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# Geek Culture

## The 3<sup>rd</sup> Counter-Culture

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to examine what geek culture is and how it influences game culture.

**Keywords**

Culture, Games, Geeks, Generations,  
Information Society

**ACM Classification Keywords**

K.4.m Miscellaneous

**Introduction**

What is a geek? What is a nerd? These questions have popped up occasionally within the new game cultures from classic role-playing games and LARP communities to trading card games and videogame communities. There is a sudden need for a definition. We want to know what these people are – and in this context, we will go even further to find out what kind of culture they represent.

Wikipedia defines geek in this way: "A geek (pronunciation /gi:k/) is a person who is fascinated, perhaps obsessively, by obscure or very specific areas of knowledge and imagination. Geek may not always have the same meaning as the term nerd." [1]

This leads us to the Wikipedia definition of nerd: "Nerd, as a stereotypical or archetypal designation, refers to somebody who is

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perceived to be of above-average intelligence and whose interests are not shared by mainstream society. Most people's interests are in the subjects of sports, music, fashion, food, etc., but nerds typically have interests that are more encyclopaedic." [1]

Wikipedia goes further to find out the difference between geek and nerd: "The word "nerd" refers to a person of "above-average intelligence" whose interests (often in science and mathematics) are not shared by mainstream society. By contrast, a "geek" is essentially a person who is fascinated, perhaps obsessively, by obscure or very specific areas of knowledge and imagination."

And continues: "Thus a "nerd" is primarily marked as having a high intelligence and is not necessarily more fascinated with one subject any more so than another. A "geek", however, is obsessively fascinated with particular subjects, but is not necessarily attributed with an above average intelligence. Thus a "geek" has the compulsion and drive to learn vast quantities of knowledge about a particular field such as computers, or *Star Trek* trivia, without high intelligence being assumed. More than likely, the main confusion between the terms comes from their common association with specific areas of knowledge that seems to require a high level intelligence (for example, mathematics and science). Thus a "geek" who was obsessed by the pursuit of mathematical or scientific knowledge, might also be classified as a "nerd" as society considers such pursuits to be intellectual in nature and as requiring high intelligence." [1]

The difference between geek and nerd is as you might already have noticed not that interesting – unless of course you are a part of these ongoing murky debates about geeks

vs. nerds. As for this paper there will be no real distinction between the two terms. For that reason geek culture and nerd culture will be seen as the one and the same cultural movement.

What is interesting to us is the fact that these definitions touch the geek culture without really defining it. But from what is being said, we may determine that it's an intellectual cultural movement. It has something to do with *Star Trek* but certainly not anything to do with sports, music, fashion, and food. It is referred to as obscure and not being mainstream.

Brad King and John Borland notice that a central part of geek culture is role-playing games and *The Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien [2]. One might have argued earlier that *Star Trek* and *The Lord of the Rings* were obscure but nowadays they seem to represent mainstream. What is going on? What happened?

### **Generations of the Information Society**

To answer these questions we must get a broader understanding of the geek culture and what kind of society that created such individuals. It has often been said that we live in an information society. What does that mean exactly? For the purpose of this article, the information society simply means a society in which people are engaged in activity with information and service, contrary to those who are engaged with industry and agriculture [3]. Then if we add the fact that people's identity emanates from what they do for a living or at least a central part of their identity, we end up understanding the impact such a society has on it's citizens.

After World War II, during the Cold War of the 1960 and '70s, the western world was changing. The major part of it's citizens were no longer workers in the industry, but employed with different kinds of information and services ranging from journalists and librarians to teachers and administrators. This changed the mentality of the people like the change of society from hunter/gatherer to agriculture, and later from agriculture to industry [3]. The majority was no longer industrial workers, and consequently, their values became marginalised and to some degree romanticised, like when young people of that time were dreaming of a socialist revolution. The new generation, the hippie generation (a.k.a. boomers, provos or youth rebels) insisted on its own values, a cultural commotion which nowadays is known as the counter-culture. Cultural products, cultural processes, and cultural identity were transformed.

The aesthetic content of the counter-culture was a continuum between High Modernism and Postmodernism. At one end they borrowed a lot of early 20th century aesthetics such as Avant-Garde music, the Bauhaus movement, and abstract paintings, and at the other end they created underground comics, rock music, and new wave science fiction. The latter was much more exciting and innovative, but was nonetheless regarded as low culture, while the artsy experiments, repeating the Modernist Art movement, was considered as high culture [4] [5].

This leads us towards the second counter-culture: The yuppies. They no longer really cared for Modernist art, and even though they could see some values in comics and rock music, they did not quite know how to

appreciate it. Living in a world in which High Modernist art was considered as the real art by the older generation, they tried to renew the perspective saying, it's only the outside (the image) of culture that mattered. In that respect, comics and Avant-Garde paintings could mix. Everything was a mix between different kinds of cultures and different kinds of aesthetics. Furthermore, commercialism was their approach to culture. Culture and aesthetics were seen by the yuppies as event-based sellable products. They still do, even though they are twenty years older. The typical cultural artefact of the yuppie-generation is of course the music video, which at the same time is a commercial, a low culture product, and a high culture sublime artefact [6] [7].

Born in 1960s and 1970s the yuppies were the offspring generation of the information society. They'd studied for so long, and when they matured, they suddenly found themselves in a world of media and offices, having jobs such as admen, designers, brokers, managers, and spin-doctors. This is their world, and this is the perspective from which they perceive the rest of the world. This means that there is a reason to how they perceive culture and aesthetics. Everything in their world is measured by how much money it's worth. If a painting is sold for one million dollars, it's worth one million dollars. If a design is sold for \$9.95, then it's worth that price. In order to show what kind of character you are, you must surround yourself with expensive stuff. Who cares if anybody likes it or not, it makes no sense anyway. Nothing makes sense anyway; or rather the world is what you make of it – nothing more, nothing less, only wealth and status matters.

The yuppie generation was the last to

experience the Cold War, and like the hippie-generation, this marks them but not in the same way. While the hippies were trying to disarm, the yuppies were trying to overthrow the Communist regimes. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the yuppies felt they had won. They felt they were right and the hippies were wrong. The yuppies were after all, a counter-culture to the hippies.

Today, the hippies are still around. So are the yuppies. Each of their counter-cultures has turned into being the norm of how our culture is today. We cannot even see how these old cultural trends have influenced our society. In that sense they have become invisible.

The aging hippies are still working in professions concerned with education, public service, social work, and cultural life. Being a lot older (among other things) means they do not look like hippies anymore, some of them may even have changed political views over time. But when we talk about the environment, art, and lots of other issues, the hippie influence is still at work, although not for long because this generation is just about to retire from the workforce.

The yuppie-generation on the other hand is still going strong. They aren't young anymore either, finding themselves in their mid-life crisis. They may have anything they ever dreamed of like a good job, a car (more cars), a house, a wife/husband etc. Nevertheless their life often feels empty. Why is that? How come? Maybe because they insisted that indeed nothing mattered except wealth and status – nothing more, nothing less.

But this is not about the yuppie-generation, nor the hippie-generation – this is just an introduction in order to understand the

cultural condition in which the geek lives. A cultural condition based on values already established by the hippies and the yuppies. Of course there were geeks before, but their influence has not been particularly forceful due to the fact that there were not many of them. They were a vast minority. This is changing all over the western world. The generation born in the 1980s and 1990s are the high-tech computer generation. They are players in a new world that is about to begin. The signs are already there, all we need is to interpret them.

The geek-generation has the right age to take over from the hippie-generation when they retire. This is important because it tells us that indeed this generation will gain a platform in society from which they will be able to become an influential intellectual power. Contrary to the hippies though, they are not afraid of media technology, embracing the power of these cultural artefacts. But more than that, by using the Internet as if it was their own playground, they are in fact manifesting their cultural power and progress in society.

### **The Cultural Geek**

This leads us further into discussing what kind of culture these geeks represent. Do they have any culture at all? Well, as already mentioned earlier, geeks seem to like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek*. *Star Trek* having to do with advanced technology is not surprising since a lot of these geeks are techno-geeks and this of course counts for any other science fiction works. *The Lord of the Rings* though is not that obvious. Why do Geeks love *The Lord of the Rings*?

One answer could be, that they like to escape from this world into another world, leaving

this world behind. If that is the case, these geeks are deserters from reality. But a deserter from reality would certainly dislike technology like the hippies.

There is another kind of escape: the escape from prison. These escapists are not deserters but people trying to get a fuller life. If that is the answer then we must ask how reading *The Lord of the Rings* is a way to get a fuller life [8]. For one thing reading is not an extroverted activity. By that I mean, you do not get a fuller, richer, extroverted life by reading *The Lord of the Rings*. But reading *The Lord of the Rings*, *Silmarillion*, and other related works offers a fuller introverted life, meaning there are a lot of deep thoughts put into these works of fiction. It's a fantasy world with a lot of nerve, and more importantly, an *inner consistency of reality* worth exploring for its own sake, renewing aesthetics, as we know it [9].

What the geek has to offer is a new way of approaching aesthetics and culture. It's a rebellion against the extroverts (like the hippies and especially the yuppies), seeking substance instead of superficiality. The geeks want to delve into issues in quest of knowledge and experience, rejecting the showiness yuppie life style concerned with trendy food, music, fashion, and sports (although some geeks tend to be very interested in Medieval fighting techniques [2]).

They are not afraid of having fun though. One of the biggest influences by the geeks on culture today is the gameplay culture. We are not talking about sports or sport videogames here, but games with fiction and game worlds (such as J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy world *Arda*, H.P. Lovecraft's *Cthulhu Mythos*, and George

Lucas' *Star Wars* universe), worlds with their own inner consistency of reality worth exploring for their own sake.

From classic role-playing games, LARP, and strategic board games to trading card games and highly developed videogames, the geek culture is mixing fun with substance, rapidly changing how culture and aesthetics are perceived in our society. The next necessary step for the geek culture must be to develop a poetics of game worlds and game fiction narratives in order to further develop the aesthetics, innovating the player's experience of fun and games.

Even though these game worlds play an important role in the geek culture, being the single most important contribution to the new aesthetics, it would be foolish not to see the many different aspects of these cultural manifestations in its entirety. We have already mentioned science fiction and fantasy as geek cultural expressions. These two genres as well as horror, action adventures, and superheroes are the main content of geek culture, whether we are talking games, movies, literature, or other kind of aesthetics displays. Expressions in the geek creations come in a variety from neo-gothic and futuristic styles to manga and janimation [10].

One could get the idea, that if these somewhat low-art products are the content, then it's not really important. It's all the same. Nothing could be more wrong. The geek (or at least the well-educated geek) marvels not just at anything, but seeks the quality in these cultural products. Not all games are equally good. The same goes for movies, comics, literature, etc. In that sense it's actually anti-post-modern, because they are not saying "anything goes" [11]. On the

contrary they are saying these aesthetic contributions need to be taken seriously, demanding meticulous criticism and genuine research.

### **Geek origins**

How come there are more geeks today than earlier? First of all the society is to blame. People spend more years than ever in the western world studying before they are able to become a part of the workforce [3]. Being a student is no longer a phase which ends during the teenage years. The geek generation study until they are in the mid-twenties or even older. In these years they go to schools and learn the academic way of thinking. They learn to be preoccupied and become immersed with specialised knowledge. In that sense the school-system creates geeks.

That's not all however. While the mass-medias like newspapers, radio, and television made the people into shallow media consumers, the Internet creates people who become engaged in developing the content of the medium [12] [13]. Everyone is expected to have his or her own homepage, weblog, and participate in Internet-forum discussions etc. It's has become possible to discuss topics in communities of interests on the Internet. Earlier on one had to find communities of interests on a local scale, now it's possible on a global scale. The Internet participant has every possibility to delve into a field of interest, thereby becoming a geek. In that sense the Internet as a medium creates geeks too.

The principal influence of the geeks may in fact be the focus on subjects and subject matters. The hippies promoted collectivism whereas the yuppies encouraged

individualism. This dualism isn't that relevant to the geeks. They are able to work or study alone or in communities of interest as long as their fellow geeks stay focused on the main thing: the field of interest. Geeks equally love to develop an interest by themselves or having fun sharing it with others. That is what matters to them.

Furthermore, the leisure time in the society has increased [14]. This makes room for all sorts of cultural activities like playing games, reading books, watching movies, developing hobbies etc. This of course makes room for e.g. sports activities too. Accordingly, increased leisure time does not necessarily create geeks. On the other hand it still supports the possibility of many geek activities and in conjunction with the increased spare time Internet use in general the geeks are bound to flourish.

In the stereotypical representation of the geek it's a male character, and you often find geek communities almost solely consisting of males – especially among programmers. There are nevertheless girl geeks too. *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling and *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* by Susanna Clarke are both recent examples of works by females contributing to the geek culture. Many participants in the LARP communities are females [15] and the Game Grrls have proved that indeed females like to play videogames too [16]. If we look at geek phenomenons like cosplay (costume play) and fan-fiction it seems as if there are more female participants than male [17] [18].

### **Creativity and change**

Geeks are incredibly creative minded. They like to contribute artistically to the geek culture, not just consuming it. That is their distinctive way of having fun. The geeks don't

just read comics, but make their own drawings as well. The geeks are not just playing games, but try to make game content too. The geeks produce machinima, write fan-fiction, blog, etc. Fantasy worlds and counterfactual history are highly popular among geeks because these imaginary worlds (or subcreations) are open-ended, providing the geeks with material for further development when creating or co-creating these universes of fun and excitement.

There is a community in which the geek culture has already conquered a central position. This is of course the game design community that is crowded by geeks. Consequently, the aesthetics and worldviews in the game design community reflect the thoughts and values of the geeks. Through these games the value system is passed on to the rest of the society, thereby transforming the culture of the society into the geek culture norm.

If it hadn't been for the geeks impact on game culture, one could imagine that videogames would only have been about puzzles and gambling, sports and racing, and board games like Chess, Monopoly, and Trivial Pursuit. There wouldn't have been adventure games or RPG but pointless hypertext narratives. Due to the geeks influence videogames are currently brimming with fiction, narratives, and multiple universes [19].

Brad King and John Borland argue that indeed the rise of the computer game culture means leaving the geek culture behind, turning the games into yuppie-style e-sports in which only fame and fortune matters [2]. First of all e-sports will never really be accepted in the western world as real sports, because it's not about taming the body. E-sport may be

compared to chess at best but even chess has a certain clean bodily nature to it. Anyway, Brad King and John Borland argues that games have become chic and turned mainstream.

It would be more correct to put it the other way around. The geek culture is, as already mentioned, changing the norm, transforming mainstream culture. Not long ago nobody would have known outside the geek culture what was meant by player character, experience points, level gain, and hit points. Now it seems like everybody knows. The geek culture is transforming mainstream culture and it's just the beginning of a general cultural change in that direction [20].

### **In conclusion**

The geek culture emanates from information society and has its foundation on the Internet and the new game cultures like RPG, LARP, trading card games and videogames. The geeks like to explore imaginary worlds, and consequently the most important contribution to the game aesthetics and culture has been to create game worlds.

Furthermore, the geek culture does not only influence game culture but the cultural state in general, transforming its ideology based on the values which up until recently belonged only to the geeks. As a result, the geeks are the third counterculture, rejecting both the values of the hippies and the yuppies, demanding focus on fields of interest and introvert activities rather than extrovert performances.

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