

**Geek Media and Identity**

**Honors Thesis in Sociocultural Anthropology**

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## Introduction

*“It's like being addicted to something that doesn't really exist, because the world that exists is insufficiently interesting” (Personal interview, December 18, 2009).*

In many ways, I have been researching for this thesis since I was thirteen. I first discovered the internet and literary fandom in 2002 when my parents refused to allow me to read a book about wizards, in large part due to their concern about my avid interest in fantasy and science fiction; in a fit of adolescent pique, I joined a fan forum for Diane Duane's *So You Want to Be a Wizard* series. Although the internet wasn't exactly new to me at that age, the social connections I made in that fandom transformed my relationship to the internet and ultimately to geek culture.

I was homeschooled for the majority of my K-12 education, and had little to no contact with other geeks in my offline life. My parents weren't part of that culture, either, so my self-creation as a geek online was a self-conscious, deliberate, and studied matter. I stayed up late at night, trading sleep for entrance into a community I regarded with awe. Among geeks, my interest in academics was regarded as a positive quality rather than somewhat suspect; my penchant for grammatical exactitude and hatred of netspeak was a status symbol. I wasn't 'the braniac' or even, less pejoratively, 'the smart one' anymore, which was both humbling and exciting. The people that I met had diverse interests that seemed unconnected at first glance, but as I grew more familiar with them I noticed that if someone liked *Dungeons and Dragons*, they probably had an interest in Douglas Adams and *Legend of Zelda*. If someone ran Linux, they probably watched *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Futurama*. There was some reason *Slashdot*

published articles about Python and articles about role-playing games (RPGs) side by side.

Due to this somewhat unorthodox introduction to geek life, I came to many geeky pursuits late; I didn't play *Dungeons and Dragons* until 2007, although I'd played a few other role-playing games off and on since about 2005. I was never allowed to have a video game console, and most of my friends were literary geeks, so I mostly played Gameboy emulators of classic solo RPGs such as *Chrono Trigger*, *Pokemon Sapphire*, and *The Legend of Zelda: The Minish Cap* throughout high school. Because it was easier to get manga online than American comic books, I got fairly involved in manga fandoms from around 2003-2007. I also became interested in web design and coding during this period; while I never became fluent in 'real' coding such as Perl or LISP, I became intrigued by the culture.

Throughout the course of my involvement with geek media and geek culture, I have become increasingly fascinated by the changing place of geeks in mainstream society. With the rise of the internet, cultural changes and trends among geeks as well as between geeks and the mainstream happen in an instant. The tension between geek and non-geek identification has been heightened over the past decade or so as geek interests have slowly become popularized in the mainstream.

This thesis merely scratches the surface of what it means to identify as a geek, but hopefully it provides a glimpse of the complexities involved in understanding the subtleties of geek culture. I intended to achieve two goals: to provide a better understanding of the media roots of modern geek culture, and to explore the common threads that define social relationships between members of the subculture. To that end,

I have tried to provide some historical context for modern tropes as well as an analysis of some major elements.

In this thesis, I begin by discussing common characters that appear in geek media. These represent the building blocks of geek worldviews. In particular, the heroes found in geek media have evolved to match the changing norms of geek culture; by contrast, the villains have generally maintained their roles as avatars of the adversarial forces that play a major role in defining geek identity.

Tracking ideals of heroism is particularly useful in gaining a sense of the emergence of geek pride. From the jock-like Superman to the underachieving Fry of Matt Groening's *Futurama*, protagonists in geek media have undergone increasingly geeky representation. As the values of the subculture have coalesced over the past few decades, geek media has both reflected and produced an increasing valorization of the intellectual and creative over physical ability.

The hegemony of the geek hero is marked by its correlate, the jock villain. However, this villain is never truly taken seriously; by contrast, the idea of the collective is often viewed as all too menacing. Meanwhile, inhuman enemies are often portrayed with a certain degree of sympathy. This is consistent with the idea that despite the resentment they feel for the privileged position athletes and their ilk enjoy in the United States, geeks are significantly more concerned with the power represented by the force of uniformity.

I have also included a discussion on women's roles in geek media. This is segregated from the chapters on heroes and villains simply because it is more useful and more meaningful to discuss women as a separate category; after all, geek media treats

women as a species unto their own. Women in geek culture are consistently subjected to the male gaze and typically hypersexualized.

While I would have liked to provide an in-depth analysis of race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, age, and religion in geek culture, the scope of this thesis has been limited by time constraints.

## **Demographic Background**

In total, I interviewed eleven men and nine women, ranging from college- to middle-aged. By all accounts, this sampling featured an over-representation of women, as men tend to comprise the majority of geek communities.

Most interviewees identified as White/Caucasian. The exceptions were one Chinese/Japanese woman, one Latina, and one Jewish woman; all three of these exceptions were personal contacts of mine. This is certainly consistent with the racial dynamics of geek culture. I should note at this point that race has been a serious point of controversy in geek culture, particularly in recent years. In fact, a discussion of race and racism known as 'Racefail' took place over several months last year involving science fiction/fantasy authors and fans. Racefail was unprecedented in terms of scale and reflected the mounting tensions between fans of color and the white privilege exhibited by much of geek media.

Three women and seven men explicitly self-identified as heterosexual. One woman and two men did not specify; the remainder, five women and two men, identified with non-normative sexualities. Several interviewees identified as polyamorous, and in fact characterized geek culture as "far more accepting of

[bisexuality and polyamory] than the general culture at large" (Personal interview, December 24, 2009).

Five did not identify their religious inclinations. Of the rest, there were three atheists, three agnostics, four non-religious, one Unitarian Universalist, one deist, one non-practicing Christian, one nondenominational Protestant, and one Lutheran. Because geek culture is not particularly sympathetic to organized religion, I was actually mildly surprised that I encountered three self-identified Christians among the interviewees. One commenter on an online forum for 'casual geeks' mentioned,

Most of the geek-like people around my area are also, coincidentally, atheists (myself included, frankly). It just seems to be more common not to believe in religion if you are a geek, something that may stem from early Star Trek episodes. Everyone knows, after all, that if you put Kirk vs God, Kirk always seems to win.

[moberemk 2008]

Although it is not uncommon for religious themes to emerge in geek media, these tend to draw more heavily on classical or obscure mythology. Christianity's ascendant position in America lends it a clear alignment with the mainstream; therefore, it is often an unpopular belief system for geeks to espouse, considering the aversion to the conventional underlying much of geek culture.

## **Chapter 1: Method**

I interviewed eighteen people over America Online Instant Messenger and gTalk, Google's chat client, between December 4, 2009, and January 4, 2010. Most interviews took between one and two hours. I also sent questionnaires to two people who were unable to meet me online. All interviews were conducted under the condition that the interviewees' names be withheld.

I had known six of my interviewees prior to my research. One of these personal contacts led me to three more through an online social network for tabletop gamers. I solicited five more interviews by attending U-Con, a gaming convention in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and putting up flyers as well as wandering around asking people if they would be willing to participate in my study; I also solicited the two questionnaires at U-Con. One of these posted the interview transcript on his blog, leading me to three more interviewees. The last interview was with the geek-identified wife of an interviewee.

### **Media Analysis and Geek Ethnography**

Being a geek, the vast majority of my interviewees declared, is about loving something that other people don't understand.

One interviewee opined,

I think one of the things that makes you a geek is that you have extremely specialized knowledge about a socially unacceptable topic[...]

I think certain things that have traditionally been regulated to "geeks" are becoming more mainstream

Star Trek, The Dark Knight...all these really popular movies are becoming more mainstream

But I think the difference becomes when you can say "I saw Star Trek once, I really liked it" or "I've seen all of the Star Trek episodes, and

I was really bothered that they ignored Spock's future bride, which was referenced in later episodes of tos."

[Personal interview, December 6, 2009]

Although most interviewees claimed that the topic of interest could range from anything outside the mainstream to any topic whatsoever as long as interest in said topic exceeds socially acceptable levels, these theoretical boundaries wavered somewhat when put into practice. For instance, one interviewee who took a broader view of geek identity used the example of his brother as a non-traditional geek.

My brother is someone I'd consider a geek despite his almost luddite disdain for tech, his interests are cars, sports, and math

he can recite facts or explain how to mathematically obtain the best results in a fantasy football league in a heartbeat

real nuts and bolts geeky interest in sports

Of course, for many self-professed geeks, this is such a betrayal... to call mere sports enthusiasts geeks[...]

*Would your brother consider himself a geek/part of geek culture?*

It depends on who he's talking to. Generally speaking, I don't think he would

*But you'd consider him one.*

\*nod\* Yes. although to a lesser degree than some other folks I know...

If I were to make a kinsey scale of geekdom, with 0 being pretty normal, pretty standard and 6 being so geeky as to be almost socially unviable...with 3 being a fair mix of geek and mainstream sociable... I'd say my brother is a 2 to 3 and I'm a 3 to 4.

[Personal interview, January 2, 2010]

In this case, as in the vast majority of the others, 'geek' is treated as an objective classification. Ironically, it is one of the hallmarks of geek culture that the notion of culture itself as a social construction is devalued. Nonetheless, there is a clear sense of boundary-setting expressed in describing who is and is not treated like a geek—regardless of whether or not this conforms to individual ideas about theoretical classification systems.

[...]geeks always see themselves as geekier than the mundanes<sup>1</sup>. There are, for example, lots of people who say they "like Star Trek" but the Trekkies aren't going to acknowledge them as geeks if they don't do the really geeky stuff like buy a lot of action figures or go to a Star Trek convention. Geeks are self-defined extremists. Geeks commit to their dumb causes.[...]

Maybe it's different for the younger generations. My generation saw ourselves as separate from the mainstream. Once you've checked out of the mainstream, you might as well go for it, and really, really, really, learn those AD&D rules. Or those Star Trek episodes. On the secret identities of the entire Justice League. That's the stuff that impressed other geeks.

[Personal interview, December 18, 2009]

As interviewees described geeks in specific, concrete terms, they returned again and again to media. Although I had initially intended to conduct an analysis of geek culture including media, it became apparent that the most accurate way to understand geek culture is through the narratives, tropes, and archetypes that make up its folktales and mythology.

After all, geekdom is a subculture that is defined primarily through its media. In many ways, geek media *is* geek culture; not only is it created with geeks in mind, drawing on the rich history of geek involvement with media, but it is also a mechanism through which geeks self-select by their engagement with the material. While 'geek' is, as with any label, learned and applied as a result of social contact, the application of the label is primarily validated through consumption of particular forms and instances of media.

[...]if someone has the entire buffy and angel series on their DVD rack, have statues from an anime on their coffee table, and have an orrery on their kitchen table, you know something about them right away

For a long time, I had a few geeky friends, but we weren't part of any greater culture, except in that we partook of the same inputs. In

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1 Geek slang for non-geek. Originated in the graphic novel series *Fables*.

michigan, though, (and other places, too, I know) there is this real culture, and if you do geeky things it's kind of hard to avoid it.

[Personal interview, December 24, 2009]

The relevant media is essential to the performance of geekhood. Television, video games, graphic novels, webcomics, and movies provide social scripts that underlie much of geek interaction. Much as words and phrases from geek media become part of geek vocabulary, the narratives in geek media shape the way geek identity is performed.

### **Choosing Geek Media**

Once I had determined that media was central to geek identity, the question of what constitutes 'geek media' immediately arose. The people that I interviewed had a fairly flexible range of characteristics that they attributed to the category.

From a literary standpoint, obviously sci-fi and fantasy are huge...and of course, the email lists we frequent are heavy with SyFy Channel, Battlestar Galactica, and the new Star Trek movie

but I think those are almost like our geek comfort food, and almost like a litmus test for newcomers.

[Personal interview, January 2, 2010]

Complicated wordplay in text, demonstrations of geek values, fantastic settings, detailed and consistent worlds and settings, association with other geek interests, such as computers, fantasy, math, science.

[Geek values are] resistance against an oppressive superior force, evil authoritarians, rewarding people who reject power in favor of their values, eventual triumph of an oppressed underclass, etc.

[Personal interview, January 2, 2010]

Ultimately, I drew on my own experience with what forms of media were familiar to self-identified geeks as well as various online resources, including articles

from geek-identified sites such as *Wired* and *Boing Boing*. One particularly useful online resource was *The Geek Test*, an online quiz that was originally conceived in 1999 and is currently in its fourth revision; it was last updated on March 14, 2010 and contains hundreds of questions against which visitors can check their levels of geekiness. Naturally, the test includes a listing of what the author considers—with input from commentators on her blog—essential geek media. These questions also focus heavily on intellectual curiosity, giving test-takers points for such items as attending public academic lectures of their own volition, independently studying obscure languages, and solving puzzles for fun.

## **Chapter 2: Heroes**

When discussing the heroes of geek media, it is important to keep in mind that these are predominantly male. In geek media, as in much of mainstream media, men and boys represent the neutral; they are the baseline from which characters are developed. Female-identified heroes are subject to their own classifications and characterizations which do not map smoothly onto the default schema elaborated here. For these reasons, this section deals exclusively and intentionally with male-identified heroes.

At any given point in geek history, the hegemonic ideal of heroism is fairly uniform. By exploring the different forms popular protagonists take, it is possible to track the emergence of geek consciousness and even geek pride.

### **The Good Guy**

Many geeks publicly decry the binary geek/jock classification, claiming that “geek and jock need not be opposites” (Denmead 2009) and asking, “Are we a group of 4 year olds led to believe in generalizations of this nature?” (Pescovitz 2010). They emphasize terms such as ‘enlightenment,’ pushing for the inclusion that characterizes geek morality.

Nevertheless, the archetypical jock arises again and again in geek discussions and media. As one interviewee observed, “Geeks never quite get over that nerd/jock dichotomy” (Personal interview, December 18, 2009) While some commentators self-consciously attribute its prevalence to childhood socialization, others accept it as a central facet of geek identity. ‘Jock’ becomes the deviant category that sets the

boundaries of geekhood. Being a geek means not trying out for the football team, eschewing “sports, action movies, NASCAR and, um, sports” (Denmead 2009).



[Krahulik and Holkins 2009b]

There are a few areas of overlap; for instance, while Halo is considered a 'jock' game, it is also cultural property of geekdom to the extent that “if you said “Yeah, I’m a

geek, I really like playing games. What the hell is Halo?" People would look at you funny" (Personal interview, December 6, 2009). However, it is uncommon to see this confluence of territory in media. Until recently, geek media was very specialized and relatively obscure: often aimed specifically at geek audiences. Although examples of the genre often featured explosions, battle, and scantily clad women, they rarely fell under the classification of 'action flick.' Since the rise of the superhero movie and box office successes such as *The Dark Knight* and *Transformers*, this has slowly been changing, but historically geek movies and television shows have ignored the jock audience.

This does not, however, mean that jocks are invisible in geek media—or even that they are portrayed as unsympathetic characters. To geek writers and audiences, jocks represent something far more complex than a mere malicious cretin.

Captain James T. Kirk, of *Star Trek: The Original Series* (ST:TOS) is one of the most prominent unacknowledged jocks in geek canon: he is brash, athletic, socially adept, and very sexually active. It is these very qualities that fans of Kirk emphasize when singing his praises, without ever offering a hint of the word 'jock'. The single most classic debate in geek culture is whether Kirk was better than his more diplomatic, less hypermasculine successor, Jean-Luc Picard of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (ST:TNG), and as a result there have been quite literally thousands of arguments for and against each captain bandied about on a regular basis since the inception of ST:TNG.

"Diplomacy for Kirk is a phaser and a smirk[...]Kirk's first officer didn't play some wimpy instrument like the trombone," (Drago 1997) declares one archived list entitled 'Kirk Vs. Picard.' This is clearly framed as a positive aspect of Kirk's character,

despite the fact that it is one far more consistent with geek concepts of jock values than idealized geek values themselves.

The Kirk character, the 'good jock,' is a typical protagonist for early geek media circa the 1940s through the 1960s. Superman, described as "the ultimate uber-jock" (Thompson 2010) by one commentator, pre-retcon Hal Jordan, and other DC Comics heroes also followed this pattern, as did many video game player characters (PCS). While the 'good jocks' of early geek media were not necessarily simplistic or one-dimensional, they remained unflinching bastions of a particular kind of morality characterizing the post-World War II era. The masculinity embodied in these characters was utterly unquestionable.

Moreover, these jock characters' attributes bore little resemblance to the actual characteristics of their intended audience. One interviewee explained, "in the early days of geekery, there was a lot of conscious 'my life is horrible, I'm tiny and people beat me up, but in this game I've got huge muscles and ladies all over me'" (Personal interview, December 7, 2009). This theme of escapism was frequently cited in interviews as a key component of geek media, but its expression has changed dramatically over the years.

### **The Bad (but not really) Guy**

Over time, the 'good jock' characters became increasingly relegated to second-string roles. The major protagonists became more flawed and more quick-witted, occasionally wandering into the realm of the antihero or even temporary villain. These characters often espouse a particular kind of 'cowboy' mentality: they prize

independence over security and “have reckless streaks and have no problem conning their way to greater profit and personal gain at the expense of their own lives” (Silver 2010).

Above all, this character is alone. The theme of loneliness and solitude is emphasized over and over again throughout these narratives. This has a very direct appeal to the geek community; while some geeks are extroverts and in fact most self-identify as geeks due to social connections, there seems to be a general consensus that “the geekiest, most genius guys are so into the minutia, so into detail, so into the nuts and bolts that they don't deal well with social interaction” (Personal interview, January 2, 2010).

The characters' solitude is often explained through personal tragedy and past events that they had little to no control over. As a result, they are left on the boundaries of society. However, they compensate for this inability to conform by excelling in other aspects of their characterization. Typically, the morally ambiguous lone wolf is either highly charismatic or physically imposing—or, in the parlance of role-playing games (RPGs), either a party face or a tank. These characters are often presented as having average or relatively low intelligence.

While intellect is not often emphasized as a major trait in the characterizations of the jock hero, they are typically portrayed as possessing great mental acuity. By contrast, the tank is a more stat-balanced figure. This concept is entirely in keeping with the increased demand for pseudo-realism; when applied to games, it is considerably more practical and interesting to achieve party balance by distributing different skillset concentrations than by allowing each player to be his or her own

Superman. This concept of 'balance' is paramount in geek world-building today, to the extent that an unbalanced element is referred to as 'broken,' and deliberately unbalancing a character can be an act worthy of utmost contempt.

This is particularly significant because tabletop RPGs became popular not long after the antihero was beginning to take hold of the collective geek imagination. From a purely mechanical perspective, the direct predecessor of *Dungeons and Dragons* was miniature wargaming. In mini games, there was no need for narrative creativity; each piece was simply a means to an end. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson irrevocably altered the history of tabletop gaming by introducing RPGs that focused on a complex and fluff-heavy personal quest, set in a rich, Tolkein-inspired fantasy world. The need for balance within-game evolved to produce a better collective narrative within this framework as well as to echo the narratives provided by the popular geek media.

As a result, characters such as *The X-Men*'s Wolverine and *Firefly*'s Jayne Cobb, avatars of this paradigm, serve as outsiders even among their chosen communities. Wolverine is often ostracized by the X-Men because of his uncouth demeanor, despite the fact that he is one of the more powerful mutants of the series. Similarly, despite his facility with weaponry and hand-to-hand combat, Jayne Cobb is unable to achieve the same level of communal acceptance as the rest of Serenity's crew.

High levels of charisma also tend to correlate with average or below-average intelligence in morally ambiguous outlaw heroes, although to a lesser degree than do high levels of physical strength. Most protagonists of this type employ firearms of some variety rather than the brute strength favored by their predecessors.

In the case of high-charisma protagonists, unlike that of high-strength protagonists, intellect is often replaced with wit. A reference document for *Dungeons and Dragons* 3.5 explains the distinction succinctly: “While Intelligence represents one’s ability to analyze information, Wisdom represents being in tune with and aware of one’s surroundings” (Meliamne and Jensen 2007). Characters such as *The X-Men*'s Gambit use not only their aptitude with weaponry but also their 'street smarts,' often marked in-text by the frequent use of quips and snide remarks. Their loner status has granted them facility with 'the real world,' and lends them a certain authenticity that is glorified both in-text and in fandom.

They are also generally depicted as displaying considerable interest in sexually and romantically pursuing women, often with great success. While characters like *The X-Men*'s Cyclops are certainly portrayed as attractive to women, they pursue the abstract Victorian ideals of true love. By contrast, characters such as Jack of Fables are at least extremely flirtatious and at most blatantly promiscuous.

The 'cowboy' character remains wildly popular in geek media, as both a PC and a narrative device, and it is difficult at this time to determine whether its hegemony is waning. Nonetheless, recent years have seen the rise of an entirely new protagonist.

### **The Nice Guy**

The increasing popularity of geek self-identification coincided with the rise of the 'nice guy' hero. This new kind of character arose with Spider-Man at the forefront of the movement in the 1960s, and has had an increasing influence on multiple forms of geek media ever since.

Spider-Man represented a significant departure in characterization from earlier mainstream 'capes'. Although there had been other teenage superheroes, they typically had mentors and were rarely showcased as the main protagonists. Moreover, Peter Parker was highly intelligent, fascinated by science, and ostracized by his peers—a “hyper-neurotic, recovering science geek” (Heinberg et al 2006). He was specifically and deliberately construed as a character unlike any of his predecessors: not heavily muscle-bound, but rather quick, dextrous, and agile.



[Heinberg et al 2006]

This marked a different understanding of masculinity in geek culture, emerging just as mainstream American culture's assumptions and views about gender were beginning to be challenged by second-wave feminism and the hippie movement—although, of course, markedly different understandings of femininity have been much slower to develop.

Since Spider-Man, there has been a steady increase of geek self-representation in geek media. Geek-identified protagonists are smart, often unathletic, or at least less athletic than their antagonists, and share the same interests in technology, science fiction, and fantasy that their target audience does. As the stories progress, the geeks generally become successful, experience fantastical adventures, and gain the romantic

interest of an attractive female character. This can be seen as a form of meta-escapism, in which geek audiences identify with a character who is subjected to a transformative narrative in which the character himself—and it is almost exclusively a male provenance—is allowed to escape from the mundane pressures of everyday life.

These characters have spread to mainstream media as well; the eponymous lead of NBC's *Chuck* and the two male protagonists of CBS's *The Big Bang Theory* are a few examples of the 'nice-guy' main characters in current prime-time television. Despite their popularity among mainstream audiences, these characters are unquestionably and explicitly tied to geek culture: they pepper their dialogue with references to *Star Trek*, *Zork!*, and *Batman*, and they often have difficulty functioning in mainstream social situations.

Nice-guy protagonists in geek media are differentiated from the popular everyman underdogs in mainstream media by more than their interests. They tend to valorize intellectualism, skill, and creativity over charisma and physical prowess, although many geek-proxy characters become through narrative adept at one or both of the latter. Geek media typically links these characters' eventual successes directly to their superior ability to reason.

However, this trend has for the most part not extended to the realm of games, both video and tabletop. The inception of the video game industry and the rise of tabletop RPGs resulted in antihero characters in gaming gaining popularity as quickly as their comic book and television counterparts, but geek protagonists in games are few and far between. Franchises with sustained popularity such as *Metroid* and *Metal Gear*

*Solid* inevitably feature warriors of some kind: Samus Aran is a bounty hunter, and Solid Snake is a retired soldier.

Professor Hershel Layton is a notable exception to the legacy of warrior heroes; the surprisingly popular *Professor Layton* titles feature puzzle-based gameplay, a mostly violence-free world, and an intellectual main character. Although Professor Layton originated in Japan, it is noteworthy because it has garnered an unusual level of attention in the United States for a puzzle game.

The *Half-Life* franchise represents another anomalous divergence from this trend, in that the player character (pc) is a theoretical physicist named Gordon Freeman who becomes a fighter in response to an alien incursion. Like many pcs, Gordon Freeman is not given dialogue in an attempt to let the player more fully immerse him or herself within the game world.

This custom of having a 'blank slate' character has rendered video game protagonists less variable over time. They are overwhelmingly white and male, with a fairly even distribution of physical builds ranging from slender to muscular, although a number of popular titles feature anthropomorphic animal or fantasy characters that attempt to circumvent this issue entirely.

Webcomics, on the other hand, are far more likely to feature geek protagonists. While there is no shortage of antiheroes, and even a few jock heroes, the vast majority of geek webcomics feature geek protagonists. There seem to be several factors influencing the rise of this genre: first, webcomics have only risen to prominence in the past 10-15 years, and their writers and artists therefore have been steeped in the geek-centric narrative of the present. Second, webcomics tend to self-select for geek cultural

ties. One interviewee remarked in reference to an example, “Webcomics in general have a bit of geekery to them[. Although Questionable Content] is not inherently AS geeky as others[...]everyone I know who likes QC, I'd call a geek” (Personal interview, December 7, 2009).

In general, webcomics tend to be open-ended narratives. While there are typically story arcs that can span days, months, or even years, relatively few webcomics begin with a sense of how and when they will end. This provides a source of tension for the webcartoonists; there is the constant creative push to evolve the main characters' personalities in light of an increasingly complex backstory, but there is also the pull of stasis that will allow the same kinds of punchlines and narrative elements to continue to take place. Eric Burns, author of a long-running blog commenting on webcomics, observed,

The idea is to take what was fun on one level and showing the reality beneath it.[...]after a while, even a successful webcartoonist gets tired of fart jokes and sight gags and wants to make these characters more than they've been.

[Burns 2004]

However, this can lead to massive backlash from fans. If the webcartoonist is unprepared for the narrative complexities produced by an attempt at evolution, it can even lead to plot holes and chaos within the story itself.

Although the more grounded a webcomic is in a reality-based universe, the less dramatically the characters are likely to change as the narrative progresses, almost every geek protagonist eventually undergoes a successful romance, typically with an attractive female character. It should be noted at this point that even though webcomics

tend to show slightly more gender parity and racial diversity in overall casting than their printed counterparts, and generally show astronomically more diversity with regards to sexuality, their protagonists remain strikingly white, male, and heterosexual —as do their creators.

## **Chapter 3: Villains**

This chapter deals with the male villains of geek culture. While there are certainly villainous women represented in geek media, these, like heroic women, are treated as deviations from the standard (male) model.

Geek villains do not follow as clear a historical trajectory as geek heroes, particularly because they tend to be more varied in form and approach. The serial nature of such geek media formats as comic books and television provides an environment that actively encourages the so-called ‘monster of the week’ format, in which new villains are introduced with every episode. The more original a villain, the more creative the hero must be in order to prevail.

Nonetheless, there are a few broad categories of note that are endemic to geek media. These forms are consistent with the idea of conformity and mainstream acceptance as the greatest possible evil. The alien, for example, may be evil—but it is also sympathetic by means of its outsider status. This chapter focuses heavily on a book by Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*, as it contains clear representations of all three major archetypes and serves as an excellent focus for analysis.

### **The Bully**

With the decline of the jock hero came the ascension of the jock villain. Perhaps the most explicit early bully of geek culture was Biff, of the *Back to the Future* series; while Marty McFly's geeky qualities were tempered with the anti-intellectualist rebel aura of the classic 1980s teenaged protagonist, Biff Tannen is a classic jock exemplar. In both his teenaged and adult forms, Biff represents the antithesis of geek values: he is

brash, overbearing, and more than willing to use his physical and social advantages to achieve his ends to the detriment of characters less privileged.

Similarly, one early villain that Ender Wiggin of Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* faces is a bully in every sense of the word. He is larger than Ender, and far crueler; he also possesses social validation, as "his sadism made him a natural focus for all those who loved pain in others" (Card 1985:36). During Ender's first days at the military academy he is placed into as a child, Bernard, the bully, deliberately sets out to humiliate him and establish his low social position. His identity as a bully is described as "the kind of person he was—a tormentor" (Card 1985:36). Ender eventually defeats his opponent using his superior skills and intelligence, and is graduated to the next challenge.

In the companion volume to *Ender's Game*, a book entitled *Ender's Shadow*, the villains are even more explicitly tied to the 'bully' figure. In fact, Achilles, the main villain that the protagonist faces originates as a member of a social group known as 'bullies.' This is emphasized even further as Bean, the protagonist, is described as far smaller and weaker than any of the other children. He is able to succeed through his genius-level intelligence.

There is a minor but significant contrast between Bernard and Achilles: the latter has a minor physical disability and has relatively low status among the social group known as 'bullies' in the text. Achilles is also much more intelligent than Bernard. This elevates Achilles to a much higher threat level, and grants him a position as a recurring villain. By contrast, Bernard is defeated early on in *Ender's Game* and represents relatively minimal danger in the scope of the narrative.

Ultimately, the true bully is a figure of ridicule. Despite often being presented as powerful, in no way is he a character to be respected. While the bully is understood in the context of geek narratives to occupy an adversarial role, he does so in a fairly pedestrian manner. Defeating him is an inevitability made potentially interesting only by virtue of the creativity that the protagonist invests in the endeavor. This effect is often heightened as a consequence of genre; villains of this type are generally relegated to lighter, less dramatic narratives.

As secondary villains, bullies quickly lose their individuality. The trope of 'henchmen' is as old as geek media itself. These muscle-bound 'goons' are disposable enemies meant to showcase the protagonist's superior abilities, whether physical or creative, not three-dimensional characters with personal motivations beyond enacting pain.

### **The Collective**

The catchphrase of the Borg, an iconic villain in *Star Trek*, 'Resistance is futile,' exemplifies the geek perception of the mainstream. In this framework, geeks are refigured from outcasts, victims of an incompatible value system, to warriors upholding the right to challenge the status quo. Through the implied agency required to resist the powers of conformity, geeks become active rather than passive. This is David and Goliath writ on the scale of galaxies.

It should be noted that as the series progressed, *Star Trek* characters began to make comparisons between the Borg and the Federation, the governmental body with jurisdiction over the protagonists. This is most apparent in *Deep Space 9*, where a

character claims that the Federation is “worse than the Borg. At least they tell you about their plans for assimilation[...]you assimilate people and they don't even know it” (For the Cause 1996). This is consistent with the ever-increasing distrust of authority, particularly governmental authority, expressed in geek media.

The majority of science fiction operates in this same way. While this narrative is not unfamiliar throughout American mainstream media, geek media is characterized particularly by the embodiment of conformity as an institutional entity or as a literal monster. It is always antagonistic and typically constructed as the hegemonic power.

In the context of *Ender's Game*, the ultimate villain is presented as the military-industrial complex that controls every aspect of Ender's life and eventually influences him to commit genocide by giving him remote control over an army under the guise of a game. Both Ender and the metanarrative place the blame for this war crime primarily on the collective authority that authorized and orchestrated Ender's actions. In this sense, Ender does not succeed against his most dangerous foes; this is not a tale of victory.

### **The Inhuman**

Aliens, monsters, and other things that go bump in the night have long held a place of fascination in geek media. They are rarely depicted as pure evil; rather, geek narratives often afford them some degree of sympathy. Their weaknesses tend to be peculiar, requiring a certain amount of cunning to ferret out. This elevates their status as respectable adversaries.

One of the earliest and best-known alien tales in geek canon is H.G. Wells' 1898 book, *The War of the Worlds*. In an age of increasing mechanization, Wells envisioned the monstrous invaders as ultimately vulnerable to the organic in the form of Earth bacteria. Similarly, the Daleks of the *Doctor Who* series are only superior due to their technological prowess; they are physically vulnerable within their metal shells.

There is a certain streak of sympathy for aliens, even in villainous roles, that has been increasing throughout geek narratives. This has never been more evident than in a recent film, entitled *District 9*, which presents a clear analogy to apartheid in which members of the oppressed class are represented by insect-like aliens. While this is problematic in that it falls within a legacy of marginalized identities being represented as literally inhuman, it acts as a natural progression of the geek tendency to humanize aliens and call into question humanity's potential for peaceful and equitable interaction with extraterrestrial intelligence.

In this sense, science fiction often acts as a cautionary tale. *Ender's Game* depicts the shift in the protagonist's perception of aliens from unmitigated hostility to compassion as a moral development. Despite the fact that through most of the narrative, the aliens are denigrated and vilified by the humans—including the dispersal of propaganda suited to the intergalactic war that *Ender's Game* is set in—the aliens themselves remain an unseen presence until their sympathetic presentation near the end of the book. Ender himself is their proxy throughout the text via his outsider status and governmentally-induced difficulty in developing kinship ties or other personal relationships. In fact, one of the most compelling scenes in the book depicts Ender

being forced to play the part of the alien in a children's game reminiscent of 'Cowboys and Indians,' complete with embedded xenophobia.

While modern geek storylines featuring the inhuman typically advocate acceptance of diversity by using aliens and other creatures as symbolic representations of minorities, it is important to note that these texts are far from innocent of exclusionary oppression. For instance, despite the progressive themes embedded in the human-alien and human-cyborg relationships in ST:TOS, many episodes endorse misogynistic attitudes. In their push to defend inclusion by mythologizing 'the Other,' geek narratives all too often gloss over or even perpetuate stereotypical and destructive representations of real and contemporary marginalized communities. Sympathy for the oppressed is all too often understood as sympathy for the oppressed heterosexual white male.

## Chapter 4: Women

*“Women in RPGs are easily parsed into “virgin/whore” categories, with a small handful of faithful bikini babes who can be trusted and the rest of them being either murderous vamps or dumpy mothers imploring you to rescue their children from the monsters”*  
*(Feminist Gamers 2007)*

Most geek communities are not, unless specifically designated as such, safe spaces for women. This is true in terms of both physical space and ideological space; despite the ever-growing number of geek-identified women and girls and the considerable historical precedent of female science fiction, fantasy, video game and comic book fans, the myth that “girls do *not* play video games” (Buckley 2003a) and “the assumption that [women] don’t get computers” (Personal interview, January 3, 2010) persist to this day.

This is thoroughly reinforced through most forms of geek media, as noted by one interviewee.

Almost all women that are depicted are the romantic love interests, and not the heroic main characters. To be honest, it has caused a bit of gender identity issues for me. I even found that when I made role-playing characters they were almost exclusively male—kind of like I’d internalized the idea that only males go adventuring.

[Personal interview, January 4, 2010]

Harassment of female-bodied attendees, particularly though not exclusively those who cosplay<sup>2</sup>, at science fiction and comic book conventions has gotten so severe that a grassroots campaign called 'The Con Anti-Harassment Project' has arisen to “encourage fandom, geek community and other non-business conventions to establish, articulate and act upon anti-harassment policies, especially sexual harassment policies, and to

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2 Short for 'costume play.' Non-theater performance art involving the use of costumes and accessories to represent a character or idea, most typically from Japanese manga and/or anime.

encourage mutual respect among con-goers, guests and staff” (Con Anti-Harassment Project).

### The Professional

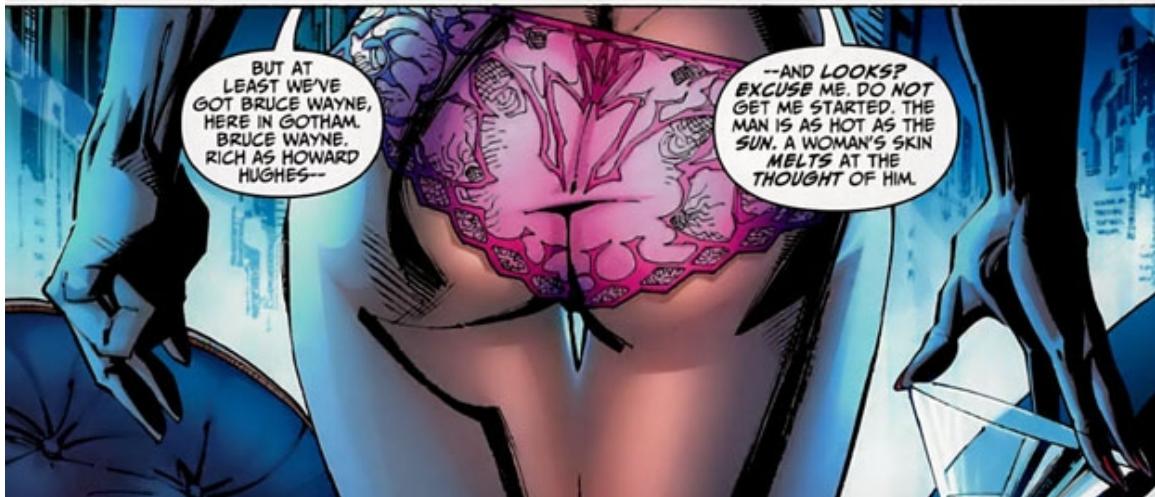
*“April O’Neal[‘s] just gotta get that story, even if it means getting kidnapped all the time and having to be rescued by a bunch of mutated adolescent reptiles over and over” (Nostalgia Chick 2010).*

Lois Lane of the *Superman* franchise is one of the most iconic women in superhero comics, despite not being a superhero herself. She is a direct descendant of a character that arose in the 1930s: the hard-boiled, inquisitive career woman. During the Golden Age of comics in the 1930s-1950s, these women—typically journalists—were sometimes used as foils for male superheroes. Naturally, they were often framed as love interests, although they tended to rebuff the advances of the protagonists in favor of their careers.

By and large, these women have faded from geek narratives. They have become unpopular to the degree that their characters' intellect and abilities are downgraded when they appear at all in modern incarnations; for instance, in the 2008 movie version of *The Spirit*, a woman who held degrees in both nuclear physics and surgery was portrayed as “an evil secretary” (Newitz 2008). A similar fate befell Vicki Vale, a woman characterized as an intelligent, independent photojournalist who in 1948 once told Bruce Wayne: “Puh-lease, Mr. Wayne...I’m here to get a picture, not a date!” (Finger et al). In the 2005 version, Vicki is scripted thus:

OK, Jim, I'm shameless. Let's go with an ASS SHOT. Panties detailed. Balloons from above. She's walking, restless as always. We can't take our eyes off her. Especially since she's got one fine ass.

[Miller et al 2005]



*Vicki Vale dictates notes for an article while fondling a martini glass and pacing by the picture windows in her apartment in lingerie.*

[Miller et al 2005]

Even in non-superhero narratives, career-motivated women tend to be downgraded in modern adaptations. For instance, Isaac Asimov's Susan Calvin was originally an older woman described as 'plain' who worked as the leading robopsychologist of her era. In Asimov's descriptions of her throughout various short stories written primarily in the 1940s and 1950s, she is brilliant, highly competent, and misanthropic. By contrast, she is played by a young, attractive actress in the 2004 film *I, Robot* as the romantic interest of the film's male protagonist.

This is not to suggest that early geek media is unproblematic; in fact, as one female-bodied Chinese-American blogger commented, "I tend to avoid most science fiction written in the fifties or earlier, because [...] most of it feels uncomfortably like it's

being said over my head at some Invisible White Man in my vicinity instead of at me” (meigui 2010). However, geek media as a whole has certainly trended towards a more homogenizing view of women in recent years.

### **The 'Professional'**

Highly sexualized women are the norm in geek media, but sexually active women tend to be evil. This is consistent with the virgin/whore cultural metanarrative of the contemporary United States, although as a general rule depictions of women in geek media are somewhat more sexualized than in the mainstream.

This is nowhere more evident than in women's costumes in geek media, particularly superhero women's costumes. The hypersexualized nature of these costumes has become so embedded in geek culture that it has become a trope. The most infamous example of this is Power Girl's so-called 'boob window,' a facet of her costume design that exposes much of her cleavage.

Power Girl is at once the most generic and most sexualized superheroine in mainstream comics. I believe that the key to whatever popularity Power Girl has is her generic, blank-slate quality – she is a tabula rasa that comic book fans and creators alike can project their conscious and unconscious desires on to.

That, and she is built like a brick outhouse.

Power Girl's bosom is her most prominent feature, and prominent is the word. If she were real, and she showed up to rescue you, you would be going, “Daaamn!” Eye contact with her would be impossible –such is the er, power of Power Girl's Magical Cleavage.

[Campbell 2005]

While Power Girl's costume is commented on both in-text and in metatextual discussion of her character, for the most part comics and other geek media have taken it

as read that women must be attired in tight, revealing, and thoroughly impractical outfits. This impracticality is particularly evident in geek media because of the athletic activity expected of the superpowered and warrior characters common in video games, comics, and science fiction/fantasy books and film.

As exploitative as superhero women's costumes are, supervillain women's costumes are exponentially more so—particularly when contrasted with their male compatriots. Even in the amplified sexual framework of geek female representation, the more scandalous the costume the more likely a character is to be evil.

*DC Direct Green Lantern Series 3;*

*Star Sapphire, Sinestro, Cyborg*

*Superman, and Batman as a Green  
Lantern. Note Star Sapphire's lack of  
pants and passive pose.*

[Raving Toy Maniac 2007]



## The Girlfriend

*“While the males must work their way up a hierarchical ladder [in a LARP], the female character finds herself as an object for their competitions. She is a grail. A gem. A treasure. An end instead of a means. A background character” (Steele 2007).*

Despite the efforts of self-identified geek girls (or, as they occasionally call themselves, 'geek grrls') women still constitute an often overlooked minority in geek culture. This social reality is deeply entrenched in producer-consumer relations and practices, as articulated recently by Paul Gitter, president of consumer products, North America, for Marvel Entertainment Inc.

Since our core customer has always been guys, we need to be very careful when we introduce female product so that we don't alienate our core[...]What we have found through testing is that we haven't alienated them, which gives us the OK to move forward with female product.

[qtd. in Kaplan 2009]

There are several points of interest here, chief among them the obvious distinction and hierarchy of gender. Not only are the financial resources of men more highly prized, the gendered markets are seen as binary and oppositional. It is implied that 'female product' will not appeal to men, and is fundamentally distinct from 'male product.' Of course, this is borne out in the hyper-gendering of the products themselves in terms of both presentation and content.

Another aspect to note is the distinction between 'guys' and 'female.' As Karen Healey notes in commenting on this article,

Referring to women as “females” is dehumanizing, particularly when it’s contrasted with the use of terms like “men” or “guys”, rather than “males”. Both female and male are fine as adjectives, in moderation. However, when you want to use a noun to refer to female humans, “women” is better, both stylistically and politically, as a recognition of that very humanity.

[Healey 2009]

In general, geek products specifically designed for women tend to situate them as 'girlfriends' or fangirls of male superheroes. Not only is this intensely heteronormative, it is a product of the systematic denial of girl-geek identification with geek protagonists. This is in part due to the dearth of legitimately nuanced and heroic female protagonists, but it is also due to the prevalence of good-aligned women and girls as romantic interests in geek narratives.

Even superhuman women in geek narratives are not immune from the 'girlfriend' role; for instance, a major part of Jean Grey's character in the *X-Men* franchise is her function as a love interest. She exhibits all the classic 'girlfriend' symptoms: she is popular, conventionally attractive—and recognized as such in-text—and retains some degree of the unobtainable.

## The Ideal

While mainstream America developed the 'girl power' aesthetic and philosophy in the late 1990s and early 2000s, women and girls involved with geek culture typically rejected the sparkly pink and flowery themes of the popularized interpretation of second-wave feminism. Within their circles, this era was characterized by the rise of the 'geek girl' as a motif and a movement.

One of the major consequences of this pseudo-feminism was the ascendancy of tokenism in the form of the ideal geek girl. While her characterization overlaps somewhat with the 'good girl' image of early geek media, she is marked by her ability to navigate geek spaces with ease. Her familiarity with gaming, technology, and geek media typically rival that of the protagonist himself, yet she tends to be far more socially adept.



[Buckley 2003b]

With these characteristics, she is relegated to the two-dimensional role of wish fulfillment while becoming a foil used against accusations, whether potential or actualized, of sexism. She is often presented by her creators and fans as a sign of social

progress, despite the way in which she is dehumanized. The idea that a female-bodied individual could somehow manage to have an interest in geek pursuits is depicted as revolutionary—and titillating.

One thing that has always stood out to me is that, now that I am older, when I do things that label boys as geeks (and therefore often unattractive), they are hot.

It frustrates me that my interests and pursuits are subject to a male gaze that classes them as attractive to some extent, because of the difference of gender presentation of who is performing them.

[Personal interview, December 14, 2009]

One of the most serious consequences of the prevalence of this archetype is the high standard demanded of girl geeks. Women are constantly required to prove their 'geek cred' to be accepted; because there are so few ready-made social roles that allow them to possess skill levels between expert and novice, they are generally held to a higher standard when attempting to self-identify as geeks.

i think the [increase of women playing video games] comes from the fact that their bf's play the video games and they play themselves, which was unheard of when i was a kid---for girls to play video games

so the bf's play vid games, then try out D&D, and the gf's already somewhat geekified by vid games play dnd too

not too many girls get into dnd without a past bf being the main influence.

[Personal interview, December 13, 2009]

The opinions expressed by this male interviewee are fairly representative of the expectations placed on real-life geek girls. For the most part, the existence of women visibly participating in geek culture is justified by a presumed attachment to a male geek.

On one trip to Origins game convention when I was around 20, I won 2nd place in a tourney for a racing board game called Formula De. I carried my trophy to the food court, where someone asked me in a rude or sarcastic tone, “Did your boyfriend win that for you?”

[Personal interview, December 24, 2009]

### **The Woman Warrior**

Despite its faults, geek media has at least one notable accomplishment to its name: the proliferation of the woman warrior in popular media, from Wonder Woman to Xena to Echo.

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is indisputably one of the most powerful and iconic influences on the modern concept of the female action hero. Joss Whedon is one of the few directors in Hollywood who self-identifies as a feminist, and the fact that *Buffy* was deliberately construed as a feminist show makes its success all the more remarkable. Although numerous aspects of the show, particularly its lack of racial diversity, have been critiqued by modern scholars, its gender and sexuality politics were groundbreaking.

Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of *Buffy* is its enduring popularity in geek culture. The titular character hardly fits the stereotype of a geek—she is an athletic, attractive, outgoing girl concerned more with fashion than studying. While most of the main characters display geeky qualities, particularly a lesbian witch named Willow, none of them appear to be immediately accessible to the mainstream geek. This is a risk that few directors before or since have taken, even though it has been proven commercially viable.

*Alien*'s Ripley and *Metroid*'s Samus Aran are two other notable female characters that have escaped hypersexualization, Zero Suit Samus notwithstanding: a rare feat in media of any kind. They are resourceful and intelligent, and most importantly they are protagonists of successful and much-lauded franchises. In fact, Samus Aran is the player's proxy in the *Metroid* video games.

These woman warriors represent a departure from the nurturing, healing roles that good-aligned women in geek media have been traditionally assigned. In video games, healers and white mages are overwhelmingly female; similarly, in other forms of geek media non-warrior women have tended to be emotional, maternal, and charismatic in a very passive sense. The woman warrior role provides a way for women in geek media to have agency and power.

## **Chapter 5: Key Concepts**

### **Technology**

Much of modern science fiction hails back to the influences of Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein. The two men, along with Arthur C. Clarke, composed a triumvirate of sci-fi giants; they were active writers in the Golden Age of science fiction, which took place from the 1930s through 1950s, and transformed it from the likes of Jules Verne and Mary Shelley into its modern incarnation as a self-aware genre.

When Asimov began writing near the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, technology was typically feared. Scientific and technological advances were framed as oppositional to 'natural' human ways of life. In fact, Asimov himself noted:

[...]it became very common[...]to picture robots as dangerous devices that invariably destroyed their creators. The moral was pointed out over and over again that 'there are some things Man was not meant to know.'

[Asimov 1983:viii]

# CAVEMAN SCIENCE FICTION



[Diaz 2009]

Asimov was highly instrumental in changing this mindset, in no small part due to the introduction of the Three Laws of Robotics. The Three Laws have earned a

permanent place in geek canon for their simplicity, elegance, and broad potential for application. Asimov designed them as safeguards against the kind of technological breakdown that the post-World War I America feared, as commands to be implanted into robotic brains to cement their purpose.

The Laws of Robotics state:

One, a robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.[...]

Two[...]a robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.[...]

And three, a robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws.

[Asimov 1942:100]

These laws marked the beginning of a new age of science fiction, wherein technology and robots began to be viewed as positive and helpful by proto-geeks. By contrast, whether fairly or unfairly, geek media began to depict non-geek reactions to technological progress as needlessly fearful and counter-productive.

As a result, fear of technology is typically depicted as a more heinous sin than misuse of technology. While said misuse is hardly an uncommon theme in geek media, particularly science fiction, the antidote proscribed by the enclosing narrative is rarely if ever an anti-technological movement. In recent years, this has manifested as a rapidly-developing focus on transhumanism in geek culture.

Transhumanism, sometimes abbreviated H+ or >H, is defined by the Humanity+ website thus:

Transhumanism is a loosely defined movement that has developed gradually over the past two decades. It promotes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing

the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology. Attention is given to both present technologies, like genetic engineering and information technology, and anticipated future ones, such as molecular nanotechnology and artificial intelligence.

[Humanity+ 1998]

Transhumanists generally champion fearlessly pushing the boundaries of technological advancement with regards to what it means to be human. Geek media that deals with transhumanism is often careful to distinguish between the dangers of abusing technology and the technology itself, placing both blame and praise squarely in the realm of human agency.

With the notable exception of Hayao Miyazaki's animated films, which are generally laced with heavily environmentalist and anti-industrialization messages, geek media espouses an ethical schema focused on using technology wisely. The protagonists tend to be 'hacker'-type characters who use their creativity and intellect to circumvent socially and often legally acceptable institutional standards. For instance, in Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash*, the protagonist is described as a freelance hacker who must apply information about Sumerian mythology and linguistics to combat a dangerous virus in a future version of the Internet.

One of the most important topics that has arisen in recent years with regards to geek ethics is the issue of privacy and piracy. Copyright law and surveillance have been increasingly conspicuous in geek discourse, in no small part due to hacker culture.

Insofar as geeks are explicitly involved in politics as a group, they tend to rally around freedom of information and resisting surveillance. While it's not unusual to find

a certain amount of social liberalism among geeks, issues such as hate crimes and healthcare are of less interest than issues such as digital rights management.

## Data

This political focus is partly a result of the concern with information that is so often found in geek culture.

I think a lot of geeks take pride to some extent in the obscurity of the knowledge -- if it became popular they wouldn't be as interested.[...]

For example, the Internet used to be a very geeky thing -- simply connecting and posting to a bbs<sup>3</sup> was enough to get you a geek badge. Now that anyone can log into a social networking site and post in a forum, you have to do things like chat on IRC using a text client to earn the badge for that kind of activity.[...]

I think what makes [something] geeky is the amount of effort needed to engage in the activity or know a particular piece of knowledge. For example, if we looked at Medieval times -- not that geek was a term back then -- but at time very few people were literate, and it took a lot of effort to become so. If you willingly and eagerly sought out literacy in that day and age, I would say by modern standards it would make you a geek. In modern times where most people read because of mandatory education systems, the people who are geeky are the ones who do things that are considered boring or hard work, like memorizing a word a day from the dictionary.

[Personal interview, January 4, 2010]

As this interviewee points out, a key component of geek identity is the overwhelming interest in the collection of data. Intelligence alone is not enough to make someone a geek—on that point, at least, my interviewees were clear—but the drive to seek out information is certainly a major facet of geek self-identification.

The acquisition of and ability to deploy data regarding geek media is a key characteristic of geek fans. Not only does referencing geek trivia and information serve

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<sup>3</sup> Short for 'Bulletin Board System,' an early iteration of an online forum

as a status symbol among geeks, it is also a common method of determining how to navigate social interaction. One interviewee noted that “my roommate and I decided we liked each other after she referenced Ewok Adventure, and we judge people by if they get our references or not” (Personal interview, December 14, 2009), while another explained,

Well, if you can rattle off acronyms like MMORPG<sup>4</sup>, LAN<sup>5</sup>, LUG<sup>6</sup>, AP<sup>7</sup>, etc. you've shown that you're not a "mundane" (or insert other term for non-geek). You're safe to talk in front of, and there isn't the annoyance of having to moderate what you say or stop every 5 seconds to explain.

[Personal interview, January 4, 2010]

It is clear that data concerning acceptable topics, particularly geek media, serves as currency among self-identified geeks. Any attempt to limit the acquisition of data is wholly taboo; therefore, geeks' political leanings tend to be strongly anti-censorship.

Despite the illegality of actions such as file-sharing, numerous geeks do not consider many forms of data distribution to be deviant. In fact, among many geeks these activities constitute normative behavior and can even be considered morally defensible.

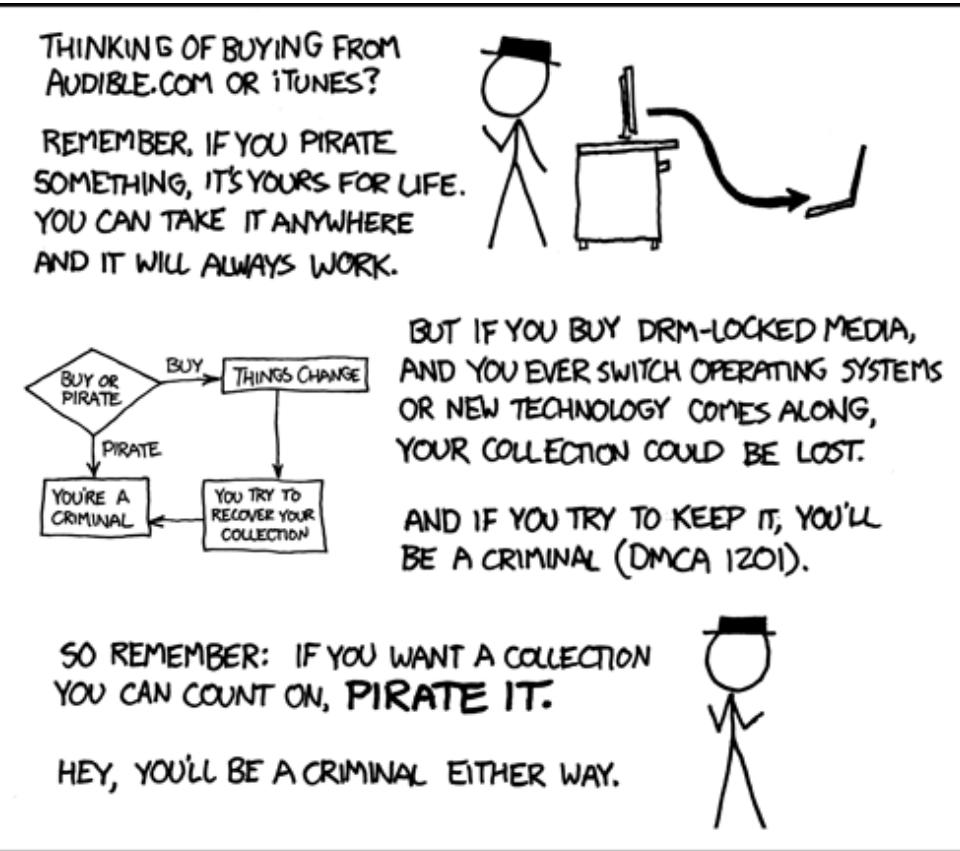
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<sup>4</sup> Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

<sup>5</sup> Live-Action Network

<sup>6</sup> Linux User Group

<sup>7</sup> Action Point



[Munroe 2008]

One result of this view of data distribution has been the open source movement. 'Open source' refers to the idea of software that allows free distribution and redistribution as well as transparent access to the source code. It is closely linked to geek sensibilities regarding inclusion: a key component of open source projects is that they are community productions.

Steve Weber describes the concept of open source as a deeply idealistic movement.

People often see in the open source software movement the politics that they would like to see—a libertarian reverie, a perfect meritocracy, a utopian gift culture that celebrates an economics of abundance instead of

scarcity[...]Like many things about the Internet era, open source software is an odd mix of overblown hype and profound innovation[. It] is in some ways the first and certainly one of the most prominent indigenous political statements of the digital world.

[2004:7]

Among the best-known examples of open source success is the Linux family of operating systems. Although it has not achieved a level of popularity comparable to its commercial competitors, Windows and the Apple operating system, it has gained considerable ground since its kernel was first written in 1991 by Linus Torvalds. The Linux kernel has been used to develop numerous distributions that can be installed and used without much prior knowledge, which has expanded its user base dramatically. It is small wonder, then, that geeks tend to consider the use of Linux systems superior to all others. Linux, as one of the most prominent open source projects, has become emblematic of geek values.

## Ethics

Ethical dilemmas have long been at the heart of science fiction. In its original form, science fiction was known as 'speculative fiction;' the premise of the genre is that it poses interesting and unusual questions about the future or occasionally about alternate realities or timelines. As such, it inevitably engages with ethical questions again and again, from the intergalactic war crimes at the heart of Orson Scott Card's *Ender* series to the Prime Directive of *Star Trek*.

This concern with questions of right and wrong is reflected throughout all forms of geek media. For instance, even among the most violent of video games, there tends to be a particular morality embedded in gameplay. Perhaps the most striking example

of this is in *BioShock*; the player must choose whether to kill young girls, known as 'Little Sisters,' and harvest their bodies for a substance called 'Adam,' or let them live and receive less Adam. However, the game eventually rewards players who chose not to kill the Little Sisters while damning any player who killed one or more.

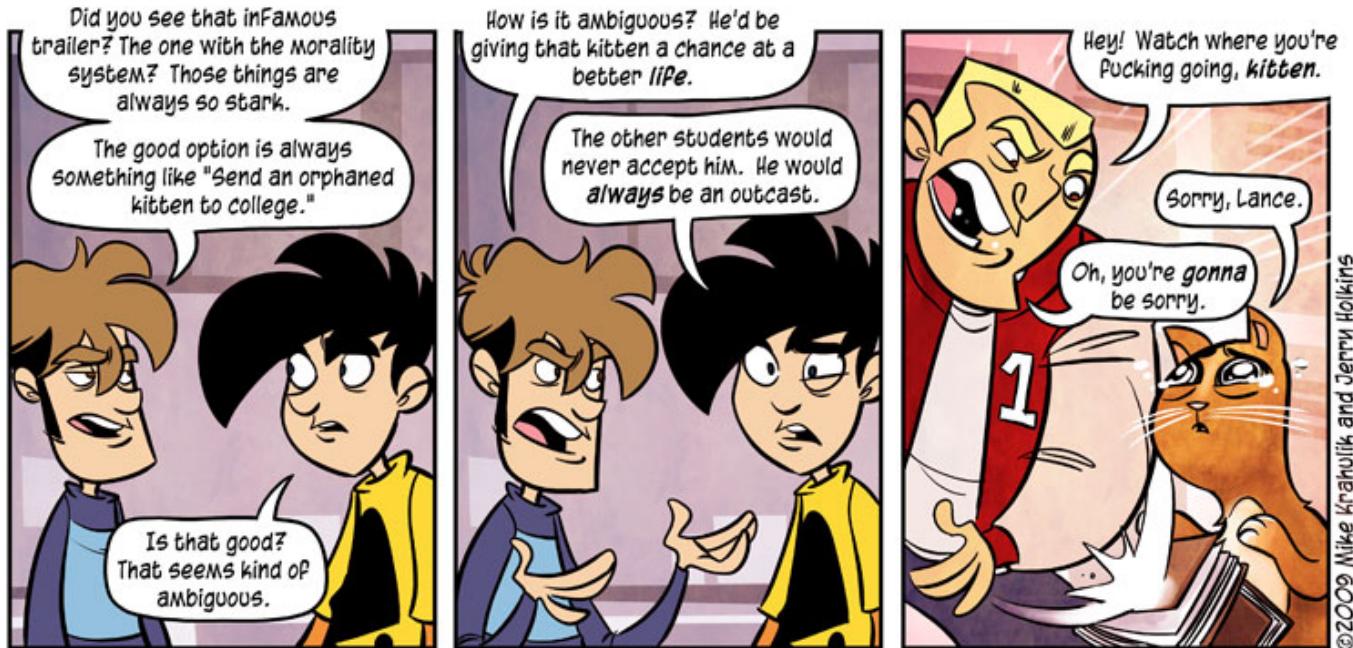
On the other hand, there is the tacit acknowledgment that the player has freedom and authority that NPCs do not. For instance, most RPGs encourage players to go into NPCs' houses in order to break jars, open chests, and take food in order to gain resources in-game.



Panel from a comic captioned 'If Real Life Were Like Dragonquest 8'  
[Buckley 2005]

The ethical revolution in video games took hold in 2001, with the release of a game entitled *Black and White*. While simulation games such as *SimCity* and its successors had enjoyed relative popularity since 1989, *Black and White* was a landmark title in that it gave player explicit control over what moral choices to make, rather than 'railroading' the player into one convention of morality; furthermore, the mechanics allowed for the multiple moralities to be valid gameplay styles. Since then, numerous

video games have included ways to determine and change characters' ethical standings, although what actions are marked as 'good' and 'evil' are a fixed schema.



[Krahulik and Holkins 2009a]

Similarly, morality as it is laid out in *Dungeons and Dragons* follows its own internal rules. While the texture of the actual gameplay depends to a heavily skewed extent on the DM, the structural system of morality was laid out in a two-variable system until 2008's fourth edition (4e): players could locate their character along Good-Evil and Chaotic-Lawful axes. The fact that the Chaotic-Lawful axis is positioned as exactly as important as the Good-Evil axis in character creation speaks strongly to the pivotal role acceding to or subverting authority has in geek culture.

Lawful Good	Neutral Good	Chaotic Good
Lawful Neutral	True Neutral	Chaotic Neutral
Lawful Evil	Neutral Evil	Chaotic Evil

*Alignment Table*

In 4e, the alignment options available were reduced to Lawful Good, Good, Unaligned, Evil, and Chaotic Evil. This represents a significant change in how morality and chaos are constructed; without institutional support for a Chaotic-Lawful axis, Chaotic becomes little more than an intensifier for Evil, just as Lawful becomes a mere intensifier for Good. This is a value judgment inconsistent with the long-standing culture of cynical deviance among geeks, and it is one of the reasons that 4e has stirred considerable controversy among *Dungeons and Dragons* players. In fact, one of the challenges often leveled against 4e is that it tries to make itself accessible to the mainstream at the expense of its history in geekdom.

4e is more video game styled--it lends itself really well to games with very specific, combat oriented adventures. 3.X (and moreso AD&D<sup>8</sup>) just feels more open in a lot of ways, with more non-combat stuff filled out.

[sup/tg/ 2009]

For many, 4e became a site for a turf battle over *Dungeons and Dragons*. While geeks may enjoy greater social acceptance, they are also fiercely jealous of their territory.

## Conformity

There is a constant struggle between values of inclusion and exclusion at the crux of geek social relations. While, as members of a subculture, geeks feel the need to set boundaries and limitations on behavior and therefore establish particular deviants as 'the other,' they often espouse a particular kind of inclusiveness as a core value of geek society.

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<sup>8</sup> Adventure Dungeons and Dragons, an early version of D&D

Geeks, particularly the young, or very recently escaped from an ill-fitting lifestyle, tend to be sensitive to feel the acceptance they used to lack. They wish to be with people with whom they fit. Sometimes their standards for shared interests are high. Sometimes they enforce rules against behaviors they identify as bullying or shunning. They do this by bullying or shunning.

[Personal interview, December 19, 2009]

This is clear boundary-setting, notable primarily for what it polices: community boundaries themselves. When questioned about this, a number of interviewees mentioned *Five Geek Social Fallacies*, an online document written in 2003, as proof positive of this tendency to fetishize inclusion and make 'bullying or shunning' the most extreme of taboos.

The first Geek Social Fallacy mentioned is 'Ostracizers are Evil.'

[...]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. If [Geek Social Fallacy #1] exists in sufficient concentration -- and it usually does -- it is impossible to expel a person who actively detracts from every social event. GSF1 protocol 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 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]

Here, not only is inclusiveness obviously delineated as a core geek social value, but its antithesis, ostracism, is explicitly linked with jock culture via that epitome of geek slurs, football. The message could not be clearer: the bad jocks are ostracizers, the good geeks are inclusive. After citing the document, one interviewee went on to mention her own experiences with GSF1:

So, this scenario has happened /at least twice/ in our group:

An annoying person begins hanging out with us. I immediately make it clear to them that I think they are worthless. Everyone else tells me I am being mean. Some amount of time later, everyone else goes, "I hate this person. Why does he insist on hanging out with us? I can't get him to go away." Said person does not even make eye contact with me, and I have no trouble with them. I point this out, and everyone says, "You're right, we should have done that."

The frustrating thing is not that it happened once, but that it repeats.

[Personal interview, December 4, 2009]

I myself have experienced this phenomenon firsthand; I have observed a near-paralyzing stigma attached to 'being exclusionary' that occasionally even obligates geeks to invite individuals they personally dislike to gatherings simply because they are part of a group, framing their less desirable qualities as evidence of their membership in the ranks of the oppressed. This membership is complicated by the fact that it is predicated primarily upon the idea of a mind too quirky to be widely accepted. A large part of the geek moral schema is characterized by this acceptance and in fact glorification of idiosyncrasies.

A weakly-bound trait of geeks is fear of conformity. Despite the fact that geeks bond strongly and rigidly enforce conformity, they are more likely to speak up to dissent the words or actions of someone in their community, than to support them. When they feel supportive of a proposal or behavior in a geek community, they often don't speak up in support for fear of group-think, or from assuming that silence will be heard as assent. It is not heard as assent. If I may broadly stereotype: geeks fear agreement and feel proud of dissent. Hence, the constant flame wars and schisms in geek communities, conflict over minutia, a reputation for feeling like "herding cats", and a difficulty in achieving group action.

[Personal interview, December 19, 2009]

Much of geek media includes themes geared towards this rejection of conformity. Despite its apparently innocuous guise, geek culture is as much a counterculture as

punk or goth, and maintains as much focus on subverting authority and repudiating socially legitimate avenues to achievement. While geeks do not necessarily insist upon the same dismissal of mainstream goals and values, such as wealth and social acceptance, these are rarely viewed as ultimate goals in and of themselves but rather as ways to achieve end goals more common to geek value systems such as the amassment of fan paraphernalia or the ability to devote more time to geeky pursuits.

## Chapter 6: Case Study

### *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*

*Dr. Horrible* is thoroughly and self-consciously derivative of geek tropes and ideals. It presents a familiar story in recent geek media: the misunderstood antihero, struggling against the system and a powerful rival to win the love of a woman. The approach is markedly reminiscent of Garth Ennis' comic book series, *The Boys*, about a world in which superheroes are corrupt and unchallenged authorities. Although *The Boys* and *Dr. Horrible* cannot yet be said to constitute a genre of gritty, anti-superhero media, there certainly seems to be a growing market for such materials. Given the overall trajectory of geek media, it is not unlikely that *Dr. Horrible* will someday be seen as a forerunner of an era.

Content aside, the production of *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* was a landmark in the evolution of media distribution. *Dr. Horrible* was written and produced during the Writers' Guild of America strike of 2007-2008 as an attempt to create media that circumvented established publishing systems. From the beginning stages of its conceptualization, it was intended to be released streaming online for free. Because it was entirely produced and funded by Whedon's own production company, Mutant Enemy, "pretty much everyone worked for free, with the idea of getting paid if the show ever made money" (Rosen 2009). Despite the shoestring budget and limited timeframe—shooting the entire 43 minutes took place over six days—*Dr. Horrible* became wildly popular, ending up #15 on TIME's Best Inventions of 2008 (TIME 2008) and attracted so many viewers on its opening day that the website's servers crashed almost immediately. *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* is a triumph of geek culture; without the

rise of internet distribution, the infrastructure of fandom, and the value geeks place on innovative superhero media, even Joss Whedon might not have been able to create something so successful.

Like much of geek-produced media, the focus of *Dr. Horrible* is on the meanings of masculinity. The two most developed characters are both male: Dr. Horrible and his antagonist, Captain Hammer. Dr. Horrible, played by Neil Patrick Harris, is set up as a geek from the very beginning—so much so that it borders on caricature. He keeps a video blog in which he performs self-important, arrogant rants on how intelligent he is compared to the rest of the world; he is physically inferior to the jock analogue Captain Hammer; the very first song centers around his inability to interact with his romantic interest, Penny. He is obsessive, inquisitive, technologically proficient, socially isolated, and convinced that he has the capacity to fix the world. There is a key difference between Dr. Horrible and other overwrought representations of geeks, however: Dr. Horrible is set up as an intensely, almost desperately sympathetic character, particularly in comparison to his rival, Captain Hammer.

Captain Hammer is played by Nathan Fillion, and it is difficult to imagine that this casting is incidental to Fillion's history with the Whedonverse; he played confident, sometimes foolhardy Captain Malcolm Reynolds in an earlier creation of Joss Whedon's. But while Captain Reynolds was a likeable rogue on the outskirts of society, Captain Hammer is the epitome of undeserved success. It could not be clearer that Hammer is a bully, a demonized stand-in for the jock; he is physically intimidating, highly sexual, brash and arrogantly unintelligent. Unlike Dr. Horrible, his powers come from innate ability rather than passion or drive. It is made clear within the first few

minutes of his appearance that he takes casual delight in tormenting Dr. Horrible. We see brief snapshots of this bullying, including one of him giving Dr. Horrible a 'wedgie' and thereby reinforcing the schoolyard imagery.



[Whedon 2008]

He is flagrantly, conspicuously hyper-masculine in all aspects, including his name—one of his most memorable lines states that “The hammer is my penis” (Whedon 2008). If Dr. Horrible is satire, Captain Hammer is a farce.

The two characters represent an easily accessible binary to the geek. This is, after all, generally understood to be media made by geeks for geek consumption. These characters also represent archetypes of masculinity, although Dr. Horrible—particularly in his aspect as civilian 'Billy,' infantilized even in name—is clearly the more accessible. However, as the series progresses, Dr. Horrible's flaws become increasingly apparent and he gradually distances himself from the viewer. His interests in both Penny and global domination become less harmless and comical, and more obsessive and sinister. Despite his defeat of Captain Hammer, it is he who kills Penny in the end. In pursuit of his goals of beating the jock and thereby attaining the

affects of the idealized woman, he engenders unanticipated consequences and ultimately loses his accessibility to the audience.



[Whedon 2008]

Penny herself, played by Felicia Day, is a deceptively complex character. While many fans have decried the apparent use of the 'Woman in the Refrigerator' meme, in which a female character is killed in order to advance the character development of a male character, there is more to Penny than what happens to her. She is a human character in a superhuman world, more of an underdog than Billy himself; she has a strong moral compass as well as the ability to empathize, two qualities lacking in either of the male leads. Despite the casual dismissal of her activism by both Dr. Horrible and Captain Hammer, she clearly has her own goals and existence outside their rivalry. As online commentators point out, however, this doesn't mean *Dr. Horrible* is a stellar example of feminist media—Penny is “left unexplored and undeveloped, constantly ignored and pushed aside” (Dobbs 2008), even as her invisibility is remarked upon in the story itself.

*Dr. Horrible* presents a commentary on and fond mockery of geek tropes as well as a compact presentation of several important themes in geek media. This conscious homage to geek identity has won Joss Whedon unending devotion and permanently established him as a geek icon even beyond that which he had already achieved with *Buffy* and *Firefly*; its success stands as a testament to the potential of geeks as a consumer base, given the appropriate incentives. *Dr. Horrible's* production and distribution embrace the freedom of data prized so highly in the geek moral schema, appealing directly to specific subcultural values and implicitly acknowledging the particular set of interests and priorities endemic to geek culture. Furthermore, its content also makes explicit the roles geeks draw on in order to interpret their social relations.

## **Conclusion: The Future of Geek Media**

If there is one thing I have learned from researching this thesis, it is that I have barely begun to understand geekhood. Geek culture is a fantastically complex organism that is being re-imagined on a daily basis, and the way geeks navigate their identity-forming practices is in a constant state of flux.

The process of soliciting and conducting interviews was an entirely new experience for me; fortunately, as I discovered, my interviewees seemed genuinely interested in talking about geek culture, and it was fairly easy to elicit meaningful and enjoyable discussions.

In general, I found using online chat programs in interviews to be both productive and convenient. Not only did it automatically provide me with searchable transcripts, it allowed me to conduct multiple interviews simultaneously. Furthermore, as most of my interviewees had achieved a high degree of proficiency with this style of communication, I feel that it allowed for more considered and candid replies.

I also found online resources to be invaluable, particularly in terms of directing data collection of geek media but also in terms of determining what themes and characters are significant to geek identity. The nature of online communications is such that casual conversations about any and every possible topic are constantly occurring and being recorded in relative permanence; the Internet provides access to an exact copy of creative and conversational documents with no editorial barrier to publication. Anything that an individual thought was important enough to post online at one point or another is, in the vast majority of cases, archived in perpetuity. Like the category of

geek media itself, the social worlds produced on the Internet are fueled by a shared reverence for the imagination.

The trajectory of geek media has been heavily influenced by the drive to be different. While it has paralleled changes in mainstream media in many ways, including the broadening of minority representation in the post-Hayes Code era, geek media has often self-consciously attempted to appeal to an audience beyond the mainstream.

As such, geeks tend to regard the increasing visibility of geek culture with a mixture of resentment and pride.

I know I am pissed off when things get popular. Take Steampunk. Neo-Victoriana is highly popular right now, which irks me because I was into it far before that but at the same time makes my life easier because I can actually find things to wear that I like. At the same time, I think there will always be within subcultures the idea of people who are really into it and who are dabblers. It may be elitist, but it helps us maintain our pride.

[Personal interview, December 14, 2009]

On one level, the increased acceptance of geek media makes it easier for individual geeks to be candid about their interests and hobbies without as much threat of social ostracism from non-geeks. However, the sticking point for most geeks is that this popularization heightens the accessibility of geek identity.

For a counter-culture built heavily around the idea that mainstream society is unable to comprehend geek interests, this can be a bitter pill to swallow. Nonetheless, geeks may no longer be in charge of their own representation. Now that mainstream culture has an interest in producing and marketing 'geek' as an identity, aspects of geek culture are becoming more and more vulnerable to appropriation.

It is therefore becoming crucial in geek culture to develop areas of thought and interest beyond that of the mainstream. One interviewee observed that "if the mainstream "caught up" then the sci-fi authors in particular would do their damnedest to move on to something stranger and weirder" (Personal interview, December 24, 2009). Fields of inquiry such as transhumanism and skillsets such as cryptography have been implemented as barriers to validation in geek culture.

This is complicated by the push for inclusion that characterizes social interactions within the subculture which, after all, values idiosyncrasies highly. As a result, the geek culture of today is caught between opposing forces; the future of geek media depends on whether geeks choose to embrace mainstream acceptance and dilute the significance of the label, or make a concerted effort to promote innovation and foster interest in socially disfavored topics.

Whether or not the intentional producers of cultural values that act within mainstream media institutions succeed in appropriating and marketing geek cultural artifacts, geek identity seems destined to be a field of contention and a product of tension. This insistent tendency towards dissent may ultimately be its saving grace: in the face of change, geeks inevitably choose the interesting over the convenient.

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## Appendix A: Glossary

A note on the glossary: it is impossible to note down every phrase or linguistic quirk endemic to geek culture. Nonetheless, I have endeavored to list some of the more common ones in order to provide a better sense of geek communication.

**42:** The answer to life, the universe, and everything. From Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy series.

**404:** Document not found. Sometimes used to refer to a lack of competence; somewhat outdated.

**Aggro:** Short for 'aggravation' or 'aggressiveness.' Used as a noun or a verb, particularly in the context of video games to denote enemy interest in combat. A common usage is 'to train aggro,' which means to displace enemy aggression onto another recipient.

**Blog:** Weblog. Online journal typically hosted on a site such as Livejournal, Wordpress, and Blogspot. Can be used as a noun or a verb.

**Blue Screen of Death:** The infamous screen displayed when Windows crashes.

**Bluescreen:** The verb form of 'Blue Screen of Death.'

**Broken:** Unbalanced in terms of gameplay; typically used to refer to an overpowered character, class, or object.

**Canon:** Used in fandom contexts to describe 'official' characters, events, etc. Can also denote the corpus of officially recognized elements as a whole. Adjectival form is 'canonical.'

**Clothy/Clothie/Squishy:** Magic-user; used as a noun. Reference to the custom of magic-users' inability to wear heavy armor.

**CoDZilla:** A reference to the overpowered Cleric and Druid classes in D&D 3.5; both classes can serve multiple roles within the party.

**Cosplay:** Short for 'costume play.' Non-theater performance art involving the use of costumes and accessories to represent a character or idea, most typically from Japanese manga and/or anime.

**Crunch:** Mechanics underlying gameplay in RPGs.

**d#:** A polyhedral die with # sides. For example: 2d8 refers to two eight-sided dice. The most common dice in RPGs are d4s, d6s, d8s, d10s (occasionally used in a pair to determine chances out of 100; these are called percentile dice), d12s, and d20s.

**.dtf, dead tree format:** A paper version, usually of a book.

**Fandom:** Can refer to specific communities defined by their enthusiasm for a particular work, such as *Star Trek* or *Green Lantern*. Can also refer to such communities formed around genres or types of media, such as science fiction or comic books, or even more broadly to the aggregate community of self-defined fans.

**Fanon:** Counterpart of 'canon;' used in fandom contexts to describe ideas widely accepted although not codified by the official texts.

**Fen:** Plural of 'fan.' Outdated.

**Flavor:** Creative backstory, typically referring to information found in sourcebooks.

**Fluff:** Creative backstory of RPG characters.

**Frak/frack:** A pejorative originating in Battlestar Galactica. Sample usage: what the frak.

**Griefer/griefing:** See Troll. Typically used in the context of a video game.

**Grok:** To deeply and intuitively understand. From Robert Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land.

**Grue:** A fearsome monster from the game Zork. Often referenced in the context of the famous line, "It is dark. You are likely to be eaten by a grue."

**Hadouken/Hadoken:** Move from the Street Fighter video games that sends an energy surge towards an opponent. Signifies total destruction.

**hax/haxxor/h4xx0r:** Originated as a leet derivative of 'hacker.' Somewhat synonymous with 'awesome,' with connotations of cleverness or having found an unusual and possibly warranty-voiding way to achieve a desired end.

**Konami code, the:** Up-up-down-down-left-right-left-right-B-A-Start. Cheat code found in numerous video games; the code has become an icon.

**Leeroy Jenkins:** A battle cry as well as a reference to a World of Warcraft character; a video of the character was posted showing him ignoring a meticulously crafted plan in favor of charging straight at the enemy, thereby getting his party killed.

**leet/1337:** short for 'elite.' Can refer to the written language formed primarily by replacing certain letters with numbers and symbols (also called leetspeak or 1337p33k); can also refer to skill or the evidence thereof, particularly in video games. Somewhat outdated; in some cases replaced by haxxor/h4xx0r.

**Meat Shield:** See Tank.

**Meatspace:** also known as the analog universe. The physical world, as opposed to the realm of the internet or computers.

**Meme:** A unit of thought or idea; in the context of the internet, it typically refers to a piece or form of media that quickly becomes popular. Examples include lolcats and the phrase 'all your base.'

**Metagaming:** Using knowledge about the game—for instance, consulting a sourcebook—from the player's perspective to change gameplay in-character.

**Munchkin:** A player in a RPG who metagames and min-maxes to excess; the implication is that he or she cares more about loot than either the story or the other players. This trope has spawned a Steve Jackson game of the same name.

**Nerf:** Typically used as a verb; more rarely as a noun. Refers to the practice of reducing the powers (and subsequent desirability) of a class or item.

**nub/noob/n00b/n00bie/newbie:** Amateur, uninformed. 'Nub' is the most recent incarnation of the original 'newbie.'

**(Party) Face:** Role typically denoting the PC with the highest charisma or equivalent in a RPG; indicates that the PC is the one who primarily interacts with NPCs.

**pwn/own:** Verb indicating domination, particularly in the context of a game. The noun form is 'pwnage' or 'ownage.'

**Redshirt:** An expendable character. From the convention in Star Trek of red-shirted security officers and engineers being killed to heighten dramatic tension in episodes.

**Retcon:** Literally, 'retroactive continuity.' Can be used as a verb or a noun to describe retroactive changes made to an established history in order to account for current events, most typically in the context of comic books.

**Rules Lawyer:** A player who attempts to force others to conform strictly to minutiae of rules in an RPG, with the implication that this is detrimental to gameplay.

**Ship:** Literally short for 'relationship.' Used as a verb among members of a fandom to denote personal preference for a particular romantic configuration of characters. The most common wordplay variation, if slightly outdated, is 'to sail the S.S./U.S.S. [ship code]'

**Slash:** Noun; fandom term for same-sex sexual or romantic behavior. Used in the same gendered sense as 'gay,' in that it can denote either male/male or female/female but can be used to specifically denote male/male, especially when contrasted with 'femslash,' also known as 'femmeslash.'

**Sourcebook:** Book of rules; gaming manual.

**Spawn Camping:** The practice of waiting for slain enemies to respawn in order to kill them again.

**Splatbook/\*book:** Supplement to the core sourcebook; usually detailing particular classes, abilities, and/or cultures.

**Tank:** Reference to a party role; used as a noun or verb to describe a character who can withstand (and usually deal out) heavy damage.

**Troll:** Used as a noun and a verb to describe purposefully acting in such a way as to draw ire and cause conflict. Typically used in the context of a comment thread. The prevalence of trolling in forums and the like has given rise to the phrase 'Don't feed the trolls.'

**Twink:** Used as a noun and a verb. It has numerous meanings, depending on the context; perhaps most commonly it is used synonymously with Munchkin. No connection to the use of 'twink' in queer culture.

**Vlog:** Video blog. Used as a noun and a verb.

## **Acronyms**

**>H/H+:** Transhumanism

**./.:** Slashdot

**40k:** (Warhammer) 40,000

**AD&D:** Adventure Dungeons and Dragons

**AU:** Alternate Universe

**BBS:** Bulletin Board System

**D&D/DnD:** Dungeons and Dragons.

**DM:** Dungeon Master. Synonymous with GM.

**DoT:** Damage over Time

**GM:** Game Master. Synonymous with DM.

**HDD:** Hard Disk Drive

**HoT:** Heal over Time

**IC:** In Character

**IRC:** Internet Relay Chat

**LARP:** Live-Action Role-Play

**LTP/L2P:** Learn to play (directive; derogatory)

**MMORPG:** Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (note: sometimes shortened to MMO)

**MUD:** Multi-user dungeon.

**NPC:** Non-Player Character. Controlled by the DM.

**OOC:** Out of Character

**PC:** Player Character

**POV:** Point of View

**PVP:** Player vs. Player

**RTFM:** Read the Fucking Manual

**RPG:** Role-Playing Game.

## **Appendix B: Timeline**

1926 – Amazing Stories magazine founded by Hugo Gernsback

1934 – DC Comics founded as 'National Allied Publications'

1937 – The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien is published

1937 – Alan Turing introduces Turing Machines

1938 – Action Comics #1 is published

1939 – Marvel Comics founded as 'Timely Comics'

1954 – Seduction of the Innocent by Frederic Wertham is published

1954 – Comics Code Authority is founded

1954 – The Fellowship of the Ring by J.R.R. Tolkien is published

1954 – The Two Towers by J.R.R. Tolkien is published

1955 – The Return of the King by J.R.R. Tolkien is published

1961 – Showcase #4 is published

1966 – Star Trek: The Original Series debuts

1968 – Zap Comix #1 is published

1969 – The first ARPANET message is sent

1969 – Monty Python's Flying Circus debuts

1969 – Unix OS conceived and implemented

1971 – The first email is sent

1974 – The first edition of Dungeons and Dragons is published

1975 – Monty Python and the Holy Grail is released

1977 – The Silmarillion by J.R.R. Tolkien is published

1978 – Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle develop the first MUD

1978 – Advanced Dungeons and Dragons is published

1979 – Infocom is formed with the release of Zork.

1980 – Usenet is established

1981 – IBM PC introduced

1983 – The Internet is launched

1984 – Macintosh computer introduced

1985 – Windows OS introduced by Microsoft

1987 – Star Trek: The Next Generation debuts

1989 – AD&D 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition is published

1990 – The World Wide Web is built

1991 – Linux kernel is written by Linus Torvalds

1992 – Maus by Art Spiegelman wins the Pulitzer Prize

1993 – Mosaic is introduced

1993 – AOL provides Usenet access to its subscribers

1993 – Star Trek: Deep Space Nine debuts

1993 – Doom is released

1995 – Star Trek: Voyager debuts

1997 – Buffy the Vampire Slayer debuts

1997 – Slashdot founded by Rob Malda as Chips & Dips

1998 – Google is founded

2000 – D&D 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition is published

2000 – Keenspot and Comic Genesis (originally Keenspace) are founded

2001 – Wikipedia is launched

2001 – Star Trek: Enterprise debuts

2002 – Firefly debuts

2003 – 4chan is launched

2003 – D&D 3.5 Edition is published

2005 – Serenity is released

2006 – American Born Chinese by Gene Yang is a finalist for the National Book Award

2008 – Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog is released.

2008 – D&D 4<sup>th</sup> Edition is published

2008 – Dollhouse debuts

## Appendix C: Sample Interview

*I'd like to start off by asking you a bit about your background. Could you describe yourself a little? Who you are, what you do, that sort of thing.*

I am a male in early middle age, white, heterosexual, under-employed. I work in graphic design and publications. I come from a fundamentalist religious background and am outspokenly non-religious. I am in a polyamorous relationship with a computer geek. I run Linux, Mac, Windows, and Palm OS. My main interests include organizing science fiction or software conventions, and playing and designing board/card games.

*That segues quite nicely into my next question: what do you like to do in your spare time? Other than the aforementioned, of course.*

I speak Lojban, an artificial human speakable language (like Esperanto or Klingon). It is engineered to minimize ambiguity with a grammar based on formal logic systems. I'm President of the Board of Directors of the Logical Language Group, founded thirty years ago to administer the language standard.

*How exactly do you administer the standard?*

We maintain the official documents describing Lojban, rule on any changes to the grammar, and rule on edge cases of meanings in the more obscure parts of the vocabulary. Our language debugging committee is the authority when asking whether a particular utterance is valid Lojban.

*Impressive.*

I mostly leave that to the others on the committee and act as a "cat herder", which is my principal talent. In most groups I am involved with, I drive the projects

forward with emails, check how motivated the participants feel, thank donors, and give press interviews. That sort of thing.

*So, how do you think these things you've mentioned fit into geek culture?*

I like to call Lojban a secret geek code.

*Why is that?*

It's engineered for utility. It tends to attract geeks and high-functioning autistics. It resembles a computer language. And if everybody in the world learned it, we'd all probably leave.

*Leave?*

Yes, because it would no longer feel like a ghetto subculture. Being a geek is about being intensely interested in things that others find boring and wish to avoid. Well, not avoid. Minimize. Like math, or language, or relationship skills. With language you learn just barely enough to get by, as an onerous chore, and would not learn a second language. Not Lojbanists. The weirdness and difficulty of Lojban is what makes it an endless source of fascination.

Let me know if I'm going on and on about this.

*Oh no, going on and on is a good thing. :)*

Similarly, I think the reason that I know so many geeks who are polyamorous is the exact same distinction, applied to relationship skills. How many times have you heard someone say they are really tired of dating? They want to get one person monogamously and get it over with. Polyamorists are relationship geeks. They keep doing it over and over because they actually like relationships, instead of just getting their needs met to the bare minimum. That's my opinion.

*So someone can be a geek about any topic others consider boring?*

Yes, if their interest is sufficiently obsessive.

*Is there anything you'd say someone has to know (or at least have heard of) in order to call him or herself a geek?*

No, but I'd say that if you are a geek, you probably wish the answer were yes.

*Really? Why is that?*

Because the obsessiveness of a geek tends to try to engulf their entire social environment if they're not careful, to exclude those who do not share that obsession, or who insufficiently share it.

*So would you say that you have a lot of non-geek friends?*

No. That's a case in point. I have a hard time making friends in the workplace, at college, or anyone outside a subculture.

*And you think this is common to most geeks?*

It's a strongly-bound trait of the radial category "geek". Do you know radial categories?

*Somewhat. Could you explain further?*

Something is in the radial category "fruit" if it has enough of the strongly-bound traits such as bright color or sweet flavor. There are weakly-bound traits which are less important. Radial categories are less "on/off" than strict categories. Language breaks when you apply it to the real world. Defining words with radial categories adds flexibility to language without giving up on meaning. If I say "every geek can quote Monty Python", I'll be embarrassed when I am proved obviously wrong. However, I can say it is a weakly-bound trait.

*What would you say is a strongly-bound trait, then?*

Interest in a topic the mainstream finds boring, to a level they find disagreeable.

To a level some of them find disagreeable.

Another strongly-bound trait, in my opinion, is a self-image of independence and contrariness. (Whether accurate or not.)

*How do you determine what topics the mainstream finds boring?*

For context of the question, who is making that determination?

*You, personally--or rather, on what basis you determine criteria for geekhood.*

I define a mainstream interest as one concerned with maximizing the number of people with whom one is compatible, rather than concerned with that interest for its own sake, or choosing people for the interest.

*In that case, could something like football be excluded from that category if the interested person was truly enamoured of the sport for its own sake?*

I would ask "is this person a geek?" instead of "is football a geek interest?" I'm not sure how I would tell what he or she would have done if football were less popular. So, as a rule of thumb, I feel I have no choice but to assume that person is not very geeky.

But nothing about football (to continue with the hypothetical) is inherently opposed to geek culture.

Football is associated with things such as fitness, activity, and attractiveness on a physical level. These contradict weakly-bound traits of a geek. That's the most that I can say with confidence.

For maximizing the number of people with whom one is popular, there are no criteria more important than the physical. The internet created an entire social world in which that is less important. It caused some kind of critical mass in geek self-image. Now, instead of a stigma, it's a positive identification.

*Speaking of which--would you say that the internet is a mainstream phenomenon?*

It's not a mainstream interest, but going there is a mainstream activity. Very few internet users are intensely interested in the infrastructure. They're interested in each other.

*How do you think the internet has affected geek culture(s)?*

It made it possible for geek subcultures to flourish to a degree never before even hinted. Previously they could barely even be called cultures. It caused some of the geek cultural imagery (such as the visual and thematic trappings of science fiction, fantasy and hackers) to take over Hollywood and television. It consolidated geek culture into a political movement in Sweden that occupies a seat in Parliament. It caused a lot of crossover between geek cultures, and an awareness that there are commonalities.

*How would you characterize these commonalities?*

Again?

*Are you saying these can be described in the same ways as interests? In other words--can the commonalities be described as simply 'boring to the mainstream'?*

Not just that. Obsession.

There are many other traits that are more weakly-bound to the radial category.

For instance, a weakly-bound trait of geeks is fear of conformity. Despite the fact that geeks bond strongly and rigidly enforce conformity, they are more likely to speak up to dissent the words or actions of someone in their community, than to support them. When they feel supportive of a proposal or behavior in a geek community, they often don't speak up in support for fear of group-think, or from assuming that silence will be heard as assent. It is not heard as assent. If I may broadly stereotype: geeks fear agreement and feel proud of dissent. Hence, the constant flame wars and schisms in geek communities, conflict over minutia, a reputation for feeling like "herding cats", and a difficulty in achieving group action.

*You mentioned that geeks rigidly enforce conformity, though; how does that fit in? And conformity to what?*

Yes. They enforce conformity by splitting, mostly. Geeks, particularly the young, or very recently escaped from an ill-fitting lifestyle, tend to be sensitive to feel the acceptance they used to lack. They wish to be with people with whom they fit. Sometimes their standards for shared interests are high. Sometimes they enforce rules against behaviors they identify as bullying or shunning. They do this by bullying or shunning. Have you read "The Geek Social Fallacies"? Brilliant. It absolutely reflects what I have seen.

*Yes, I've seen it; quite an interesting read.*

*In terms of social identities, how do you think your gender, race, and sexual orientation have affected your participation in geek culture?*

I think being a white heterosexual male is probably an advantage. I'm told I look like a geek. If I say "oh yes, non-white gay females have it very different", I'd be

claiming a perspective that I don't have. But I know that everyone around me just believes I am a geek. They feel like they can let their geek flag fly around me.

My girlfriend has said she had it very different. We will be sitting in a coffee shop, laptops open. She is working on writing software, setting up servers, using Asian cookware as a wireless antenna, or updating Linux on her Apple laptop which dual-boots Windows and Linux but not Mac OS. I will be drawing pretty pictures with my tablet. A stranger approaches us. Which one do you think they ask for tech advice?

I have a ridiculous number of stickers on my laptop, and she does not. But that cannot be the explanation.

*Why do you think these dynamics exist? Or, to rephrase: how have these dynamics developed?*

I risk blowharding out of my butt if I try to talk about that. I simply don't know-- all I have is surmise. But, if it has nothing to do with babies somehow, I will be very surprised.

*Babies?*

Women can give birth to them, or so I hear. ;)

If you raise a baby, well. You can't have as much fun. Including geeking out on hobbies. A woman is always present at the birth of her child. When that happens, the attachment hormones start flowing like mad. Men are sometimes completely absent. Their commitment is different. Without raising the child, they can turn their minds to obsession with topics that are outside of strict necessity.

I have never caused a pregnancy. I got a vasectomy at the age of 32.

*So being a geek takes a lot of time?*

If you define it by behavior instead of one's nature, yes. If you define it by nature, one can be an unsatisfied repressed geek.

I think it is possible to be a closet geek, but there is hardly any reason for that in contemporary America.

*Why is there hardly any reason to be a closet geek?*

The social consequences of geekhood are easier to get around, because it's easier to find and spend time with other geeks. You have entire events centered around this or that geek interest. You even have one or two like Penguincon that are just about being a geek generically. We build entire websites around algorithms that can identify fellow geeks. OKCupid works really well.

*Remind me to ask you about Penguincon in a minute, but I just want to clarify: do you think geek culture is getting more mainstream?*

Yes, it is diffusing-- incorporating more diversity, learning to be less touchy about shibboleths. Geek is less distinct from non-geek than it was before the internet. It is still very, very concerned with shibboleths, but less so than before, I think. More aware of the greater world. Participating in geek communities can be, for some, a way to eventually become more socialized and well-rounded instead of less. Specifically, I feel it worked that way for me.

*Given your previous definition of geek interests as inherently anti-mainstream, does this make geek culture less--well, geeky?*

Geekiness is not evenly distributed. Geek interests are not inherently anti-mainstream. It is more accurate to say mainstream is inherently concerned with popularity at the cost of all other interests. To be a geek, all one needs to do is fail to

devote one's self exclusively to "popularity with the maximum possible people". The farther one falls on this continuum, the geekier one is. That's why it's porous. Nobody is at the hard Mainstream end of that continuum.

That having been said, most people are frightfully near the mainstream end of the spectrum.

*Do you think geeks signal each other? (i.e. references to geek media)*

Yes. Signals include Monty Python, science fiction and fantasy, and terms from software development.

*What role do you think physical objects such as dice, minis, cards, computers, etc. play in geek culture?*

That is a really interesting question. Collections provide an easy way to visually demonstrate obsession, without rattling off knowledge. Also, collecting is an addictive activity. That addiction is created by geek urges, but also amplifies and perpetuates them.

*Would you say you have to have a lot of resources to be a geek?*

No. I don't. But it helps.

*Okay. Just to go back to your own background for a bit--would you say your family had an influence on your geekiness?*

Despite existing on the extreme right-wing fringe of politics and religion, my father has always been deeply geeky, far more so than anyone with whom my parents surrounded themselves. He just has a non-geek community. My mother used to be no slouch at programming, either. They introduced us to computers as early as the Vic-20. We watched Star Trek together, one of the few things we did regularly as a family.

My father used to consume a lot of science fiction of the more tame variety. He warned me to only read Heinlein novels from before 1963. Of course I went right out and read Job and Stranger In a Strange Land. I believe SF novels were a large component of my eventual apostasy. And yet most of the preachers I have met were extremely familiar with written science fiction.

My great-grandfather recorded episodes of the Dr. Demento Show, and my parents would play them in the car. Novelty music acts were, and continue to be, a significant source of geekiness for me.

*Do you think people are born geeks, or can they be inducted into geekiness at a later date?*

Some are born geeks. Some achieve geekness. And others have geekness thrust upon them by their spouses.

*Do you remember when you first started identifying as a geek?*

Oddly-- and counter to stereotype-- that was not in high school. I was completely ignored in school, and had no interest in my peers. I was never tormented.

It may have been when I left behind my entire life and everything in it, at the end of 2002. I left my church, which created strain between me and my parents. I was laid off from my job at another church. My wife filed for divorce. My grandmother died. Even our pet died. This was all within a few months.

I had very little to lose from re-invention. So I asked myself what I wanted to do. And what I wanted to do was go to my first science fiction convention.

So I Googled "science fiction convention michigan". The first result was the website for the first year of Penguicon. The rest was history.

*Oh, right; Penguicon. Could you speak briefly about what that is, who it's targeted at, and why it works?*

Penguicon is a convention bringing together fans of science fiction and fantasy with that of open source software. Those are the "twin suns" of the Penguicon solar system, you might say. There is a gas giant of board, card, and roleplaying games; a rocky planet of comedy music concerts; a verdant world of webcomics and other digital media; ice cream made with liquid nitrogen, rapid prototyping machines, customizable marble roller coasters, and anything that anyone geeks out about.

It works because science fiction brings the vision, open source software brings the spirit of contribution, and conventions bring in community as a factor in a way that you can't get on the internet alone.

It is an explosion of creativity and intelligence, a geek Woodstock, a Nerdvana, and you can probably tell it is one of my favorite things in the world.

Anyone who wants to tell everybody about their interest gets podium there. Those who say "OK, I paid for my fun, now where is it?" will have less fun, but they can show up if they want to.