. Some support the Entertainment Consumers Association, which funds a blog to track legal complaints against games and game developers, hosts tools to contact legislators supporting disproportionate regulation of games, and arranges public debates about the effects of gaming. Some act as “moles,” in the words of comics creator and theorist Scott McCloud – e.g., “We have enough moles now in cultural institutions” (Dean, 2002, p. 11) – such as by setting up comics collections and curricula at libraries and schools (e.g., K. Green, 2007). Video game designer Alan Youngblood writes on Gamasutra that such efforts must be made for gaming, suggesting that gamers and game designers should push for inclusion of games in media studies curricula and attempt to teach such classes themselves to “push the medium towards maturity and credibility.” He concludes, “Let’s get legit!” (Youngblood, 2009). Numerous journalists, meanwhile, have worked to get the favorite media more coverage. One article identifies Calvin Reid of *Publishers Weekly* as one of the mass media moles helping comics to gain greater

penetration: “My intent from the beginning was to raise the profile of comics publishing in the book industry” (Alderman, 2004)

Those who feel motivated to promote their interests outside of an institutional framework sometimes do so through organized or individual grassroots efforts. Following some misleading attempts by news media to connect the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech with violent video games (Crecente, 2007; McCauley, 2007), gamers organized a rally in Central Park to “protest, morn [*sic*] and show how real gamers play videogames peacefully and responsibly” (Empire Arcadia, 2007). One writer for a website on comics criticism and culture explained his more personalized approach, including wearing a Superman t-shirt to spark conversation about comics with strangers, and taking further steps to promote his hobby:

I consider myself a comics activist. I print out PDF booklets and distribute them in coffee shops and movie theatres, bookstores and clubs. I volunteer time to the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund and, when I can spare the money, buy multiple copies of books like AUTOMATIC KAFKA and EGOMANIA to pass out to friends, co-workers, and occasionally the unfamiliar face passing by on the street. (Parker, 2003)

The quest for legitimacy has thus been seen as something of a cooperative imperative, an issue for fans and professionals alike, a campaign waged by both institutions and individuals.

Some have contended, however, that “legitimacy” in itself is the wrong goal, or one that many fans may not be ready to actually accept. Comics journalist Tom Spurgeon (2003) has written, for instance, that the rah-rah mentality of those who promote comics – “Team Comics,” as he calls it – leads to weaker critical standards. Negative criticism is not seen as adequately supportive of the medium, he argues, and further serves industry interests by duping fans into providing free marketing. And Jonathan Blow (2009),

creator of the critically acclaimed video game *Braid*, writes that legitimacy isn't even deserved yet. "Many comments here seem to be saying that games are already extremely deep as cultural experiences and that it's just some kind of education or PR problem. That is not true," Blow writes in response to Brian Green's aforementioned article on legitimacy for games. "[T]he question 'How do we gain legitimacy?' is ill-construed and will only lead to bad answers. The proper question is 'How do we start doing things that will have legitimacy?'"

The answer to that question is one that may lead many enthusiasts to question whether legitimacy is really what they want. Leigh Alexander (2009), a gaming journalist, reflects on how the video games "that we hold up as groundbreaking in terms of story, immersion, emotion" are all science-fiction and fantasy games about killing bad guys. Great games, she concedes – "But plainly: That's nerd stuff." She asserts that she's just as nerdy as her audience, but argues that in order to attract audiences who aren't nerds, media like games and comics need to offer a broader range of content, much of which is of no interest to nerds at all.

"The entire point of the Ultimate line is to reclaim the mainstream media with comics," notes a Usenet poster quoted by comics writer Warren Ellis (2000), discussing Marvel's plans to make comics without the baggage of years of back story. "If they even gain a fraction of the goal, the readers of regular titles will be dwarfed in comparison. That's a VERY dangerous thing for us." Another is quoted as writing: "I'd rather read junk about characters I know and love than well-written stories about characters I do not care about." Gamers frequently voice similar frustrations, especially as Nintendo turns its marketing and development focus toward broader audiences. Even more recently, a

character in gaming-oriented webcomic VGcats rants, “With the Wii and games like Rock Band, it’s opened what was once a reclusive hobby to the light of the teeming masses. [...] We didn’t spend *years* as a social outcast to watch you assholes fuck this up” (Ramsomair, 2009). The strip, titled “Nerd Rage,” was picked as favorite gaming webcomic of the week by the readers of Joystiq, a major gaming blog (McElroy, 2009).

Others, meanwhile, contend that “legitimacy” isn’t an issue with a medium’s content at all, but with enthusiasts themselves. The author of the *Geek Social Fallacies*, discussed in Chapter 1, reflects, “I don’t *know* that RPGs and comics would be more popular if there were fewer trolls who smell of cheese hassling the new blood, but I’m sure it couldn’t hurt” (Suileabhain-Wilson, 2003). And commenting on the aforementioned games rally in Central Park, one Game Politics reader remarks, “Can we take any grassroots effort seriously when its led by a man who legally changed his name to ‘Triforce’?” (J. Brown, 2007). Even if such individuals aren’t representative of the majority of fans, some argue, cultural norms that support such behavior may outweigh any other public perceptions of stereotypically juvenile pursuits.

### *Achieving Legitimacy*

I once attended a panel at Comic Con International that explored the question of how comics relate to “The Mainstream,” hoping to get a sense of the criteria by which legitimacy might finally be proclaimed. Some expressed some hope or contentment with comics’ position in American culture, though there was still a sense that much work had yet to be done.



“People think of comics as either artsy/edgy stuff or as superheroes,” one panelist suggested. “We need people interested in what’s in between to grow the medium.” Two panelists got into a debate: One said that only superheroes were the niche now, but the other insisted, “People hate comics, they’re culturally biased against comics.” Another panelist says that most complaints she hears are from people who think comics are “dirty, nasty,” not for kids at all, but the opposite. “It’s like back in the 1950s,” someone offered. (It’s generally expected that the details behind the Senate Subcommittee Hearings on Juvenile Delinquency and the formation of the Comics Code Authority are common knowledge among comics fans.) Another panelist remarked, “I don’t want to see any more headlines like, ‘Zoom bam pow! Comics aren’t for kids anymore.’” There was much nodding in agreement. They lamented about how unwelcoming comics stores can be, questioned whether the serialized format is a liability to mainstream acceptance, and agreed that movies based on comics can’t save comics themselves. One panelist reminded us about Calvin Reid’s award for promoting comics to mainstream audiences. “So if you see that guy on the convention floor,” he said, “shake his hand.”

They invited audience questions; one woman sparked a discussion on how to use the internet in building a fan base. Another woman asked, “How do we preach *beyond* the choir?” Someone noted that the years of back story needed to pick up some comics makes it hard to reach out to mainstream audiences, but it was unclear whether this meant that pros needed to write differently or that fans needed to find something else to obsess over besides continuity.

Eventually, I reached the microphone to ask my own question. “I noticed that fans here in the audience and the pros alike have been discussing at this panel what ‘we’ can

do to help comics. There've also been some rumblings in the industry that the 'Team Comics' mentality might actually be unhelpful and exclusive. Do we have a responsibility as fans to help comics, and if so, what is it?" This was an academic question for me, of course, of direct relevance to my research. It was also a personal question, however, from the founder and former president of the UMass Comic Art Society, who had once handed out flyers recommending "Comics for People Who Don't Like Superheroes" with the help of fellow club members, and who later looked back on such activities and wondered whether they simply seemed desperate.

One panelist, who worked for a major publisher, responded that it's the collector mentality, sealing comics in bags rather than reading them, that hurts the public image. "Give books to people who'll like them," he said.

The only woman on the panel, an artist who was working on a fantasy comic, replied that the problem would be solved in generational shifts. The solution, then, was to have fans to get married and bring new readers into comics-reading communities. "I wish more of them were breeding," she said.

One panelist, an artist with a cartoony, small-run book, said, "When I come in here, I feel like I'm with people like me who share my interests, and it's not like that in the real world, and we're just trying to spread that." He didn't quite answer the question I asked, but it did probably offer some insight into the motivations behind the calls to make geeky media "legitimate."

It's unclear when comics – or video games, or science-fiction, or whatever geeky medium – will ever be "legitimate" enough to declare such fan activism unneeded. In terms of "artistic," "cultural," and "financial" legitimacy, such media appear to be

making progress, even doing quite well in some areas.<sup>7</sup> This is not to suggest that the desire to “save” the objects of enthusiasts’ adoration is disingenuous or even unhelpful. The quest itself may have additional purposes than those that are commonly discussed, however, and the legitimacy that fans seek may sometimes have more to do with their own perceptions than those of American culture at large.

For some, the quest for legitimacy might be a way of trying to share beloved interests with others without the stigmas attached. Some may hope to change public perception of their hobbies so they no longer need to feel “in the closet” about them. Some, who are already unashamed to talk a stranger’s ear off about the virtues of comics, games, or sci-fi, may simply be eager to share a sense of cultural belonging located around their supposedly solitary interests.

We might suggest, then, another type of legitimacy left out of the previously discussed categories – *personal legitimacy*, perhaps – to describe when fans themselves feel like it’s okay, or even commendable, to admit to their own interests. Achieving this sense of legitimacy might entail little more than being less wary in front of those imagined to be less geeky, without fear of judgment (even if judgment *is* indeed forthcoming). As the stigmatized media of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fall into more common use in the 21<sup>st</sup>, the greater obstacle to finding “personal legitimacy” for geeky enthusiasts may not be their specific entertainment preferences, but the kind of enthusiasm itself that’s on display.

### Let's Play Pretend

As I discussed in the previous chapter, one way to understand geekdom is in the expression of enthusiasm, passion, and play, though some forms of this are more considered more respectable than others. In this section, I'd like to discuss how broader cultural norms even suggest that some types of the most potentially involved forms of play – dressing in costume, playing with toys, and anything else that seems indicative of “pretend” – are somehow more acceptable than the kinds engaged in by geeks.

It seems logical to many that any time someone dresses up for fandom, it should be “geeky”; but as we'll see, it isn't always understood as such. Consider, for instance, a question once posed to me:

If a television show turned cultural phenomenon spawns diehard fans who recite dialogue by heart, wear costumes inspired by the show and buy all the tie-in products, are these devotees nerds? If the show in question is *Star Trek*, *The X-Files* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the answer is certainly yes. But what if we're talking about *Sex and the City*? (Medley, 2008)

Mark Medley, a reporter writing for the *National Post*, phoned to ask me this question for an article published in the days leading up to *Sex and the City*'s move from television to the big screen. Published as “Female Trekkies,” the article's premise may sound a bit confusing to those unfamiliar with the HBO series and its devoted following. For some, being a *Sex and the City* fan goes beyond catching up on the show every week: It means buying the outfits worn by the program's thirty-something, sex-positive, high-income heroines, and making a special event out of the movie's premier. The parallel with geek culture was not lost on some plugged into the worlds of media fandom. Comics writer, novelist, and blogger Jamie S. Rich described the premier on his website:

Really, it was like I was at a comic book convention, but one for chicks. Though, I don't think it's fair if I show up for the Hulk screening covered in green make-

up I'll get called a geek and going to see *Sex and the City* in fake couture is somehow not geeky. [...] Nerds in any other underwear are just as nerdy. (Rich, 2008)

As I've mentioned before, there are those who would argue that 'geek' is now a broad enough term to apply to just about any fervent entertainment interest. Nevertheless, when Mark Medley asked me whether I thought *Sex and the City* fans were geeks, I told him no – or, rather, that I suspected these fans wouldn't call themselves geeks, and that most of the self-identified geeks I've known wouldn't understand *Sex and the City* "costuming" as a part of geek culture.

Medley's interviewees seemed to agree. Annalee Newitz, co-editor of *She's Such a Geek!* and science-fiction blog io9, responded, "Are women who read *Vogue* geeks? Are women who know every detail about Sephora cosmetics geeks? No. You can't expand the term 'geek' to mean anyone who is interested in something without draining the term of all meaning." One especially enthusiastic *Sex and the City* fan quoted in the article said, "I don't think there's anything nerdy or geeky about *Sex and the City*. ... I think it's more of a diva, glamour [thing]. I guess that's more what I'd consider myself."

So, Medley asked me, what's the difference?

"Being identified as a geek, or identifying oneself as a geek, kind of signals an understanding that you are (or you know that you should be) feeling embarrassed about what it is that you're interested in," I told him, realizing that this was the only thing I had said that would get quoted. This is just a summary, of course, of the wordy ramblings I offered on the ways that the geek image relates to our broader cultural norms, especially of maturity and gender.

Again, it's tempting to say that geeky/nerdy interests are generally more "intellectual" or based around an obsession for data, rational systems, or problem-solving, as self-proclaimed geeks are often wont to claim (and as explored in the previous chapter). Looking at all things that are typically thought of as geeky, however, this can seem to be a somewhat reductive and self-congratulatory definition. What's so geeky about *X-Men* comics or *Star Trek* movies? We could understand interests in these activities as somehow information-obsessed, such as in the case of fans who memorize the first issue their favorite characters appeared in, or those who learn Klingon vocabulary – but there's nothing inherently more "informational" about these that would count out *Sex in the City* fans with an encyclopedic knowledge of fashion, or even sports fans with a good recall of player names, records, and statistics. And, as long as sports fans are entering the discussion, it's worth noting that they too will similarly dress up – in jerseys, hats, and among the more extreme, in face paint – for their own major fan events. Why is it, then, that the same behaviors get called "geeky" when applied to other activities?

As a label we first learn as children, 'geek' is expected to refer to those kids who don't fit in, who would prefer to bury their noses in their books and hide in their bedrooms to play with toys rather than hang out with the other kids. The geek stereotype, and the entertainment media and fans it is applied to, carry connotations of juvenility. These also tend to have an assumed gender coding – not just "male," because it's not *men* that comics and games have been traditionally marketed to in the past, but *boys*.

Sports fans are not thought of as geeks because sports represent a traditionally masculine interest, celebrating competition, aggression, and physical prowess – which, to

put it bluntly, also represent suitability for mating. Athletics are sexy, and sex is adult.<sup>8</sup> *Sex and the City*, meanwhile, is another kind of sexiness, targeting a different audience. The *Sex and the City* fan quoted above resists the ‘geek’ label in favor of “glamour” and “diva,” expressing a gender-coded understanding. It’s not just for *girls*, but a sort of power fantasy for women. The characters aren’t mindless female consumers and self-sacrificing housewives, but wealthy and successful career women whose interest in romance and shopping are cast as signs of empowerment. Geeky entertainment media don’t exactly fit into this paradigm of age-appropriate and traditionally gender-coded interests. To the world at large, comics, games, and science-fiction generally represent escapism, a substitute for real power among bookish and non-athletic boys. The war paint of a sports fan somehow seems more manly and acceptable than the war paint of a live-action role-player clad in chain mail. And in comparison, the fashionable dress and four-inch heels of the *Sex and the City* fan is practically unassailable as an acceptably adult and gender-appropriate “costume.”

When *Sex and the City* fans and sports fans dress up, they may be cutting loose, having fun, and even acting out a certain role. When geeks do likewise, however, the question is raised whether they can tell the difference between fantasy and reality.

#### *Childlike Enthusiasm and Juvenile Stereotypes*

At the Penny Arcade Expo, I wandered by a giant cloud of people formed around the door to the main meeting hall. A panel was about to start, but was running late. Rather than sit around listlessly, however, the members of the several-people-thick line bounced around an inflatable, blue ball. They cheered and laughed as they tried to knock it as high

as possible. Later, when I interviewed one of the people who had been standing in that line and asked her what she thought needed to be discussed in a study of geeks, she told me, “Play is really important to who we are in society.” Another interviewee I met at PAX echoed this sentiment, explaining to me, “I’m proud to be a geek, I’m happy that I’m a geek, I enjoy being geeky and just totally making fun of myself, making an idiot of myself in public because I don’t mind. I’m having fun, so it’s okay.”

To the extent that escapism is a type of “play” (Hills, 2002), we could say that such things are common to just about all media consumers, from football fans to casual moviegoers. The type of escapist play that geeky enthusiasts perform, however, can be especially devoted, involved, and, oftentimes, connected to materials more broadly associated with childhood. In many cases, as noted in the previous section, this may even be material with which geeks have strong associations dating back to their own childhood. And as noted in the previous chapter, geeks often have a childlike enthusiasm even about interests that we recognize as suitably adult: The activity should be wholly consuming, a release of social inhibitions, regardless of the object’s broader cultural value. This can be profoundly liberating for those who find a certain awkwardness in keeping up with what may seem like arbitrarily-defined social rules. When this kind of enthusiasm is applied to tinkering and technology, it’s considered acceptably productive. When childlike enthusiasm is applied to activities already associated with childhood, however, it seems to cross the line between “acceptably geeky” and “a little too geeky” – and even geeks themselves recognize the distinction.

This distinction is illustrated by the Geek Hierarchy (Sjöberg, 2002b), mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. As “The Geek Hierarchy” shows, sometimes even nerds



understand being more “geeky” than another nerd isn’t necessarily a good thing. The reason the Geek Hierarchy works as a piece of satire is because readers who see themselves at any of a number of levels on the chart can relate to it as a form of self-mockery, but also feel some consolation in the knowledge that there’s always *someone* geekier than themselves. Even the geeks who learned Klingon can feel reassured that they would not get married in Klingon dress; even the geeks who get married in Klingon dress can be reassured that they don’t dress as cartoon animals; and so on.

The distinction here is the extent to which the geek’s behavior seems to blur the line between reality and childish fantasy. Thus, the difference between the acceptably geeky and the unacceptably geeky, as one of my interviewees suggested, is “between the people who *do* these things and the people who *live* these things.” This distinction could be applied to just about anybody who seems obsessed with an activity, but among geeks, it’s strongest when it seems closest to a children’s game of “let’s play pretend.” Geeks often have a love of fantasy worlds, but tend not to want to be mistaken for being unable to tell fantasy from reality. (For an impassioned example, ask a gamer sometime whether video game violence causes real-life violence.)

It’s never entirely clear where the line between “living” and “doing” is drawn among geeks, but it’s a line that fans and gamers often attempt to keep in mind in presenting themselves to others. Games that involve actively taking on the role of a character in action or in dress are particularly suspect, despite being a rather common experience among geeks. The most widely known example of such activity is *Dungeons & Dragons*, a fantasy role-playing game in which one person narrates a story and players each narrate a character’s actions, rolling dice against numerical statistics to determine

the success of their attempts at heroics. As noted in Chapter 4, many geeks give *D&D* special credit for teaching them how to think – but even those who would not go so far in describing its influence still recognize it as a crucial touchstone in geek culture.

At a panel at South by Southwest Interactive, when video game designer Warren Spector wanted to offer an example of something on his mind, he decided to quickly poll the audience to make sure we would follow. “How many people here have played *Dungeons & Dragons*?” he asked, and dozens of hands went up – nearly everyone in the room. “Great,” said happily, “we’re all geeks here!” *Dungeons & Dragons* is such a common touchstone among geeks that the death of its co-creator, Gary Gygax, saw acknowledgement on gaming blogs, on tech news sites, in nerdcore hip-hop tributes, and elsewhere across the internet. At Kotaku, gamers responded with nerdy elegies (comments on Fahey, 2008):

**Setzer HDX**

**12:31 PM on Tue Mar 4 2008**

Sounds like he critically failed his heart condition roll.

Godspeed, oh grandfather of geeks. Hopefully you lived a good, comfortable life.

**ghnvt**

**12:38 PM on Tue Mar 4 2008**

RIP geek God

**Machete\_Bear**

**12:42 PM on Tue Mar 4 2008**

Roll for grief.

Perfect 20. :(

I thought some of the jokes about Gygax’s death might be seen as disrespectful. As Church (2008a) suggested to me on Geek Studies, however, “I’m sure that everyone who understands enough D&D to craft a ‘saving throw’ line is at least as serious as they are humorous.”

Nevertheless, as one interviewee admitted to me, “I have to be wary about what I admit to people I play.” Video games are generally acceptable, he explained, but role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* still carry more of a stigma. One *Boston Globe* article indicates a widely understood need for this wariness in its subtitle, “Some men have secretly been playing Dungeons & Dragons for decades” (Diaz, 2009). To gamers, the difference between taking on the role of a character in a video game versus a tabletop role-playing game may seem negligible – even computer games like *World of Warcraft* are essentially *D&D* on a screen – but there is still a general understanding that acting out the role without some mediation is a bit too close to “let’s play pretend.”

Some simply draw the line at this hobby, such as the interviewee who told me that she won’t play *Dungeons & Dragons*; “I think that would be going too far.” For others, however, where the line is drawn between the acceptably geeky and the unacceptably geeky can be vague and arbitrary, even among nerds themselves.

“We were talking about playing a role-playing game over the summer,” an interviewee I met at Comic Con explained, speaking of herself and her fellow graduate students. “At some point we were all sitting around and talking about our respective experience with such things, and people were both apologetically too experienced and apologetically too *inexperienced*.”

“And then something comes up where someone says something like, ‘Well, you know, it’s not like we ever do voices or anything like that – that’s ridiculous.’ And then, like half the people were like, ‘What? You don’t do voices?’” she said, affecting a disappointed tone, and then laughed. “And so, even then, even amongst a group of people

who are thoroughly identifying themselves as nerds and geeks, it was still just like, ‘Oh wait, you actually talk funny? That’s just sad, that’s just nerdy, that’s too far for me.’”

Anything significantly more playful and involved than *D&D* seems to be too much pretend for many geeks. Even more stigmatized than role-playing games are live-action role-playing games, or LARPs. “I’m a hip nerd,” one of my interviewees specified, noting that she and her friends have good fashion sense, consider themselves socially mature, and, crucially, “We don’t LARP or anything like that.” When I asked interviewees what kinds of geeky interests they have and what kinds of geeky activities they tend not to partake of, LARPing was the most common answer; when I asked why, most politely left their answers at, “It just isn’t my thing.” A few were a little more analytical or frank. “A lot of people do that ... as in, crazy people,” a 19-year-old man told me in a telephone interview, recalling how the tabletop gamers were even located in a separate hotel from the video gaming rooms at one of the earlier Penny Arcade Expos. “They’re almost the outcasts of the gamers, I guess.” When I asked what made LARPing different from other hobbies, he answered: “I think it’s the childish stuff, the figurines and stuff. And the demonic stuff.” The “demonic stuff” refers to the moral panic surrounding *D&D* in the ‘80s, cautioning parents that players who couldn’t tell fantasy from reality might participate in real Satanic rituals, even murder.

Another “too-geeky” interest is cosplay, or costuming. As a hobby, it stretches back decades with traditions from both Japan and the US, referring to the assembly and donning of homemade costumes of popular film, TV, cartoon, comic book, or video game characters. The designers typically wear these costumes at conventions, posing frequently for photographs and occasionally acting in-character for passers-by. While

many convention-goers appreciate what cosplay brings to a convention, this hobby also crosses the line for many. “This convention doesn’t have as many freaks as the Anime Expo,” a man beside me in line remarked at Comic Con. He was accompanying his son, who looked about nine years old. “I bet it’s only about 10 percent of people here in costume.”

Few are so blunt with strangers, but the sentiment is relatively widespread. The derision heaped upon the most stigmatized geeks is sometimes quite similar to the kind meted out by dominant groups in high schools. At the Penny Arcade Expo’s question and answer panel, an audience member asked the comic creators and organizers whether future PAX’s would see more official support for cosplay activities. A substantial portion of the crowd booed. Jerry Holkins, Penny Arcade’s writer, responded, “There’s probably a place for it ... underground.”

Even in the “safe spaces” of the internet, geeks often shy away from endorsing such activities. One post on Gizmodo, a highly-trafficked blog (nominally) about gadgets, for instance, embeds a YouTube video of people dressed in Transformers costumes that really allow “transforming”: One moment, you’re looking at someone covered in what appears to be painted cardboard boxes resembling a robot; after a moment of crouching and contortion, you’re looking at a cement mixer, a truck, or a jet; some pop back out into a person to offer a thumbs-up. The video was linked to under the “Too Much Free Time” category, and many commenters offer similar sentiments, tempering their praise with admissions of shame for appreciating the craftwork (Frucci, 2007). The comments are a mix of admiration and derision, mostly heaped upon the commenters themselves for even admiring such a “waste” of time. “It amazes me that nerds seem to be so ashamed of

being nerds and of other nerds,” one commenter points out. “Whenever we see anything wicked which happens to also be very nerdy, we always have to say, ‘What a nerd! But cool!’ I wonder what’s up with that” (nevyne, 2007).

Even among cosplayers, there can be such a thing as going too far. Some maintain that it’s very different to dress in costume in a private or more socially insulated context, like a convention, than it is to dress in costume for a more formal or public occasion. When the Commander of the Little Rock Star Trek Fan Club attended jury duty in her Star Trek uniform, for instance, some Trek fans applauded her commitment to the show’s ideals, while others regarded her behavior as “crazy,” and reflecting badly on other Trekkers (Dahl, 2009). One forum poster, for instance, remarked: “Ok....even I -- who met my wife through a Star Trek writing club -- wouldn’t go THAT far!!” (84BDSop, 2009). The line between “living” and “doing” gets particularly blurry when cosplayers make alterations of a more permanent sort: A cosplayer at MidSouthCon, quoted in *The New York Times*, stated, “Some people go way overboard with their costumes. [...] I’m not to the point where I’d get my teeth shaved or anything” (Itzkoff, 2007b). Someone has likely done just that, but such cosplayers are likely very few in number; no such cosplayer was sighted by the reporter behind the article, and I’ve yet to run into any myself.

The LARPer and cosplayers I’ve met at conventions generally seemed to me relatively unperturbed by the notion that their hobbies are inherently “too geeky” for other fans and gamers, though they are aware of it. Some have tried to defend such hobbies by linking them to other interests, or explaining them according to broader cultural ideals – somehow more adult, or more masculine than you might first think. At

Comic Con, I attended a panel where a professional costume designer engaged the audience in drawing connections between LARPing and various other popular pursuits. He was in steampunk/pirate garb of his own crafting: a tunic under a leather vest, goggled over a bandanna, and swashbuckler-style boots. Masks fashioned to look like the heads of a fox and a bear sat on the table at the front of the room. “LARPing is like medieval football,” the costume designer explained. “You fight all day and then go drinking together at night.” A woman I met at the Come Out and Play Festival, meanwhile, simply shook her head in frustration when we chatted about how so many people specifically name LARPing as too geeky for them.

“You would’ve thought they would’ve said ‘furries,’” she muttered.

#### *When It’s Okay to Play*

I once walked into The Body Shop, a sweet-smelling store for bath goods in my local mall. Walking up to the counter to ask where I could find some aftershave, I paused mid-stride – Freezepop was playing on the store speaker. How did a mall chain store in Philadelphia come to have a Boston-based synthpop band, popular among gamers if among anyone at all,<sup>9</sup> playing on its speakers? Upon reaching the young woman tending the counter, I asked just that.

“Oh, this is my CD – it’s from *Guitar Hero!*” she said excitedly. “I’m not really into video games, but that game is different. I love it!”

The (negatively) geeky connotations surrounding some interests may be gradually dropping away, though it is a slow process, observable just a few cases at a time. *Guitar Hero*, for instance – along with other titles games in the burgeoning music game genre,

such as *Rock Band* – is indeed unlike most other games, at least on the surface. Instead of using the compact, multi-button controllers that have been the norm from the Nintendo Entertainment System’s release in the ‘80s the current generations of Sony PlayStation or Microsoft Xbox, the *Guitar Hero* series and its ilk feature scaled-down, plastic instruments. Players click buttons, bang drum pads, and make noise in rhythm with colored notes flying across the screen. It can be very fun, and, at least at first, it can be rather difficult. Professional musicians often seem a little shocked and amazed that they aren’t better at it.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is at least one common criticism of this genre. Carrie Brownstein (2007), former guitarist for indie rock band Sleater-Kinney, sums it up neatly, even after acknowledging how much fun she and her friends were having in playing:

When I looked carefully, I realized I was having a party where people were sitting around playing video games. And, really, if you are going to play the game with a group of friends for more than a night, shouldn’t you just form a real band? There is something sad about the thought of four teenagers getting *Rock Band* for Christmas and spending all of their after-school time pretending to know how to play.

Stigmatized entertainment media face something of a double standard: If they depict some activity that would be unacceptable in real life (e.g., physical violence), they’re criticized for *encouraging* that behavior; if they depict some activity that might be commendable in real life (e.g., musical performance), they’re criticized for *discouraging* that behavior. Either way, any activity that requires a decent amount of pretending is going to be considered by adults as “sad,” at best (or dangerous, at worst). This is not just because it comes presumably at the exclusion of other, more “productive” activities, but because it’s perceived as juvenile. *Rock Band* kind of looks like playing with toys in front



of the TV – and what could be geekier and more juvenile than actively playing pretend with actual toys in hand? It probably doesn't help that these music games' character creation and reward systems may be suspiciously reminiscent of role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* are still selling quite healthily. Even beyond The Body Shop, I've seen and heard tell of the games in hip bars and trendy clubs, sometimes for "Rock Band Night," sometimes a permanent fixture. Such games could be seen as part of a relatively recent trend in bringing electronic gaming to broader audiences – not by making games more serious or artsy, but by making them more social, and, somewhat paradoxically, making them more like playing with big toys. The Nintendo Wii is consistently declared the bestselling video game console of the current generation, reaching a broad range of consumers, despite being somewhat derisively referred to as a "toy" by gamers and developers (John, 2009). The Wii sees players waggling a remote-control-like device to throw bowling balls, swing tennis rackets, and shoot plungers at cartoon rabbits. It features a number of (optional and technically unnecessary) snap-on objects to make the controller even more visibly resemble a toy tennis racket, toy steering wheel, toy sidearm, and so on.

It's interesting that games that seem to be "big toys" have found a foothold with popular, not-necessarily-geeky audiences. After all, even among geeks, toys are one of those potentially "too geeky" interests. Many geeks seem to *want* to play with toys, but I don't get the sense that most actually do so. The use of small figurines in tabletop war games and role-playing games is, as one interviewee quoted above points out, part of why such activities are considered weird; but these are more "game pieces," like in chess, than

toys you get to use for pretend. Toy collectors themselves often frame their hobby as an “investment”; a monetary motive ostensibly recodes the activity as more adult. Many who buy toys simply leave them on display, but plastic weapons and action figures are designed to be played with and used in pretend.

Even when geeks experience “playing with toys,” then, it’s usually from a distance, so to speak. *Robot Chicken*, which airs during Cartoon Network’s “Adult Swim” evening block, features stop-motion sketch comedy with action figures as the actors. “The show looks like what nearly every kid did: You got out your cars and G.I. Joes and smashed them together,” fan and stop-motion filmmaker Mike Johnson told *Wired*. “The show works because it captures the joy of playing with your toys” (Winer, 2007). The toys on *Robot Chicken* are collected and manipulated by actor and producer Seth Green, whose TV, movie, and video game roles include a werewolf in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a tech nerd in *Enemy of the State*, an arch-villain’s son in *Austin Powers*, and a space ship pilot in *Mass Effect*, among others. Geeks who are already rich and famous get to play with their toys; everyone else gets to watch. Similarly, all-ages video games like *Lego Indiana Jones* and *Lego Star Wars*, which retell well-known adventures with Lego figurines, allow people to play with toys without necessarily handling any actual Lego bricks themselves.

Outside of cosplay, it’s rare to see even hardcore geeks making use of toys that actually get marketed as toys. Nevertheless, we now commonly see people playing with “game peripherals,” but we know what they’re *really* doing: pretending to be in a rock band, to play tennis, to drive a car, and so on. These types of games manage to encourage childish play and pretend by drawing in other connotations and mitigating the usual

sources of stigma. Nintendo has gone to great lengths to market the Wii to “alpha moms” (Horovitz, 2007) and seniors (Reuters, 2007), among others (see also Schiesel, 2008), such as by playing up its potential physical and mental health benefits. The Wii and music games like *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* also emphasize multiplayer functionality for up to four people at once, dismissing the notion that games are necessarily antisocial. And, of course, rock music (by top-name bands, at that) is a sign of coolness if there ever was one.

Do such activities give childlike play activities a nudge toward acceptability among adults? Perhaps, but it’s a slight nudge. Rock music is cool, but “let’s play pretend” is not. Video games are finally finding content that reminds adults of what it feels like to pretend with their friends, but many adults are not yet ready to withhold judgment or let their guard down. Maintaining an appearance of coolness or of sophistication – to oneself or to others – takes a certain amount of commitment, and in the adult world, such an appearance may feel more immediately and obviously valuable than unrestrained fun. Thus, we adults must either shake our heads in disapproval or shrug our shoulders and admit we are geeks. In terms of acceptably geeky interests, American culture at large may draw the line somewhere around the level of involvement demanded by regular games of Wii Bowling, or perhaps occasionally reading a comic book marketed as a “graphic novel.” Nerds themselves, meanwhile, may draw that line a little further. Even so, the hierarchy imagined by geeks still reflects the values of the parent culture to some extent, leaving many to practice their hobbies in semi-secrecy.

For the truly playful and out-there activities to ever be adopted by those beyond the self-proclaimed geeks, it may take a more radical shift in the parent culture’s ideas of

what's acceptably "adult." As I'll explore in the section that follows, some activists are attempting just that, even as open display of the geekiest geeking out remains quite rare.

### Playing in the Streets

I walked along the sidewalk on Broadway, just south of Central Park, with my video camera at about chest height. A young, skinny guy passed over my view screen, wearing a green t-shirt with a "1UP" mushroom from the Super Mario games. He was looking for someone to compliment.

I crossed the street and found a small group huddled around a man in a suit, holding out a cell phone. "*You're stunning*," the man with the phone said, speaking over chatter to inform the group of their secret passphrase. Someone else in the group caught a glimpse of something over the suited man's shoulder – opponents – and warned the group. They counted down in readiness.

A blast of compliments passed over the crosswalk between the two groups. After the jumble of words, someone in the first group repeated, "You're stunning!"

"You're too kind," a woman at the front of the newcomers said with a smile. "You have a delicious day." From the laughs and groans, the new group knew they were victorious. They cheered and pumped their arms in celebration.

Cruel 2 B Kind is a game of "benevolent assassination" – an alternate reality game, or ubiquitous game, depending on whom you ask. It's played in the physical world, in normal social spaces, where you don't necessarily know who's in on the game and who isn't. Like the "assassins" games that have been played on college campuses for years, the purpose is to hunt some target and avoid being hunted yourself. In this

particular variant, however, there is a twist: You “kill” an enemy team by offering a compliment that has been pre-assigned as its weakness. If you hit the right team with your compliment, they join your team. If you hit the wrong team, they inform you that you are too kind. If you hit someone who’s not playing – well, it’s friendlier than traditional crossfire, at least.

“We’re amazed by you,” my friend said politely to passers-by. One woman thanked us. Another woman gave a dismissive, half-smiling sneer. One group happened to be gathered for a sweet 16 birthday party. They cheered, and we wished her a happy birthday. “What kind of treasure hunt is this?” one woman asked, so we explained to her and her friends. She wanted to play too. As the game progressed and teams absorbed one another, mobs of 50 or more people eventually came to roam the sidewalks of New York, shouting pleasantries to one another from across the wide avenue.

Eventually, we were alerted by text message when the time limit was up. We gathered in Central Park to announce awards and eat cupcakes. The ultimate victory went to Team Nerdgasm, though my friend and I walked away with glittering, purple fedoras for our standing as runners-up. I headed down into the subway with my companions, discussing where to head next, recording equipment in hand and hats atop our heads. As the subway started moving, I heard a young guy’s voice nearby.

“Hey, man, poppin’ hat!” he exclaimed. I turned to see him offering a friendly smile. He was hanging out with a couple young women.

“Thanks!” I said. “I just won it – but hey, you can have it if you like it.”

“Seriously? Yeah, thanks!”

I have no idea whether he actually wanted my hat or whether he just found it hilarious (or both). Either way, the spirit of the game had infected me, and no part of me could hesitate to offer my glittery purple prize to a complete stranger.

Cruel 2 B Kind was one of many games held during the Come Out and Play Festival, scattered across three days and a good portion of Manhattan. The games saw attendees putting golf balls down sidewalks, LARPing in a Western setting with zombies and wizards, and gesticulating in front of motion sensors to direct a game of *Space Invaders* projected onto a neighboring building, among other shenanigans. I attended to produce a short ethnographic film about street games, gathering footage of people at play and shooting short interviews with attendees and organizers. Initially, I saw it as part of the branch of my research concerned with game play and design. I was caught off guard when I realized, shortly into shooting and after repeatedly hearing people describe themselves as nerds, that I was also doing research for my dissertation.

“It’s a very strange thing to come to the city, go outside, walk in the streets, and play games if you’re over the age of *eight*.” My interviewee said the last word with a sharp emphasis on the final word – *eight* – acknowledging the absurdity that one might find implicit in the idea of adults playing outdoors like children. He searched for more words. “And that’s, that’s the really neat thing about – I mean, people *should* do that,” he said with a laugh.

As an alternative to (or in parallel with) the goal of making geeky interests seem “legitimate” by mainstream standards, some seek to display their geeky playfulness openly, to reject the shame associated with the stereotypically juvenile, perhaps even to make the rest of the world a bit more geeky and playful itself. It’s difficult to say how

commonplace this attitude is among geeks, but it's not just confined to annual street festivals. Earlier, when I discussed writers for *The Escapist* who expressed shame about their interest in gaming, I noted that some of the reader comments expressed recognition of such feelings, but many others chastised the writers for creating their own problem, or urged the writers to shed their fears.<sup>11</sup> "Try this for a week," a commenter advises the "social loner" who confesses to playing games only in private. "Ignore the shame that you feel whenever you enjoy a favorite hobby (ie. video games) and force yourself to 'act like a fool' and play games in front of others" (Novan Leon, 2008).

Promoting this ideal is one of the major motivations behind the Come Out and Play Festival, though taken to a certain extreme. At a panel on the second night of the Festival, designers and organizers attempted to explain the rationale behind these games. "There's so much stuff to play with in cities, and I think that's what we used to do as little kids, and I think kind of getting older and getting away from that kind of makes you nostalgic for that stuff," Franz Aliquo, the co-founder of a water-gun "assassins" game, explained. "I think slowly people are starting to see the city more as a playground – a *huge* playground – rather than kind of the designated spots to play."

Jane McGonigal, a longtime organizer and researcher of games and co-designer of *Cruel 2 B Kind*,<sup>12</sup> cited the strength of online communities as part of her inspiration: "When I think about making reality-based games, it's not because I think games aren't real enough, and that we have to take them back from virtuality and put them back into reality – it's that I think *reality* isn't virtual *enough*. I think that games engage us, they give us skills and motivation and people to work with and a sense of purpose and a sense

of responsiveness, and if we can map that onto everyday interactions and our everyday social ecologies, that we will feel a lot better in our everyday lives.”

Frank Lantz followed up by describing these games as “a double movement,” mingling the traditional and the contemporary: the physical, childlike play and the face-to-face social interaction absent from video games, combined with video-game-like modes of thinking of the world as rule set, and the ability to have data at our fingertips via mobile computing devices. “In some ways,” he reflected, “we are like the hillbilly astronauts of game design.”

“Is this a ‘geeky’ phenomenon?” one audience member asked. Maybe, to some extent, for the time being, they conceded – though *Come Out and Play*’s 500 registered attendees ranged from ages six to 60, frequent gamers and curious fun-seekers alike. “These are public games,” co-organizer Nick Fortugno later told me. “They should be for the public.”

The contributors to the Festival come from a variety of backgrounds. They are game designers, academics, professionals, and activists for the cause of fun. Some run games purely as a recreational activity, spending hours coordinating vast scavenger hunts or squirt gun fights without any compensation. Some, like Frank Lantz and Jane McGonigal, design, write, and teach about games professionally. And a few even run their games as a for-profit venture, like *The Go Game*, a PDA-assisted scavenger hunt that had teams snapping photos and interacting with paid actors. This last game is commonly run as a corporate team-building exercise, but the version for the Festival was designed as “Geek Seek Beta,” tailored for the audience the designers expected *Come*



Out and Play to attract. They were half right: Nerds, normals, and the employees of past clients showed up to play side by side.

I filmed a couple groups interact with one actor for the Go Game, a woman in a black leather coat and sunglasses, an outfit straight out of *The Matrix*. Two women, following the instructions on their PDA, squared off across from her seat at the edge of an open-air café and announced their presence with mock attitude.

“We’re gonna challenge you to a Hong Kong throwdown.”

“Are you ready?”

They struck kung-fu stances and gave a Bruce Lee-style “WA-CHAAAAA!” The performer suddenly produced a pair of foam swords, and a slow-motion battle commenced. The challengers’ teammates (and I) recorded from a short distance. A few moments later, they all high-fived, and the challengers continued on their journey.

The next group included a shy fellow wearing a beanie that looked like a cartoon pig’s head, a style often worn by anime fans. He held out his arms at the actor and raised one knee, pantomiming a wobbly “Crane Kick,” *Karate Kid*-style. “I don’t know,” he said, looking back to the team’s souped-up phone for further instruction. Finally, after some goading from his teammates, he offered a formal verbal challenge to his opponent. When she whipped out the swords, he flapped his hands at her lamely.

“Come on, fight!” the actor taunted, bopping him gently with the foam weapons.

“Okay!” he said, delivering a few playful fighting moves, then crumpling over with nervous laughter as the leather-clad woman whacked him. His attacker relented and kneeled, and he quickly stole away to his team, asking between breaths whether it had been recorded successfully.

This was something different from Comic Con International. In a way, Comic Con takes over San Diego by force for one weekend, flooding the population with geekdom by sheer numbers. Come Out and Play brought together a few hundred people, mingling gamers, geeks, and the general populace, with playful activity designed for everyday environments, rather than simply spilling over from a swelling convention center. It wasn't quite like games you might play on a TV, or on a computer. It wasn't about feeling at home, free from prying eyes. It was about feeling *out* of your element, leaving behind the security of insulated social spaces and darkened rooms with glowing screens. It was about bringing geek culture out into the light of day, but it was also about giving the light of day a geeky glow of its own.

"See, it's mostly about being antisocial," one woman told me, describing her experiences with *World of Warcraft* as we walked. I was following alongside her and two of her friends, self-described science geeks from a nearby medical school. They were playing Journey to the End of the Night, sort of a combination between a race and a game of tag. "I'm a geek by myself, and playing a game."

"Antisocial isn't necessarily a nerd quality," her friend said. She had noted earlier that she played *Magic*, a collectable trading card game, and went to anime conventions.

"Yeah, but that's, I'm not equating that with being a nerd, I'm just equating that with like my gaming experience. It's like, aww, I just want to sit at my desk, in like, sweatpants, and like, kill things. How can I make that happen?"

"Yeah," the anime fan acknowledged, "but you're doing it with six million other lonely and sad people!"

I followed them until they ran into a chaser. He bolted after them, and they broke into a sprint, but he was able to catch up to one of them. (Before I met up with them, I already had to reassure one concerned passer-by that there was nothing serious going on.) The would-be escapees backtracked to join their friend, catching their breath. As they donned the yellow caution tape that now marked them as chasers, a couple New Yorkers wandered by.

“Raccoon City, man,” one guy exclaimed, recalling a zombie-infested locale from the *Resident Evil* video games. “I’m telling you, this place is turning into Raccoon City.”

On a relatively warm February weeknight, wandering through Rittenhouse Square and mumbling to myself as I struggled to phrase something for a paper, I caught an unusual sight: Jedi. A group of six or eight men and women in loose-fitting clothes swung around swords with glowing, green and red blades, striking dramatic poses as they leapt and parried.

I paused in my walking and mumbling. Playing with lightsabers is just not something people do out in the open in the local city park, but behind the closed doors of convention centers. It was a spectacle, though it didn’t seem to be bothering anyone. In warmer weather, that space might have been occupied by people tossing a Frisbee, playing with a dog, or sitting on a blanket. I wandered over.

“Hi,” I announced from a short distance. Some turned to face me, smiling. “Are you guys part of some, uh, organized lightsaber group? Or are you just, ah....”

A tall fellow immediately swung around the lightsaber in his hand, holding out the hilt for me. Another answered, “We’re from PA Jedi. You’re welcome to join, if you like!”

I was a little shocked – not so much from the invitation to join in itself (which I found rather touching), but by being offered use of a replica lightsaber that could have cost its owner upwards of a hundred bucks.

I explained I was working on a paper on video games, but I appreciated the offer all the same. One of them produced a glossy, postcard-sized flyer with more info about the group, the kind that I’d expect to see handed out for free at a convention. I took it, thanked them, and continued with my walk.

Dressing up and playing with toy weaponry marks one as among the geekiest of the geeks, so it’s relatively rare to see such activity flaunted outside. When a photograph in Google Street View caught an image of two guys in costume and battling with foam weapons, blog writers and visitors even on fairly nerdy sites derided the duo with headlines like “LARP Nerds Busted by Google Street View” (MethodShop, 2009) and “Google Street View Captures Your Shame” (Krangel, 2009).<sup>13</sup> When people gather in a park and hold out lightsabers to whoever expresses passing interest, they’re well aware that they’re going to be seen as a little odd.

I visited PA Jedi’s website. Several members have photos of themselves posed with glowing lightsabers, some in costume. They profess their desire to meet “like-minded geeks,” offer gentle self-deprecation (“Yes ladies, I’m single!!”), and express how the best thing about the group is being in “a family that looks out for each other” (“PA Jedi.com,” 2008).

It's possible that, for some members of PA Jedi, going out into the park is a kind of activism, a chance to reclaim public spaces, assert the value of playfulness, encourage the visibility and promote the openness of geek culture. Personally, though, I just got the sense that even though people might think they were weirdoes, they were having too much fun to care.

### Conclusion

A common refrain among nerds is that comics, games, science-fiction, and other stereotypically or traditionally geeky media are distinctive because of their intellectual, sophisticated nature – and indeed, much of this material is quite capable of satisfying such needs. As this chapter means to demonstrate, however, there are other appeals at work, relating largely to personal and cultural connections to the materials themselves, a shared sense of childlike playfulness, and potentially a purposeful resistance against broader norms of maturity. This chapter should thus offer a fuller understanding of the associations enthusiasts have with the pop culture and entertainment commonly characterized as geeky. The notion of a “geek hierarchy” (in a pejorative sense), combined with certain common hopes, fears, and contradictions regarding enthusiasts’ relationship to “the mainstream,” help paint a fuller picture of the layers of connotation associated with geeky objects and pursuits.

Twenty-sided dice aren't just platonic solids, but a sign recalling one of the most potentially embarrassing (and most potentially “authentic”) of geeky pursuits. *Space Invaders* sprites aren't just nameless characters from an old video game, but a sign of youthful nostalgia and simple playfulness. And when someone uses the word ‘grok’ to

describe understanding what another geek is going through, it's doing it in a geeky way, indicating a more authentically geeky understanding. These signs constitute a sort of language of geek culture, a system of symbols circulated through running jokes cracked in person and on blogs, slyly referred to in webcomics, plastered all over t-shirts, rapped about in nerdcore hip-hop. The attachment that geeks have to certain media creates a shared sense of "geek culture," even if many are not necessarily interested in engaging with a broader "geek community" beyond their own groups of personal friends, or even their own living room.

Relatively socially insulated spaces, such as conventions and websites, provide contexts where fannish enthusiasm is the norm, allowing people to feel free to "be themselves." In daily life, however, many feel an impulse to hide these interests. Some seek to make their interests appear more socially acceptable by common standards, but others seek to replace common standards altogether with a geekier standard for "appropriate" adult behavior. As described in Chapter 3, this isn't to say that geeks actually do face regular persecution for their interests – but the sense that they *might* be judged has been a strong force in keeping geeks hiding in the shadows as they celebrate their interests.

After so many years of feeling hidden and judged, fans, gamers, and pop culture enthusiasts sometimes resent the popularization of their interests. By the same token, many have long called and worked for greater acceptance or "legitimacy." To some extent, this represents a culture that actually *wants* to be assimilated, but also wants to keep what it has built for itself. I will explore this tension further in the following chapter, "The Geek as Chic."

## Notes for Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup> Comic Con is so large, in fact, that I felt I had to go for two years in a row just to get a sense of how many different kinds of geeks get packed in there. In my first year, I tried to focus on going to panels of interest to comics fans and gamers; in my second year, I tried to focus on panels of interest to TV and movie fans. There is a great deal of overlap between who's going to what, of course, but the different sorts of events did offer fairly different experiences in terms of their size and scope.

In my description of Comic Con International here, I am blending elements from my two years into a single narrative. Careful readers may notice that the timing of some of the promotions I discuss here is spread over two years (e.g., *Stargate Atlantis* was not being promoted alongside *Snakes on a Plane*). Otherwise, however, I thought that the convention experience was better served by a more fluid description, organized by relevant and related happenings rather than by chronology.

<sup>2</sup> I borrow the term "Line Culture" from Julien Mailland, currently a doctoral student at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. The week before Comic Con, I had been in Paris for a conference and research trip, where I had a casual conversation with Julien that would unexpectedly come to inform how I understood my Comic Con experience. His examples of "Line Culture" included new Harry Potter novels and the iPhone, both of which had seen releases that summer, with people lined out the door. It's a level of enthusiasm – and not just for stories, but even for hardware – that seems a relatively recent and notable development, which may be worth further research of its own.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 3 for a discussion of how this distrust of those who don't match the geek stereotype (of the nonathletic male) is likely part of what upholds such stereotypes in the first place.

<sup>4</sup> For additional discussion of "the mainstream" as simultaneously constructed as a (low-class) "mass" audience and a (middle-class) "bourgeois" audience, see *Club Cultures* (Thornton, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> It may be worth noting that I had a back-and-forth on this topic with Matt Sweeney between our blogs, now collected at free-geek.net under the title "The Geek Culture Debate" (Sweeney, 2008). We discussed very similar reasons to the ones described by Green for why geeks might fight for the "legitimacy" of their media, though I borrow Brian Green's (2009) terms for the discussion in this chapter because I appreciate their precision relative to the terms used in the aforementioned blog posts. What Green called "artistic legitimacy" we referred to as "the cultural reason"; what Green called "financial legitimacy" we discussed as "the economic reason." The third type of legitimacy Green offers is "cultural legitimacy," focusing on the broader public perception of gaming,

though my analysis is more concerned with fans' own *idea* of how the world sees them – “the personal reason” in the blog post I originally wrote, and “personal legitimacy” (according to Green’s terminological scheme) here.

<sup>6</sup> Given that this is the second time the phrase “raping my childhood” has come up in this dissertation, it may be worth noting that it has become such an unfortunate and common cliché of internet discussions regarding unfaithful alterations and adaptations that io9 once even ran a tongue-in-cheek poll to vote on what phrase could replace it.

<sup>7</sup> It should be acknowledged that fears of “legitimacy” may appear to be of much more immediate concern when one of those concerns in particular – “financial legitimacy” – is at risk. The comic book industry in particular has been described as “unstable” (Harvey, 1996, p. 48). Its “direct market” specialty shops kept the industry going after newsstand distribution regulations severely hampered genre diversification (Sabin, 1993, 1996), though that network of stores might have faced collapse if a major publisher were to discontinue patronage – which seemed a real possibility in the 1990s, when Marvel faced bankruptcy. When fans speak of “saving” comics, many mean it quite literally.

<sup>8</sup> Fantasy sports leagues, of course, sit in an interesting middle ground between the acceptably masculine and unacceptably geeky. Fantasy sports players have demonstrated some desire to distance themselves from anything so childish or unmasculine, however. One Fox Sports piece, for instance, debunks myths such as that “Fantasy Football is only for geeks,” that “Fantasy Football is make-believe football” involving a “board game” or “dice,” that it requires “hours and hours of study,” or that a fantasy league is like a “book club” where members “share innermost feelings and deepest thoughts” (Rotter, 2006). Much to the relief of fantasy sports fans, however, media coverage has evolved as more spectator sports fans got into the hobby and journalists realized that players weren’t, as one ESPN anchor puts it, “just a lot of geeks who got together and had never played sports in real life” (Woodward, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> I believe Freezepop has become somewhat more known since my Body Shop anecdote. The band has long been known among gamers, as one of its members has been employed by Harmonix, a Boston-based developer of music games. The group has since also played to large crowds at the Penny Arcade Expo.

<sup>10</sup> See the blog post by halfawake (2007) for a personal account relating the play experience and formal mechanics of *Rock Band* with *D&D*.

<sup>11</sup> When I last glanced, I noticed more comments telling the writers that they shouldn’t be so ashamed of gaming, but I am not confident that the readership of The Escapist’s essay-style articles is a representative sample of self-identified gamer geeks. Short-form gaming news blogs and review sites, for instance, may be likely to garner larger and wider audiences on the web.



<sup>12</sup> For a more sustained academic consideration of the motivations and mechanisms of ubiquitous games, see McGonigal's (2006) dissertation, *This Might Be a Game: Ubiquitous Play and Performance at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*.

<sup>13</sup> Some reports noted that the scene of LARPerS on Google Street View had actually been staged as a bit of performance art. While the scene may have been fake, the reaction was real. The performers knew how LARPing publicly would be received.

## CHAPTER 6: THE GEEK AS CHIC

“A few months or so ago, I decided to completely re-embrace my geekness,”

stephen writes in the inaugural post on his blog, *For the Love of Geeks*:

I have spent awhile hiding it in the shadows, forcing back shouts of glee when a really cool sci-fi show was advertised, or when a really sexy looking computer was in use at a coffee shop, but those days have come to a close.

I sit here now, with a geek card in my wallet [...], a “work shirt” that has a patch on it that reads geek, and license plates that say ‘geek 2 u’ on them... Overkill, maybe, but I have a lot of geek love to make up for. (stephen, 2008)

To stephen, such items are the markers of the geek lifestyle. Being a geek, he explains, can mean many different things, potentially including fannish interests, technical skills, and ideological inclinations – “Personally, I lump all us geeks together for the most part.” The important thing is that “Geeks are here, Geeks are cool, and Geeks aren’t going anywhere... (although we will be unavailable during episodes of *Battlestar Galactica*, new season starting in March).”

This blog post describes a relatively new way of understanding what it means to be a geek. The different characteristics discussed so far in this dissertation – social awkwardness and ostracism, intellectual and technical skills, fannish playfulness and juvenility – have long been assumed to overlap to some extent. It is only in recent years, however, that we have seen media and markets actively and overtly targeting consumers as “geeks” and “nerds,” putting a face on a scattered and diverse set of interest groups through the construction of a more unified market segment. Some of this market is being constructed by tech-savvy (or trend-savvy) companies, producing the geek apparel stephen wears, figuring out ways to market beverages to gamers, or organizing the very geek-targeted events I attended to conduct the research for this dissertation. And, to a

considerable extent, amateur media producers are constructing this “geek demographic” by selling (or simply giving away) media and products proudly labeled as geeky, intended for the consumption of other geeks, and, in many cases, hosting a discourse about what being a geek today means at all.

This chapter, then, explores the notion of geeks not just as misfits, geniuses, or enthusiasts, but as a ‘chic’ market segment and lifestyle demographic that represents all of these characteristics at once. Whether it’s now cool to be a geek because of high-profile Hollywood fanboys, or because of rich computer nerds, or because of the mainstream popularity of comics or games or sci-fi movies, or even because geekiness is the new flavor of “uncool” nonconformity, there is now a visible interest in reaching audiences who understand themselves as geeks and nerds. The new-found acceptability of geekiness and newly-made market for geek fashion and geek music means that there are now relatively hip ways to express one’s geek identity outwardly. These aren’t the developments that created geek culture, but are among the objects that have made it more visible, and given geeks a new way to think about themselves.

As the image of the geek becomes more commonplace in daily life, not just in the form of a goofy popular portrayal, but as a real way that people express their own identity publicly, it remains to be seen for how long geeks will be able to remain “in the closet.” To some extent, the construction of geeks as a demographic has spurred debates and presented potential opportunities to offer inroads to historically excluded groups, even to inject some playfulness, intellectualism, and quirkiness into its parent culture. By the same token, geeks built up their sense of identity behind half-closed doors, at conventions and online, where they could play as they wanted to play, wear what they wanted to wear,

and debate how they wanted to debate. Even as ‘geek’ becomes ‘chic,’ it is still through such socially insulated and conceptually separated contexts that geeks are able to remain continuously connected to geek culture, consuming the products and participating in the discourses that define what the geek lifestyle is supposed to stand for.

### Lifestyles of the Uber-geeky

If you’re looking for evidence that geeks are finally considered hip, cutting edge, and worthy of marketers’ attention, you need look no further than South by Southwest Interactive, an offshoot of the trendsetting Film and Music festivals of the same name. Held annually in Austin, Texas, SXSWi is a conference for “uber-geeks and digital creatives” (“Interactive FAQ,” 2009). My student ID got me in at a discount for \$225 back in 2007; the price tag reflects the role as a professional event, rather than a nominally consumer-oriented convention. Nevertheless, the offerings are much like those of fan conventions, composed of panels, after-parties, and a (relatively smaller) exhibitor’s room. The big difference, I found, may be in how marketers try to ply attendees. As we’ll see here and throughout this section, the idea of geeks as “superconsumers,” influential and ahead of the next big thing, may have some basis in reality, though it may also represent divergent constructions of geekdom – some of which seemingly actively designed to cut out those who seem less easy to pin within the “target market.” I went to South by Southwest looking for techies, not necessarily for marketing; but where geeks are chic, so too are they courted by those who want their business.

Upon reaching Austin on a Friday afternoon, I first made my way first to the hotel where I was staying. I had arranged to sleep on the floor of a room shared with a bunch of

my friend Phoebe's former co-workers from her past life in the tech world, before she answered the siren song of graduate school. I found my new roommates, a trio of guys in t-shirts, sprawled out on the beds and the desk with their laptops when I arrived.

"Hey," one greeted, "We're just nerding out." I'm not sure what kind of specific technological fiddling "nerding out" entailed, but I did know that each had his own blog, Twitter account, and collection of RSS feeds to pull down news related to his particular interests. The desktop wallpaper on one computer caught my eye; it was the album art for the most recent Ladytron album, an electronic pop band that had been getting popular in indie music circles. We made our introductions, and they gave me the password to the wireless router they brought from home so we wouldn't have to pay for internet access in more than one room.

Heading into the festival, I found that the atmosphere was casual-chic, with relatively few attendees clad in suits, and many in jeans, designer t-shirts, and the occasional blazer. I made my way to the registration area to pick up my badge and "swag bag," a colorful cloth tote already half-full with promotional materials and event information. Unsure of where to go from there, I headed to a panel titled "How to Rawk SXSW," which the program promised would help in "making the most of your next few days in geek wonderland." I rooted through my tote bag as I waited for the panel to start, pulling out recent issues of a couple tech and design magazines, and one magazine about anime. People around me were finding magazines about video games and toy collecting in their own bags. Also included was a guide to food stuffs around the convention, provided by Chow.com, with tips for hangover cures.

The ambassadors of geek wonderland were not the shy, pasty dudes of popular folklore. Seven panelists – stylishly dressed men and women of a range of ethnic backgrounds – greeted us enthusiastically to South by Southwest Interactive, “where nerds rock out.” One of the women on the panel polled the audience: “How many of you are noobs? How many of you are South by Southwest virgins?”<sup>1</sup> To introduce the panelists, the moderator asked them to give their names, their web addresses, and why they rock. One panelist noted of another: “He does have the hipster glasses, so in terms of hipster culture nerds, he does rock.” The “hipster glasses,” of course, were the thick-rimmed sort that might have been called “nerdy,” without further elaboration, back before they became a fashion statement.

They took us on a guided tour of the contents of our tote bags, recommending that we toss several of the sponsors’ publications. A couple design and tech magazines made the cut. Most others did not fare so well. “*Wired* is the *Cosmo* of tech magazines,” one explained. “Dump it.” Coming upon some stickers in the bag, one panelist advised, “Don’t stick all of them on your laptop now. That’s like wearing the band’s t-shirt at the concert.” They advised us to wear the button from *Make*, a DIY tech magazine, for long enough to earn a freebie at the publisher’s booth. They found some sort of aerodynamic toy in the bag with a sticky tip, as well, and proceeded to toss it around on stage.

Moving on from the tote bag, we got tips on how to navigate the week with various online services. They showed us Consumating.com, a dating site geared to 20-somethings owned by CNET, a company known for tech news and reviews. The site invited visitors to “Check out all the hot nerdy girls and indie rock boys in Austin for SXSW07.”

“Another thing you can do if you are a geek is go to the South by Southwest site and sync with your iCal,” a woman on the panel noted, then paused, and reflected:

“Okay, I’m a geek.”

I went to a number of other panels over the course of that day and the weekend: panels on online video, on marketing games to broader audiences, on using games themselves as marketing tools. Arguably, however, the real draw at South by Southwest Interactive was and is the party scene. Prominent tech and design commentator John Gruber (2007) remarked after the event, “I can’t think of any other conference where, if forced to choose, I’d prefer to participate socially and forgo attending any of the official presentations/lectures/panels.”

Walking away from the convention center on my first night, I got into a conversation with one of the other attendees, Ian. He told me that he had been able to guess that the fellow next to him on the plane was also bound for SXSWi because his neighbor pulled out a portable Nintendo DS gaming system. “I made a nerd buddy,” Ian said proudly. “We played Mario Kart together. That was the first time I’d ever done that. There was a big DS gaming event here yesterday morning, too, promoted by Upcoming.”

As we were walking and chatting, a couple men with a video camera approached us. “Would you guys be willing to say a few words about South by Southwest?” one asked with a smile.

“Uh, we’re all nerds,” Ian said.

“Great!” The guys with the camera seemed overjoyed.

“I mean, we’re Interactive nerds, not Film nerds,” Ian explained.

“Oh,” said the guys with the camera. They thanked us and moved on.

The quiet gathering of academics that we ended up in did not reassure us that we were very cool. We migrated to a larger bar where the drinks were not free, and the crowd seemed quite disproportionately male, but at least we got to play darts. All attendees were encouraged to wear nametags reading, “HELLO, MY URL IS \_\_\_\_\_.” I made a mental note to start a blog someday.

Over the course of a few days, I learned that the South by Southwest Interactive parties represent a combination of professional networking events, artsy spectacles, and drunken revelry. The Dorkbot party, for instance, saw attendees sipping beer from plastic cups while investigating ongoing projects of the local DIY tech collective. Remote-controlled robot contraptions scurried across the dirt – one on wheels, another with moving arms and head, and another with a backlit toy tarantula under its cranial dome. A vendor sold metalwork hats and brassieres that seemed fashioned for scantily-clad warriors on some distant planet. A crowd gathered around a Tesla coil that played out the theme from *Ghostbusters* in the sound of its sparks. A woman handed out issues of *Make* and *Craft* from giant stacks of magazines upon a table, and sold silk-screened posters depicting a toy robot and the date and time of the party, reminiscent of posters promoting a punk rock show. And with good reason, perhaps, considering that there was live music: I snapped a photo of a DJ dressed in a full Star Trek uniform (Picard era, not Kirk) as he was leaving the stage, and caught the beginning of Tree Wave’s set, which featured music programmed in assembly language, featuring sounds from Commodore 64s, an old PC sound card, and a dot matrix printer.

I met up with Phoebe’s friends at one point to make our way to the 8-bit party, sponsored by a few web-oriented businesses. A DJ spun ‘80s and ‘90s pop while people



mingled and fiddled with arcade game cabinets set to coin-free play. I stood around, separated from my group; half in researcher mode, half in socially introverted nerd mode, watching people chat and play. “He’s not a skilled player,” a stranger muttered beside me, observing the guy playing *Ms. Pac-man*. “You can tell from how he takes the corners.” I nodded silently – partly because I wasn’t sure what to say, but also because he was right. Off to the side, a man with a camera took photos of a woman looking alternately somber and sultry with a glowing *Star Wars* lightsaber replica in hand. Most people there just seemed happy to chat, free bottled beer in hand.

I had a harder time finding parties some other nights. It wasn’t always easy to tell where the good ones would be, but word around the convention was that you could go all week without paying for dinner or drinks if you knew where to go. My traveling companions coordinated with one another through Twitter, sending out text messages that broadcast their destinations to the entire group. Twitter is all over the news as I write this – either the Next Big Thing or the newest threat to writing, journalism, and modern civilization – but at the time, only the cutting-edge early adopters knew about it. That weekend, in fact, it won the SXSW Web Award for revolutionary technologies. A writer at tech culture site Laughing Squid wrote of the win, “Of course everyone immediately Twittered that Twitter won, causing massive waves of SMS notifications throughout the ballroom” (Beale, 2007). When I signed up for Twitter, I was still early enough to the service to get a username without any numbers appended to the end; I hadn’t yet allowed it to contact my phone at SXSWi, though, hopelessly retrograde in my hesitance to be charged a dime for each incoming message. After wandering aimlessly for a while on one

night, I finally got a text directly from Lillian, one of Phoebe's friends, relaying the address for the Yahoo! party.

Lillian was right: between the filling hors d'oeuvres, the stacks of free shirts printed on slim-fitting American Apparel tees, and the fact that even the top-shelf liquor was free, this was the party to be at. Simple signs had been printed out on copy paper and taped to the wall: "Please tag your photos YahooBarTab," knowing quite well that this crowd would likely be uploading and labeling its mementos of the revelry.

When the free food and drinks ran out at 9:30, Lillian, Phoebe, and company left for the PayPal party. A limo with a PayPal logo was parked outside. Someone in my group commented that it seemed "clubby," with lots of made-up twenty-somethings on the prowl, full of people with no connection to SXSW Interactive. Phoebe overheard a woman in the bathroom say, "I'm totally going to meet someone rich." We didn't stick around long.

We moved on to a place known for its giant margaritas. They had an open bar for awhile longer, but we couldn't figure out who was actually sponsoring it. It was as if mysterious powers were simply determined to provide us with a steady supply of alcohol. Members of my group snapped surreptitious photos of "internet famous" people I had never heard of; one guy posed, while another shot over his shoulder at minor celebrities in the background. As the hour grew later and the crowd grew too dense for mingling, we ended up seated around a table telling stories, like about the time Kevin proposed to his wife through an elaborately staged scavenger hunt. We took silly photos of one another, destined to be posted on Flickr. I got well and truly drunk, thinking I was taking the night off from ethnography, realizing only the next morning, with notebook in hand and

gurgling noises in my stomach, that I had engaged in participant observation of the most involved sort. I truly knew how it felt for ‘geek’ to be chic – in an hors d’oeuvres-for-dinner, sleeping-on-the-hotel-room-floor sort of way, at least.

I’ve attended several events where I was marketed to under the assumption that all in attendance would be comfortable being addressed as geeks and nerds. South by Southwest Interactive, however, may have been the first I attended which presumed not only that it’s *okay* to be a geek, but that it’s *cool* in the way that rockers and movie stars are cool. On the surface, SXSWi appears to serve up the same nerdy products and interests you’d see at any other tech show or fan convention – games, neat little robots, free shirts and magazines, and so on – but with a bunch of free booze and loud music thrown in. The fact that the free shirts weren’t all extra-large, however, and that the music was from quirky, independent artists was not incidental. We were expected to on the cutting edge of the art, tech, and culture scenes, people who are capable of wearing tight shirts and flirting at a party.

I did see some of the mentality that geeks are cool because they are rich, such as expressed by the hopeful woman at the PayPal party. I think attendees welcomed being treated as such, but I didn’t get the sense that most in attendance were necessarily wealthy wunderkinds themselves, so much as folks who were in touch with tech trends and make a living doing things that they enjoy doing. Actually, much of our glamour felt like “coolness by association” thanks to the neighboring Film and Music portions of South by Southwest. Being politely dismissed by a camera crew encouraged such suspicions.

Geeks currently exist in a state of tension between this image as a cutting-edge, tech-savvy trendsetter, and the long-established stereotypes already discussed in previous chapters. The result is an increased interest in imagining geeks as a discrete market segment, with new opportunities to identify oneself as a geek and renewed risk in solidifying existing stereotypes.

### *Courting the Geek Demographic*

*Chuck* is an “action comedy” TV show about a nerd who gets a government intelligence database imprinted in his brain. Despite his new super power of sorts, Chuck still spends many a night slumped on a couch with a video game controller, still gets flustered around a pretty CIA agent, and still works in tech support as a member of the “Nerd Herd” in the “Buy More” chain store (a parody of Best Buy’s Geek Squad). In explaining why the series was being made, one website’s “Fall TV preview” observed, “*The Office*, *Heroes*, and *Superbad* prove that geeks are chic.” For “likely pitch,” these critics suggest: “The demo reel will kill at Comic Con!” (Rabin et al., 2007).

In fact, it was the pilot that was shown, and yes, it sure killed at Comic Con.

The episode featured a lot of video game jokes, a ninja woman who beat up the protagonist and his best friend, and the actor who had formerly played Jayne on *Firefly*, who received applause from the crowd whenever he appeared on screen. Following the screening, some of the cast and creators came on stage for a panel, telling stories and answering audience questions. “You need a guy who you believe can be the social outcast but can get the girl,” co-creator Josh Schwartz said. Lead actor Zachary Levi seemed up to the role: believably awkward on screen, yet tall and handsome enough to

imagine actually attracting a woman who might get cast as a female lead in Hollywood. In Josh Schwartz's world, the geeks are pretty, and their eccentricities are charming. Prior to his work on *Chuck*, Schwartz made his name as the screenwriter behind *The O.C.*, known among geeks for its loveable heartthrob comics artist.

Executive producer and director Joseph McGinty Nichol – better known among moviegoers as McG – chimed in occasionally to tell embarrassing stories about the cast and explain his vision for the series. “My favorite story is the Neo story, the Peter Parker story,” he said. He was drawing on references the Comic Con crowd would recognize: Before Neo was “The One” in *The Matrix*, he was a shut-in hacker with an unsatisfying office job; before Peter Parker was Spider-man, he was a spectacled bookworm mocked by his fellow students.

“We’re products of the ‘80s,” Schwartz said. “We’re all pop culture aficionados – well, maybe not aficionados, but enthusiasts!”

The actors cracked jokes and told video game war stories, leaving an opening for McG to tell stories about how the actors had to be dragged out of the game aisle in CompUSA to shoot the Buy More scenes. Having shown off some gaming-induced battle scars, Levi asserted, “There’s nothing more bad ass than going to the emergency room at three in the morning and telling the doctor you cut your hand open playing Nintendo.” He reassured the audience that we should go buy a Wii, and professed his love for *Guitar Hero* as well.

Finally, the panel opened the floor to the audience for the Q&A, and people lined up at the microphones in the aisles. A woman approached wearing an orange and yellow

Jayne hat, recalling again the *Firefly* character whose actor had found his way onto the cast of *Chuck*. “I’ll get my friends to watch,” she promised.

TV and movie studios appear convinced that the geek image is now sufficiently acceptable to parade in front of mass audiences, and that geek audiences are worth catering to with flattering portrayals. “A memo saying ‘geek chic is going mainstream’ must have circulated among network TV execs as they concocted this fall’s prime-time lineup,” Mark Anderson (2007) muses in one *Wired* article. Over the last few years, the networks have become inundated with shows featuring sometimes-brainy, usually-awkward young guys who work for the CIA (*Chuck*), hunt demons (*Reaper*), travel through time (*Heroes*), do tech support (*The IT Crowd*), raise the dead (*Pushing Daisies*) – and, of course, have a chance to get the girl. In the aforementioned *Wired* article, executives at NBC and the CW reflect that “Geeks are the new cool,” and, “Whether we call them ‘geeks’ or ‘nerds,’ the major quality of these people is they all seem like good, normal, underdog-type characters” (quoted in M. Anderson, 2007).

Hollywood box-office blockbusters also participate in the trend, with dorky-boy-made-hero characters in action flicks like *Wanted* and *Transformers*. In *Time*, a producer behind *Spider-man 3* and other Marvel films notes, “Hard-core fans represent a small piece of the viewing public, but they influence geek culture, journalists, Wall Street. You don’t want them to trash your project.” That same article describes this demographic as “the typically geeky 16-to-34-year-old male (though there are some fangirls)” who is “one of the most powerful taste-makers in Hollywood, the guy behind the record-breaking success of *300*, the hit status of NBC’s *Heroes* and the reign of the Xbox 360

gaming console”; and, “occasionally he likes to dress up as Spider-Man” (“Boys who like toys,” 2007).

Geeks themselves seem to recognize this new status as “tastemaker.” On a comment on Geek Studies, Z. (2008a) explains:

by becoming vested in the “nerd lifestyle” you’re also becoming part of this ever-growing nerd market. It’s a demographic – or maybe a cross-section of a number of demographics – that seems to be developing some pull. I know we’ve all marked how everything from soft drinks to politics seems to be becoming more and more nerd-centric, with energy drinks marketed to gamers and political figures looking to pull in the Internet-savvy nerd vote.

The GeekForce report, commissioned by the SciFi Channel, indicates that a majority of geeks see themselves as people to whom friends come for purchasing opinions (quoted in “Nerds won’t fail,” 2005). It’s a self-serving report for those who commissioned it, of course, but it does probably reflect how many geeks see themselves as knowledgeable and discerning consumers.

As discussed in previous chapters, geeks pride themselves on their intelligence and nonconformity. Many see themselves as not too easily tricked by hucksters, and some see themselves as the force that drives their favorite entertainment industries. The program for the Penny Arcade Expo, for instance, notes in its description for a panel on PR and outreach that the “hardcore community” represents “early adopters [and] market influencers” that make or break game sales. At one Comic Con International panel about fan bloggers, the panelists explained their qualifications by noting, “We’re fanboys so we know if something’s cool or not,” and describing the sets they got to visit where they “totally geeked out.” They spoke about the influence they had, such as in preventing *Saw* from being a DVD-only release, or forcing WB to include a trailer in their Comic Con presentation that it (supposedly) wanted to keep secret. An audience member said, “I’d

like to thank you guys for giving all the drooling fanboys a voice so the movies don't turn out as complete and utter crap."

It's difficult to say whether this marketing dream actually represents reality, whether geeks really do represent the tastemakers they have been made out to be. Even *Chuck*, which killed at Comic Con, veered close to cancellation. It might have only been saved by a campaign by fans to patronize Subway, one of the show's sponsors, right before the first season finale (Mel, 2009). *Reaper* and *Pushing Daisies* face cancellation as well. *Heroes* has been renewed, but has declined to host a panel at Comic Con 2009. *Snakes on a Plane*, which saw unprecedented fan enthusiasm and voluntary promotion, was considered a failure by many for failing to make a huge smash on opening weekend.<sup>2</sup> It's possible that a marketing and production strategy that encourages fan input and internet buzz could benefit a media producer's own career and prestige among critics and fans (Shefrin, 2004), but this isn't to say that it's the most financially rewarding strategy.

Regardless of whether geeks represent a bloc of consumer superpower, the realization that they can be profitably addressed according to a constellation of some commonly shared interests and characteristics makes them a valuable market niche in its own right. The geeks' money is just as good as any other group's, and so geekdom has come to be marketed to as a demographic segment in much the same way that marketers have turned their attentions in the past to African American (Weems, 1998) and LGBT (Sender, 2005) consumers. The result has been a number of products and services targeting geeks openly and directly, offering more targeted takes on otherwise broadly marketed media and services. A number of geek dating and social networking services have sprung up on the web in recent years, for instance, including Geek 2 Geek, Sweet on



Geeks, World of Datecraft, and Geekvolution. And a number of periodicals have changed their approach to the fit in the “lifestyle magazine” format, promoting a nominally broadened focus from a specific medium to geek interests more generally.

Once a heraldic tech magazine calling for cultural revolution, *Wired* is now routinely compared to *Cosmopolitan* and *Maxim*. Alongside features on topics such as tech corporation leaders and autism, factoids about the world of science, and previews of upcoming products, issues are peppered with advice on living the geek life. My own subscription included a guide to the “Best Geek Cities,” rated on factors such as personal ads on Geek 2 Geek, availability of free Wi-Fi, and comic book stores per capita (Di Justo, 2007); a two-page spread on “How to Boost Your Geek Cred,” with flow charts and translations for common convention phrases in elvish, klingon, and 133t (“How to boost your geek cred,” 2008); a guide to “gizmo etiquette,” with tips like, “No one cares about your conference; badges in public are a *Don’t*,” and, “Are you Batman? No? Then you *Don’t* need a utility belt” (“Dos and don’ts for the tech set,” 2006, pp. 28–29); and a guide to high-fiving. After all, “For anyone who spent their formative years in peer groups favoring the Vulcan salute, the high five can be an intimidating prospect” (N. Miller, 2008, p. 50). It is thickly padded with ads for electronics, games, and personal grooming products, and has a handful of blogs targeting different subcategories of nerdy consumers, such as the GeekDad blog for parenting tips and family-friendly geekery.

Some other magazines that have more or less fit this format for some time have rebranded to reflect the relatively broader audience that might not have been able to be named before. *Wizard*, once labeled “The Guide To Comics,” rebranded itself in 2007 as “The #1 Men’s Pop Culture Magazine.” *PiQ*, once a manga magazine, similarly

rebranded itself, according to one blogger's write-up of its press kit, as "entertainment for the rest of us, squarely addressing the needs of a cutting-edge young male audience" (Butcher, 2008). And, of course, there are entirely new publications. *Geek Monthly* seems cut from the same cloth, if more weighted toward pop culture and fashion. It's a slimmer magazine, with fewer ads and fewer advertisers than *Wired*, including roleplaying and collectable card games, computer graphics curricula, direct-to-DVD releases, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* action figures, and occasional "adult" movies (such as one about pirates). And, like *Wired*, it gives tips for living the geek lifestyle in a way that won't get you ostracized too badly (including the discussion of appropriate use of 'frak,' described in the previous chapter). *Geek* also shows some attention to readers' style of dress: Mirroring fashion magazine spreads, *Geek Monthly's* "Style" sections feature young, attractive models in slim-fitting clothes and stylish accessories, with blurbs identifying where one can purchase such items. Many of these blurbs direct readers to web sites, such as Threadless.com, while some credit brick-and-mortar chains like Urban Outfitters, or designer labels like Hugo Boss (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Style section from Geek Monthly. Photo by Renard Garr.

Such blatant construction of a group as consumers may seem crass to some, but the practical upshot may be a sense for geeks that their culture is now more widely recognized as a “real,” discrete way of life by American culture at large. Justin attempts to clarify this by commenting on another Geek Studies post:

the geek demographic, as much as geeks have demographic qualities in common, is a growing power[...] You start to see companies reaching for a bigger slice of the pie (e.g., Wii, built for both geeks and non-geeks). But I think that by and large, geeks could give a crap – they just want the goods, vs. “hey, we’re finally being marketed to in a big way” – so I don’t think that it’s a form of validation in itself. I think the validation comes from the increased awareness of geek culture by non-geeks, with a bit more crossover of participation in that culture by non-geeks, that serves to lend a bit of normalcy to geek culture. (J. Miller, 2008)

The question that arises, then, is what will be constructed and presented as “normal” for the geek demographic.

### *Co-optation and Assimilation*

The construction of geeks as a demographic presents risks and opportunities alike to those who would consider themselves members. The default approach of many geek-targeted products and services implies a codification of geek TV and movie heroes as young, white men<sup>3</sup>; of geek parents as “GeekDads”; of tastemaking moviegoers as “fanboys”; and of *Geek Monthly* readers as audiences responsive to ads for pirate-themed porn. This reflects not just the well-established geek stereotype, but also the segment of particular interest to marketers – that “16-to-34” range (or narrower, depending on how one defines it) that advertisers suspect are eager to spend on DVDs, gadgets, and so on.

On the other hand, a broadened notion of what it means to be a geek potentially bespeaks a more inclusive geek culture, freer from the stereotypes associated with social ineptitude and lack of diversity. This kind of geek has many different interests, all considered related; is aware of personal appearance; and has the desire and ability to date and socialize. Products like those discussed in Chapter 3, such as the t-shirts by the Black Nerds Network and books like *She’s Such a Geek!*, even imply that the geek demographic is so broad that niches within it could be tapped. As I’ve touched upon in earlier chapters, however, geeks are somewhat divided on the notion that geeks and their interests are suddenly being thought of as cool.

At io9, a science-fiction blog, one writer suggests that the term ‘nerd’ be abandoned altogether in the face of mainstream co-optation:

Here’s what it meant to me [to be a nerd]: intellectual play, lack of pretension, gaming, science fiction, being smart and not caring what other people thought.

Nerds were people who questioned everything, who didn't accept anything until it was proven, who picked locks and repurposed lab equipment, who pursued their own passions for their own sake.

The category "nerd" overturned conventional ideas of cool, of attractiveness in both men and women, and of what it made sense to do on a Friday night. By valuing people who like cool stuff and don't care if gets them called a loser, it redefined what being a winner is. It gave me a way to value who I was and what I was doing.

So yes, I'm saying the category means something to me, which makes it all the more irritating that it's been re-branded out from under us. It's not just the mainstreaming of video games and superhero comics, it's that the whole identity is being reduced to a set of keywords, generational nostalgia and Internet trends that people can reflexively cheer for.... (A. Grossman, 2009)

The author offers a poll asking, "Should we retire the term 'nerd'?" As of this writing, between over 4700 votes, the minority (7%) has voted for, "You're dead wrong man, keep the faith! Cool stuff is still happening! Nerd4Life!"; slightly more (9%) voted for, "You're way late guy; it was all over by [*Star Wars* prequel] *The Phantom Menace*, or maybe that *Hackers* film with Angelina Jolie"; and slightly more than that (13%) voted for, "Let's keep it alive anyway for what's still valuable. Future generations of misfits will thank us." A glitch resulted in two extra options, "Answer 4" and "Answer 5," each of which has garnered more votes than any of the originally intended options. (Answer 5 is winning in a landslide with over 2500 votes, following a great deal of silly campaigning for the two in the comments.)

We could interpret this in a few ways, perhaps, but what I take from it is that some nerds feel hopeful about the future of geekdom, some feel jilted about the past, and many are more happy to practice doing silly, nerdy things than to lament that the term has already been lost.

It's worth considering that the co-optation of geek culture may not just be by outside forces, but equally represents a process of assimilation willingly accepted by

those who have long considered themselves geeky. As I discussed in previous chapters (particularly in the latter sections of “The Geek as Misfit” and “The Geek as Fan”), many geeks would be happy to feel less like outsiders in culture at large, even as they prize the objects and associations of geek culture. This process could allow members to retain a sense of geek identity, but to make that a culture that is more welcoming to those outside the usual stereotype, and less shameful for those to whom it applies.

Even those who might welcome greater appreciation of geeky interests still see some danger in this. With their fashion and behavior “dos and don’ts,” some products espousing the geek lifestyle imply that there may be a “cool” way to be a geek, and also an “uncool” way to be avoided. To some, warning against co-optation and assimilation isn’t necessarily a call for geek culture to keep out the “mainstream,” but to understand that ‘geek’ as ‘chic’ may actively exclude the uncool underdogs – and that geeks are welcoming this upon themselves. At *Hipster, Please!*, Z. rails against the practice of defining ‘geek’ as more hip than ‘nerd’ as a process that makes geek culture even more exclusionary:

We split up the nerds [...] and the geeks [...] based on unqualifiable differences instead of uniting them under their obvious similarities. We, in short, became our own tormentors. We decided who would sit at our table and who would be relegated to the far side of the lunch room. We became that guy who shook you down and called you fucking faggot or that girl who defaced your gym locker and made you a laughingstock. We became our own worst enemy. And we did it gladly. [...]

This enduring “geek chic” that the mainstream media has become so fixated upon is key to spreading our message of hope, but it can also prove a destructive element if we lose site of the fact that we are all but defined by some of our most unsavory experiences and inclinations. [...]

[I]n this new millennium so rooted in the technologies we helped to foster, to redefine this culture, then let us do it with a fine eye toward making it even more inclusive. (Z., 2009)

“I don’t know, be proud of what you are,” said the anime fan I met at the Come Out and Play Festival. We walked through New York in the late evening, chatting about my dissertation topic and the idea of whether nerds can be hip. “You’re a nerd or you’re not a nerd, but you don’t have to qualify it, you know?” We walked in silence for a moment, until she added: “To say that there’s hip nerds means that there’s a lot of unhip nerds.”

And perhaps there are a lot of unhip nerds – but to make that distinction overtly sounds a bit too familiar to those who were first called nerds against their own wishes. To deal with this paradox, a number of products marketed to geeks assert a sense of normalcy or assimilation on some level, but potentially leave some room to welcome (and to feel like) the resistant outsiders. This chapter will explore some of those products in greater detail for the insight they can offer into how geek identity is constructed today in ways that deal with this tension.

### The Social Logic of Nerd Fashion

The most outwardly apparent way to communicate which side of the line one stands on between “nerdy freak” and “geek chic” may be through fashion. Traditionally, geeks have not long been known for their dress sense, but a burgeoning market of t-shirts and specialty apparel explicitly aimed at nerds and geeks illustrates how clothing acts as a visual medium capable of expressing interests and ideals. As we’ll see in the examples that follow, geek apparel is sometimes used to express geeks’ willful sense of otherness, but at other times, it represents a means of trying to express geekiness without *looking geeky* at the same time. In some sense, it represents a recognition that the status

hierarchies of high school, defined by the appropriateness of one's interests and stylishness of one's dress, are just a microcosm of our culture at large – a culture that geeks sometimes may have no choice but to join, at least some of the time.

Many geeks may show the most attention to apparel in convention season, when they finally feel free to express their passions in an outward fashion. I once shared a hotel room with someone at Comic Con International who wore a pin on his backpack that read, "Being a fan means never having to ask, 'When would I ever wear that?'" The population at Comic Con represents a broad range of ages and dress, though the style leans more toward "celebratory nerd" than "geek chic." Many, many people showed up in shirts declaring their love for comic books, webcomics, video games, *Star Wars*, *Thundercats*, and other assorted declarations of geekiness. I passed at least a dozen women in t-shirts declaring, "I ♥ Nerds," with the heart occupied by an image of Clark Kent tearing open his suit. A teenage boy's shirt ironically declared in a faux-computer typeface, "I've obviously had hundreds of girlfriends." A mass of people lined up around the Fox Searchlight booth – some because they actually wanted to audition for a *Revenge of the Nerds* remake, perhaps, though everyone I spoke to was in it for the free shirt that read, in simple black on white, "nerd."

Being a professional event, South by Southwest Interactive featured a smaller proportion of people in t-shirts, but had a colorful showing nonetheless. There was less overt fandom on display, more claims of tech prowess, and a higher proportion of shirts from trendy and stylish designers. I bumped into a woman who explained that she was putting together a photo essay on geeky shirts at SXSWi for *Smith Magazine*; the results include shirts from sites like ThinkGeek and Nerdy Shirts, with slogans such as, "I'm



blogging this,” “css sucks,” “THE INTERNET is for L♥VERS,” and, simply, “geek” (jeremy, 2007). I noticed that many of those in attendance were decked out in shirts from Threadless, a website where fashion design is “crowdsourced” – submitted by designers, and then commented and voted upon by the online community, determining which shirts make the cut for production.

While such events can give fans and techies a chance to show off their nerdy best, such products represent a relatively broad market for geek apparel that many indulge in year-round. Blogs featuring news on geek culture and media, such as Boing Boing and Geekadelphia, often offer links to nerdy fashion items. GeekSugar, part of the Sugar Inc. network that includes blogs on fashion and other topics targeting a largely female audience, runs polls on whether the wearable items it links to are “totally geeky” or “totally chic.” The straight-up functional pieces, like the “KarrySafe Phone Pouch” (geeksugar, 2007a) – the modern equivalent of pocket protectors – often garner less appreciation than the quirky fashion statements, like rings featuring Space Invaders (geeksugar, 2007b).

Despite the still widespread notion that geeks are misfits (and even that this may be central to one’s geekiness), even geeks have standards for acceptable social norms. On many occasions, I’ve detected some palpable resentment among geeks toward “the smelly ones” for giving the rest a bad name. At the Penny Arcade Expo, for instance, one woman angrily exclaimed to me, “Ugh! I can’t stand it! You can practically *see* the stench, like a *cloud!*” (I don’t think she was talking about me.) Visiting in a later year, I passed someone wearing a shirt that read, “Real gamers shower.”

“If you saw a guy dressed nice, with good hygiene, you’re never going to think he’s a nerd,” one designer of geeky apparel told me. “It’s really outward appearance that’s going to determine that, and in some cases, it’s out of their control, like acne or something along those lines.” He favored the term ‘geek,’ identifying nerds as more annoying and not necessarily engaged in geeky interests.

An acceptably “geeky” person, then, would be unacceptably “nerdy” (or just “too geeky,” if you prefer), if not for having certain interests, wearing the right clothing, and practicing good personal hygiene. The distinction is somewhat reminiscent of the one made by popular kids to denigrate their peers in high school. By the same token, it’s a way of understanding how the individual geek polices him or herself as much as, or even more than, defining how to count others out. Elevating one of these terms has enabled adult geeks to claim a label suggesting certain positive qualities, still within arm’s length of ‘mainstream’ culture’s notions of appearance and social etiquette.

Certain stereotypes about nerd fashion (or lack thereof) still circulate in the popular imagination, then, and even among geeks themselves. These ideas are reflected in apparel marketed directly to geeks. Some embrace their stereotypes and rail against “mainstream” notions of coolness. Some partake of a growing market of stylish shirts allows fans, techies, and self-proclaimed outsiders to display that they are nerds without looking *too* nerdy, if they so choose. And some may not seem geeky at all, by all (or most) outward appearances.

*Wearing Geekiness on Your Sleeve*

The line for the Penny Arcade Expo stretched around the corner of Bellevue's Maydenbauer Convention Center, down the block, around another corner, and out of sight. A pair of men, one with a cardboard box, made their way down the sidewalk, quizzing people and tossing free t-shirts into the crowded line for correct answers. Passing by my spot, he said to the fellow next to me, "I like your shirt," and tossed him a free shirt without quizzing him. My neighbor was wearing a black shirt that said "RIAA" – for the Recording Industry Association of America – crossed out. He accepted the free shirt without comment, without even smiling.

I ended up interviewing my neighbor in line some weeks after the convention. I recalled the giant banner-sized ads in the convention center; the way that Bawls energy drinks had been given away free in previous years, and were starting to be sold, with blue, fizzy mints given away in their place; and the free shirts passed out, including the one he had been given.

My interviewee responded flatly, "I'm kind of immune to marketing."

It's one thing to jokingly paint oneself as an outsider in conversation with friends, a geeky blog with a small readership, or an anonymous interview with a graduate student doing a dissertation on geeks. But being willing to publicly proclaim that stereotypes apply to oneself by literally wearing them on one's sleeve – or, even more visibly, the front of one's shirt – takes this a step further. This loudly proclaims subcultural affiliation, claims to power, and outright scorn, whether for normative ideals of behavior and appearance, or for those constructed specifically as powerful enemies (like an industry that has a habit of suing computer-savvy consumers). These are some of the

common functions of t-shirts marketed to geeks, largely sold through web-based retailers. This represents an image of the geek simultaneously as a knowing consumer and as a resistant anti-consumer.

In my interviews, casual chatter at cons, and online, it's common to hear geeks say that they don't have a reputation for being stylish, and that they tend to dress pretty casually. Accordingly, many geek t-shirts are printed on black. An employee of one popular nerdy apparel dealer explained to me, "We keep trying to make different colors but they just don't sell very well." Similarly, a designer from another major geek apparel designer online indicated that the site carries a lot of black shirts because they are "kind of what everybody wants." He suggested to me that black may be the color of choice for someone who just wants to throw on a t-shirt and spend the day in front of a computer, but black is also the universal color of anti-establishment sentiment and disaffected youth countercultures such as punks and goths (who often share negative school experiences with geeks).

Generally, the most common approach is to signifying "insider" membership in this "outsider" culture is to offer a gag or reference that will be understandable to in-group members, and meaningless, purposely obtuse, or even insulting to nonmembers. The most non-confrontational approach is to simply make in-jokes, like on one black t-shirt from SplitReason that shows three red lights around a power symbol, with the text, "I'M AFRAID I CAN'T LET YOU PLAY THAT, DAVE" ("RRoD t-shirt," 2009) – a reference to both the malevolent computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the error lights on an Xbox game console suffering hardware failure. Another relatively non-confrontational motif used to signal outsider status is a humorous acknowledgement (or reclamation) of

negative stereotypes. ThinkGeek, a site with “stuff for smart masses,” and J!NX, site with apparel for “gamers and geeks,”<sup>4</sup> both feature shirts playing off the stereotype of the pasty, shut-in nerd, with slogans like “Keep out of direct sunlight” (“Keep out,” 2009) and “The sun is trying to kill me” (“The sun,” 2009). ThinkGeek in particular carries a “frustrations” line of shirts simultaneously suggesting the power that professional geeks wield (in the form of technical expertise) but also the subordinate position they must occupy as tech support staff, or in dealing with ignorant managers.

Many geeky black t-shirts, however, typically imply or state outright an “us/them” dichotomy in which the geek is presumably superior. One of the most common motifs is a boast of superior skills, particularly related to multiplayer games or coding ability. A shirt from ThinkGeek makes the us/them distinction particularly apparent, stating: “There are only 10 types of people in the world: Those who understand binary and those who don’t” (“Binary people,” 2009). (“10” is the binary notation for “two.”) Shirts related to multiplayer gaming particularly assert hostility, aggression, and dominance. J!NX, ThinkGeek, Geeklabel, and other geek apparel sites sell a variety of shirts boasting dominance in first-person shooter video games, sporting threatening boasts and gamer slang associated with defeating less experienced opponents (e.g., “I see fragged people” and “I eat n00bs”), as well as iconography including guns and skulls (“Live in your world,” 2009). Some signal rebelliousness against corporate and government powers, such as the J!NX shirt declaring the wearer a “Music Pirate” (“Music pirate t-shirt,” 2009). A shirt once sold by ThinkGeek challenges gamer stereotypes and video game regulation, featuring a skull with a video game controller and the ironic text, “Guns don’t kill people. Kids who play videogames kill people.” The page

featuring the shirt also quipped: “And if you believe that, we also hear that Bill Gates is switching to Linux and making all MS code Open Source” (“Guns don’t kill people,” 2006).<sup>5</sup> These statements fit into a resistant image characterized by geek interests: A general anti-corporate ethos suggesting hostility toward any who seem to prioritize monetary or political gain over consumer freedom and creativity.

In addition to these shirts’ ability to indicate in-group status to fellow geeks, their obtuseness or self-denigration is also presumed to help cultivate an image of the eccentric outsider to culture at large – a source of pride among geeks who foreswear conventional modes of popularity. J!NX’s description for one shirt reads: “We don’t need to explain this one. If you know what it means, you get the joke. If you don’t have a clue, you should probably ask someone.” J!NX’s website allows comments from users on each shirt’s page, and at least one user comment indicates that a visitor wants the shirt just for the blank stares it will draw (“Chown t-shirt,” 2009).<sup>6</sup>

Even as such products attempt to assert geek power and reclaim geek stereotypes, however, they sometimes represent a risk in upholding power differences and divisive stereotypes. Many shirts on geek-branded apparel sites are only available in men/unisex sizes, with a smaller selection available in women’s (a.k.a. “girls,” “ladies” and “babydoll”) sizes. Some shirts become available in women’s sizes only after people request them, as suggested in comment threads and elsewhere. The limited stock of clothing specifically cut for women, even with the same designs on them as the men’s shirts, presumes and potentially ensures that the main market for such clothing is male.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, while the geek cred of being good at video games or savvy with movie references is presumably available to men and women alike, some products asserting

geek power may implicitly suggest that this means masculine power, with products asserting geek attractiveness implicitly suggesting that female geeks are starved for male attention. There are some shirts made in women's sizes that specify dominance over men, such as the ThinkGeek shirt that states "i PWN boys" ("i pwn boys," 2009).<sup>8</sup> Much more common than themes of dominance in women's shirts, however, are slogans casting the wearer as an adoring (or would-be) girlfriend. The most commonly-worn geek shirt I have seen on women at fan conventions is some variation of the "I ♥ Geeks" slogan. Unlike most other geek shirts, these reverse the statement on the shirt from a statement about the self to a statement (potentially) about the spectator. The aforementioned "I ♥ Nerds" shirt spotted repeatedly at Comic Con International, for instance, with a picture of Clark Kent in the heart, flatters people who see (rather than wear) the shirt by implying the power that nerdy men hide beneath their deceptive exteriors. The Smith Magazine photo essay of t-shirts at South by Southwest Interactive also features women in shirts reading "TALK NERDY TO ME" and "Ask me about my access points." Smith Magazine invites readers to comment on the photos on Flickr, but specifies, "don't proposition nerdy girl; that's just played out" (jeremy, 2007). (As of this writing, "Talk nerdy to me" had 40 comments, compared to fewer than 5 on every other photo.)

We might see such t-shirts as an opportunity to challenge the stereotype of geeks as romantically or sexually undesirable, but the availability of such shirts reflects an ongoing gender division. J!NX's "The Sun is Trying to Kill Me" shirt was initially only available in male/unisex sizes, with a girl version only made after multiple requests in the comments ("The sun," 2009). Another shirt, meanwhile, which invites sexual advances by using a line from the *Gears of War* video games – "Press and Hold (X) to Pick Up" –

is only available in women's sizes, despite some requests in the comments for a men's version ("Press and hold," 2009). ThinkGeek's variant on the "I ♥ Geeks" concept for the spoken-for geeks, "I ♥ My Geek" ("I love my geek," 2009; emphasis mine), was similarly only available in women's sizes at first and only made in men's sizes after visitor requests.<sup>9</sup> Geeky men may be expected to take some pride in their pasty complexions and hermit-like ways, but are not expected to have mates to be proud of; geeky women are expected to be willing sexual or romantic partners, but there may also be an expectation that they must be attractive.

As many of the above examples illustrate, geek shirts signal in-group membership by making references to things only fellow geeks would be likely to recognize, often in a tone that draws attention to the wearer's outsider or nonconformist status. They are sometimes purposely exclusionary, and sometimes less purposely so, but may still be exclusionary nonetheless. As some geeky interests seem less embarrassing in American culture, however, and as the nonconformity associated with geekiness comes to be associated with coolness, geek references increasingly find their way beyond sites for hackers, gamers, and web comics fans, and into mainstream fashion outlets.

#### *Nerdy Hipsters vs. Hip Nerds*

Walking through H&M, in search of a shirt might fit, a certain graphic caught my eye. A t-shirt for "Dorkington Hackers" featured a young man in glasses, surrounded by a microscope, floppy disks, calculators, and seductively-posed women. The slogan on the shirt, "Ain't nothing we can't hack," reminded me of some shirts I'd on websites overtly marketing products to geeks, though those shirts had actually seemed quite earnest to me,



whereas this one seemed pretty easy to interpret as an ironic interpretation of the nerd as financially and sexually successful. Perhaps I saw this as more mocking because it uses the term ‘dork,’ which generally implies social ineptitude even worse than ‘geek’ or ‘nerd’ (see Chapter 4). Perhaps I saw it as more ironic because of the use of “ain’t” juxtaposed with a cheesy-looking white guy seemed an intentional race-reversal, and the especially sexualized women were so overtly represented rather than more subtly implied. Or perhaps I simply interpreted it as a joke because it was part of a pair, and its mate was harder to read as a celebration of the nerdy. Beside “Dorkington Hackers,” another shirt read like a wordy vintage ad for an “Anti Pizza Face” acne cure, linking stereotypes of juvenility and physical unattractiveness with “Fantasy Fairs,” spending “several hours in front [*sic*] of the computer,” and inspiring envy among “rollplaying [*sic*] mates.”

This is a version of “geek chic” that is more concerned with the chic – an of-the-moment fashion that may come and go with the season. “The line between geek chic and plain-old geek can be a fine one,” warns an AP article with “Tips for Making the Geek Chic Look Work For You” (Associated Press, 2009). “A bow tie could be a fraction of an inch too thick, or there might be just a little too much room in the collar of a short-sleeve dress shirt.” The article suggests specific pieces – sweater vests, horn-rimmed glasses, and wingtips, among others – for those who would like to “ease into this new look favored by the hipsters who just a few seasons ago were touting tight jeans and skater sneakers.” A look accentuating slimness is the way to go, but only if you’re already slim, according to the senior vice-president and general merchandise manager of Men’s Wearhouse. Specific designers, such as Thom Browne, Shipley & Halmost, Penguin, and

Ben Sherman also offer their own versions of the style worthy of consideration, says the author of *The Nordstrom Guide to Men's Style*. Hair should be very neat or just a bit messy, says the fashion director of *Men's Health*.

Some of the nerd-flavored apparel marketed to stylish consumers may still be of genuine interest to self-proclaimed geeks. The design of such clothing nevertheless makes apparent how to render the nerdiness as palatable for those who do not want to be mistaken for losers. In Urban Outfitters, I found shirts that presented geeky references sanctioned by license-holders and recognizable to much broader audiences. The shirts with the Flash and the Joker are okay by DC Comics and its parent company, AOL Time Warner. Hasbro rather recently approved the faded Transformers shirt that features Optimus Prime, a faded rainbow, and the number "84." Even the generic "NERD" shirt, printed in college-athletics style typeface with artificially faded letters, is licensed apparel from the *Revenge of the Nerds*, according to the print below the collar on the inside.

This purposefully worn look, achieved through pre-faded fabrics and distressed images, mimics an authentic, thrift-store aesthetic. It's a dominant style for graphic tees at trendy clothing retailers aimed at middle- and upper-middle-class youth, including American Eagle, Abercrombie and Fitch, Express, and others. Wearing nerdy shirts in this style affirms one's awareness of contemporary trends, but it also serves a secondary purpose, acting as an ironic distancing technique. The image on the shirt is something that was relevant to its wearer years ago; that Optimus Prime image and number "84" tells people that the wearer belongs to a certain generation, but not necessarily that the wearer still plays with Transformer toys.<sup>10</sup>

These are not shirts by geeks who feel the need to express what big fans they still are, intellectual property rights be damned. Nor are they shirts asserting any esoteric knowledge. If there is to be a reference to intellectual pursuits, it is unlikely to be an exclusionary joke requiring detailed knowledge of binary or UNIX. One shirt I came upon in Urban Outfitters, for instance, features the periodic table of elements, a familiar feature of every high school chemistry classroom. In short, these shirts offer signs with connotations of nerdiness, but with a relatively low barrier to entry, and without any suggestion that the nerdiness on display is very central to the wearer's life. "Nerds are beginning to represent a sort of punk rock-flavor brand of anti-hip that is almost bulletproof," Z. (2008a) once remarked on Geek Studies. "With geek chic, anything that's nerdy marks the conspicuous consumer as bearing a keen self-awareness as an outsider, while anything that's cheesy can be easily laughed off as ironic."

As this quote explains, this fashion-friendly interpretation of nerdiness potentially serves a couple purposes. One is to affirm one's social and stylistic capability through blatant irony, to actively distance the wearer from that which is uncool. The geek chic hipster is *different* from the pizza-faced gamer referred to on the t-shirt, or the fashion-blind twig recalled by too-snug shirt collars. And, on the other hand, another potential purpose is to claim a sort of *similarity* to the nerd, indirectly claiming coolness by implying that one is not "trying too hard." Reviewers at Yelp.com and other websites, for instance, describe Barcade, a Williamsburg bar with '80s arcade games, as "nerdy" in a positive sense, and full of "hipsters" in a negative sense. Taking on some trappings of nerdiness can help one seem less like they're trying to be cool: "It's a fun bar, perhaps 'hipster'ish... but it is Williamsburg. Much less pretentious feeling than most

Williamsburg bars, because you can't really act like hot shit playing Pac Man" (tangentialism, 2004).

Still, better *Pac-man* than *Tekken 5*, *Marvel vs. Capcom*, or some other game that's more recently popular in American arcades, still played by the hardcore gamers and geeks (Tocci, forthcoming-a). There's a reason that the party with arcade machines at South by Southwest Interactive, described earlier, featured titles like *Pac-man*. I am reminded of an interviewee who explained to me that the hipsters she knew from zine communities were happy to play old Atari and arcade games, but balked at contemporary games like *Halo* and the *Grand Theft Auto* series: As with the Optimus Prime "84" shirt, a "retro" gaming reference takes on just enough uncoolness to be cool.

In *American Nerd*, Ben Nugent (2008) describes hipsters who take on the nerd look as "faux-nerds," declaring that the real nerds are the systemic-thinker outcasts who can't help but be outsiders. As some of the examples from the above paragraphs demonstrate, it isn't entirely off-base to suggest that some who dress "nerdy" aren't actually nerds: There are indeed people who do not even necessarily consider themselves geeks, but who incorporate trappings of geekiness in their fashion for the connotations they carry, much as one might wear a pea coat without actually considering oneself a sailor. This notion of "geek chic" is a trend, and, like bell bottom pants, it will pass, perhaps destined to see the occasional comeback.

Nevertheless, given my own methodological and theoretical inclinations, I'm hesitant to proclaim anyone a faux-nerd who might proclaim him or herself a nerd. While nerdiness may be a stylistic affectation for the hipster, it's worth considering that hipness may be a stylistic affectation for the nerd.

Consider first that many who have long identified as geeks and nerds welcome the chance for a slight makeover. Some geeks actually are concerned with appearance, not just presenting themselves as outside of the mainstream through esoteric references. At a panel on marketing for web comics at Comic Con International, for example, creators of popular, geek-oriented comics agreed that it was not sufficient to simply make shirts with the comics' characters or their logo, as those tend not to sell as well as expected. While such references should be sufficient to signal who a fan is to other fans, the consensus among the creators was that they also need to be *good shirts*. This may help explain why Penny Arcade's creators stopped making their own t-shirts and hired the designer behind Gameskins.com, who brought over a complete line of stylish shirts with references more broadly related to gaming culture. Similarly, in addition to the high-selling black t-shirts, J!NX makes colorful t-shirts for more fashion-conscious customers. Its shirts sell not just online, but through both X-treme Geek, a catalog for gifts and gadgets, and Hot Topic, a trendy mall chain store.

Even among those who are deeply embedded in less-than-hip fan and tech cultures, the notion of 'geek style' has become more normalized in conjunction with keeping open romantic possibilities. "I think that the term geek or nerd is very different from when I was younger," explained one self-proclaimed geeky woman I met at Comic Con International. "Now, it's even fashionable to be a nerd. You see those guys with those big, thick glasses, and look all preppy, but they have that cool rock star haircut, so there's a different kind of nerd or geek." And when Kotaku announced that French "lifestyle" magazine *Amusement* would be mixing games, geek culture, and fashion, commenters responded:

**Intellectualdiot**

12/17/08

The kid in me likes the gaming side!  
 But the fag in me loves the high fashion side!  
 This has got my approval.

**new\_pornographer**

12/18/08

There's nothing faglike about fashion, man. How else are you going to attract ladies? (comments on McWhertor, 2008)

Moreover, much of the more designer-style geek apparel still clearly strives for “geek cred” rather than simply co-opting the geek image or making appeals to the broadest common denominator of recognizable symbols. The “hip nerds” may not declare that there are “10 types of people in the world” on the front of their t-shirts, but may still wander beyond the safety zone of retro video game references in their style of dress. A shirt ironically declaring “I put the bad in badminton” (Chris the Geek, 2007) from Geekfitters (run by a former *Beauty and the Geek* contestant) provides some gentle self-deprecation to circumvent the assertions of power and reclamation of more hyperbolic stereotypes displayed in the black t-shirts described above; it presents one as proudly geeky, but not confrontational about it. An orange shirt from Insanely Great Tees (which bills shirts as “Made by Geeks, for Geeks”), meanwhile, features a pixilated bomb from the error messages of early Macintoshes (“The bomb,” 2009). As with the retro gaming shirts, such pixilated imagery acts as a visual shorthand for “nostalgia value” and “computer skill,” but in this case tied to something a little more middle-ground in esoteric appeal: not necessarily as accessible as *Pac-man*, nor as exclusionary as binary.

Another reason we may be hesitant to proclaim that trappings of hipness mark one as a faux-geek is that some such especially earnest signs cannot be definitively coded as either ‘geek’ or ‘hipster.’ Consider nerd references in tattoos, a relatively permanent way

of wearing your geekiness on your sleeve. Perhaps it remains acceptably hip to have ghosts from *Pac-man* tattooed on oneself for the reasons described above, but some certainly go the extra mile in getting inked with less-than-obviously-cool imagery to reflect their identity. A contributor to the Weekly Geek, a video game podcast and geek culture blog, has one elaborate tattoo from Nintendo's Legend of Zelda games, and another of a character from Achewood, a long-running webcomic – neither especially *uncool*, but both obscure enough to carry a respectable degree of geek cred. Z. (2008a), the man behind nerd culture blog and podcast at Hipster, Please!, admits, “I suppose I see things like the rise geek ink and clothing as just another way of watering down the culture. (The discerning reader will, no doubt, note that I've participated in both of these self-indulgent bastardizations myself, but whatchagonnado?)” Nevertheless, his tattoo – a giant 20-sided die on his arm, a reference to “the golden age of tabletop roleplaying” (Z., 2007d) – is unassailably nerdy, considering that playing *Dungeons & Dragons* is still beyond what many geeks are willing to admit in public.

It may be difficult, then, to notice that someone might consider him or herself a geek just by sight. Part of that may be because the line between “hip” and “geeky” has become so blurry, but part of it may also be a result of active efforts to hide one's geekiness. Geek attire has a solution even for this, however, in the production of garments that proclaim multiple cultural affiliations simultaneously.

### *The “Stealth Geek” Aesthetic*

The geekiest shirt in my own wardrobe may be the one that looks at first glance to just be any one of a number of parodies of the iconic image of Che Guevara. It sports a

high-contrast, black-on-red image of a man in a beret. Those who follow game industry news might recognize the star-shaped icon on this particular beret, or even the man's face: He is Shigeru Miyamoto, famed designer of the *Super Mario Bros.* games, and spokesman for the Nintendo Wii, promoted pre-release under the codename "Revolution" (hence the Che pun). The style of the shirt might not seem out of place in youth culture fashion chains like Urban Outfitters or Hot Topic, but the joke behind it is lost on all but the most serious video game fans. I wasn't trying to be exclusionary in purchasing it; I simply found it hilarious, and felt I could use more apparel with Super Mario stars. And, on some level, it probably occurred to me that I could wear it in public without feeling like too big a dork.

You might call me a "stealth geek," I suppose. As I noted in the previous chapter, this term refers to one who has geeky interests, but may not outwardly fit the geek stereotype. The difference between a stealth geek and a closet geek (see Chapter 1), presumably, is that a closet geek doesn't even admit to himself that he is a geek, whereas the stealth geek is well aware of it, but may not display it at all times. To some extent, this is a matter of "playing it cool"; 'coolness' is historically conceptualized as laid-back and effortless, while geekiness (as described in the previous chapter in particular) is often conceptualized by geeks themselves as being about passion, playfulness, even obsession. Being a stealth geek entails little more than simply not displaying fannish enthusiasm until bidden to do so. The stealth geek isn't necessarily trying to hide that nerdiness, but, as the "Viva Miyamoto" shirt described above may help illustrate, there are ways to signal one's geekiness to one's fellow geeks without coming off as a pedantic nerd to those who miss the signal.



For many, working geeky references into a wardrobe may be a welcome means of revealing the interests they find central to their lifestyles and identities. As adult geeks occupy a variety of social contexts, however, wearing “loudly” nerdy clothing may be felt to be inappropriate. Wearing clothing that hides geeky references in cryptic imagery, designed to be ignored as meaningless, enables wearers to avoid negative stereotypes rather than confronting or embracing them. By the same token, some of this apparel may simply reflect the reality that geeks cannot be fully in a playful “geek-out mode” all the time. Adult lives bring responsibilities that may lead us into a variety of contexts, and wearing geeky clothing even in those contexts where we should be dressed “appropriately” could allow one to feel that the geeky part of one’s identity need not be suppressed entirely.

One ThinkGeek necktie makes this sentiment plain: Featuring rounded squares and lines arranged in a tasteful pattern, the tie secretly spells out “ties suck,” coded in binary; the site proclaims, “Simultaneously affirm and reject corporate conformity!” (“The ThinkGeek ‘ties suck’ tie,” 2009). Along these lines, Penny Arcade has announced plans to develop polo shirts with an inconspicuous game-controller logo over the left breast where one might normally expect to see a polo player or a crocodile. The company also sells t-shirts, of course: “But not everyone works in a place where you can wear T-shirts,” PA business manager Robert Khoo explains in *Wired*. “Especially T-shirts that say BOOBIES, which one of ours does.” *Wired* further reports that “each garment will also come with a helpful pamphlet explaining the rules of fashion to sartorial n00bs” (Baker, 2007, p. 106).

Even much more casual attire can signal “geek cred” by hiding pop culture references in apparel that doesn’t necessarily seem geeky at first glance. ThinkGeek and J!NX, for example, feature shirts displaying the number “42” without further explanation; ThinkGeek’s in particular is fashioned to look like a sports jersey, though the number is actually a reference to a series of science-fiction novels (“42 ringer shirt,” 2009). Gecklabel similarly hides a comic book joke in a t-shirt with an unassuming “Kent Farm” logo, referring to the place where Superman grew up (“Kent Farm,” 2009). As these examples suggest, and in a similar fashion to the apparel described earlier, fashion-oriented shirts by small, online, geeky businesses maintain “geek cred” through subtle, unauthorized use of characters and phrases appropriated from popular culture. Such clothing straddles a line between the esoteric and purposely exclusionary apparel described earlier and the more “normal” attire marketed to the hip. It retains the more tightly focused reference to signal in-group membership, though embeds it in a style that leaves does not mark one as an “other” in less-geeky crowds.

Some recent trends in fashion make such embedding relatively easy: If no one expects to recognize what is referred to on a shirt anyway, then a vague or hidden reference doesn’t look out of place. Various trendy and mainstream fashion outlets sell t-shirts with highly stylized but functionally meaningless designs. The “graphic tees” section of most such contemporary retailers features a number of shirts depicting coats of arms and unfamiliar logos of the sort that, like the “worn” style described earlier, might appear on clothing in a thrift store (Figure 7). Such shirts carry connotations not in the message itself or the object that seems literally signified, but in their visual style and broader cultural associations. Shirts with hidden geeky references actually do confer a

message to those in the know, but often mimic (and/or mock) prevailing styles, potentially slipping past the notice of casual observers.



**Figure 7.** Graphic t-shirt sold in Express Men. Photo by author.

The crest or coat of arms motif, for instance, is often used to give an air of contemporary style to geeky interests, such as fashioning a coat of arms or crest out of video game hardware, fantasy weaponry, or other geeky iconography (Figure 8). Penny Arcade's clothing also occasionally slips gaming references into designs directly based

upon trendy shirts sold through outlets like Urban Outfitters and Hot Topic. The Miyamoto-as-Che-Guevara shirt, noted earlier, is one such example; another example is a “Jesus is my guild leader” shirt, simultaneously parodying the “Jesus is my homeboy” shirts sold at major fashion chains, a running joke from its own comic strips (that Jesus is a hardcore gamer), and the wearer’s own interest in online games like *World of Warcraft* (“Jesus is my guild leader,” 2009).



**Figure 8.** J!NX men’s coat of arms t-shirt. Image from [jinx.com](http://jinx.com).

Ultimately, however, one may not even necessarily have to actively hide such geeky references in order to be a “stealth geek.” As the notion spreads that ‘geeky’ is not mutually exclusive with ‘socially capable,’ unapologetically geeky references slip more visibly into fashion marketed to even broader audiences. Some online apparel retailers include products with somewhat more subtle references that may be recognizable to geeks, for instance, even as their “geeky” offerings represent only a portion in their offerings overall. Noisebot features designs like *i* arguing with  $\pi$ , with the imaginary number saying “be rational” and the irrational number saying “get real” (“Be rational,” 2009). Threadless, meanwhile, is not a geek clothing site per se, but given its reliance on dedicated web audiences, it should not be surprising that a number of relatively esoteric geek references make it to print. Examples include a shirt featuring a skull formed out of the polyhedral dice used for roleplaying games that acknowledges the disdain heaped upon the hobby – “We’re rollin’, they’re hatin’” (Hudson, 2009) – and another titled “Nerds Unite!” (Davies, 2009), featuring an assortment of awkward-looking kids and band geeks forming into a robot-like shape to menace an athlete in a letter jacket.

As such geek-oriented clothing options multiply online, what was once a relatively narrow niche market has become so large that some decry it for co-optation, inauthenticity, or mindless conformity, as alluded to earlier in this chapter. “This is a poser shirt. Only posers wear it,” one blog commenter notes of a shirt with a joke about GameStop, a retail chain, sold at ZeStuff (Capt. Jack, 2007). “The whole idea behind these quirky shirts was that they were rare finds,” another reader complains on another highly-trafficked video game blog, responding to a post on a shirt with a Wii joke from

Nerdy Shirts. “Now that you can buy them en mass [*sic*] at 1,000 different websites they just make you look like a geek in uniform” (Boxelder, 2007).

Even so, working geeky references into a broader array of products potentially speaks to a broadened sense of who can and should feel welcome identifying as a geek, implying that the label isn’t mutually exclusive with other interests or identities. Noisebot features “Geek” as a category of shirts alongside “Sports” and “Ethnic,” which would be unlikely to be found on sites more narrowly targeting nerds. Threadless, Noisebot, and other sites with geeky offerings (but less explicitly geeky affiliations) also offer a broader selection of shirts in women’s sizes that what one might find on more narrowly geek-targeted sites, suggesting a more gender-balanced market. Conformity may be antithetical to geek ideals, but an expanding market for nerd esoterica potentially challenges the notion that geekdom is solely expressed and defined by those who fit the old stereotypes.

As we’ll see in the section that follows, there are other kinds of products which are tailor-made to reach geeks and celebrate their identity, including specialty entertainment media similarly distributed online. Like magazines and fashion, making entertainment “for geeks, by geeks” may imply a sometimes uneasy means of negotiating geekiness with “the mainstream,” an interest in integrating esoteric symbols of geek identity into the more universally understood system of conspicuous consumption in American culture. Creating and marketing digital media also represents a lower cost of entry than producing magazines or fashion, potentially allowing more people to participate in the construction of what it means to be geeky, and according even greater “geek cred” to those who make it to the top. But by creating and consuming material that’s somehow set apart from mainstream markets and consumable in private, however –

such as music or comics that are primarily distributed online, and practically impenetrable to outsiders – geeks engage in a potentially less conspicuous form of consumption.

#### Made in Nerd Nation

Jonathan Coulton opened his set at the Penny Arcade Expo with “The Future Soon.” The song begins by describing a scene of high-school rejection and humiliation, but suggests in the refrain that things will get better:

*‘Cause it’s gonna be the future soon  
and I won’t always be this way  
when the things that make me weak and strange get engineered away  
It’s gonna be the future soon  
I’ve never seen it quite so clear  
And when my heart is breaking I can close my eyes and it’s already here*

By the end of the song, the narrator has quite literally rebuilt himself, enabled a robot uprising, and chased after his former school crush (“there’s nowhere she can hide / When a crazy cyborg wants to make you his robot bride”) (Coulton, 2008).

“I’m going to do a song about math,” he announced later, receiving explosive cheers. He laughed a little: “Why do I feel like this is the only place in the world where I can say that and get a response like that?” The crowd also enthusiastically accepted its role as a groaning, flailing undead chorus during “Re: Your Brains,” a song about a smarmy office worker-turned-zombie. The audience indicated its approval by holding aloft glowing cell phones, PDAs, and handheld gaming devices in lieu of lighters.

The headlining act that night was The Minibosses, a four-piece rock band that covers music from the original Nintendo Entertainment System. As they played wordless songs from Super Mario Bros. 2, Castlevania, and Mega Man 2, a sizable portion of the

audience sang along – “daa daa daa daa dadaa daaa.” I suspect a good number of them were singing the tune from memories of playing the games in the 1980s more so than from memories of the band’s version.

The evening concerts are among the largest attractions at the Penny Arcade Expo, featuring what Penny Arcade Writer Jerry Holkins describes as musical acts “specifically relevant to the geek experience.” The shows feature rappers like Optimus Rhyme, whose name is a reference to *Transformers*; MC Frontalot, who wrote the official Penny Arcade theme song; Freezepop, a synth pop band with gaming and geek influences; video game cover bands like the Minibosses and the Neskimos; and Jonathan Coulton, singer/songwriter and Contributing Troubadour to *Popular Science*.

This fits into a broader range of products that don’t *require* audiences to be nerds to enjoy them, but it sure helps if they are. Coulton’s music is on the more accessible end of the spectrum; everyone knows what a zombie or a mad scientist is and why it’s funny to sing about them. On the less accessible end of the spectrum are webcomics like Penny Arcade, which cracks jokes about geeks, gamers, and practically up-to-the-minute game industry developments, sometimes requiring visitors to read accompanying news posts in order to even get what the comic is about. These are among the more successful businesses in marketing to geeks as geeks, rather than marketing geek-styled products to the mainstream, or leaving the audience’s nerdiness politely unacknowledged. As an innumerable series of Penny Arcade knockoffs and Frontalot imitators could attest to, the vast majority of would-be geek-to-geek entertainment projects remain labors of love; those featured here include a few that enable their owners to make a living.



*Geek to Geek Business*

It's important that anyone can create their own content and participate in the production of geeky media, but not necessarily because everyone actually does. Most don't. It's important because the few who do rise to the top to be the nerd idols started out as regular geeks just like their audience, representing a DIY ethic shared by nerdy tinkers and crafters (as seen in Chapter 4) and youth subcultures like punk rock. The decidedly nerdy content of such products is thus matched by a business strategy to tap into a nerd market. Fiske (1992) is correct in asserting that "fan cultural capital" is difficult to convert into actual economic capital, though the "anti-commercial" attitudes commonly associated with media fandom seem an inadequate explanation. Rather, it could simply be that some are savvier artists than others, and even among the skilled, putting personal interests ahead of fiscal sense is frequently bad for business. When it does work, it often involves a lot of faith and investment in the community that pays the artist's bills.

Jonathan Coulton, for instance, gives away most of his recordings from his website. He makes money off of merchandising and touring (and, presumably, the songs and CDs people do pay him for). He spends hours a day replying to fan emails and staying engaged with the community that supports him (Thompson, 2007). Penny Arcade, meanwhile, is a veritable juggernaut of geek culture, now connected to a variety of geeky niche markets, but once only staying afloat through donation drives. It began as a couple guys making comic strips and written commentary about video games on the web, which still attracts over 4 million regular readers, but has also evolved into a company with one of the largest gaming and geek culture conventions in the world and

an online game distribution service (which sells their own series of games, among others).

As business manager Robert Khoo regularly recounts on convention panels and in interviews, Penny Arcade now makes profit off a combination of merchandising, advertising, and other services, but had to rely on reader donations for a while back when the comic's creators were on their own. Their lack of business sense appears to be a point of pride, like a badge of DIY credibility: They refer to Khoo affectionately as their "business devil" (Krahulik, 2005) and have made something of a bitter running joke about the time they sold the rights to their entire business without even realizing it (Tochen, 2005). Penny Arcade also offers an annual scholarship for aspiring game developers, and founded Child's Play, a charity which sends millions of dollars worth in toys, games, and money to children's hospitals worldwide. Child's Play also receives all the proceeds from Nerdapalooza – not a gaming or comics event per se, but a geeky music festival whose founders never expected to be in it for the money.

Out of this geek-to-geek entertainment renaissance, a number of subgenres, scenes, and niches-within-niches have emerged. Every corner of nerdy life seems to have its own webcomic, in addition to the vast especially large genre of gaming webcomics that followed in the wake of Penny Arcade and a few other heavy hitters. Peek behind a librarian's desk and you'll probably see strips printed and hanging from Unshelved, the comic about librarians. The grad students I walked with at the Come Out and Play Festival asked if I read *Piled Higher and Deeper* (PhD), noting that it seems to be required reading for all graduate students. (I do read it, and it does seem to be required

reading.) Chatting with programmers after my weekly Ultimate Frisbee game, chatter turned to the previous day's xkcd strip once we realized nearly all of us read it.

Webcomics may collectively command massive niche audiences, but it's the geeky music – especially nerdcore hip-hop – that seems to attract mainstream news attention and occasionally raise some eyebrows (Braiker, 2007; Dannon, 2007; Dargis, 2008; Miranda, 2007; Rosen, 2009; C. Smith, 2007). After all, nobody is surprised that geeks read comics on the internet, but the idea that geeks might be involved in something traditionally thought of as cool – and that white kids might be pretending to act black – may seem newsworthy. Geeky music comprises so many genres that some participants prefer to think of it as a “movement” (“Hipster, Please!,” 2008). MC Frontalot coined the term ‘nerdcore hip-hop’ to refer to his music, and has happily lent its use to the scene at large. The term ‘nerdcore’ now gets applied more broadly – I’ve heard some use it to refer even to folk pop acts like Coulton – and has been joined by an array of other geeky sounds, showcased at events like Nerdapalooza and on Z.’s podcast music show, Radio Free Hipster. This includes Wizard Rock, Harry Potter-themed music featuring bands like Harry and the Potters, the Parselmouths, and the Whomping Willows; chiptunes and 8-bit, utilizing sounds and samples from old video game technologies and ostensibly obsolete electronics; and VGM (or video game music) more broadly, which also includes remixes and covers of music from games. The resulting music represents the gamut of expressions of geek cred: a chance to bond over beloved reminiscences of fan adoration; a chance to revel in mutual pride in recognizing obscure terms from science, math, programming, and other pursuits; and, for musicians themselves, a chance to exercise

technical and creative skill in crafting clever rhymes, personal narratives, and well-mixed samples.

In some ways, the presence of geek culture in song is nothing new. Nerdy styles and references have appeared on the radio before. Bands such as They Might Be Giants, Talking Heads, Weezer, and “Weird Al” Yankovic have long worked clever lyrics, spastic attitudes, and references to geeky pop culture into their music. Even as early as 1984, *Revenge of the Nerds* offered one moment of genuine coolness to its protagonists, thanks to a musical act drawing upon Devo’s electronic sounds and futuristic attire. Hip-hop also has a history of weaving geeky pop culture into its lyrics, such as in the Wu Tang Clan’s martial arts movie references, and Kool Keith’s sci-fi concept album *Black Elvis / Lost in Space* (McShane, 2008). Meanwhile, fan-produced nerdy music has long represented a way to celebrate the beloved objects of geek culture. As Henry Jenkins (1992) describes in *Textual Poachers*, filking (i.e., folk-music sing-along to familiar melodies with lyrics changed to be about TV shows) is a well-established tradition at science-fiction and fantasy fans’ conventions. The geek music scenes described here represent phenomena that have long existed in other forms, but seem especially visible and associated with a particular culture now – even attracting documentarians for productions like *Nerdcare For Life*, *Nerdcare Rising*, and *We Are Wizards* – because of the more recent push toward conceptualizing geeks as a distinct culture and market.

“*For Nerds, By Nerds*”

This is ours. It will always be ours. You will never grok it, unless you become one of us. Do not try to make it yours. Do not try to co-opt it for your own ends. If it inspires you to create your own thing, then fine. The thing that you create though is not the thing we have created. Do not pretend otherwise.

You are welcome to join us. Otherwise, leave us alone.  
The Geek Community

This is a portion of “The Geek Culture Manifesto,” which Matt S. (2007c) wrote in response to “questions that have been floating around recently as the mainstream and underground try to grapple with the question of how to approach the alien world of geeks,” especially the oft-floated notion that nerdcore hip-hop is a racist parody (2007a). He posted it on his blog, where it was linked to by other geeky blogs and websites related to topics like fan fiction and nerdcore hip-hop, generating discussion and commentary scattered about the web. Many linked to it in approval, and some men and women have even personally commended me on it (seeing it linked alongside some of my writing and misinterpreting the attribution).

The Geek Culture Manifesto is one part welcome mat, one part “do not disturb” sign. It actively invites anyone to join, though it may be hard to read as warmly welcoming because of the firm tone in turning away those who aren’t already sold on the idea of sincerely geeking out. Those who *are* interested in geeking out, presumably, will be able to relate to the feeling of not wanting to be judged for it.

This recalls the email sent to me (quoted way back in Chapter 3) describing “the whole geek culture thing” as a “healing process.” The idea of a ‘geek culture’ represents more than a shared sense of identity and belonging; it also refers to the material objects and media made by geeks, for geeks, and about “the geek experience,” as a testament to their existence and validity. They serve particular functions for members of the in-group: straightforward entertainment for an interested niche, of course, but also reassurance that there is an alternative to banishment from mainstream “coolness” for those who are still struggling with the shame of “nerd disdain.” It’s about having access to more ways to

recognize oneself as a geek in daily life, to celebrate one's geekiness, and to recognize that sense is shared with others.

These are some of the driving sentiments behind nerdy music scenes. Z. has similarly that he started his own nerdy music blog and podcast, *Hipster, Please!*, for similar reasons: "to serve as a place where young geeks can come to see that their culture is valid." YT Cracker,<sup>11</sup> a well-known nerdcore hip-hop artist, described similar sentiments to me via email: "my music is like letters to my middle school self telling him hes the fucking man but since i dont have an awesome machine that can send emails to the past maybe someone else can benefit from it."

These statements speak to the functions that music and subcultural commodities have traditionally served in defining personal identity through consumer culture. Youth subcultures and countercultures have long rallied around music as a way of understanding and expressing shared ideals, tastes, and desires; of "empowering the everyday life"; of choosing a symbol that marks oneself to be in a minority (Grossberg, 1997; Hebdige, 1979; Shank, 1994; Traber, 2001). Nerdy music does all of this. But the niche element of geeky music that's reflected in the *Geek Culture Manifesto* stands somewhat in contrast with, say, punk rock, characterized by a "threatening pose" or even the "actual threat" of overt anarchic resistance (Clark, 2003). Nerdcore doesn't usually make earnest threats so much as giddily or awkwardly enthusiastic assertions. The subcultural styles that birthed nerdcore are present in some performers' dress at times, but this is more a representation of how the artists actually dress (e.g., some people really do wear baggy clothes and baseball hats) or a caricature of the nerd stereotype (e.g., MC Frontalot's signature head-mounted bike light, tie, and short-sleeve dress shirt with tie). The audience, for its part,

seems to dress like at any other nerd gathering, or any other casual concert. If there's a hardcore pose, the nerdcore faithful seem unaware of it.

For their part, nerdcore artists don't necessarily see their audiences as purposely limited to nerds. "There is merit to the 'for nerds, by nerds' mantra, but the purpose of music is communication. My mission is to spread the word of the nerd where it might otherwise not be found," YT Cracker once told Z. (Z., 2007e) in an interview. Appealing to the nerdy niche doesn't mean that geeky musicians are opposed to being heard more broadly: "I feel a good Nerdcore artist could exist outside of the realm of Nerdcore hip-hop and do just fine, just as a Latino rapper like Pitbull does fine in mainstream hip-hop."

The "for nerds, by nerds" mantra may be somewhat of interests to the nerdy consumers themselves, however. "The average nerd isn't interested in hip-hop music," Ben "Mouse" McShane (2008) blogs at Classical Geek Theater. Labeling music as "nerdcore hip-hop" may be potentially off-putting to wider audiences, but identifying the music as part of a movement or scene separate from hip-hop as a whole may make it seem approachable to nerds. McShane suggests:

Part of the problem is that self-identifying nerds and geeks (the "hardcore geeks") are not accustomed to being embraced, and often insist on remaining on the fringe. As one of these people, I can relate to the unfortunate impulse to disregard the mainstream in retaliation for prior offenses.

This blogger finds the situation lamentable, as it calls into question capable nerdcore artists' "legitimacy" in much the same way faced by Christian rock artists. Nerdcore artists, however, may not see their product as an alternative to, replacement for, or facsimile of "real" hip-hop in the way that Christian rock and pop are sometimes marketed as a replacement for mainstream music. Z. inadvertently echoes this sentiment in one comment on Geek Studies: "I think we're witnessing an almost biblical attitude; if

‘no servant can serve two masters,’ then how can the culture of hip-hop and nerd culture – both of which require stringent adherence – co-exist within an individual?” (Z., 2007c).

Whatever the artists’ intent, one reason that this material appears to stand apart is that it is often created without much regard for concerns of whether it will be impenetrable or offensive to outsiders. Such acts are easy to dismiss as nothing more than parody – and, as the Geek Culture Manifesto alludes to, are indeed frequently dismissed as such. A particularly common allegation is that nerdcore hip-hop is little more than a gag about white rappers acting black, or even that it plays out like a minstrel show in which rappers affect “blackness” or play up their “whiteness” to intentionally or inadvertently mock black cultural norms (e.g., Rosen, 2009).

This opinion may seem to have been affirmed in some eyes by Weird Al’s hit single “White and Nerdy” (see Kendall, forthcoming), rapped to the tune of Chamillionaire’s “Ridin’” (which has helped popularize the phrase “riding dirty,” or driving while in possession of illegal drugs or weapons). The criticism does hit upon a real development in some nerdcore hip-hop that even nerdcore fans themselves often decry. “Honestly, Jason, I hear echoes of many of these same indictments from a segment of the nerdcore fandom quite regularly. I’d be hard-pressed to quantify the pervasiveness of such a mindset, but it definitely exists,” Z. (2007c) writes in response to a question I posed on Geek Studies about racial insensitivity in nerdcore scenes. “I’d chalk it up to the common misconception that modern hip-hop itself is all about ‘guns, hos, and bling,’ but, even in that regard, there is a definite undercurrent of racism.” As explored in “The Geek as Misfit,” such undercurrents may be reflective of a broader ignorance of racial issues



among geeks, or even a common desire to foreground geeks' personal struggles by shutting out the concerns of other groups not coded as geeky.

That said, some nerdcore hip-hop can seem off-putting to outsiders for reasons that go beyond to race. The joke implicit in "nerds rapping" is not necessarily focused on the incongruity of white guys pretending to be black; rather, it is typically between the appearance of someone the stereotypically scrawny, overweight, juvenile, unpopular, or otherwise rejected, juxtaposed with the tropes associated with the tough, popular, and sexually secure. The quintessential example comes from MC Hawking, who sets a flat computer voice over a beat and pens song titles like "Fuck the Creationists." As crass as it sounds to say it, Stephen Hawking's race is largely irrelevant to the formula; the joke is that a paralyzed guy in a wheelchair is droning about science when he threatens to "bust your jaw." This admittedly opens up other avenues for censure, even in spite of Dr. Hawking's expressed appreciation (Carpenter, 2000). The point we might take from this is that nerdcore hip-hop isn't necessarily racist, but neither does it shy away from messages that might invite condemnation.

And what of the nerdcore hip-hop that is not parody? Nerdcore artists express interest in reaching broader audiences than just nerds and cite mainstream and independent hip-hop and pop luminaries among their influences (e.g., see Faraone, 2007), but also frequently make a point of insisting that they are playing for different stakes. For many artists, the creative process of hip-hop itself is nerdy enough qualify as geek-friendly even before the "nerdcore" label, thanks to the integration of digital editing skills, cleverly-constructed wordplay, and esoteric appropriation and references. "The

Rappist,” by Mark Schaffer (2009) – a.k.a. Schaffer the Darklord, or STD – offers a potentially useful point of reference in describing this attitude.

*... I don't bounce and I don't rap, and  
See, look at me, I look like an ass, man  
No crew, no gin and juice,  
I'm no Dr. Dre, I'm more like Dr. Seuss [...]*

*And I don't play tough and say "step the fuck back"  
What the fuck is that? That's not how I act  
I like to keep my audience up close to the stage  
I'd rather you'd stay than chased away when I play [...]*

*I got props for the real hip-hop  
Those who pop and lock to the beat of a boom-box  
Those who cock their Glocks and go "fuck the cops!"  
It's just not how I rock, and I don't stop*

Schaffer waives any “cool” or traditionally masculine connotations that might come with his association with hip-hop by explicitly denying any claim to them, instead laying claim to other composition and performance skills (in being unlike “Dr. Dre,” but more like “Dr. Seuss”). Meanwhile, he undercuts his own sexual dominance (through sexually unsavory nicknames, “The Rappist” and “STD”), popularity (lacking a “crew”), and physical toughness (“I don’t play tough...”). He isn’t vying for the same kind of in-group credibility that some other rappers might be (specifying he’ll “never battle rap or rap like I’m black”), but works within another group’s standards altogether.<sup>12</sup>

Geeky music thus represents cultural material both “for geeks, by geeks” but also (explicitly or subtly) recognizes and comments upon values that are presumed not to be geeky. On *Mega Ran*, when Random raps over old video game music that he “Just can’t seem to grow up / But you know what? / I don’t think I want to,” he is celebrating the media geeks remember affectionately, and also celebrating geeks’ refusal to give up the interests and behaviors that get dismissed as juvenile by our culture at large. Meanwhile,

when Jonathan Coulton describes the Mandelbrot Set as a “badass fucking fractal,” the crowd goes wild as if the lyrics had just invoked sex, drugs, or any other traditional rock trope, from some other concert. These songs make use of cultural signifiers of coolness in the sounds of rap, rock, and dance, but bend them to nerdy ends. Such media potentially inject traditionally geeky values into broader popular discourse, but the construction of geeks as a discrete demographic also leads such material to be regarded as somewhat separate.

### *Exporting the Geek Image*

As the amount of material ostensibly made “for nerds, by nerds” grows, it’s inevitable that some of it will find its way beyond its geek demographic. It remains to be seen what kind of image will be constructed for the geek as a cultural figure – both for the insiders and to American culture at large – in the wake of all this celebration and reflection on the topic of geekdom. Nerdcore hip-hop seems to have been of particular interest to mainstream media producers and audiences for the sheer unexpectedness of the image it presents, but to consider another tactic of constructing a geek image in sort-of grassroots media spreading outward, I’d like to offer *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* (Whedon, 2008), a musical about a supervillain.

Joss Whedon, the geek celebrity writer and creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly*, made this mini-series of web video shorts during the television writers’ strike of 2008. Whedon has obvious mainstream appeal beyond Browncoats and other “Whedonites,” but it’s clear that *Dr. Horrible* was expected to reach the geeks first of all. Rather than relying on conventional methods of release, the series “aired” online for free

for a limited-time, and was subsequently distributed via downloads through Apple's iTunes Music Store, and, later still, on DVD. The web page that hosted the original video featured ads to J!NX, the aforementioned online apparel store for "gamers and geeks," which sold the official *Dr. Horrible* t-shirts. Moreover, the content of the series itself tells the recognizable tale of the geek archetype, though with a twist.

The story is told as an unusual hybrid of musical theater and video-blogging epistolary, sporting a cast with impeccable geek cred. Neil Patrick Harris, an actor (perhaps until relatively recently) known most widely for his role as a child prodigy in *Doogie Howser, M.D.*, plays Dr. Horrible, an intelligent, idealistic, and generally gentle-natured supervillain. He hopes to conquer the world in order to reverse injustices, and he eschews violence. (Upon being called out by a superhero to do battle around a playground, he retorts: "Look, I'm just trying to change the world, okay? I don't have time for a grudge match with every poser in a parka. Besides, there's kids in that park.") He is the geek.

Nathan Fillion, an actor known for his role as the lead in *Firefly*, plays the muscled, stupid, cruel, and arrogant Captain Hammer, a superhero who torments Dr. Horrible and claims the doctor's crush, Penny,<sup>13</sup> as his sexual conquest. He is the jock.

Finally pushed too far, Horrible plots to kill Hammer. It doesn't work as planned; Penny dies in the scuffle. The killing gets Dr. Horrible admitted to the Evil League of Evil, however, and leaves Captain Hammer crying to a therapist. Dr. Horrible is greeted by the League with high-fives, showing that he has finally found some popularity within a bad-ass fringe group. It's the revenge of the nerd – but at the expense of everything he ever actually valued. The last note leaves no doubt that this is not a happy ending.

This story represents a largely unexplored avenue in the portrayal of geeks in popular culture, coming from a product that potentially reaches out both to the “geek demographic” and to broader audiences as well. The more common moral of the nerdy underdog story tells us that we’re all nerds deep down inside (as in *Revenge of the Nerds*), or that the geeks will have the last laugh with their riches and hot girlfriends in the end (as in *Can’t Hardly Wait*). That’s the feel-good, mass-market version. This is the version that questions the values of viewers who measures success as being rich enough to steal away the jocks’ girlfriends. In the wake of “geek chic,” we may be confronted with new notions of what it means to be a geek, both in entertainment and in daily life.

### Conclusion

I describe geekdom in this chapter in terms of consumer culture and market formation – rather than in terms of subcultural identity – because what we have only recently begun to call “geek culture” already bears many of the recognizable hallmarks of earlier youth subcultures’ absorption by market forces. Even nerdcore hip-hop artist MC Lars’s merchandise is sold through Hot Topic, despite (or probably because of) his now well known song, “Hot Topic is NOT Punk Rock.” T-shirts, magazines, music, and other items represent means to express a more holistic ‘geek’ identity, staking claim of any or all of the various pieces of that image and its related stereotypes. For those who see geek identity as one of multiple roles that must be selected between depending on context, these kinds of products and services can encourage a sort of identity management system. Advice from magazines on how (not) to dress and apparel offerings that proclaim geekiness stealthily offer possibilities for “inconspicuous consumption.”

Grant McCracken (1988, p. 133) warns that “when ‘hippies,’ ‘punks,’ ‘gays,’ ‘feminists,’ ‘young republicans,’ and other radical groups use consumer goods to declare their difference, the code they use renders them comprehensible to the rest of society and assimilable within a larger set of cultural categories.” In other words, adopting a particular demographic label through commodities and dress means taking part in the parent culture, not rebelling from it. This is only problematic, of course, if protest is actually the goal. Reducing ‘geek chic’ to a brand, a digestible set of styles and references, arguably dilutes its potency as a resistive counterculture, but it’s not clear that geeks want to run counter to mainstream culture at all. Some seem to want to live outside of it, and others seem to actually welcome a degree of integration into it.

Even those geeks who are not actively looking to be regarded as “normals,” however, do not necessarily want to differentiate themselves as hostile to American mainstream culture, so much as reassure themselves (or others whose lives mirror their own earlier experiences) that having felt like an outsider doesn’t actually mean they’re all alone. For those who want to comfortably “geek out” on a daily basis, or who need some private reassurance that their interests are shared, the nerdiest of the nerdy material from webcomics and music can be downloaded for free at home, or contributed to by anyone with a personal computer.

Conceptualizing geek culture as a sort of market for material “for geeks, by geeks” does potentially open up opportunities for geeks to mobilize as a “movement,” though it may be telling that even in this, power is exercised through the pocketbook. Potentially, such media could provide a corrective to corporate impulses to systematically and unapologetically narrow down the geek demographic to a specific gender, race, and

income level. The Nerdapalooza music festival, for instance, brings together a diverse range of genres and audiences (thanks in part to heavily male crowds in nerdcore blended with heavily female crowds in Wizard rock), representing an act of consumption that may help redress gender disparities in traditionally geeky domains. Meanwhile, the donation efforts behind events like Child's Play demonstrate an interest in spreading commonly geeky values through giving and spending. How that market/movement's power could be further exercised in the future still remains to be seen. These corners of geek culture may still represent some of the demographic imbalances of the traditional geek stereotype and a lingering fear to "come out of the closet," but as more people consider themselves members of both geek culture and of American culture at large, we may see geekdom shifting to something more inclusive and beyond concerns of co-optation – or, for those determined to remain on the fringe, retreating back into the cracks of the internet.

#### Notes for Chapter 6

<sup>1</sup> I chose to spell "newbs" – shorthand for "newbies" (or newcomers) – in the prevailing online style among geeky venues. Another common variant would have been "n00bs," but I did not want to confuse my readers. It's also worth noting that when the panelist asked how many of us were "South by Southwest virgins," meanwhile, it may have been reminiscent of the term used for people attending *Rocky Horror Picture Show* events for the first time. I think the panelist managed to capture the crossover audience of computer geeks and film geeks pretty concisely in this greeting.

<sup>2</sup> We may question whether *Snakes on a Plane* would have *lost* money without so much fan support, but that's a question for another day.

<sup>3</sup> There are similarly superheroic portrayals of somewhat nerdy women, as well, but they are fewer, further between, and often less stereotypically nerdy according to one or more of the dimensions described in this dissertation. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, an favorite with the Comic Con crowd that ran from 1997 to 2003, does feature a tech-savvy witch in a supporting role, but the title character is more of a cheerleader-turned-outcast who still

wants to party instead of doing her homework. The “geek chic” lineup described earlier in this chapter, however, is oddly devoid of female geeks. *The Bionic Woman* – sci-fi, but no geek gals in sight – aired its pilot in the same season as *Chuck*, was similarly anticipated at Comic Con, and was ultimately cancelled.

<sup>4</sup> J!NX was formerly known as being for “gamers, geeks, and hackers,” but I suspect the change was made because of unwanted attention from law enforcement officials who assume that “hackers” (which computer geeks refer to any sufficiently clever programmer) are necessarily “crackers” (the kind who compromise computer security).

<sup>5</sup> The original page for this shirt was accessed in 2007, but the shirt is no longer for sale, and the page is offline.

<sup>6</sup> The back of the “chown” t-shirt mixes messages somewhat with an image of a kick-me sign that instead reads “HACK ME.” The readers then disagree in the comments about whether this compromises statement of power implied on the front. Regardless of how the shirt was meant to be read, then, such comments do indicate that customers expect that geek apparel should be helping them to assert their power.

<sup>7</sup> J!NX allows site visitors to comment on each shirt, which helps offer some indication of demand for shirts in “girl” sizes.

<sup>8</sup> “Pwn” is gamer slang referring to besting or defeating an opponent, an intentional typo (from “own”) now integrated into internet lexicon.

<sup>9</sup> ThinkGeek does sell a “men’s version” of the shirt that only followed the women’s version “by popular demand.” See ThinkGeek.com.

<sup>10</sup> It may be worth noting that the Optimus Prime shirt in question was spotted in Urban Outfitters before either of the contemporary *Transformers* movies hit theaters. I don’t know whether they are still being sold through the store, but I wonder if Optimus Prime’s nostalgia value has worn off now that the character has been reinvented for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>11</sup> Under normal circumstances, I would anonymize personal communications in this dissertation. In this case, however, I had actually emailed Z. to ask him for help in finding a certain interview with YT, with a certain line I wanted to quote. Z. couldn’t find it, so he emailed YT and Cc’d me, asking if he remembered the quote from the interview. Viacom apparently took the interview in question down from YouTube, and YT couldn’t remember it verbatim, but he suggested that this might be an approximation of the sentiment.

<sup>12</sup> All of that said, even “The Rappist” leaves some room for criticism. One line, making reference to KRS-One’s “Sound of da Police,” says: “that’s when I go: “woop woop!” /



That's the sound of the police / But I really doubt they're coming for me." It reads like just another means of undercutting Schaffer's "street cred" in favor of "geek cred" – though that reading may imply a misunderstanding of the song it references, which is not meant to glorify the gangsta lifestyle, but a denunciation of police brutality against black citizens, presented as parallel to the white oppression of black slaves. Again, as suggested before, nerdcore hip-hop artists could show greater sensitivity by giving greater consideration to the likely unintended meanings of their songs.

<sup>13</sup> Penny is played by Felicia Day, who appeared in *Buffy* and is also widely known in geek circles for *The Guild*, a web-video comedy about *World of Warcraft* that she writes and stars in. *The Guild* is another example of entertainment by geeks, for geeks, which has achieved a certain degree of notoriety, as well as additional distribution through Microsoft's Xbox Live Marketplace.

## CONCLUSION

The previous four chapters illustrate several of the different ways that people come to understand themselves as geeks and nerds, and how these have been conceptualized as part of a collective “geek culture” – or even multiple geek cultures, as some seek to distance themselves from others. I’ve attempted to offer examples of how geeks accept, resist, and respond to the common stereotypes of being social misfits, technical geniuses, juvenile fans, and hip consumers. By way of conclusion, I’d like to offer an anecdote that might help to encapsulate much of what I see as characteristic of geek cultures.

Randall Munroe’s xkcd is, according to its website, “A webcomic of romance, sarcasm, math, and language.” The only place where such a niche product could have been constructed is on the web, as newspapers and magazines would balk at printing a comic strip of squiggly stick figures and extremely niche-oriented jokes about string theory, programming, and other hyper-nerdy references. What it lacks in style it makes up for in geek cred. *Wired* suggests that “‘xkcd’ isn’t an acronym, but in some ways, the comic is itself a language – a way for people who are unpracticed at talking about their emotions to articulate them.” Randall Munroe, a former roboticist for NASA who went on to cartooning full time, notes that he gets the most feedback about comics that offer insight on the ways geeks think: “Noticing when the stoplights are in sync, or calculating the length of your strides between floor tiles – normal people notice that kind of stuff, but a certain kind of person will do some calculations” (So, 2007). Other strips explore themes like what it means to grow up, such as when a woman fills a living room with playpen balls, like those that might be found in children’s play areas at Chuck E.

Cheese's, "Because we're grown-ups now, and it's our turn to decide what that means" (Munroe, 2009b). Some strips even criticize certain arguably common habits among many nerds, such as oversimplifying human interaction to predictable equations (Munroe, 2009a), viewing oneself as intellectually superior to others (Munroe, 2009c), and acting obnoxiously to women on the internet (Munroe, 2007).

The comic represents a nerdy institution in its own way, capable of mobilizing audiences in surprising ways. When a self-proclaimed geek named Sean Tevis ran for Kansas State Representative, for instance, he knew he could rely on other geeky voters to recognize that his comic-strip-style political ad on the web wasn't just any stick figures, but an homage to xkcd (Tevis, 2008). This wasn't just a gag, but a way of suggesting ideals presumed to be shared among a significant portion of xkcd's geek audience, including "open government" and "sustainable energy." Boing Boing and other highly trafficked geeky websites picked up the link, and Tevis broke fundraising records thanks to internet donors. xkcd serves as a prime example of internet-oriented niche cultural production, then, but also illustrates how the culture that forms around such materials has started to coalesce and become more visible even in offline spaces.

I witnessed this firsthand on a day when I happened to be in the right place at the right time. A friend of mine and frequent commenter on Geek Studies sent me an email with a link to xkcd's online forum, discussing some numbers noted in a strip that had recently been posted – some geographic coordinates, a date, and a time (42.39561 - 71.13057 2007 09 23 14 38 00), which the aforementioned artist, Randall Munroe, had inexplicably changed from a location in upstate New York to a small park in North Cambridge, Massachusetts, the same city where he happens to live. This quickly turned

into a discussion of who was going to make the pilgrimage to this park on September 23, 2007, at 2:38 PM local time (or 10:38 AM, which is 2:38 GMT). Fans started threads at the xkcd forum, Livejournal, and elsewhere to plan how and when to meet. Searching online for “xkcd event” still yields a number of those pages.

In the original comic strip, these coordinates are whispered to a person in a dream by a mysterious woman. That person goes to those coordinates, and the original strip ends with the acknowledgment, “It turns out wanting something doesn’t make it real.” This makes for a sad and touching sort of ending, but also leaves the door open for something much grander.

I was in Cambridge that weekend, visiting from Philadelphia, coincidentally staying about two blocks from the location indicated by those coordinates. I walked over with a camera at 10:30 AM to see who might have shown up. Only a few people had arrived by that time, but they knew to expect others. As I walked into the park, I saw some college-age guys milling about, making eye contact with me to see if I was there for the event. They greeted me as I approached; one was from Long Island, and another was from Russia. The Russian guy flew there just for the event, and had to get help from others on the xkcd forums in obtaining a visa. Ten or twelve others were around the neighborhood for the meetup, they explained, but were wandering until the appointed time. Another fellow arrived, explaining that he was from (relatively) nearby Framingham. “I wasn’t sure if it was universal time,” he said, explaining his earliness. I had to take care of some other errands before the main event, so I bid them farewell for the time being.

At 2:30, I realized I was going to be late if I didn't leave the house soon. I ran down the street, camera in my pocket, hearing the murmur of the crowd as I approached. People were standing outside the fence of the park, looking at the mass within. I started taking photos (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** The xkcd meetup. Photo by author.

The space was full, especially the jungle gym, which I mistook for a solid structure until people started climbing out later and I realized I could see through it. Hundreds of happy geeks were scattered across the park. The center of the playground was especially densely packed with people shoulder to shoulder – most around college-aged, I thought, though the ages spanned decades – many clad in t-shirts referencing

xkcd, Penny Arcade, MIT, and countless obscure jokes about video games, science, and math (e.g., “ $\sqrt{-1} \heartsuit$  Math” – the square root of negative 1 being the imaginary number “ $i$ ”).

I hurried to the center of the throng, taking pictures as I went, as people started a ten-second countdown to 2:38. After the cheers that followed, some started chanting “Ran-dall, Ran-dall,” calling for the creator of the comic to appear. I noticed a giant, unfinished version of the comic strip that started it all, affixed to the fence against the basketball court. The last panel was blank.

Randall Munroe appeared next to the giant strip just as people were calling “Speech! Speech!” All heads turned and the crowd quieted as he shouted, “Thanks for showing up.” The crowd laughed appreciatively. He explained that the original strip ended wrong; apparently, wanting something enough *does* make it happen. When the cheers subsided, he explained the next step: This meant that the comic needed a new ending, so he brought some markers. “It’s like Wikipedia,” he shouted, and in no particular order, people made their way to the strip to doodle and scribble messages of their own.

I suspect that many of those in attendance didn’t actually draw anything on the strip. Most were just happy to have a spontaneous “geekfest,” as a friend of mine called it. I didn’t attend with this friend; we just happened to spot each other across the crowd. We’d first met on a local BBS in the early ‘90s, finally met in person when we ended up at the same college, and acted as teammates years later in the MIT Mystery Hunt. After I bumped into him, he unexpectedly encountered even more people he knew from MIT. It was like this all over the park: people running into friends, chatting with strangers, finding or creating things to do. The result was basically “Nerdstock,” if on a small scale:

A more-or-less impromptu gathering of techies, fans, students, and fun-loving adults from the greater Boston area and even wider. The crowd numbered at least in the hundreds, though some estimates online put it at over a thousand.

A small group was competitively trying to see how far they could extend tape measures before they bent (once suggested by xkcd as a new Olympic sport). A few were in costume or carrying props; I spotted one guy in furry cat ears, tail, and gloves; a guy in a cape; a few people dressed as stick figures (e.g., tape over a white outfit); several people with foam or papier-mache weapons; someone in a suit and a green dinosaur mask; and two people holding up “citation needed” signs (a Wikipedia-inspired form of protest for political rallies, suggested in yet another xkcd strip). The folks with fake weapons staged playful battles for onlookers. Some guys played guitars by a tent. A few blankets were laid out with groups picnicking. Someone was distributing shirts commemorating the event, emblazoned with the coordinates. One fellow wore a fill-in-the-blanks shirt from ThinkGeek reading “im in ur 42.39561 -71.13057 2007 09 23 14 38 00 meeting ur dorkz.” riffing on a popular web joke among gamers and people who look at funny pictures of animals (see Rutkoff, 2007).

I had to leave early – I was actually in town for a family gathering, not research – but things were still going strong at 3:20. Reports online indicate that the crowd eventually found its way to another park, where it tossed objects with a trebuchet. I found (and contributed to) a photo pool on Flickr with images of the crowds, the trebuchet, and park signage that had been altered for the event, temporarily renaming the park to “Randall Munroe Memorial Park,” and declaring that the playground was “for children

ages 5 to ∞.” Such alterations seemed to have been swiftly removed in the extensive cleanup that followed.

After the event, I checked forums to get a sense of how people were remembering it. I was particularly fascinated to see how people discussed what this whole event must have meant for the local community; there was a separate mini-playground fenced off from the larger part of the park, and I had seen some parents with kids in there.

by **rhichi** » Mon Sep 24, 2007 6:03 am UTC

You know...more than the normals, I felt bad for the little kids and their parents expecting a nice afternoon at the park. I'll admit it I nearly bulldozed a kid trying to get to the pole that activates the fountains. It was just so awesome!

by **chaospawn** » Mon Sep 24, 2007 1:23 pm UTC

I talked with one of the parents there, turns out he was an xkcd fan. He didn't recognize the name Randal Munroe, but looked it up when he went back home and realized that it was from the comic. So he came and hung out while his kid was napping.

by **Okita** » Mon Sep 24, 2007 1:48 pm UTC

Some guy asked me to take a picture with his son who had been playing in the fountain and was all wet.

by **dogfish** Mon Sep 24, 2007 4:12 pm UTC

That would be me. (I would probably not describe myself as a normal, however.) (Okita, let me know if you'd like a picture of the the picture – it came out really well.)

by **Admiral\_Obvious** » Mon Sep 24, 2007 6:20 am UTC

Truth be told, I was surprised that there were ANY “normals” in the crowd at all! At least we weren't a rowdy bunch – I was half worried that a mobscene would have scared off any parents bringing their children to a “favorite neighborhood park,” expecting a quiet Sunday. (“XKCD meetup,” 2007)

Perhaps not coincidentally, the term used here for non-geeks – “normals” – is the same term that researchers use to refer to those students who belong to no particularly maligned nor particularly powerful rung of high school status hierarchies.



I dropped by the park the day after the xkcd meetup to see what kind of mess might have been left over. To my surprise, there wasn't one. The community bulletin board included some ads for local science-fiction cons and a page with a stick-figure guy in search of his "dream girl," but litter seemed conspicuously absent. The only trace on the ground itself that anyone had been there at all was the chalk writing on the asphalt walkway: "flickr: xkcddreams," "hack the planet," and "nerd nation was here."

Months after this event, I delivered a presentation featuring a number of the photos I took. While chatting with a couple of academics following the talk, one of them mentioned to me that some of the t-shirts worn by attendees seemed obnoxious to him. Speaking of the fellow wearing the " $\sqrt{-1}$  ♥ Math" shirt in particular, he smiled at me in astonishment and admitted, "I wanted to punch that guy in the face."

The woman chatting with us said wryly, "My brother in law has that shirt."

A little while earlier that day, that same woman had incredulously asked me what's at stake for "closet geeks" in "coming out." And, as I told her, the answer is: probably not much. The man who loves math is still a lot less likely to get punched in the face than the man who loves men. Even so, the conclusion to this anecdote might help to explain why many nerds appreciate a Geek Culture Manifesto that proclaims, "You are welcome to join us. Otherwise, leave us alone." This xkcd event was supposed to be a place where anyone could feel free to wear a t-shirt proclaiming a love of math, knowing that no one would be offended because, well, of *course* he loves math. They're nerds. It's not about one-upmanship or bragging, but creating an environment where people are less likely to feel guilty or ashamed to celebrate the stuff that they feared would get them beaten up twenty years ago.

I describe the xkcd meetup here not because it was a common occurrence – it certainly was not – but because it simultaneously represents so many of the broader trends and ideals described throughout this ethnography. This event brought nerds together to assert that math, science, the internet, games, superheroes, warriors, and other geeky staples are all part of some sort of shared culture, some way of life. They insisted that being intelligent is not mutually exclusive with playing like a kid. They offered a loud and boisterous ideological statement of a sort – perhaps disruptively, but not necessarily destructively. Their DIY spirit may look punk, but their gentleness looked more hippy (or more like the non-aggressive kids who made likely targets for bullies back when they were kids). As with geeky haunts on the web, “normals” were not actively invited, though were welcome to stop by.

The meetup was a “real-world” event, but it was coordinated almost entirely online. Like a nerdcore hip-hop show, it only existed because a community with a number of shared cultural reference points had already been constructed online through a product generated for an explicitly geeky audience. Geeks still seek the privacy of socially insulated spaces and virtual venues to circulate their symbols and express their passions without fear of judgment, and ability to build a sense of commonality through the internet is often key to the development of a sense of geek culture. As this and so many other examples illustrate, however, geek identity does not necessarily begin and end on the internet.

We might like to think that the rising visibility of geek culture signals a rise in appreciation for technology, a decline in anti-intellectualism, or a promise that the harassed and excluded will eventually reap financial rewards. It is possible that such

developments may correlate with the spread of geek culture, but loving computers and wealth does not mean that people love geeks; for many, it may just mean that our culture has constructed an image of the geek that is more acceptable to its eyes. Kids are still picked on for appearing to put time into work instead of into sports; techies still distinguish that which is “truly” geeky from the business setting that’s presumed to have made them “cool.” Enthusiasts sometimes describe themselves as “in the closet” about their interests, pine for “legitimacy,” and conceptualize “play” as a form of ideological resistance. Even those who have been marketed to as a “chic” demographic of hipsters and tastemakers may prefer to come off as “stealth nerds” rather than openly revel in their nerdiness.

From the geeks’ perspective, the “revenge of the nerds” may not be in finally getting weirdoes to grow up, move out, and get high-paying jobs, but in an increasing sense of belonging, a personal sense of validity, perhaps even a gradual creeping out of insulated spaces. Geek cultures have been constructed as something other than “the mainstream” – not necessarily a force to dismantle or oppose dominant ideology in most cases, but a space within it or beside it, where members feel free to act silly, celebrate feeling sappy, and indulge in being brainy.

Nerdy folk-pop musician Jonathan Coulton once offered a remark that fairly effectively summed up the reality and the aspiration of geek identity for many today:

People who grow up feeling like geeks soon become very practiced at hiding the parts of themselves that don’t fit in with the rest of the people around them, and that’s a terrible shame. I hope my kid loves math (or robots or elves or aliens), and I hope she doesn’t care who knows it. (Z., 2008c)

Coulton’s remark reminds me of an exchange I once overheard while standing in line at Comic Con. A kid behind me mentioned the word “geeks”; I didn’t catch the exact

context. The man standing with him said, “Be careful what you say. Not everyone might appreciate being called that.”

The boy looked about twelve years old. “I’m a geek,” he said. “People should just say what they are.”

Explaining identity may not always feel so simple. Nevertheless, as a shared sense of geek culture becomes more commonly accessible, ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ may become correspondingly more relevant and recognizable as a dimension of identity in kids’ – and adults’ – lives.

I hope that this ethnography helps give a better sense of what it means for many who call themselves geeks and nerds today. And, more broadly, I hope this helps us in conceptualizing a more nuanced understanding of how a salient dimension of cultural identity may be constructed today: built upon the circulation of shared symbols and references, nurtured through multiple channels of communication and interaction, and interacting with other traditionally recognized dimensions of identity in complex ways.

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