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Revenge of the Nerds: Tech Masculinity and Digital Hegemony

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REVENGE OF THE NERDS: TECH MASCULINITY AND DIGITAL HEGEMONY

A Dissertation Presented

by

BENJAMIN LATINI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of
Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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English

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DEDICATION

To My Mom and Dad

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ABSTRACT

REVENGE OF THE NERDS: TECH MASCULINITY AND DIGITAL HEGEMONY

SEPTEMBER 2023

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Revenge of the Nerds provides a cultural history of the evolution of white nerd masculinities in American culture through interpretations of a wide variety of texts and representations using the methods of literary studies and American studies. The dissertation is organized around four overlapping stages of nerd masculinity based on changes in technology and their effects on culture, as well as white male nerds' efforts to remain culturally relevant and gain the benefits of being close to hegemonic masculinity. The four nerd types are the computer nerd, the gamer, the gatekeeper nerd, and the maladaptive nerd which reflect the following movement through chronological development: the introduction of computers into the mainstream of American culture, the early years of video gaming culture, the nerds' cultural power and influence as early adopters of the Internet and the white male nerds' participation in a backlash against factors like social media which made gaming and Internet cultures more mainstream and diverse. Throughout these changes, white male nerds chased a promise they felt was implied by the adoption of "revenge of the nerds" as an American pop cultural myth, but the nerd identity was constructed in such a way that it would never be perceived as fully congruent with hegemonic American masculinity. Therefore, the identity was based on an insecurity about masculinity, which nerds tried to assuage by being especially aggressive in their pursuit and enforcement of American norms of masculinity.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation's main argument is that white male nerds, as a representation and an identity, are placed in a relationship to their own whiteness and masculinity in which they are always understood as in need of adjustment to reach the hegemonic ideal, and yet always shown tantalizing glimpses of the possibility of *achieving* the ideal, or are discouraged from imagining alternatives to hegemonic masculinity, through American pop cultural narratives like the revenge of the nerds, and through images of nerds like Bill Gates and Elon Musk who occupy the heights of power in American culture. These factors ensure that nerds remain committed to maintaining complicity with the norms of hegemonic American whiteness and masculinity and supporting hegemonic norms within their own cultural productions and their participation in mass culture, even though their identity and privilege as white men offer them space to try and subvert the gender order if they wanted to.

Instead of wanting to abolish hegemonic masculinity (or at least rebel against it), many white nerd men want to *keep* the hegemonic masculinity hierarchy, but simply place *themselves* at the top of it. This is the desire held by incels, for example, and it is also why many nerdy white men find that Jordan Peterson's rhetoric about the validity of traditional hierarchies resonates with them.¹ These ideas resonate because cultural ideologies like the Revenge of the Nerds serve to make the ideals of hegemonic masculinity seem accessible to nerds, because some men who are perceived as nerds truly *do* make it to the top of the hierarchy of masculinity and representations like the *Revenge of the Nerds* films and countless other media narratives show nerds succeeding and reaching a state of hegemonic masculinity through their technical skills and intelligence. However, what is missed about these figures and these narratives (which become aspirational for white male nerds) is that the men in real life who reach the top of the

masculinity hierarchy do so through traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity: wealth, power, and the subordination of women and people of color.

For most white men who identify as nerds, or are identified as nerds by other people, their relationship to hegemonic masculinity is what Raewyn Connell describes as a complicit masculinity. They receive many of the privileges of hegemonic masculinity even though they don't fit the hegemonic masculinity ideal, so they support the status quo which keeps hegemonic masculinity in place. It is not unlike what historian David Roediger calls "the wages of whiteness,"² in which poor and working class white people in America have been convinced to ally with rich white people, against their own class interests, in order to claim a placement in the social hierarchy that puts them above people of color. There is even a term for the privileges accrued by complicit masculinity which is similar to the wages of whiteness: "the patriarchal dividend."³ The hegemonic order uses the patriarchal dividend in order to enlist the technical skills and abilities of nerds into service of hegemonic masculinity and gatekeep the powerful technology industries against women and people of color,⁴ while at the same time, keeping nerds from rebelling against hegemonic masculinity. Instead, fantasies like *Revenge of the Nerds* are power fantasies for nerds in which they succeed on hegemonic masculinity's terms, by proving they can perpetuate gender and racial inequality just as well as men who outwardly fit the hegemonic ideal.

I want to avoid confusion right away by explaining that I'm using "nerd" and "geek" not as a subject in-and-of themselves, but as a lens through which to analyze and critique whiteness and masculinity in digital culture. I want to make this clear, since whiteness and masculinity can often be hidden in discourse behind terms like "geek" or "nerd" which present themselves as race and gender neutral but are most often used in contexts that refer to white men. For example,

to call an event like GamerGate⁵ a movement of gamers and nerds (while true in a very technical sense) obscures the fact that the true significance of GamerGate lay in its status as a harassment campaign mostly involving white men and targeting women and people of color. Since white masculinity maintains its power through representing itself as the unmarked, universal identity position, but the nerd and geek represent extremes of white masculinity (extremes perceived as both positive *and* negative), the nerd and geek provide a lens with which to make white masculinity more visible and particular. Hamilton Carroll has shown how white men have often displaced their whiteness in contemporary American culture, by placing emphasis on other identity factors like class and ethnicity which seem to complicate or supplement whiteness,⁶ but Carroll's analysis also shows that while those identity factors can be obfuscating of the role of whiteness in identity and culture, they can also *illuminate* whiteness, because their specificity helps to deconstruct the veil of universal indistinctiveness in which whiteness has shrouded itself.

There is an important dichotomy at the heart of the nerd/geek as a cultural archetype. Nerds are used to represent both socially undesirable traits and cultural power. They capture the privileged position of the young men who were failing at coming of age, because, as a cultural image, they crystallize all of the anti-social traits that make integration into adult maturity difficult, while also being privileged by whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality and being cisgendered. In order to understand this complex cultural positioning of white masculinity in digital cultures through “nerd” or “geek” identities, I will examine both the representations which place white men and boys in the nerd’s relationship to hegemonic masculinity and the self-expressions of men and boys as they try to grapple with that positioning.

It could be asked why a scholar of American studies and American literature has written a dissertation about nerd masculinities in American culture. In answer, I argue that a humanities approach, attention to narratives, archetypes, symbols and language can contribute a lot to our understanding of this topic, because of the way nerd masculinities have contributed to the narratives, archetypes, symbols and language of American culture. The nerd has a sort of textual quality. “Nerds” are not an empirically existing object, they are more of a fiction, but a fiction that is highly significant and impactful upon American culture. To paraphrase Nell Irwin Painter’s claim about whiteness, “nerd” “is an idea, not a fact and its questions demand answers from the conceptual rather than the factual realm.”⁷ The slipperiness of “nerd” is a complicating factor in this dissertation, but also makes it suited to being paired with the equally slippery concepts of whiteness and masculinity.

The changing fortunes of the nerd as an image and an identity in American culture demonstrate the changing relationship between hegemonic white masculinity and computer technology. It has felt natural for scholars to study nerd masculinities from the perspective of communications and the social sciences. But until we look at the mark nerd masculinities have made upon the American social imaginary and our symbolic life, the stories told about American culture, we cannot fully understand their significance.

Because of the importance of the symbolic and the imaginative in the creation and development of nerd masculinity, this dissertation will use the sensibilities, methods and techniques of literary criticism and interpretation (blended with those borrowed from other disciplines like history and communications), with an understanding of American culture as the larger framework within which my questions are situated. However, the subjects to which they are applied will not primarily be literary texts.

While I will look at conventional mass-cultural texts like films, video games and popular novels, I will also turn to vernacular Internet creations which arise from participatory culture, like Internet memes, YouTube Videos, tweets, and more. These texts are important, because they allow people to operate outside of the some of the constraints of what Theodor Adorno called the “culture industry” and express their more genuine and immediate experiences of new realities, what Raymond Williams called “structures of feeling”: those emerging, fleeting signs of social change that we can sense but can’t yet name.⁸ Also, the participatory culture of the Internet can exert more of an influence on people since they are usually active contributors instead of just passive viewers, and the creators of the content with which they engage are more relatable than traditional culture industry professionals like film directors and novelists. However, I will try to bring my background in literary and cultural, textual analysis to all of these cultural artifacts, because, like Michelle White, I seek to bring the underutilized techniques of close reading to studies of the Internet: an approach that “attends to the narrative and structural aspects” of digital culture texts and seeks to resist the “‘speed-reading’ culture” which is encouraged by the design and social norms of the Internet as well as by the speed and amount of content that circulates online.⁹

Defining Nerd and Geek: What Does It All Mean?

First, I must explain why I am linking “nerd” and “geek” together, and how I will use them in relationship to each other. These are two terms that are closely linked and often used interchangeably. Burr Settles, a machine learning expert analyzed the usage of the terms on Twitter in an attempt to parse differences in real, everyday usage in the kind of digital setting where “nerd” and “geek” are used with facility and fluency. Settles’ results indicate that “geek” is more associated with fandoms and popular culture, while nerd leans more toward the academic

and intellectual.¹⁰ Settles' findings resonate with the definitions given by other scholars and with my own observations of popular usage of these two terms.

However, in spite of the distinctions often made between the two, I believe that in the 21st century, there is enough overlap in usage and representation to use both “nerd” and “geek” interchangeably, because neither one fully captures what I’m trying to study when they are used separately. I’m interested in exploring the way masculinities are shaped by both “nerd” and “geek” cultures, and then the way those masculinities shape mainstream American culture in turn. From the nerd, I am interested in discourses and images of expertise, knowledge and skill, and from the geek, I am interested in the savvy engagement with popular culture, and the passion for, and the use of, consumerism as a source of identity and influence. While these traits tend to be associated with either “nerd” or “geek,” I believed that most “geek” subcultures and individual “geeks” tend to share many of the characteristics definitionally associated with “nerd,” and vice versa.

The Internet has vastly accelerated and intensified the overlap between “nerd” and “geek” as many people treat fandom and other forms of cultural enthusiasm as forms of nerdy expertise. For example, people possess obsessive knowledge of arcane community histories for their favorite online forums and fierce loyalty to those communities, a phenomenon I will refer to as the “gatekeeper nerd.” People also approach the acquisition of knowledge and skill with a kind of geeky enthusiasm. For example see websites like “I Fucking Love Science”¹¹ which fetishize learning like a fandom and the raising of Astrophysicist Neil Degrasse Tyson to the level of social media superstar.

Therefore, I will use the terms “nerd” and “geek” interchangeably, only explaining the usage of one or the other when I think it is necessary to emphasize a distinction. After all, though

some people have fierce debates about the distinction between the “nerd” and “geek,” the very fluidity and adaptability of these terms are probably the characteristics that allowed them such a durable presence in American culture for at least 50 years. Michael Boynton points out that the term “nerd” can be sorted into several different categories, in terms of what it describes: “a lived identity, a stereotype, a subculture, an aesthetic, a performance, or a combination thereof.”¹²

I will choose “nerd” to be my most frequently used term henceforth, but unless otherwise specified, I am using the term to refer to the concepts signified by both “nerd” and “geek” blended together in the ways I’ve described: Basically a bookish person with technical expertise who may be obsessive about academic subjects as well as science fiction and fantasy fandoms and is marked by a very apparent social awkwardness and expected to be white and male (and probably cisgendered and heterosexual) unless otherwise specified.

However, while I describe some of the traits associated with “nerd” and “geek” above, I don’t want to essentialize either concept. “Nerd” has been deeply entwined with two other concepts that are equally as resistant to definition, if not more so: “whiteness” and “masculinity.” According to the founder of masculinities studies, Raewyn Connell, “masculinity” is not “a coherent object about which a generalizing science can be produced.”¹³ The same is true of “nerd” and of “whiteness.” Each concept is the result of discourse, in the poststructuralist sense, meaning, “statements which are enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence.”¹⁴ In other words, each of these terms is defined contingently by how it is used in a given context. For example, while many definitions of nerds revolve around computers,¹⁵ Michael Boynton argues that nerds are not *inherently* associated with computers (his history of nerds places their origins before the advent of computers and posits nerds as lovers of knowledge and technology, for

which the computer just happens to be the major vehicle in the present moment).¹⁶ I've had disagreements with other scholars over whether major figures in the tech sphere, like Steve Jobs and Elon Musk, *count* as nerds, but Jobs was one of the subjects of the article which originated the phrase "Revenge of the Nerds."¹⁷ According to Raewyn Connell, "Any one masculinity . . . is simultaneously positioned in a number of structures of relationship,"¹⁸ For example, white masculinity in a given time and place, is in relationship with white femininity, black masculinity, etc. and not all white masculinities in that time and place are the same, So to say something like "nerd masculinity" is to try to isolate one piece of a system of overlapping and intersecting gender relations in order to analyze it. In this case, "nerd masculinity" is a prism that can illuminate whiteness and masculinity and the relationship of whiteness and masculinity with technology and pop culture. "Nerd masculinity" as I use the term in this dissertation, is a conceptual tool, based on observable regularities within discourses and representations in American popular culture and especially Internet culture. When we combine "nerd masculinity" with other conceptual tools, like Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, and with cultural hegemony more broadly, as a way of understanding power and cultural/social influence, we will start to understand a lot more about how masculinities and technology have shaped America in the 21st century.

Hegemony in General: How Cultural Power Works

Because hegemonic masculinity is the major touchstone for the academic study of masculinities, and hegemony is a major touchstone for the study of cultural politics, it is essential to place hegemony at the center of this study.

Hegemony, as a theoretical concept, was originally used by Marxists as a way to understand why people came to accept their subordination to the ruling classes. It was a way of

understanding why the working class people of the world did not join together and revolt against capitalism. Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist was the first major theorist of hegemony in the 1920s and 30s.¹⁹ The idea was picked up again at the end of the 20th century by Marxists and “post-Marxists” like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as a way of avoiding what they saw as a tendency of Marxist theory to reduce all explanations of historical events to economic determinism²⁰. The study of hegemony was also a major building block for the burgeoning field of Cultural Studies in England, and was deployed by theorists like Stuart Hall.

Hegemony appeals to those of us who study culture, because it relies heavily on culture as an explanation for how power works in a society. Hegemony is different from our most crude understandings of power. It is not achieved through force, though the threat of force always lingers behind it, hegemony renders force mostly unnecessary. It is the ubiquity and acceptance of the ideas of the “ruling bloc” of a society (those with the most influence, power, and control) by everyone in the society. The ideas that are part of hegemony come to be seen as common sense. Cultural Studies scholar Chris Barker explains, "Subordination is a matter not just of coercion but also of consent. Cultural studies has commonly understood popular culture to be the ground on which this consent is won or lost."²¹ Barker associates the securing of hegemony with the meaning-making processes of culture. Popular culture tends to be a struggle in which certain meanings and representations are ascendant and authoritative and lead “certain ways of understanding the world [to] become so self-evident or naturalized as to render alternatives nonsensical or unthinkable.”²² Obviously, if you can get your way of seeing the world to be experienced as beyond question or challenge, you will exercise immense influence, and will do so with little or no resistance, which is why hegemony is so valuable and so often struggled over through the medium of cultural conflicts.

Hegemonic Masculinity: How Men Work

Because hegemony was such a prominent concept in the 1980s, it was in the air when the sociologist of gender, Raewyn Connell, was looking for a new way of understanding masculinity that transcended the limitations of the concepts of “patriarchy” and the “male sex role” (from feminist theory and sociology respectively) which tended to treat all men as having an equal share in male power over women and tended to be unable to recognize hierarchies among men or to account for historical change in masculinities.²³ Thus, Connell introduced the theory of “hegemonic masculinity” in the article “Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity”²⁴ and further developed the concept in her books *Gender and Power* and *Masculinities*, the latter of which was essentially the founding text of masculinities studies.²⁵

Connell defined hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.”²⁶ In other words, hegemonic masculinity is any form of behaviors and discourses which ensure that inequality between men and women which favors men will continue and that inequality among men which favors one group of men over others will continue as well.

The idea of “configuration of practice” is a little confusing for those of us outside the field of sociology though. Within literary and cultural studies, “practice” will seem very ambiguous and fluid, because it can’t be pinned to specific cultural texts. However, I think the use of the term “practices,” and any confusion it might cause us, comes from Connell being a sociologist and wanting to make sure the theory was legible and useful to other sociologists, by being grounded in real world, material/concrete social relations, rather than grounded “merely” in representations and discourses (a concern Connell expressed about other influential theories of

gender based more in the humanities and poststructuralism). For those of us in cultural studies, who don't make such a drastic distinction between representations or discourses and material realities, I think the following rough and ready definition of hegemonic masculinity will work best: hegemonic masculinity is a collection of ideals and assumptions about masculinity which preserve inequality between men and women and coerce men to behave in certain ways and make them fear punishment if they don't. Hegemonic masculinity is not something that can be ascribed to actual specific men like a personality type. The values that enable hegemonic masculinity are embodied and circulated by cultural texts.

What is important to understand for the purpose of critiquing hegemonic masculinities is the fact that hegemonic masculinities "came into existence in specific circumstances and were open to historical change. More precisely, there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by newer ones."²⁷ Just like hegemony in general, hegemonic masculinity is inherently unstable and always subject to challenge and change, this is why critique is valuable, hegemony is often hard to see, because it has been calcified into common sense, but critics can make it visible. Once hegemony is visible, then subordinate groups can force some of their interests into the public sphere and into public common acceptance.

One final important question to ask is how "nerd" or "geek" can have effects on power in American culture if it is such a fluid and ephemeral concept. The answer lies in how white men come to identify with these terms and how they act (often collectively) within cultural spaces, in accordance with that identification. In order to use "nerd" and "geek" as analytical tools for the study of culture and power, we have to imagine these classifications as being collective groups into which people are interpellated. They are hailed by cultural discourses and find themselves

inhabiting these social identities. The term used, “nerd,” “geek,” “gamer,” is not important. The important part is that a certain type of man tends to answer the call whenever such a group is constructed by discourse.²⁸

It might be objected that the idea of hegemonic masculinity (who meets the ideal and who doesn't) is too difficult to clearly delineate in real life. This is what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe identify as “the essential instability of political spaces, in which the very identity of the forces in struggle is submitted to constant shifts, and calls for an incessant process of redefinition.”²⁹ the dividing line between groups whose interests are in conflict with each other (who is *part* of a group and who is not) is so “fragile and ambiguous that its construction came to be the crucial problem of politics.”³⁰ Therefore, all politics is, according to Laclau and Mouffe, about the struggle for hegemony. Radical politics is no longer a simple matter of the working class vs. the ruling class, if it ever was so simple. There are so many complex categories into which members of a society can be divided and arrayed against each other and the identities of the people who coalesce into political groups are fluid and socially constructed. A large part of politics becomes about the definition of in-groups and out-groups, who you are *with* and who you're *against*. Politics was always about those kinds of social divisions, but the categories into which people were divided seemed more obviously pre-formed by the structure of society. Through Laclau and Mouffe's theory, it becomes possible to see groups which otherwise would have been too vague and ephemeral as political collectives. Nerds and Gamers, for example can be seen as forming political collectives at various moments in recent American cultural history in ways which perpetuate the power of whiteness and maleness (GamerGate, The attacks on representations of marginalized people in nerd culture, and the cultural messaging in support of Donald Trump for example).

What is the Revenge of the Nerds?

The narrative of a “revenge of the nerds,” from which this dissertation takes its title, came about as a way of explaining how these men, who had been represented as social outcasts for so long in popular culture, were now important to American culture. Revenge of the nerds is a narrative trope, seen throughout American culture since the early 1980s. The revenge of the nerds is when men who fit a “nerd” profile (and were rejected, isolated and mocked for their social awkwardness and lack of the conventional traits associated with the hegemonic American masculinity of their time and place) find success and wealth because of those very nerdy interests and traits, and now have to be grudgingly accepted as socially and culturally relevant men. Lori Kendall argues that the partial acceptance of “nerds” “represents a reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinity to incorporate some aspects of the previously subjugated nerd identity, especially as that identity relates to the understanding and use of computers.”³¹ Kendall claims that this reconfiguration of hegemonic masculinity was motivated by “changes in economic and job prospects for middle-class white males”³² in which computer savvy was suddenly an important career asset and the lack of computer knowledge was a bit of a liability.

The narrative of the revenge of the nerds, the fact that nerds fitting into mainstream American masculinity was a challenge and a triumph for them, reveals that nerd or geek masculinities have the possibility of “broadening the definition of masculinity” in American culture to “better include” previously non-normative practices, traits and identities.³³ This is why hegemonic American masculinities have both claimed and repudiated nerd and geek masculinities at different times, based on what seemed most advantageous. Kendall also notes that “The changing and contested meaning of the term nerd allows for both progressive uses and those which protect the status quo of hegemonic masculinity.”³⁴ It’s still somewhat up in the air

whether the nerd will ultimately be a progressive or repressive figure in American imaginings of gender and race, but so far they have mostly leaned in a repressive direction.

Nerd and Geek Masculinity Archetypes: The Making of Men for a Digital America

In order to explore the trajectory of nerd/geek masculinities in American culture, I have used a series of archetypes to act as case studies. Each of these is a particular “nerd masculinity” or “geek masculinity.” We call something “a masculinity” or “masculinities” because these subjectivities are something different from “masculinity” writ large. “Masculinity” in masculinities studies is not just a description of anything a man does, “a masculinity” is a particular configuration of practices and discourses which are understood to be masculine within a certain cultural context. “a nerd masculinity” or a “geek masculinity” is the same kind of concept. It is a configuration of practices and discourses that resonate with the understandings of “nerd” or “geek” and “masculinity” among people living within a particular shared cultural code.³⁵ These archetypes are: the computer nerd: a sort of prototype of the young man fully immersed in the emergent digital culture of the 1980s and 90s, the gamer: a boy or man who comes to digital culture through the immense popularity of video games, the gatekeeper nerd: a boy or man whose main interest in digital culture centers on social communities like forums and social media platforms, and the maladaptive nerd or pathological nerd: a boy or man whose intense alienation from society leads them to invest almost exclusively in digital culture and leads to the kind of angry, toxic nerd masculinity that people are surprised to see coming out of digital culture today. Each archetype is most prominent in one particular chapter, but they overlap with each other and each one had a significant role in every historical moment I study, even when they are not at the center of my analysis.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 will focus on the computer nerd, and will present the nerd's rise to prominence alongside the personal computer as both entered mainstream awareness in American culture.³⁶

Many nerdy young American men who were mostly white and middle class had already developed an interest in computers before their importance became obvious to the general public, so they were poised to take advantage culturally, socially, and especially economically.

The centerpiece of chapter 1 will be the construction of the "revenge of the nerds" narrative as an American pop cultural myth, a social mobility tale for the 21st century, by journalists, filmmakers and other cultural producers, in order to explain the sudden ubiquity of computers in the American economy and pop culture, and to create a human interest story surrounding the men who were creating successful startup companies based around computers and were getting rich.

In chapter 1, I will examine a series of cultural texts, including magazine articles, films, television and biographies in order to understand how representations of the computer nerd in American pop culture shifted from the grotesque to the grudgingly accepted.

Nerds were held at arm's length at first, within the American cultural imagination. They were depicted as smart and often successful, but socially and physically off-putting, and this residual element of nerds not *quite* fitting in with representations of American hegemonic masculinity is what led nerds to use their privilege to gatekeep the aspects of power that were under their influence, because it made them feel closer to their hegemonically masculine ideal.

Chapter 2 is about the nerd identity of the gamer, an important figure in the evolution of American nerd masculinity because his technomascularity earned him the respect given to computer nerds for their intelligence and resourcefulness, but his connection to the cultural form

of the video game put him in touch with the pop cultural zeitgeist.³⁷ The masculine subjectivity assumed by gaming discourses was competitive, clever, and mischievous in a boys-will-be-boys kind of way, which felt much closer to normative masculinity than the awkward, machinelike mannerisms attributed to the computer nerd. By studying the print culture and marketing of video games, and the early history of how Americans envisioned the place of video games in their culture, this chapter will show that the gamer identity offered a more normative cultural position than the computer nerd. The gamer was nerds, but also *not* nerds. Gamers were able to simulate hegemonic masculinity, and a masculinity based on simulation was also validated by American culture, so that nerds would feel perfectly entitled and able to simulate hegemonic masculinity on the Internet when access became available to them.

Chapter Three is about a figure of masculinity I call the gatekeeper nerd. Like the technomasculine gamer, this nerd is *also* an early adopter of technologies. He was there through all of the incarnations of the Internet, and when the Internet went mainstream with the World Wide Web, he sought to make it an insular culture guided by values of nerd masculinity in which those who weren't smart enough, clever enough, or ultimately white and male enough, would be marginalized or pushed out.

I use the metaphor of the social hierarchy at a stereotypical American high school as a central piece of this chapter, because it represents the social dynamics that seem to shape the gatekeeper nerd's imagination of social spaces. Instead of creating the utopia anticipated by many observers of the early Web, gatekeeper nerds wanted to reproduce traditional American social hierarchies with themselves in the role of popular kid, or bully. Because the affordances of the early Internet favored their skills and allowed them to shape a large portion of online sociality, they created a world that ranged from boyish mischief and toxic white masculinity and

framed it as an escape from the “real world” where they felt outcast. What’s more, gatekeeper nerds were able to simulate more conventional forms of masculinity that they did not feel they could perform in real life. The anonymity and text-based nature of the early Internet made that possible, because they did not have to be tough, wealthy or good-looking, they only had to be clever and willing to be rhetorically aggressive.

The gatekeeping really ramped up when gatekeeper nerds felt the influences of commercialization and social media were blurring the line between the Internet and reality and compromising the digital fantasy space the gatekeeper nerds had built. The second half of this chapter examines how a large part of the gatekeeper nerd’s history has been about how gatekeeper nerds felt threatened by the loss of their gatekeeping power and how they lashed out in response in ways that were intended to stop people from breaking down the lines between the Internet and the real world, which would diminish the gatekeeper nerd’s ability to perform hegemonic white masculinity and maintain their fantasy of the Internet as a space for “revenge of the nerds” in which white male nerds were the only ones who got to be influential and in charge. Gatekeeper nerds had a feeling of hegemonic white male nerd power over the Internet for a long time, and then they felt in danger of losing that power and had to adjust their performances of masculinity accordingly. This attitude of anger and wariness informed a culture of nerd masculinity online that embraced subculture and transgression called the “deep vernacular web” and the those subcultures incubated movements that would take the white male American backlash politics of the 80s and 90s into the digital world.

Chapter 4 is about the Maladaptive nerd, a figure of nerd masculinity who became obsessed with his own feelings of victimhood and of not fitting in to American culture or Internet culture. The maladaptive nerd is the angry young man we are so used to seeing on the news, the

mass shooter, the incel, the Internet troll, the white supremacist or the Redpill Pickup Artist. Even now, when nerds and geeks are socially accepted and even celebrated, these young men still feel like they don't belong anywhere.

However, since America is a patriarchal, white supremacist society, these behaviors and attitudes were not confined to the fringes of American culture. White male backlash against the perceived progress of women, people of color and other marginalized groups is practically an American tradition, and the digital world is not any different. This chapter will show how a fringe fear of losing control of nerd spaces and Internet culture spaces developed into a series of reactionary outbursts in various cultural and social modes and genres which played out on larger and larger cultural stages as the feeling of white male victimhood reached higher and higher in the structure of cultural power. This chapter argues that the white male backlash in nerd culture is, once again, driven by the fundamental insecurity about masculinity that was implanted within *nerd* masculinity as an identity from its inception, but in this case the insecurity is exacerbated by being placed within an increasingly alienated and overly mediated American culture.

This chapter will examine texts like a shooter's manifesto, a popular film and the public discourse around it, a global harassment campaign in gaming culture and a performance of public victimhood by the world's richest and most powerful nerd in an attempt to see where maladaptive nerd anger came from, and where it might be headed.

Conclusion

The main takeaway from this dissertation should be that as various forms of the nerd and geek have come to be constructed, in digital culture and the broader American culture, as an identity that can provide white men access to the status and privilege associated with hegemonic masculinity, the nerd identity has come to be pursued *at the expense* of women and people of

color. The images, rhetoric, narratives, and aesthetics produced and consumed in pursuit of hegemonic nerd masculinities position the white male nerd in a *complicit* but slightly distanced relation to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, the result of which is that participants in nerd cultures keep pushing harder in the direction of misogyny and white supremacy in their production and consumption of culture, because it seems like this will bring them closer to the hegemonic masculinity ideal. It is important for masculinities scholars to see this unique structural placement of nerds within American culture and digital culture, as having a foot in hegemonic masculinity that grants them access to its powers and privileges, and one foot outside of hegemonic masculinity which leads to cultural activity in nerd subcultures that keeps promoting the worst aspects of white hegemonic masculinity (white supremacy, racism, homophobia, transphobia, etc).

It is important for American studies scholars to understand how this cultural positioning of nerds was constructed by American discourses and narratives that were created as Americans navigated a transition into the digital computer age and the economic and cultural imperatives that came with it. Scholars interested in race can see from this dissertation how nerds have been represented as an extreme embodiment of the two paradoxical poles of whiteness: universality and exceptional status. Scholars of the Internet can see how the nerd's particular intersection of whiteness, masculinity, and youth contributed heavily to the shaping of the "Internet imaginary" and scholars of nerds can understand how the nerd's very particular relationship to representations of hegemonic masculine ideals and the influence of that relationship upon nerd cultures.

CHAPTER 1

REVENGE OF THE COMPUTER NERDS: A BEGRUDGINGLY ACCEPTED ADDITION TO AMERICAN HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Paul Ciotti refers to “Revenge of the Nerds” as “the best title any editor has ever come up with for any article I’ve ever written.”¹ The article was written in 1982 as a profile of Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, the founders of Apple Computer Inc. who had become multi-millionaires through the new, up-and-coming industry of personal computers. The introduction of Ciotti’s article lays out the basic “revenge of the nerds” narrative that has spread for years in American culture. The revenge of the nerds narrative is a Horatio Alger-style rags-to-riches tale for the information age.² However, the rags from which the nerds emerge are not the literal rags of poverty, but the metaphorical rags of social ostracism.

The narrative, neatly laid out in the kicker of the article,³ has three parts: 1. Nerds are mocked and ostracized. 2. Nerds get rich and successful and “control the future” because of their intelligence and technical knowledge.⁴ 3. “[T]he joke’s on you,”⁵ because now most people who mocked the nerds are beneath these successful nerds in social and economic status. Many variations of the narrative even go so far as to show former bullies working low-level jobs with the nerds as their bosses.

In the 21st century, it’s often taken for granted that the characteristics which make someone a “nerd” might include the kinds of technical skills and intelligence that will make them financially successful, but one takeaway from Paul Ciotti’s “Revenge of the Nerds” article is that, originally, the revenge of the nerds was a surprise. Most people did not see it coming, because they held the nerds in such low regard. His first few paragraphs set up the us-vs-them dynamic of a high school cafeteria and make it clear how unlikely it had seemed to Ciotti that he

would ever be writing a magazine cover story about nerds. He asks readers if they remember the “odd little guys [in high school] who tinkered with electronic equipment.”⁶ The way he phrases the question assumes that none of his readers *was* one of those guys, or at least that none of them would want to admit to fitting that profile.

Ciotti writes, “While *we* danced our way through college taking ‘relevant’ courses in sociology, psychology, and all the other fuzzy studies, *they* spent all night in the computer labs becoming computer scientists and electrical engineers” [*italics mine*].⁷ The use of “we,” the first-person plural point of view from which Ciotti narrates his introduction, groups the reader with him in a cool, countercultural in-group. He suggests that he and his friends were focused on human issues while the nerds were worshipping machines. This is not surprising, because the “revenge of the nerds” narrative is used by Ciotti to give a human interest angle to the increasingly common discourses about the growing importance of computers to American society and the American economy.

Ciotti’s introduction has little to do with the article that follows. It never uses the word “nerd,” and it is a straightforward profile of Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, the founders of Apple Computer, Inc. The intro doesn’t even mention Jobs or Wozniak. It seems like the article was written, then editor Tom Bates suggested “Revenge of the Nerds” as a title and Ciotti retroactively wrote an introduction that contextualized Apple’s story in terms of a “Revenge of the Nerds.” The idea of a “revenge of the nerds” humanized the story by playing into classic American beliefs about meritocracy and love for underdog characters. It was a clever and pithy way to describe yet another white male monopoly on a growing source of power in American society. It framed the hoarding of power by a small collection of white men as a comedic narrative, and because the narrative called them “nerds” instead of “white men,” it allowed

people to discuss hegemonic power very frankly without actually acknowledging that they were talking about power. A reorganization of American power was being consolidated in a way that still privileged wealthy white men almost exclusively, and yet it was culturally represented as just a quirky new social change for readers and viewers to chuckle at. This is a textbook example of the kind of ideological work that supports hegemonic power.⁸

While comedy is one half of the “revenge of the nerds” ideological narrative, the other half is a representation of white male nerds in the tech industry as revolutionary heroes who were changing society for the better. In 1982, the radical ideas of American counterculture in the 60s had faded, but it was still easy to remember a time when a cultural revolution seemed possible. It’s clear that this is true for Ciotti, who writes as though it’s all still fresh in his mind and he’s looking for something to replace the 60s counterculture and give forward momentum and meaning to American culture. In the 1980s, computers seemed like a new revolution and whoever led that revolution would be swept into economic and cultural power, so it’s significant that Ciotti’s description of “odd little guys” did not allow for the possibility of *female* nerds, and the magazine’s cover used women as props to bolster the nerd’s image of masculine power.

In July, 1982, when Ciotti’s article came out, Ronald Reagan’s presidency was less than six months old. In terms of policy he hadn’t done much yet, but it was a symbolic defeat for the radical and egalitarian spirit of the sixties and seventies. Ciotti wrote, “We spent the last fifteen years debating a revolution that never happened, while [nerds] went out and led a real one instead.”⁹ At the dawn of what would come to be called “The Reagan era,” it made sense that the new “revolution,” the rise of the personal computer industry, was an economic “revolution” based on elite skills and rare opportunities that made a handful of white men rich.¹⁰ This blending of 60s era counterculture aesthetics with a 1980s-style glorification of business and

wealth is exactly the blend out of which Steve Jobs crafted his image, and he was helped along by writers like Ciotti who bought into the idea that the 60s ideals could be blended with neoliberal capitalism without fully corrupting them.

This chapter will focus on a cultural analysis of Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and the “Revenge of the Nerds” narrative which spawned from their success stories, including the *Revenge of the Nerds*¹¹ film from 1984. I will analyze Jobs and Gates not just as influential people, but, chiefly, as media productions, constructed images based on real individuals. This analysis will enable me to explain the ideological role of key figures in the representation of computer nerd masculinity.

Because of the success of men like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, and their symbolic influence, the white male nerd is now a part of American hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is a *cultural* hegemony, achieved through the acceptance and consent of those over whom hegemony is exercised. In the case of culturally hegemonic power, acceptance and consent is not freely given, but rather, is acquired by using cultural messaging to obscure the existence of other possibilities and make the status quo seem inevitable, desirable, or at least acceptable. It is not usually a conscious conspiracy, but rather is the result of people with power and privilege acting in their own best interests, which tends to reinforce the division of power and resources that is already in place.

Their ubiquity in the fastest growing sectors of the American economy gave white male nerds a claim to power and expertise, and figures like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs were accepted into the halls of American power through discourses that make their power seem natural and inevitable. Those discourses also assumed that white male nerds were the *only* people with significant interest and aptitude for digital technology, an assumption which they used to justify

the gatekeeping to ensure that tech and nerd culture spaces *remained* white and male as much as possible, as each of my chapters will demonstrate.

Also important to the understanding of nerd hegemonic masculinity is the fact that not all white male nerds had an equal share of power, though they all *did* acquire power and privilege as a result of their whiteness and maleness, and their connection to technology or other nerd spaces. As always, power was stratified on a class basis, so that while nerds like Gates and Jobs were squarely placed at the center of hegemonic power, other white male nerds were a combination of what masculinities theorist Raewyn Connell called a “subordinated” or a “complicit” masculinity: they benefitted from supporting the status quo of hegemonic masculinity, without being hegemonic themselves (complicit masculinity),¹² and they were “constructed as lesser than or aberrant and deviant to hegemonic masculinity” (subordinated).¹³ They were complicit in the sense that their whiteness and masculinity granted them all the privileges society afforded to those in the white male social position, and their understanding of technology gave them cultural and economic advantages, but also subordinated in the sense that the image of the nerd was a symbolic screen onto which more normative white American men projected traits and characteristics which they did not want to see associated with the normative image of American whiteness and masculinity.

A white male nerd identity is inevitably organized around an insecurity about the claim to masculinity, because in representations of white male nerds, being truly congruent with the norms of American masculinity is always represented as being just out of reach. Even after a proverbial “revenge of the nerds” takes place and a particular man is successful, there is always a surplus requirement for masculinity that he cannot achieve. This is true in representations of nerd masculinity and it also seems to have been absorbed by men who identify with the concept of the

nerd in real life, which is why white male nerds are often especially eager to prove themselves by being especially ardent enforcers of the norms that a patriarchal, white supremacist society demands. My explanation of the average white male nerd's relationship to hegemonic masculinity is not intended to let them off the hook in terms of culpability for toxic actions and discourse, but rather to explain the dynamics driving their toxic masculinity and explain why a critique of nerd masculinity that dives deeply into how it is constructed is so important.

The subordinated aspect of the nerd's image was emphasized in the early days of nerd media representation, which led to nerds being depicted as grotesque, annoying, pathetic and any number of other socially undesirable traits. In fact, Hollywood introduced nerds to America as comedic figures to be mocked throughout the second half of the twentieth century. They became a very common character type that was instantly recognizable with a set of well-known traits, and the nerd served as comic relief almost every time he or she (but mostly he) appeared on screen. However, it did not take long for the nerd to transition to a begrudgingly accepted form of masculinity. The earliest representations of nerds I will examine depict them in a dismissive way, as though there was no use for them and no place for them in American culture, but rather quickly the representations of nerds change to emphasize the valuable skills and intelligence which nerds were thought to possess. This chapter will examine the cultural changes through which the nerd was grudgingly accepted as part of the collection of images and performances that make up American masculinity as representations of nerds shifted from unpleasantly antisocial to clever and successful.

The Nerds of the 1970s: An Unlikable Aesthetic

While the ingredients of the original nerd stereotype, like thick glasses and obsession with technology, had been present in American culture for most of the 20th century, the word

“nerd” was not applied consistently to a particular type of person until the 1970s.¹⁴ The word “nerd” or “nurd” as it was sometimes spelled in those early days, was brought to national attention by two sources known for bringing countercultural comedy to the mainstream: *National Lampoon* magazine and *Saturday Night Live*. The magazine published a foldout poster in 1974 called “Are You A Nurd?”¹⁵ which featured what is probably the most quintessential photograph of a stereotypical nerd ever taken.¹⁶ Meanwhile, The *Saturday Night Live Sketch*¹⁷ allowed us to see behind the scenes of a fictional radio broadcast introducing a rock band called “The Nerds.”¹⁸ These were two of the earliest mass media representations of nerds which were seen by large audiences, so these two texts had a strong impact on the way nerds were depicted and understood going forward. The creators of these texts chose to focus their comedy through the lens of disgust and distaste toward nerds, and images of nerds have been in conversation with these foundational texts ever since. While “nerd” or “geek” are often adopted as terms of pride or endearment in the present day, the words carry the baggage of their original use, and they are always present as a possible subtextual meaning whenever the terms are invoked.

Both of these aesthetic artifacts focused on introducing and explaining the nerd for an audience assumed not to know much about them. The poster takes an almost academic approach of labeling every detail of the nerd’s physical form. The comedy sketch meanwhile focuses on comparing their personalities to a cool disc jockey as a foil.

Together these texts provide viewers with a complete introductory education about nerds which demonstrates how to recognize a nerd, how to tell if *you’re* a nerd, how nerds act and how to *react* to nerds. All of these aspects of the early discourse about nerds take on a tone of disgust and dismissal and these elements of distaste toward nerd masculinity will remain a core subtextual part of the representations of nerd masculinity even as nerds become more culturally

acceptable. For example, the revenge of the nerds is represented as a surprise because nerds could not fully fit the *image* of American hegemonic masculinity, so there always seemed to be something a little improper about their performances of it.

These elements of the performance are the surplus requirements of normative American masculinity that many white male nerds strive unsuccessfully to achieve. The fact that white male nerds still struggled to feel fully masculine, even though they were granted the social privileges associated with hegemonic masculinity, led to a persistent tension in the white male nerd's identity. The tension was between feelings of entitlement and feelings of rejection, and the frustration caused by this tension would be made manifest in particular nerd-inflected versions of masculine aggression which were displayed vividly when the Internet democratized the publication of self-expressive texts.

The mocking, comedic representations of nerd masculinity which are to be discussed now, laid down a sense of rejection that would be incorporated into the self-image of nerd masculinity when young men started personally identifying with the figure of the nerd. The sense of rejection then planted a seed of bitterness or resentment that would grow into nerd forms of toxic masculinity.¹⁹

Labeling Nerds and Introducing Them to Mainstream America

Above the photograph in the *National Lampoon* poster, there is a long definition of “nerd” that follows the standard format of the *Oxford English Dictionary* even suggesting a possible Old English origin for the word (a joke, of course). The definition concludes with a long list of synonyms that all sound insulting, suggesting that the nerd is a figure to be mocked. The formal legitimacy lent to the text by the Oxford style not only matches the nerd's teacher's pet image, but also makes the list of insults seem like an academic assignment that must be learned,

remembered and then deployed in the proper situation, like the vocabulary words one learns in school. This undercurrent of seriousness hints at the high social stakes which young men placed on identifying nerds and making sure they were not nerds themselves.

National Lampoon's definition of "nurd" begins with the phrase "an adolescent male,"²⁰ making youth and male gender identity perhaps the most essential, basic features of their definition. The gender and racial elements of the *National Lampoon* poster's definition of "nerd" would remain standard for many years to come, and the official, authoritative tone probably cemented this image of the nerd in the imaginations of many Hollywood writers, filmmakers and actors, since *National Lampoon* was a popular magazine, likely read by many comedy writers. The subject of the photograph is an adolescent boy. He is white and ethnically nondescript. He is dressed in clothes that appear to be too formal for wherever he is going. He carries a briefcase and wears thick glasses, his hair slicked back with Vaseline, and he wears a short-sleeved dress shirt with a pocket protector full of pens and pencils. His pant legs do not reach all the way to his shoes. These are all of the classic visual signs of nerdiness and also were heavily associated with whiteness.²¹

The poster as a whole has a kind of sepia tone, which emphasizes the colorless blandness and awkward formality of the nerd, himself. The image looks almost like an illustration from a field guide to local flora and fauna in which the distinguishing features of a particular species of bird are marked for the reader's identification. It is almost as though the nerd was so odd as to be like a different species from his peers. There are little black lines pointing at certain features, which are labeled, such as his shoes: ("oxblood cordovans") and his short sleeve dress shirt ("Preferably a color not found in nature").²² The unnatural features of the nerd's appearance are

emphasized in order to make it clear that he is especially awkward, and does not fit in with the people around him.

The paragraph at the bottom, and the title “Are You a Nurd?” suggests that readers should return to the image, labels, and definition, and see how many characteristics they share with the nerd. It says “If you have less than five (5) of these dead giveaways, you’re probably a cool guy.” But at the other end of the spectrum, if you have “Ten (10) or more” you should “Check for a leper colony near you”²³ as if being a nerd were a serious illness to which others must not be exposed.

The poster performs several didactic functions regarding the way Americans were supposed to see nerds, think about nerds, and respond to nerds. First, The poster is a thorough primer on how to identify a nerd. And secondly, each label attached to one of the nerd’s characteristics was another tip about how and why nerds should be mocked. Third, the poster establishes that the viewer should desperately want to be “a cool guy” and fear being a nerd with the same level of panic associated with a severe disease like leprosy. In other words, at this point, the nerd’s image was being used to police American masculinity, and any positive connotations that could be attached the nerd identity were not yet recognized.

The 1977 *Saturday Night Live* sketch, “Nerd Rock” is about the introduction of nerds into the sphere of the media. In fact, the writers have set up the sketch as a fictional media production designed to introduce nerds to the public. And as the sketch is introducing nerds to *SNL*’s *real* audience the radio host in the sketch is introducing nerds to his *fictional* audience. This sketch goes even further than the *National Lampoon* poster in depicting nerds as repulsive and completely unlikable.

The sketch presents a radio show in which the Host (Dan Ackroyd) introduces a band called “The Nerds” made up of Gilda Radner (Four-Eyes), Bill Murray (Pizza Face), and Robert Klein (Spaz).²⁴ Ackroyd represents the “cool guy” that the *National Lampoon* poster encouraged its viewers to emulate, rather than being a nerd. He wears dark shades indoors, spins the most cutting edge new punk rock records, and regards The Nerds with a disdain which is supposed to be a model for how the audience should also react to nerds.²⁵

Meanwhile, The nerds look like slobs and everything they say seems off-putting. They speak in nasal voices, have greasy hair and acne, and all of their songs are about being bullied, like, “Let My Head Up Out of the John and I’ll Give You Tomorrow’s Lunch Money.” Ackroyd offers free copies of their record, *Trying Desperately to Be Liked*, to the first ten callers, but no one calls because nerds are supposed to be unpopular and unwanted. Then the mother of one of the nerds comes into the studio to pick them up and they don’t even have the social awareness to be embarrassed by it.²⁶

The main point to be had from these representations of nerds is that nerds were represented as completely unlikable and unappealing. The images of nerds that were presented to the public in the 1970s had no real redeeming qualities. Perhaps this context explains why the mildly positive portrayal of nerds in 1984’s *Revenge of the Nerds* was such a big deal, by which I mean that it was a hit movie that made 40 million dollars on an \$8 million budget,²⁷ and it is still fondly remembered by those who watched it in the ‘80s as the first semi-positive portrayal of nerds they ever saw.²⁸ The film *Revenge of the Nerds* combined with the adulation and respect heaped upon figures like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs and the adoption of “revenge of the nerds” as a popular American cultural myth added up to an implied promise to nerds that they could go from being the grotesque outcasts of *National Lampoon* and *Saturday Night Live* to being

accepted as a part of American masculinity, however begrudging that acceptance might be at first. Computer nerds found acceptance because many of them seized an opportunity to acquire power as America reluctantly transitioned from an analog culture to a culture of computers.

Fear of a Digital Nation: Computer Anxiety as the Nerd's Opportunity to Thrive

Understanding the context of the computer nerd's importance to American culture requires an understanding of the deep anxieties Americans felt toward computers throughout most of the 20th century. In 1964, for example, Free Speech Movement protestors at the University of California at Berkeley wore punch cards used for computer programming around their necks to protest the dehumanizing bureaucratic handling of both the university itself and the war in Vietnam.²⁹ In the 1970s, the phrase "computer anxiety" entered the American lexicon.³⁰ In the 1980s, the Supreme Court heard a case in which the town of Mesquite, Texas passed an ordinance restricting unsupervised children from playing arcade video games,³¹ and workers at a pulp mill reflected anxiously on the newly installed computerized control room that would automate the functioning of the mill and possibly cost them their jobs³².

These examples show how computers frightened and puzzled many Americans for the first several decades of "the information age." Their only exposure to these complicated devices in the 1950s and 60s was likely to be Hollywood films in which the computer was a hulking, mysterious machine that took up an entire room.³³

In the 1970s, computers were experienced as a niche "hobbyist's pastime"³⁴ and as video gaming devices. They were "caught between adult and child uses, between seriousness and fun."³⁵ The microchip had been invented and was cheap enough to be used in myriad devices (everything from digital wristwatches and calculators to children's toys).

Finally, in the 1980s, computers became less of a novelty and more of a necessity. They were entering Americans lives, whether Americans wanted them or not. Americans would be forced to encounter computers through work, play, culture, or some other aspect of life. Because this new wave of computer technology seemed more like an imposition than a choice, the anxiety which many Americans had always felt about computers was ratcheted up to a new level. They were no longer just a fun device to explore if you had the inclination, they suddenly felt like something you would to understand in order to function in a changing workforce. Adrienne LaFrance explains that “‘Computerphobia’ came up in magazines, newspapers, computer training manuals, psychology studies, and advertising copy.”³⁶

People started to feel out of the loop the less they knew about computers and the growing public discourse about computers both reflected and exacerbated those anxieties. LaFrance cites an IBM ad from 1986 that promotes Gem Desktop, an operating system intended to be more user-friendly than the more common DOS, developed by Microsoft. The ad says “maybe even the most dedicated computerphobes in your company will warm up to the PC after this,” and major publications like the *New York Times* offered tips for how to cope with computerphobia.³⁷ However, while most Americans found computers strange and unfamiliar, There *was* one group of people who understood computers very well, because they had been interested in them long before they were consumer objects being pushed on the general public and workplace devices which threatened to automate people out of their jobs. This group was called “nerds,” and Americans projected a lot of their anxieties about computers onto them.³⁸ Because of their understanding of the complex and mysterious devices, computer nerds began to take on a sort of mystique in American culture.

In the 1990s, the importance of computers and of nerds was even further solidified when Bill Gates became the richest man in America while undeniably fitting nearly every nerd stereotype, and an army of nerds from Silicon Valley startups were also getting rich and powerful. Suddenly, the idea that nerds were not part of hegemonic masculinity became impossible to sustain. How could the richest man in the country be excluded from masculine power? The problem was that the American public had been conditioned to think of nerds as pathetic losers ever since they first heard the word “nerd” or saw someone with horn-rimmed glasses. No one could just revamp the nerd’s image overnight. However, cultural representation tends to echo the power structure of society, so as people like Paul Ciotti remarked with surprise upon the changing status of nerds, a narrative started developing and spreading through repetition which depicted nerds in a new light. This narrative, the “revenge of the nerds” was a *social* and *cultural* version of the kind of economic rags-to-riches tale that had long been a popular American narrative in books like *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*³⁹ and Horatio Alger’s *Ragged Dick*⁴⁰. Because it was drawing upon the idea of the “American Dream,” which has such deep roots in American culture, the “revenge of the nerds” narrative was very effective at shifting the nerd’s image in a more positive direction.⁴¹

The *Revenge of the Nerds* film series got its title from Ciotti’s article and the first film’s status as a minor cult classic probably plays a large role in keeping the phrase “revenge of the nerds” alive.⁴² People remember the phrase from the film, and it is used frequently in media for a catchy headline, or pithy reference that sums up some kind of nerd-related situation. For example, a search in *The New York Times*’s archives for the exact phrase “Revenge of the Nerds” returns 200 articles in which it appears.

This kind of casual usage of the phrase “revenge of the nerds” shows the workings of cultural hegemony, in that we have accepted the idea of “revenge” as harmless and benign in the context of “nerds.” The word “revenge” is usually associated with violence in most other contexts, but it is somehow stripped of that meaning in the “revenge of the nerds” usage, which suggests that nerds are viewed as so harmless and nonthreatening that even when they take revenge, it’s not something to worry about. In other words, this is a very clear example of cultural hegemony: a form of hegemonic power that is accepted by the public via passive consent. In cultural representation, it is their very nerdiness that gives nerds the kind of underdog flavor that gets audiences on their side. This paradoxical image of nerds, as simultaneously losers and winners, allowed nerds to be powerful, often without drumming up the same kind of resentment that the powerful usually face.⁴³

This chapter examines two case studies that help us understand the changing status of the nerd in American cultural history: The biographical discourses surrounding Bill Gates and Steve Jobs as the quintessential nerd success stories of the ‘80s and ‘90s, and the rise of new ways of representing nerds in film and television (from grotesque to acceptable, if still laughable). We will see that the success of Jobs and Gates as individuals *and* as media images was accompanied by and caused a change in fictional media representations of nerds. These case studies of cultural representations are important, because theorists of masculinity hold that “discursive persuasion” is one of the most significant ways in which hegemonic masculinity is achieved.⁴⁴ Cultural representation is one of the most effective and powerful means of discursive persuasion. I will show that these discourses comprise the “revenge of the nerds” that took place as nerd masculinity began acquiring a central place in American culture.

Ultimately my argument in this chapter is that the begrudging acceptance of the nerd into the repertoire of acceptance performances of American masculinity demonstrates the cultural hegemony of nerd masculinity, because the representations of nerd masculinity and the actions of nerd men were able to attach nerd masculinity to computers in the public imagination in a way that made nerd masculinity's presence near the center of American life seem inevitable. After all, Cultural hegemony is based on a sense of inevitability.⁴⁵

Slobs vs. Snobs: Setting Up the Nerds' Revenge

Around the time that the nerd was ready for an image makeover, there was a vast appetite for underdog stories in American cinema which allowed nerds to be refashioned into likable protagonists. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a wave of comedies that fell into a category called "slobs vs. snobs" in which the socially disrespected underdogs defeat the hegemonic social insiders.⁴⁶ Everything from *Animal House*⁴⁷ to *Caddyshack*⁴⁸ to *Police Academy*⁴⁹ followed this formula. These comedies were successful because they were doing what comedians call "punching up": the socially successful, the wealthy, and the powerful, who were not typically vulnerable to mockery, were being bested by ordinary people the audience could relate to.⁵⁰

The Revenge of the Nerds was a successful addition to this burgeoning cinematic trend because it introduced another element that Americans are trained to instinctively embrace: meritocracy. Wacky characters like John Belushi's John Blutarsky in *Animal House* and Rodney Dangerfield's Al Czervik in *Caddyshack* did not seem especially skilled, or deserving of victory in their respective films, they were just amusing goofballs whom the audience liked more than their rivals. However, the nerds in *Revenge of the Nerds* brought something new to the table. Their intellectual and technological expertise was useful and important to the emerging

computer-based information economy, *and* they were able to put it to use to defeat the jocks who unjustly claimed to be better than them. It was precisely the merits of the nerds that enabled their success, and meritocracy is a concept dear to the hearts of white American audiences.

Just like nerds in real life, the nerds in the film were better suited to functioning in a world of advanced technology than the older form of hegemonic masculinity based on social capital and physical power that was represented by the Alpha Betas. The nerds were a new form of hegemonic masculinity that would replace or supplement the other hegemonic masculinities that existed in America. In a world being transformed by computers, the nerds' skills were necessary for white men to remain in a hegemonic position by being gatekeepers to the high-tech world. Certainly many young men and boys would have absorbed this message when seeing the film, and it would have become part of the experiences and messages that shaped their worldview.

Revenge of the Nerds (The Motion Picture): A Two-Sided Model of Nerd Masculinity

Revenge of the Nerds takes a new approach to the representation of nerds which probably accounts for much of its appeal. The film features two protagonists, each of whom follow a different narrative path, and each character's path illustrates a particular version of nerd masculinity. Granted, most people would probably see Robert Carradine's Lewis Skolnick as the protagonist and Gilbert, played by Anthony Edwards, as Lewis's sidekick. However, I would suggest the dual-protagonist reading gets at the heart of how the film works as an aesthetically crafted ideological message about nerd masculinity.

Lewis functions as a representation of the stereotypical nerd: he looks like the kid in the *National Lampoon* poster and his behavior is very socially awkward. Meanwhile, Gilbert fits *some* aspects of the stereotypical nerd, but he is also a more complex and three-dimensional

character. Gilbert seems very appealing because of his contrast with the abrasive Lewis and he allows the filmmakers to introduce viewers to the idea that, perhaps, not all nerds are totally grotesque and unlikable, which helped open the door for neutral or positive nerd representations. Gilbert offers one of the earliest hints that nerds could be relatable to the average person instead of just the absurd stereotype exemplified by *National Lampoon* and *Saturday Night Live*.

In this way, the image of Lewis authenticated the characters for American audiences as an accurate representation of a group of nerds, because he offered an image of the stereotype which earlier entertainment had taught them to recognize as a nerd. Meanwhile, Gilbert suggested to those audiences that maybe nerds could be more than the stereotype suggested, while still retaining a nerd identity.

In fact, Gilbert in *Revenge of the Nerds* provides the first attempt to position “nerd” as an identity rather than just a stereotype, because he can be recognized as a nerd by viewers without having to adhere to every feature of the nerd stereotype. This will become important later on in my dissertation, as I study people and representations which can be identified as nerds based on their proximity to nerdy spaces and activities rather than strict adherence to a stereotypical image of “the nerd.”

As a foil to Gilbert, Lewis plays the more traditionally unappealing nerd. He is overconfident, small, sort of mousy looking, with the thick horn-rimmed glasses that are the nerd’s trademark. Gilbert is taller than Lewis, and he has sandy blond hair, like so many of the jocks that bully them. One of the most significant aesthetic markers of the differences between them is the fact that Gilbert has wire-framed glasses as opposed to Lewis’ horn rims. This may seem inconsequential, but we must remember that horn-rimmed glasses (especially with white tape on the bridge) are probably the most definitive visual sign of the classic nerd. They are, for

example, a key feature of the *National Lampoon* “Are You a Nurd?” poster, and if you buy a “nerd” Halloween costume, they are probably the one item that is *guaranteed* to be in the package to make sure you are recognizable as a nerd. That’s what makes these glasses so important. If you saw them, and nothing else, most American viewers would think “nerd” without needing any further visual evidence.

The film represents character differences between Lewis and Gilbert through their romantic choices. Lewis is one of the most classically stereotypical nerds in the film. He pursues, and wins the heart of, the head cheerleader from the Delta Pi sorority, Betty. Just as Lewis is a very stereotypical representation of the nerd, Betty is a stereotypical blonde cheerleader: pretty, shallow, and only interested in having fun. Lewis wins her by demonstrating sexual prowess, proving that he can compete on the terms of conventional (stereotypical) hegemonic masculinity just like the jocks from the Alpha Beta fraternity.⁵¹ Lewis’ entire narrative arc works within the realm of hyperbolic stereotypes. He is not at all realistic, and his narrative arc is not very believable, but this contrast serves to add a sense of drama and sincerity to Gilbert’s relationship with a woman named Judy, which seems quite realistic compared to the relationship of Lewis and Betty.

As a character, Gilbert also seems like he was written to appeal to female viewers and perhaps as an figure of identification for nerdy men in the audience who didn’t want to see themselves as being like Lewis or the other nerds. He is a little better looking than Lewis, in conventional Hollywood movie terms. He also displays a kinder, sweeter, gentler personality. He is less shallow and more genuine.

Throughout the film, Gilbert has much more self-knowledge than Lewis. He understands and accepts that people see him and Lewis as nerds. He has a sense of who he is and where he

can comfortably fit in. He expresses doubt when Lewis wants the two of them to pledge for the Alpha Beta fraternity, the most popular guys on campus, most of whom are also football stars. He seems happy when the nerds form their own fraternity the Tri-Lambs, and only gets upset when the Alpha Betas attack the Tri-Lambs and ruin their frat house. Otherwise he seems very happy to be among people with whom he shares interests and personality traits.

Meanwhile, Lewis is always angling to become part of the popular crowd and prove himself as worthy by *their* standards, which he does through the traditionally patriarchal act of stealing a woman from the most dominant man in the school (Betty is originally the captain of the football team's girlfriend). Even when Lewis loses his virginity to a nerdy girl who says "I think robots are sexy,"⁵² after he shows her the robot he built, he never talks to her again, and he continues his single-minded pursuit of Betty. By proving himself to be shallow and sex-obsessed, Lewis fits in better than Gilbert with the tropes of the college sex comedy, which is ultimately the kind of film *Revenge of the Nerds* is, and he also fits in with older ideas of conventional masculinity. However, the character of Gilbert opens the film up to the possibility of having some emotional resonance and represents a possibility for a new form of nerd masculinity. In the director and cast commentary track featured on the *Revenge of the Nerds* DVD, director Jeff Kanew explains that Gilbert provides heart to the film.⁵³

However, I need to introduce a bit more complexity into the reading of Gilbert. Gilbert is not perfectly ethical in the film, he is more of a superego to Lewis's id. His character does offer viewers the possibility of reading the nerd as a harmless and lovable figure, but there is a more troubling possibility.

Our first introduction to Gilbert is when he pretends to be sick because he is anxious about leaving his mother and going to college. We get a sense that this is partly his own fear of

homesickness and partly his worry about leaving his mother alone, since it seems to be just the two of them in their home. These kind of dual motives, split between the selfish and the sincere showed how nerds could moderate their public image. Perhaps that seems innocent enough, but consider the fact that Gilbert also participates in the panty raid scene in which the nerds see many sorority girls naked against their will, steal their underwear and plant hidden cameras in the sorority house. Then he watches the hidden camera footage with the other nerds and helps them sell nude stills of the sorority women captured with those cameras as part of a fundraiser.

Lewis is the id of the film who represents the way many nerds may have wanted to behave: chasing his sexual appetites without hesitation or consideration for women's humanity. He ditches the nerd girl with whom he loses his virginity in favor of a cheerleader, Betty, and he circumvents Betty's ability to consent by having sex with her under false pretenses while disguised as her boyfriend. Meanwhile, Gilbert is the superego who regulates the nerd's public image, so that the audience won't notice his participation in toxic masculinity behind the scenes. This is similar to the way Bill Gates used his persona as a goofy awkward nerd, and then later an avuncular philanthropist to cover up the cutthroat tactics through which he hoarded his massive wealth.

The dynamics of the centerpiece scene of Gilbert's romance with his love interest Judy go on to further illustrate the complexity and mixed motives of the computer nerd's dance with the American public. Gilbert's romantic arc begins in the school computer lab, where he helps a young woman named Judy with an assignment on the computer. He is a comforting presence who tells Judy "[The] computer is your friend" and charms her with a cute animation he programs of the two of them dancing.⁵⁴ This scene has two potential readings which actually make the most sense when combined together. On the one hand, it must be remembered how

little experience most Americans had with computers in those days, and how much more difficult they were to use than they are now. Computer users had to type commands onto a black screen rather than clicking icons on a graphical interface like we do today. Computers appeared mysterious and baffling, like something only a genius could operate, but instead of gatekeeping and judging Judy for her lack of computer skills, Gilbert tries to make the world of computers more accessible, and share his passion with her.⁵⁵ On the other hand, it is a paternalistic demonstration of his power. Gilbert easily takes over and subordinates to his will the computer that made Judy feel so helpless she was literally banging her head against the screen. He explains that the computer makes him feel “godlike,” through a sense of “complete control.” He uses that control to make a cartoon of the two of them dancing, which can be read as sweet, but can also be creepy and overly familiar, like the flirtatious emails Bill Gates sent to a female employee saying things like “If this makes you uncomfortable, pretend it never happened.”⁵⁶

I don’t mean to say that the creators of *Revenge of the Nerds* were deliberately sending messages to computer nerds about duplicitous ways to exercise gendered power, I’m saying that the messages offered to young nerds about whiteness and masculinity were complex and conflicting. Sometimes harsh and hurtful, often enabling of toxic masculinity, and rarely offering a clear path toward a constructive and emotionally healthy way of being themselves.

The nerds in *Revenge of the Nerds* are portrayed as heroes because Lewis proves that nerds can use their intelligence and technical skill to compete with hegemonic males at their own game of exercising power over women. This was a way of fitting nerds into the highly macho cinema world of the 1980s dominated by characters like Sylvester Stallone’s Rambo⁵⁷ and Rocky⁵⁸ and comedies that focused on young men’s pursuit of sex like *Porky’s*⁵⁹ and *Risky Business*.⁶⁰ The movie tries to make the nerds seem a bit cool, and in ‘80s media, that means they

had to meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity that were so popular with the decade's movie audiences.⁶¹ It had to be clear that Lewis was *still* a nerd in order to show that nerds could be masculine without giving up their nerdy identity, but he also had to occupy the structural role of the conquering hero with the beautiful blond by the end of the film. Since the release of this film, nearly every representation of a "revenge of the nerds" narrative has hinged upon nerds attempting to perform toxic masculinity.

The Nerd As Cover Model: Still Grotesque but Now Successful

After closely analyzing *Revenge of the Nerds*, it actually makes sense to return to the original "Revenge of the Nerds" magazine article, and analyze the cover of the magazine, because the image on the cover compresses so much ideological information that becomes much easier to parse consciously once the subtext has been spelled out by the *Revenge of the Nerds* film. Additionally, since the magazine article is about Steve Jobs, this slight reversal of chronology will make the connection between the "revenge of the nerds" narrative as fiction and the "revenge of the nerds" fantasies constructed around Jobs and Gates more salient.

Ciotti's piece was the cover article of *California's* July 1982 issue.⁶² The cover image reveals that the "revenge of the nerds" has its basis in the fantasies of white, heterosexual, American men. Of all the ways to show that the nerd is successful, the magazine staff chose to show him being fawned over by two scantily clad beautiful blond women as he sits at his computer and grins goofily at the camera. The nerd on the cover is the classic image of the nerd stereotype, as laid out in the *National Lampoon* poster. In fact, he looks a lot like Lewis from *Revenge of the Nerds* down to his pocket protector, horn-rimmed glasses taped at the bridge of his nose and his greasy, messy hair. The two women with him both look similar to Betty, the idealized blond cheerleader from the film. The cover line associated with the article almost

taunts the reader,⁶³ suggesting a kind of bitterness on the part of the rich and successful nerds. Perhaps that's why Ciotti and his editor Tom Bates chose the word "revenge" to describe the experience of nerds like Wozniak and Jobs.

The magazine cover actually presents the cover line as if it were dialogue being spoken by the nerd. It says "Remember me?"⁶⁴ as if the nerd in the cover photo is speaking directly to the viewer (the general American public), setting up a situation of nerds vs. everyone else. The competitive logic of the "revenge of the nerds" narrative is established as the cover line continues: "I'm one of those guys everybody laughed at in high school. Well, today I design computers and I'm worth millions. So, who's laughing now."⁶⁵

Apparently the designers of the magazine cover thought this nerd's voice and point of view was important and compelling enough to be emphasized on the cover itself. What's more, the nerd's statement is a fictional creation, and the nerd in the picture is probably not a real nerd. Certainly he's not one of the famous nerds discussed in the article. Those nerds apparently did not provide the exact stereotypical image the cover designer and photographer wanted.

In fact, Steve Jobs, the most famous nerd covered in the article, looked a bit more like a hippie than like a typical nerd. The designers of the magazine cover had to be able to dress someone up in the classical nerd-stereotype costume and stage this very contrived looking photo in which the women and the computer compete for the nerd's attention, but he ignores both and faces out toward the viewer instead, challenging us with the aggressive statement the magazine has crafted for him.

He has already mastered the computer, so he doesn't need to attend to it, and the attentions of the women are supposed to be taken for granted because of the nerd's financial success. In some ways this image brings to mind *The Nutty Professor*, in which Jerry Lewis

transforms from the nerdy Julius Kelp to the swaggering alter ego Buddy Love who provokes envy in other men and makes women swoon.⁶⁶ This image is different, though, because the nerd on the magazine cover didn't have to change his appearance or his personality to attract women and cause envy among other men. The man's core nerdy trait, his extreme facility with computers, is exactly what has changed him from a laughing stock to a success. The idea that nerdy traits and abilities could lead to success was new, and this was only the first inkling of how the nerd's status in America would change in the coming decades.

Although he is sitting down in the picture, this nerd looks tall and well built, and like he might well be a model who has been styled as a nerd temporarily for the photo shoot. In other words, the nerd's appearance reflects what the stylist and photographer (experts in creating iconic and eye-catching imagery) thought a nerd should look like. The women, in order to be subservient, must stand while he gets to sit. They lean over him from behind as he takes little notice of them. One runs her fingers through his greasy looking hair as if to show that his wealth makes up for his lack of sex appeal, and this woman is able to touch his hair with no apparent display of disgust. The other woman playfully pulls a pen out of his pocket protector, which means she is directly interacting with a central symbol of his nerdiness and yet she still looks at him with what we are meant to perceive as desire.

Again, we must remember, though, that given the dialogue about how he's "worth millions,"⁶⁷ we are probably supposed to assume that the women are only attracted to him for this reason. Instead of representing the attractiveness of the nerd, they represent his wealth. The wealth either *creates* attractiveness or bypasses the need for attractiveness. If the nerd was made to look attractive, or at least not *unattractive*, the viewer wouldn't be sure that it was only the nerd's wealth and success that attracted these women who serve as symbols of hegemonic

masculinity. It is the wealth that is his path to hegemonic masculinity. In the 21st century, we have seen that people can have what are thought of as “nerdy” interests while still looking and acting “normal,” but that was inconceivable in the 1980s. As the characterizations in *Revenge of the Nerds* demonstrate, the unappealing look of the nerd, the awkward social behavior, and the computer expertise were all seen as inseparable parts of the nerd’s identity.

Again, as suggested by the implication of the nerd’s economic success being the thing that makes him attractive, the idea that the nerd was accepted only begrudgingly was a subtextual element of representations of nerd men like this one, and eventually the belief that their acceptance was inauthentic and conditional seemed to have seeped into the subconscious of many white male American nerds as will be clear in chapters 3 and 4 when the resentful gatekeeping and backlash these nerds perform is discussed. The aggressive behavior of contemporary nerds who engage in behaviors like the harassment and threatening of women online seems to stem from an attitude that could be summed up as “you never fully accepted us, so now we want to reject you and bully you.” That attitude was being subtly cultivated all the way back in the “revenge of the nerds” narratives of the early 80s, because the imagery of nerd success in that era was associated with lashing out at other people, saying “who’s laughing now?” and objectifying women.

Instead of reacting to the women’s attention, the nerd sits rather stiffly, looking in the opposite direction and he has his arm around his computer’s keyboard instead of around one of them. He is posed so as to be engaging with the women as little as possible, so that it’s clear that they are objects to enhance his status rather than human beings with whom he is having any sort of interaction. He looks out at the viewer instead of at the women, because he is more interested in the response of *other men* to the women, than the response of the women *to him*. The

heterosexual male viewer of the image is supposed to envy the nerd for getting the women's attention, which is intended as a reversal of the dynamics the nerds faced in school, when everyone was higher in the social hierarchy than them. Like Lewis' pursuit of Betty, about whom he knows nothing beyond her physical appearance, the nerd is more interested in the status boost the women give him with other men.

In this way, men who identified with cultural representations of nerds were trained to think hierarchically. This reversal of fortunes is the key to the "revenge of the nerds." That's where the revenge part comes in. The nerds' triumph is not just a victory for its own sake, it is a triumph *over* other people. This is the perfect kind of success story for a capitalist society, and that's why the most prominent stories of nerd success have been focused on economic factors. People who could be seen to fit the stereotypical image of the nerd have achieved all kinds of remarkable things in fields from medicine, to science, to music and everything in between, but their success rarely captures public attention and makes them a household name if they have not acquired massive wealth while pursuing their accomplishments.

Computer Nerd Figureheads: Mythologizing Jobs and Gates

The way in which Steve Jobs became a household name is a good example of the role of economics in the fame acquired by nerds. In 1988, when Journalist Lee Butcher was trying to explain the public's interest in Apple and its founders, he wrote that "by 1977, [When Apple was founded,] Americans were starved for homegrown success stories" because "the newspapers around the nation were filled with chilling stories of how foreign competition was undermining American business"⁶⁸ in key industries like electronics and automobile manufacturing in which Americans feared the threat of Japanese competition. Butcher explains that "Rather than emphasizing its technical advances, Apple positioned itself as a bastion of hope for American

free enterprise.”⁶⁹ If a couple of nerds working out of their garage could start such a hugely successful business, perhaps there was hope for American ingenuity after all. Because they downplayed the technical jargon and played up the fantasy of a “rags to riches” story of two young men who created a booming business from scratch, “the publicity made both Jobs and Wozniak cult heroes, not only among computer devotees but among a wider national audience.” According to Butcher “The Two Steves” became “household names.”⁷⁰

Steve Jobs and his garage became the ultimate symbol of the American Dream when told through the lens of the tech startup company. Bill Gates has also been mythologized as a young American genius, as we can see if we look at the many representations of a single crucial moment in his life. As varied representations of a single biographical event accumulate, it becomes clear that the biographies and public images of men like Bill Gates are as dependent upon creative representation as any work of imaginative literature.

Bill Gates was at Harvard in the 1974 with his friend Paul Allen when they had the idea that would lead to the founding of Microsoft. This critical moment, when Allen showed Gates a copy of *Popular Electronics* magazine with the Altair 8080 microcomputer on the cover, has been represented many times. It was a eureka moment for the two men because The Altair offered “ordinary” people the opportunity to own a computer for the first time. It became clear that the personal computer was going to develop into a major industry and they decided they would be the ones to make the necessary software. The story is intended to demonstrate the shrewdness of Gates and Allen and the fact that they “got there first” in terms of recognizing the future potential of personal computers and software. This moment is critical to the idea of white nerd masculinity because it demonstrates the how privilege and educational advantages gave the white male computer nerd the first-mover advantage. Gates and Allen put a lot of hard work into

developing a programming language for the Altair, but they were also perfectly positioned to be the ones to do so

In *How the Web Was Won*, Paul Andrews describes Paul Allen running “across Harvard Square to Gates’s room” with a copy of the January 1975 issue of *Popular Electronics*. The idea of Allen running and breathlessly showing Gates the magazine gives the moment a sense of urgency and gravitas which seems appropriate in hindsight. The symbolic meaning behind Allen’s cross-campus sprint is that Gates and Allen were competing in a race against other computer entrepreneurs. Metaphorically speaking, they were racing to be the first company to create a language that would allow users to program personal computers like the Altair in order to make it perform useful tasks.⁷¹

The book *Hard Drive* by journalists James Wallace and Jim Erickson tells the story of seeing the magazine cover from Allen’s point of view. In this representation, readers are told that Allen “had read [*Popular Electronics*] regularly since childhood,”⁷² which establishes his credibility as a longtime nerd. Wallace and Erickson mark the moment as a coming-of-age for Allen as well as a crucial coming-of-age moment for the personal computer.

The sudden availability of personal computers means that the revolution which will lead to the “revenge of the nerds” is happening, and the realization of this sea change “sen[ds] [Allen’s] heart pounding.”⁷³ In this version of the story, Allen has to stop Gates from playing poker to get him to look at the magazine, a more traditionally masculine activity that Gates was known for in his Harvard days, likely emphasized in biographies because it suggests he was too smart and confident to worry about school and stayed up all night playing poker instead. This is similar to Gates’ much reported love of sports cars and fast driving, which blended the nerdy and the masculine by combining risk taking and action with a love of highly technical machines.

Poker similarly blends nerd traits with traditional masculinity by connecting a nerdy acumen for numbers and strategy with the masculine activity of staring down an opponent and risking big money.

In the 1999 TV-Movie *Pirates of Silicon Valley*, Allen is shown waking Gates up in his bed to hand him the magazine, as though Allen is “waking Gates up” to the reality of the personal computer revolution that is coming to American society and the economic opportunities it entails. To drive the point home about what a truly life-changing moment the Altair was for computer nerds, Allen is later depicted walking toward Gates with an Altair computer in his outstretched hands while he is bathed in angelic light and mystical sounding music plays on the soundtrack.⁷⁴

It is natural that a film would have to rely on visual metaphors to convey the significance of the moment, and the ways in which the film relies on sound and visual presentation for its heightening effects make it clear that the importance of these moments is a matter of aesthetic and discursive construction rather than a mere reporting of reality and of history. By showing the aesthetic work that went into the Bill Gates mythology, this collection of anecdotes about the Altair prepares the way for an aesthetic and discursive reading of Bill Gates himself.

Bill Gates and Hegemony: The Ubiquity of Microsoft Masculinity

As the quintessential public nerd of the early personal computer era, one of the most interesting things about Bill Gates in the 1990s was the way in which he seemed to represent both the unremarkable generic whiteness of nerd masculinity and the hegemonic *power* of nerd masculinity. He was the prime example of Richard Dyer’s claim that “The combination of extreme whiteness with plain, unwhite whiteness means that white people can both lay claim to the spirit that aspires to the heights of humanity and yet supposedly speak and act disinterestedly

as humanity's most average and unremarkable representatives."⁷⁵ He was, in many ways, the ultimate symbol of white masculinity for the information age: visible through his ubiquitous presence in American culture and invisible through the extreme averageness of his physical presence. Gates was basically the human face of computers for the American public in the 1990s. He was both revered and hated for this status in ways that reveal a lot about both white nerd masculinity's place in American culture and the American public's relationship with computer technology.

The historian Randall Stross tried to understand the intense emotions observers in the American public expressed toward Gates and Microsoft. As of 1996, he found that the Internet was full of anti-Gates and anti-Microsoft sentiments, to such an extent that *Wired* magazine was able to publish an entire article called "On Hating Microsoft"⁷⁶ which was a guide to the dozens of web pages dedicated to attacking the company and its CEO.⁷⁷ Stross believed that most of the "charges directed at Microsoft [were] groundless"⁷⁸ and he sought to understand why such powerful negative sentiment was being directed toward the company and toward Gates.

Stross concluded that Gates and his company were a scapegoat for the ways in which technology was changing the American economy and thus disrupting the lives of average Americans.⁷⁹ Stross points to "the shrinking of U.S. Manufacturing since the 1970s" and the ways in which this negatively affected the jobs and incomes available to the majority of Americans.

Stross explains that "All of these changes mean greater insecurity for most. And we have nothing but amorphous economic forces on which to fasten blame."⁸⁰ But Microsoft "epitomizes the economy's shift to an information-based dynamic . . . and has pushed us unwillingly into an uncertain post-manufacturing era" so Microsoft serves as the "symbol of a future we did not ask

for.”⁸¹ However, a corporation is an abstraction, and it’s hard to process and maintain emotions toward something so abstract and distant from our experience, but Bill Gates is a person and a person can be understood and disliked. As Stuart Hall explains, representation of difference “engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way.”⁸²

But why were Microsoft and Gates the particular targets for these fears? I think this is explained by the ways in which Microsoft positioned itself as omnipresent and omnipotent, so ubiquitous as to be generic representative of the personal computer industry. Microsoft was like white masculinity itself in this way: the omnipresent, powerful, engaging in force behind the scenes, but at the same time, it presented a façade of unforced cultural hegemony.

Microsoft was synonymous with personal computers for the American public, and Gates was synonymous with Microsoft, and all of this was by design.⁸³ In order to watch this unfold, we have to look at the development of Microsoft’s marketing practices throughout the ‘80s and ‘90s and the ways in which Gates’ image was crafted.

In addition to software, Microsoft manufactured the image of Bill Gates and of Microsoft itself. It has even been suggested that the image of the company and its founder were “Microsoft’s most marketable product.”⁸⁴ In the early 80s, Bill Gates began to take an interest in marketing his company and its products beyond the world of people already familiar with computers to the broader public. Presumably, this was to compete with the marketing mastery of Apple and Steve Jobs who were impressing America with the user-friendly Macintosh, including a flashy Superbowl ad in 1984 directed by Ridley Scott which emphasized the Mac’s populist appeal as opposed to the forbidding aura that surrounded other PCs.⁸⁵ After all, Gates was inspired by the Mac’s Graphical User Interface (GUI) which allowed users to operate the

computer by clicking icons with a novel object called a “mouse.” While the first edition of Microsoft’s Windows operating system was in production, Gates kept telling the team to “Be more like the Mac.”⁸⁶ In many ways, Jobs and Apple were the ultimate foil for Gates, because Jobs and his company were able to market themselves as hip and almost countercultural. Jobs was the Gilbert to Gates’ Lewis, if we want to place them within the map of nerd masculinity established by *Revenge of the Nerds*.

However, Instead of being the “cool” or “hip” computer company like Apple, Gates took the strategy of trying to be “the ‘safe buy’ . . . [the] brand you could defend to your nontechnical senior management, as well as to shareholders.”⁸⁷ In order to achieve this image as the dependable brand, the default operating system that people would pick so that they knew it would work and they didn’t have to think about it, Gates and Microsoft had to lean into a generic nerdiness that was so unexciting as to fade into the background at the same time, Gates engaged in cutthroat business tactics to ensure a near-monopoly over placement of his software and operating system on nearly every company’s computers.⁸⁸ This is how cultural hegemony operates: The hegemonic norms are treated as common sense facts that are too obvious to question, on the surface, but they are backed up by the threat of enormous force if anyone dares to question the status quo. Eventually, the public saw Microsoft as the default computer software and only someone making a deliberate choice to be different would use anything else.

Jennifer Edstrom and Marlin Eller describe Gates’ keynote speech performance at a major computer industry convention in this way: “His fingerprint-smudged glasses reflected the light. Dandruff dusted his collar. He looked like central casting’s idea of a technical genius, which was, of course, all part of the image being marketed.”⁸⁹ They wanted Bill Gates to look like exactly the guy who the American public would expect to know all about computers, so they

presented Gates as a slightly polished version of the stereotypical nerd and turned him into “essentially, the company mascot.”⁹⁰

At the same time, a more sinister image of Bill Gates was being fashioned as the Federal Trade Commission began investigating Microsoft for antitrust violations and competitors in the software industry started speaking out about Gates’ brutally unfair competitive practices. While at first most of Microsoft’s publicity maneuvering was designed to make Microsoft seem like the safe and unintimidating computer, and Gates as a safe and unintimidating man, the company eventually also had to contend with Gates’ image as a ruthless high-tech robber baron. Microsoft’s actions to position the company and its CEO in certain ways in the public eye were typical of representational practices, which, according to Stuart Hall, “[intervene] in the many potential meanings of an image in an attempt to privilege one.”⁹¹

In *Hard Drive*, a Bill Gates biography published in 1992, the authors make a point to mention Gates “oddly high-pitched voice, which cracked occasionally like a nervous teenager’s . . . His mop of dishwater blond hair,” his constant dandruff and “the acne to which he was still prone” and, most importantly to his fitting into the stereotypical nerd image: “his oversized glasses.”⁹² However, they are also quick to mention Gates’ obsession with sports cars and fast driving as well as his highly competitive personality: two traits more readily associated with hegemonic masculinity than nerd masculinity. The fact that Gates so publicly possessed both sets of characteristics was very important to the convergence between nerd masculinity and hegemonic masculinity that was hinted at in the ‘80s by the *Revenge of the Nerds* film and the success of Apple, was extended in the ‘90s by Gates and the growth of the personal computer industry and then was fully realized in the 2000s and 2010s by the expansion of the Internet into every corner of American life.

Conclusion

Through a series of media models of nerd masculinity, computer nerds learned which performances of nerd masculinity would lead to rejection and which were acceptable. Characters like the nerds in *National Lampoon* and *Saturday Night Live* showed nerds how *not* to present their masculinity. Meanwhile, Gilbert in *Revenge of the Nerds* showed them what they could get away with and how to present themselves in a socially acceptable way.

The most important idea to be gleaned from these representations is that computer nerds were integrated into the mainstream of American culture through their technical skills, wealth and power, but also through a re-branding of the nerd's image which turned their unappealing surface traits into a source of strength. The idea presented by the "revenge of the nerds" narrative, was that nerds possessed skills and intelligence so valuable and useful that the rest of America *had* to embrace them even if they did not want to. Therefore, the "revenge of the nerds" fits very well into the beloved American myth of meritocracy.

The next chapter will examine a cultural identity that channeled the computer nerd through popular culture and made the image of nerd masculinity much more congruent with normative American masculinity by staging masculine performances as simulations: the gamer.

CHAPTER 2

THE GAMER: SIMULATING HEGEMONIC AMERICAN MASCULINITY

Introduction: Selling Nerds a New Identity

One of the biggest changes computers brought with them was a new cultural form called the video game. Video games were normal. Video games were important to American nerd masculinity because of their acceptance as a normal, even exciting, part of American popular culture. While the computer nerd secured a grudging acceptance in American culture due to the importance of his skills, the gamer identity provided a bridge that got nerd masculinity closer to the characteristics of normative American masculinity by simulating those traits within digital culture. This chapter will follow the construction of the “gamer” identity in American culture in order to show that the gamer had one foot in nerd culture and one foot in the realm of normative American masculinity. Advertisers, writers, game developers and video game enthusiasts were able to find a way to integrate nerd masculinity into mainstream American pop culture, so that the image of the white male nerd was no longer just grotesque comic relief like the computer nerd. The video game industry sold the gamer identity to white male nerds, and by “buying” it and taking on that identity for themselves, they could fit in more comfortably in American popular culture. I will demonstrate the construction of the gamer identity as a mainstream American nerd masculinity. I will do this by following the gamer’s development through the origin of video games within an insular university culture that valorized white nerd masculinity, to the construction of games and gamers as a vital part of the late-capitalist consumer economy, to the creation of a gamer culture in magazines, and a blending of the gamer with normative American masculinity in video game advertising and in the content of video games, and then,

finally the separation of gaming from the public image of being a children's toy to being a medium that explored heavily masculinized adult themes like violence and sex.

Video Game Origins: Proto-Gamers as Pioneers

The creators of the first video game, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, were prototypes of the gamer, an identity which would combine technological cleverness with genre fandom and mischievous playfulness. They predated several ingredients that would make gaming into a full-fledged part of American culture: the robust nerd and geek media culture that would develop later, the ready accessibility of computer technology and the mainstream marketing strategies that would create an image of the “gamer” in which young men could see themselves. As video games progressed from *Spacewar!* to Sega, from the 1960s to the 1990s, the adjustments made to gaming culture to make it fit into the American mainstream are also indicative of how the gamer as an identity was adapted from the computer nerd to something more acceptable in American pop culture.

Spacewar! was created in 1962, before the wide spread use of the word “nerd” and the dissemination of the nerd stereotype (Jerry Lewis's *Nutty Professor*, an early nerd icon, hadn't even been released yet) and before the extreme commodification of pop culture that would accompany a cultural property like *Star Wars* was in full swing.¹ Even *Star Trek*, the show that spawned the first huge nerd fandom was a few years away from having its first season. Perhaps the fact that the offerings of nerd culture were so meager was what led to these young men making the kind of game they would want to play, making their *own* nerd culture, answering J.M. Graetz's question: “why doesn't anyone make *Skylark* movies?”² (referring to one of their favorite series of science fiction novels). They didn't know how to make movies, so they used

the skills they *did* have to make something that captured the *Skylark* space battles the way they imagined them: they created a computer game.

The first video game, *Spacewar!*, came out of the privilege of access to computers and the juvenile enthusiasms of young masculinity. *Spacewar!* was ultimately born from trash science-fiction and the imaginations of a handful of white twenty-something nerd men who worked in a computer lab at MIT. It was a collectively built male power-fantasy simulation brought into being and developed by a collective of nerdy young white men.

Branding *Spacewar!*: The Hippie Meets the Nerds

In an article called “Spacewar!: Fanatic Life and Symbolic Death Among the Computer Bums,” Stewart Brand was telling the story of these young men and their computer game because he was an early evangelist of computers for the masses. This 1972 article, in the very popular *Rolling Stone* magazine was a major text of his evangelism. Because of his desire to make computers seem revolutionary, Brand developed a lot of the language of computer-nerd as hero and brave pioneer that would later be put to commercial use in descriptions of the gamer. Brand constructs a form of masculinity out of the technological mastery and rebellious playfulness on display. According to Brand, these men are powerful but also playful and youthful: they are “elite” and “magnificent men with their flying machines” but also “Fanatics with a potent new toy.”³ They are adventurers, explorers and heroes “scouting a leading edge of technology” but that edge has “an odd softness to it.”⁴ It is not the masculinity of their fathers that was afraid of playfulness and sensitivity. And yet still, the “edge of technology” they were “scouting” was “outlaw country” and they were not bound by any rules made by human beings but only “the starker demands of what’s possible.”⁵ Brand carefully dances on a razor’s edge, building up a powerful image of masculine adventure, while subtly acknowledging the computer

itself through language like “flying machine” as if he is trying to subtly outmaneuver the fact that he’s writing about young men sitting at computers for hours at a time. Brand is crafting language to make computing sound like an adventure. This is the same kind of linguistic trickery we will see in commercial video game advertisements, where marketers craft their rhetoric around the activities which the games are *simulating* in order to make the activity of gaming itself seem like a masculine adventure.

The primary creator of the game, Steve Russell, gave a description of playing *Spacewar!* which also helps to construct an image of gamer masculinity by explaining a dichotomy at gamer masculinity’s center. He explains that *Spacewar* is “a compromise between action . . . and thought,” between “reflexes” and “tactical considerations,”⁶ which makes it a test of physical skill and intelligence at the same time. This prefigures the rhetorical strategies through which the activity of gaming would be represented as a masculine activity and the gamer as a *nerd* masculinity in particular, because Russell argues that gaming involves action and physical skill to an equal degree as it requires strategy and rationality. This makes gaming the perfect combination of nerdiness and masculinity.

Computer Utopianism: Fact or Fiction?

Spacewar! was a revolutionary technological development, but video games would not have a major cultural impact until they were commercialized. Stewart Brand saw *Spacewar!* as part of an open and unconstrained computer culture that would open up computers to the people. Unfortunately, as has so often been the case in America, “the people” only meant middle and upper-class white men, because computers were only accessible in largely white, male spaces, like university computer labs. *Spacewar!* was created through a meritocratic sharing of labor, since everyone with access to the code of the game was allowed to make improvements.⁷

However, access was only available within an already preselected community based on social structures that preserved white male hegemony.

The Advent of Atari: Video Games Go Public

The first person to really have a vision of video games that would make them accessible to the masses was Atari's founder Nolan Bushnell. Like so many other nerdy young men, Bushnell was exposed to *Spacewar* in his college's computer lab at the University of Utah.⁸ Bushnell's story is significant to the development of the gamer as a form of nerd masculinity because he started the mainstreaming and commercialization of video games that would enable the gamer to become a significant pop cultural figure.

Bushnell first tried to market an arcade video game called *Computer Space*⁹ that was an imitation of *Spacewar*. It seemed to make sense to democratize that game which had become a classic among computer science students and hackers. But, of course, most people had never used a computer in those days and were more interested in a fun game rather than something like *Spacewar!* which was a game that made sense to computer nerds but not necessarily to everyone else. Still, Bushnell had the right idea in trying to create a game that could be mass-produced and placed in public spaces.

With his second attempt, *Pong*,¹⁰ Bushnell went from trying to market a game where "You had to read the instructions before you could play" (*Computer Space*) to selling a game that "any drunk in a bar could play" (*Pong*).¹¹ Bushnell put a *Pong* test machine in Andy Capp's, a bar in Sunnyvale, California and very quickly realized it was going to be a hit.¹² Video games were suddenly out of the university computer lab and subject to the pressures of the capitalist market. Atari started mass producing *Pong* machines in 1972, ten years after the advent of *Spacewar!* and in the same year as Stewart Brand published his *Spacewar!* article.

The failure of *Computer Space* and the success of *Pong* showed that while video games had originated in the context of a nerd culture, game designers had to shed some of the trappings of nerdiness if they wanted their video games to be popular and successful. This opened the path for the gamer identity to be constructed because Bushnell was sloughing off enough of the computer nerd baggage attached to video games to enable them to become a mainstream pursuit around which a masculinity would later be constructed.

Buying Masculine Identity: The Gamer As Consumer

Nerds who took on the gamer identity also became more relevant to American culture as consumers in a changing economy with their finger on the pulse of a rapidly growing sector of pop culture. Video games would become essential to American masculinities as computers became ubiquitous, because games provided an easy way of connecting masculinity to computer technology in a way that made sense to wide mainstream audiences.

It turned out that nerds and consumer capitalism were a match made in heaven. Kayla McCarthy points out that “geek [and nerd] culture [is] a media culture, a culture that is defined by the media that participants consume, interact with, and reproduce.”¹³ This meant that the burgeoning American nerd culture in the 70s and 80s was a perfect fit for a form of capital which could no longer derive enough profits from durable physical goods and had to start commodifying pop cultural objects at an accelerating pace. As David Harvey explains, “The mobilization of fashion in mass (as opposed to elite) markets provided a means to accelerate the pace of consumption not only in clothing, ornament, and decoration but also across a wide swathe of life-styles and recreational activities (leisure and sporting habits, pop music styles, video and children's games, and the like).”¹⁴ There was also an emphasis on consumption of services or experiences, many of which were based within media, like going to the movies or

playing video games in an arcade, because “If there are limits to the accumulation and turnover of physical goods . . . then it makes sense for capitalists to turn to the provision of very ephemeral services in consumption.”¹⁵ People like nerds and gamers, who would build their identities on pop culture commodities were exactly the kind of consumers needed for such an economy.

However, it wasn't until 1978 with the release of *Space Invaders*¹⁶ that video games started to seem like a major cultural phenomenon. *Space Invaders* was kind of a compromise position between *Spacewar* and *Pong*. It had the visual appeal and sci-fi mis-en-scene of *Spacewar* with the fast-paced arcade excitement and simplicity of *Pong*. While *Spacewar* had been created by computer hackers in a university computer lab, and had the complexity that those origins would lead one to expect, it was never envisioned as leaving those environs, which is why Bushnell's *Computer Space* failed. However, *Space Invaders* was designed for the arcade and surprised everyone with the level of popularity it achieved. Also in 1978, the Atari VCS was released, and launched the age of programmable home consoles. Programmable, in this case, meant that the game consoles were not just designed to play one game, like the original *Pong* machines for the home. New systems like the VCS (Video Computer System) were compatible with game cartridges, which meant they could play a wide variety of games, and the game companies could continue producing new games for the system as long as they found it profitable to do so, which meant that a home video game system had a newly extended life. It was no longer something you got bored with quickly and threw in the closet, because there was constantly a new game to get excited about. This, probably more than anything happening in the arcades, was what turned gaming into a subculture or a lifestyle because it allowed people to dedicate an unprecedented amount of their leisure time to games, since they no longer had to pay

in quarters for each play session. At the same time, the arcades were still the leading edge of game culture where the most exciting new games made their first appearances, but Atari capitalized on that by making agreements with the developers of those games to port them to their home systems. Then in 1980, *Pac-Man*,¹⁷ created by Japanese Namco and imported by Bally/Midway (like they did with *Space Invaders*) opened up a new level of popularity for video games that no one had ever imagined.

The Year of the Video Game: *Electronic Games Magazine* and 1981

When publishers caught on to the idea that video games were more than just a fad, they began creating magazines to shape the discourse of gaming as a hobby, a subculture and an industry. Through a close reading of the inaugural issue of America's first video game magazine, *Electronic Games*, I will demonstrate how the gamer and gaming culture were being created and shaped in gaming print culture from its earliest moments in ways that would establish the white male nerd as the quintessential gamer for whom video game companies would craft masculinized fantasies.

Electronic Games appeared in 1981, and was the first magazine in the United States to focus exclusively on its eponymous topic. 1981 was the perfect time to release a magazine devoted to video games because *Pac-Man* was released in 1980 and massively expanded the audience interested in video games. Most of the country had "Pac-Man Fever" to quote a pop song dedicated to the game.¹⁸ *Electronic Games*, was a spinoff of a column called "Arcade Alley" that appeared in *Video* (A magazine about audio and video technology) which the column's authors convinced their publisher that video games were significant enough to deserve their own publication.¹⁹ The cover of the inaugural issue of *Electronic Games* shows an illustration of an adolescent white boy playing *Space Invaders* on a home console, highlighting

the issue's cover story about the competition for popularity between the two most influential arcade games of the moment (both outer space shooting games): *Space Invaders* and *Asteroids*.²⁰ This cover establishes the adolescent white boy as the primary audience of the magazine and the primary referent of the term "gamer."

Electronic Games got to work defining gaming culture right away: The editor's introduction of the first issue tells readers they are "a member of the world's fastest growing hobby group" and even provides a history of video games. *Electronic Games* aligns itself with the gamer's in-group concern for authenticity in the editor's introduction of the first issue. Frank Laney Jr. writes, "this publication is written by actual gamers for actual gamers. You'll never see so-called 'reviews' written directly from manufacturers press releases by know-nothing writers in these pages."²¹ The use of the word "actual" appended to "gamers" suggests that there is already a concern about authenticity in gaming culture, or that if there isn't, there should be.

The concern with authenticity suggests that gamers need to be on the lookout for those who wish to manipulate them. This makes sense when one considers the novelty of the video game industry, and the fact that it was not likely to be seen by most people as anything more than a way to make money. Video games were a novel consumer market that was very lucrative in the short-term, but not necessarily expected to last long, so the idea of taking video games seriously most likely did not come naturally to anyone. This identity of the "gamer" had to be developed discursively, and taught to consumers and audiences, and there was a built-in concern about outsiders to the subculture not taking gaming seriously or respecting it as a hobby or lifestyle. A concern about who is an authentic gamer and whether or not gamers are respected were two

perennial concerns for the gamer as a nerd masculinity as will be seen in chapter 4 when GamerGate is addressed.

It seems clear that the magazine's writers and editors envision adolescent white boys as the image of authentic gamer when we read carefully. The magazine contains contradictions that show a certain uneasiness with the exclusions on which gamer culture is based and which suggest that the limiting of the culture to such a narrow demographic was not inevitable but was a very deliberate choice. The writers argue that "game machines that hook up to the family television have become part of the fabric of American life,"²² a lofty claim which seems to involve the entire American family in gaming culture. The article continues, drawing on the popular criticisms of Americans "sit[ting] passively in front of the television set watching others have exciting adventures"²³ and contends that video games allow families to have adventures of their own. However, in spite of all the article's talk of the American family being involved in gaming as a group, the adventures mentioned are all based on fantasies mostly associated with boys and young men.

The article explains that gamers are "ready, willing and able to defend the earth against aliens, race high-powered cars at the Indianapolis Speedway or throw an 80-yard touchdown in the waning seconds of the game!"²⁴ No effort is made to include fantasies or adventures that were conventionally thought to appeal to the mothers or sisters of these American families, perhaps because such games did not actually exist. Much like in the marketing of gaming consoles as a device for the whole family, or the advertisements that touted computers as educational devices, a sort of bait-and-switch was practiced in which a broadly appealing message was used to sell a device that really was intended for a narrower market segment. Just like advertisers, the writers of *Electronic Games* were discursively nimble, able to address just

boys, or just parents, or the whole family, as each situation required, while ultimately, in spite of this discursive maneuvering on the surface, the content underneath was focused on a white adolescent masculinity.

Furthermore, The magazine's centering of the adolescent white male *Space Invaders* player on the cover is no coincidence. This boy is the magazine's ideal reader and the magazine staff even features Frank Tetro Jr. as "Strategy Editor" who happens to be a "15-year-old super-gamer" who "first came to the magazine's notice at last year's New York regional *Space Invaders* tournament" in which he got the highest score ever achieved in tournament play and earned his spot as the "boy wonder of the *Electronic Games* crew."²⁵ The idea of a 15 year old magazine writer is so unusual that it was almost certainly a deliberate choice to hire Tetro in order to emphasize the magazine's focus on adolescent white boys by having one on staff. Granted this concept is not unprecedented, given the fact that film director Cameron Crowe wrote for *Rolling Stone* magazine at age 16,²⁶ but this was a similar situation in which the culture of 1970s rock music was often centered around the interests of adolescent boys and so was the magazine, so a teen-boy writer made perfect sense for the audience and sensibility both publications wanted to cultivate.

Electronic Games acknowledged technomasculine-boy-wonder figures on the development side of gaming too, not just the player's side.²⁷ With imagery that recalls the garage-based legend of Apple computers, Bill Kunkel and Frank Laney Jr. end an article of previews for upcoming games with the statement that "It's entirely likely that a youngster bent over a computer in the family garage is putting the final polish on a new electronic game that will top even the wonderful ones already poised to astound arcaders in the year to come."²⁸ A section of their next article, a brief history of gaming called "Video Games: The Entertainment

Revolution!” even begins with the claim that “It started in a garage late in the 1960’s . . . where Nolan Bushnell created the game that eventually took the world by storm—*Pong*.”²⁹ This statement proves the importance of the garage tinkerer to the mythology of game history that *Electronic Games* wants to create. The article sketches a kind of suburban white American dream, with brilliant young men creating games (“Bushnell’s vision of a hobby that the entire family could enjoy and share on an equal basis”)³⁰ and becoming rich entrepreneurs based on little more than their ingenuity. In doing this, the magazine draws on the cultural energies circulating around the Jobs/Wozniak legend that would coalesce into the “Revenge of the Nerds” narrative in another magazine article a year later and then a hit film two years after that. The repeated references to the raw materials that were used to construct the “Revenge of the Nerds” narrative: the boy-genius, the garage, the ingenuity, the wild success, show that the writers of *Electronic Games* were establishing the gamer and the games industry around a version of masculinity very similar to the “Revenge of the Nerds” narrative that animated the computer industry.

Close reading the first issues of a new magazine about a new topic like *Electronic Games* is very useful, because the magazine must expend a lot of ink and energy justifying its existence, so the discourses that explain and justify video gaming as well as develop the gamer and gaming culture are the main focus of early issues and as we look at those discourses closely and combine them with the imagery created by game companies and advertisements, the idea of “gamer masculinity” starts to come clearly into view.

Showing Off: Games and Representation

Once the gamer masculinity identity was created in print culture, it could be appealed to and directed through advertising and game companies began shaping gamer masculinity through

the many paratexts surrounding each game. This early period is crucial for understanding games and “gamers” because, as Michael Newman explains in *Atari Age*, there was nothing inevitable about the way video games would come to be understood and it all had to be negotiated by many stakeholders in particular sociocultural contexts. He writes that “during their emergence, video games were objects without fixed meanings, without a clear identity, without a commonly shared understanding of their cultural status.”³¹ Therefore a close look at a set of paratexts surrounding one particular game will provide a better understanding of how the gamer was made into a masculine identity through the simulation of masculine fantasies. In other words, video games, because of their interactivity, sell a fantasy. You don’t just *watch* a cowboy or a baseball star, you *are* the cowboy or baseball star. As my examples suggest, the fantasies that games sold to customers tended to be fantasies that traditionally called for a male subject to inhabit them, likely because technology was assumed to be more appealing to boys and men than women and girls. This created a vicious cycle, since the surface appearance of games and their paratexts seemed to invite boys and shun girls; it became a self-fulfilling prophecy and the gamer became a masculine persona.

The 1981 Atari and Intellivision game *Stampede*, made by Activision, is a useful example to see how many intertextual elements were necessary to construct the fantasy of a 1980s video game. It depends on images of the cowboy which have a long and complex history in American culture, showing how early video games depended on imagery and fantasies that were already well-developed in other media. Even though video games of this era were usually not capable of much narrative complexity, they referenced echoes of past narratives in their text and paratexts.

Representing Masculinity in Game Advertising: “The Toughest Challenge Known to Man”

An ad for *Stampede* in the second issue of *Electronic Games* promises “The toughest challenge known to man”³² with an emphasis on the word “man.” Video game fantasies were constructed in a way that tried to bridge the gap between a traditional American masculinity based on physical strength, and a masculinity for the 21st century information economy, which would revolve around familiarity and skill with computer technology. Video games were so new that the companies who made them had to rely on other media to build the fantasies which made the games compelling, and they had to get people comfortable with computer technology. Ideas and images of masculinity played a key role in both of those processes.

I have chosen *Stampede* as a case study because the figure of the cowboy connotes American masculinity in a special way compared to other games, and the figure of the man on horseback was a particularly fitting avatar onto which boys could project themselves. For one thing, playing “cowboys and Indians” was seen as one of the oldest American pastimes for boys, and for another thing, the cowboy was a human figure at a time when most game avatars were more abstract and less human . . . or less manly. A lot of the most popular games like *Space Invaders*, *Galaga*, and *Asteroids* featured spaceships, which certainly had ties to the masculinity of astronauts and science fiction heroes, but the players never saw the pilot, they only saw the ship. Even with sports games, it was true that football players, for example, were considered extremely masculine, but their activities were rule-bound in a way that the cowboy’s weren’t. The cowboy represented the rugged individualism that was one of the cornerstones of the American ideology of masculinity.

Close readings of various texts associated with *Stampede* will demonstrate the ways in which the fantasy of the cowboy was equated with the identity of the gamer, in the hopes that the

masculinity associated with the cowboy's image would translate to the gamer's image. I will also show how The fantasy of the cowboy was used to manage the contradictions that were involved in trying to establish gaming as a masculine activity. It is likely that not all of these features were consciously intended by the creators of the advertisements and other paratexts, but considering the fact that video games were such a novel cultural artifact, and companies were experimenting to figure out how to market them effectively, it is likely that the companies were trying to mold a particular identity for the consumer to step into, especially when the ads were appearing alongside articles in gaming magazines that were *also* deeply invested in shaping the identity of their core audience of gamers.

After all, the process of making a new medium or product legible to its audience involves creating the right fantasy to make them want to consume the product or have the experience which the medium promises. As John Berger argues, the "truthfulness [of an advertisement] is judged, not by the real fulfillment of its promises, but by the relevance of its fantasies to those of the spectator-buyer."³³

By looking at the paratexts of early video games: the magazine articles, ads, manuals and cover art, we can see how the abstract, pixelated images in the games were being invested with symbolic meaning, and just how much work had to go into that process.

Video games had to present a convincing case that the gamer was *participating* in the fantasy when they played the game, which *Stampede*'s ads accomplished by creating a subject position that was both gamer *and* imaginary cowboy for the player to inhabit. The magazine ad for *Stampede* addresses the reader in a way that recalls the Althusserian moment of interpellation in which a person becomes a subject who submits to their role in society. The text opens with "Hey, you!"³⁴ but instead of a police officer saying it, like in Althusser's example, it is a posse of

cowboys. As the reader looks at the ad, twelve grizzled ranch hands stare them down, looking like seasoned old experts who are going to show them the ropes. By answering their call, they are fitted into the subject position their discourse creates. In fact, they were “always already” the subject to whom the cowboys speak (or they weren’t). The ideology expressed in the ad is not *constructed* by the ad, after all, it is simply the product of the systems of race and gender around which American society is based. In other words, the subject whom the cowboys address is male and most likely white, since all the cowboys in the photo are white men who appear to be addressing the reader as a person who has the potential to become one of them. The text assumes masculinity must be proven through physical feats: the cowboys call the reader “Greenhorn” and challenge them to “Come on out and play like a man!” The ideology to which the reader is subjected presents masculinity as a hierarchy in which some people are more successful at being men than others, and it is desirable to position oneself as close to the top of this hierarchy as possible. While it uses the symbolic language of the western genre, the ad constructs the subject position not of the cowboy, but of the “gamer” as a male who rises to the challenges presented by video games and proves his masculinity by doing so. The cowboy is merely the symbolic medium through which the gamer’s prowess is summoned and communicated. By blurring the line between the achievements of the gamer and the cowboy, the ad symbolically moves the gamer closer to the cowboy’s normative masculinity.

The box art on the cover of both versions of *Stampede* works in tandem with the print ad to create a fantasy. When customers went to the store to purchase the game they would see the cover art, which was a cartoonish image of a cowboy on horseback for the Atari version, or a realistic painting of a cowboy for the Intellivision version. Because this image was no longer a photograph of actors styled to look like cowboys, like in the print ad, but rather an artist’s

rendering of a cowboy, the gamer was taken a step away from the realism so often associated with photography, and one step closer to the representational world of the game.

When they got home and put the cartridge into their consoles, the gamer had been mentally prepared to interpret the pixelated stick figures on the screen as a vivid rendering of a cowboy on horseback chasing and lassoing cattle. If they'd merely seen the game with no preparation or aesthetic mediation, not knowing even the title, it's possible they would not even have recognized what the shapes on screen were supposed to represent. Therefore, I argue that in the case of pre-1990s video games, paratextual content, and the game itself, should all be read as part of a continuous text that stimulates the gamer's imagination and aids the gamer's suspension of disbelief. Moreover, the paratexts are where most of the ideological content is to be found when it comes to the creation of an image of gamer masculinity.

When we view the game's TV commercial alongside the print ad, we can start to get a sense of my second main point: the idea that gamer masculinity was unstable and contradictory at its inception and had to be managed through marketing discourse. The fact that *Stampede* had to rely on so many paratexts to create the fantasy upon which its success depended, is the very thing that reveals that fantasy's instability, because it is hard to maintain ideological consistency across so many modes of communication, each with their own techniques and standards.

My reading of *Stampede's* print ad, so far, has been about how the ad was effective at transmitting the ideology of American hegemonic masculinity, and attaching it to the persona of the gamer. However, when we read the two ads in tandem, we can start to see the cracks in this presentation of masculine fantasy, which reveal the contradictions and difficulties involved with making the gamer into a masculine figure in the public imagination.

The television commercial for *Stampede* trades the positioning of gamer-as-cowboy for a rendering of cowboy-as-gamer. In the commercial, a rough-looking, mustachioed cowboy glares into a camera so close that his face fills the screen. As a coyote howls in the background he gruffly says “I’ve been ropin’ cattle most of my life, and you’re tellin’ me I can’t handle a stampede?” The commercial cuts to a two shot in which the cowboy sits next to a companion who says “Not this one, Buck.”³⁵

They put the Stampede cartridge in their Atari VCS and play on a TV they’ve set up under the stars. The two middle-aged cowboys crowd the screen, wide-eyed and excited like a pair of small children. The regression or infantilization of the cowboys is underlined by the way the commercial ends. An elderly woman’s voice calls out from inside the house and says, “Buck, you boys come in now,” to which the two cowboys groan in answer: “Aw, Ma!” Instead of being authentically tough no-nonsense cowboys, like those depicted by the magazine ad, *these* cowboys are gamers who live with their mother. They look the part of tough, cowboy-masculinity, but their behavior is at odds with the ideal of the rugged frontier individualist. By flipping the dynamic of gamer-becoming-cowboy shown in the print ad into a representation of cowboys who regress into a state of gamer boyhood, the combination of print ad and TV commercial, when read together, shows that the subject positions of gamer and cowboy are interchangeable in the symbolic, simulated world of gaming.

This reduction of cowboys to gamers was even more important to the ideology of *Stampede*’s cowboy fantasy than the gamer-to-cowboy route depicted in the print ad, because the gamer was unlikely to become a cowboy, but anyone can become a gamer if they have the time and disposable income. This commercial actually *undermined* the cowboy fantasy, by implying that playing the video game is just as satisfying as being a cowboy, if not more so. And, after all,

Activision didn't *really* want us to *become* a cowboy, they just wanted us to buy their video game, so they created a cowboy fantasy, immersed us in it, and then reduced it or transformed it into a fantasy of being a gamer. We were told that even the people living the life we are supposed to be fantasizing about, would rather be playing the video game simulation of their own lives. Digital tech masculinity was in the process of taking the place of older forms of hegemonic masculinity, so in a way it made sense to depict technological adeptness as equivalent to the masculine subject position that a skilled manual laborer like a cowboy once held.

What's striking is that the game is organized around a stampede, a moderate crisis in the workaday world of the cattle rancher. That's rather unique, since the game focuses on the cattle rancher as a working class laborer rather than foregrounding one of the more exciting tropes of the western genre, like a shoot-out, which had already been explored in a popular 1975 arcade game called *Gunfight*.³⁶

Ironically, *Stampede* was designed for home video game consoles which were most common in middle-class homes where many of the gamers would not have to do manual labor when they grew up. Thus, even the mundane aspects of being a working cowboy could be exotic to these youths. The labor is glamorized and represented as a fast-paced adventure. Working class labor is turned into a culture-industry commodity for the middle class. Perhaps this detachment from manual labor was preparing gamers for a life in middle management. The game also trained them as consumers of commodified experiences in a service-based economy. The game's simulation of ranching is like a computerized version of the experience vacationers could have on a dude ranch, where the upper-middle class go to perform fetishized masculine outdoor labor for novelty's sake, most famously depicted in the *City Slickers* films.³⁷

The instruction manual for *Stampede* allows me to make my a final point about the game and its paratexts. *Stampede* facilitated an ideological connection between traditional ideas of masculine American labor and new forms of knowledge work and service work that involved sitting at a computer and were more closely linked with nerd masculinity. In this way, the gamer identity provided a symbolic link between conventional American masculinities and the masculinity of the computer nerd.

Activision, the publisher of *Stampede*, did not want its players to become like cowboys, because real cowboys probably wouldn't have been buying videogames. But, there *was* a use for cowboy imagery in the construction of masculinity for the information age. The magazine ad leads with the idea of physical toughness as essential for a cowboy. In addition to toughness and physical skills, the game emphasizes that players will need “real smarts and lots of know how.” The cover of the Atari edition's instruction manual explains how the know how is to be acquired. The player must “read these instructions first. Real careful-like” before they “saddle up.”

Carefully reading instructions sounds more like school or office work than ranching. This subtle shift from the print ad, which emphasizes the need for physical toughness and technique, to the instruction manual, which emphasizes reading instructions in preparation to operate a computer program, shows how gaming helped to facilitate what Carly Kocurek refers to as “necessary shifts in ideals of masculinity”³⁸ which were taking place simultaneously with the rise of video game culture. Masculinities theorist Raewyn Connell writes that, “where work is altered by deskilling . . . working-class men are increasingly defined as possessing force alone. . . . Middle-class men, conversely, are increasingly defined as the bearers of skill.”³⁹ The aesthetic totality of *Stampede* as text and paratext presented a sleight of hand in which the game dressed a skilled encounter with a computer in the symbolic garb of physically dominant masculinity,

creating a best-of-both-worlds situation, in which boys gained experience dealing with computer technology by playing the game, but were also exposed to traditional gender ideology in the guise of old West Americana. In light of this, we could say that *Stampede* was trying to create a representation in which technological skill with computers was clothed in the mystique of physical working-class masculinity. In this way, the advertising and other paratexts of *Stampede* attempted to sell the idea that nerds could feel more masculine by becoming a gamer. The aesthetic of toughness brought to gaming by texts like *Stampede* brought gaming closer to the idea of the “hardcore gamer,” a version of the gamer identity that had more intensity through an increase in the aesthetics of violence, rebellion and mischief in gaming culture and a refusal of the idea that games were “for kids.”

Won't Somebody Think of the Children?: Gaming Masculinity in the 90s.

The next thing that had to happen for the gamer identity to become a form of American masculinity was the expansion of the age-range associated with gaming. While *Electronic Games* and many other voices from *within* the gaming culture didn't necessarily see gaming as intended only for children, there were many people both inside and outside gaming who still saw gaming as a children's pursuit.

Available data in the early 1990s suggested that video games were most commonly played by boys between the ages of seven and twelve,⁴⁰ and the largest retailer of video games in the United States was Toys 'R' Us.⁴¹ In order to find a market niche not already occupied by Nintendo, who dominated the home console market with the Nintendo Entertainment System and then the Super Nintendo, a company called Sega marketed their console, the Genesis, to a slightly older demographic.

The shift toward teenagers and young men made video games into less of a toy and more of a media genre, which made it feel inherently less childish, and the attempt to capture the teen market meant that Sega couldn't just try to make their games fun. In order to appeal to teenagers, the market demographic most attuned to current fashions, they had to try to be *cool*. The pursuit of coolness pushed video gaming out of the realm of children and nerds and more into the mainstream. However, in order to be cool, you often have to either break or challenge rules and norms, and in 1993, the games industry found itself under fire for producing controversial content.

In December of 1993, the Senate Governmental Affairs subcommittee on Government Regulation of Information and the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice held a hearing on Violence in Videogames. The hearing was chaired by Senators Joe Lieberman and Herbert Kohl and was intended to support a bill that would require video game companies to implement a ratings system. One of the main premises of the hearing was that video games were becoming much more realistic and that more realistic representations could have a more pernicious effect on the nation's youth, a sentiment that senator Byron Dorgan expressed in his comment that "It's been quite a leap from *Pac-Man* to *Night Trap*."⁴² What he meant was that the simplistic, innocent games of the 1980s had been replaced by violent games the likes of which had never been seen before. Two Sega Genesis games: *Night Trap*⁴³ and *Mortal Kombat*⁴⁴ were the centerpieces of the hearing, solidifying the idea that "Sega does what Nintendon't." In other words, Nintendo was the family friendly video game company, so Sega achieved market differentiation by establishing itself as the company that wasn't afraid of controversy and was willing to make content targeted toward teenagers and men in their early twenties. Sega's vice president of marketing, Bill White, claimed during the hearing, that the average age of the Sega

Genesis owner was 18, and the average age for owners of the Sega CD was 21. Much like the senate hearings about explicit musical content in the 1980s which established the “Parental Advisory” label on tapes and CDs, the controversy around Sega’s games and marketing had the effect of making them seem cool and transgressive. The hearing took place exactly one day before the release of *Doom*⁴⁵ and did nothing to dampen the sales, popularity or influence of that game (one of the most violent and realistic of the time).

The idea that video games were taking up the mantle of rebellion and controversy once borne by rock and roll made it clear that the game industry and gamers (who voted with their wallets by purchasing these controversial games) were seeking to shed the childish image that gaming might once have had in exchange for an edgy, controversial nerd masculinity. One of the witnesses at the senate hearing, an education professor named Eugene Provenzo who wrote a book about Nintendo, claimed that, “Most adults pay relatively little attention to video games, since they're largely the domain of childhood,” but the senate hearing proved that video games had finally gotten the adults’ attention.⁴⁶

The marketing and the culture of “cool” that was developing around video games in the 1990s gave nerd masculinity an opening through which to merge with the mainstream. I would argue that the video game culture of the 1990s laid the groundwork for contemporary American pop culture, in which the lines between nerd culture and the mainstream are often completely blurred.

A telling advertisement for one particular Sega console says “Believe it or not, the brains behind the Sega CD don’t wear pocket-protectors or glasses held together with tape. (Those guys work at Nintendo).” Eric Vero claims that, “This ad demonstrates the importance of being cool as a gamer rather than being a nerd,”⁴⁷ but I would argue that the ad demonstrates the importance

of being a *cool nerd* rather than being cool *instead* of being a nerd. This was an important distinction because the new marketing rhetoric for which Sega was a leading voice was opening up for nerd masculinity the possibilities of being “cool” or “badass,” or “hardcore” to use the gamer parlance. The image makeover that 90s marketing gave to computer technology through the video game industry made it possible for that technology to shed its nerdy image and become mainstream, which would have important consequences when young men started forming online communities like Something Awful, Newgrounds, and 4chan around the same kind of edgy, rebellious, but still technological, self-image that gamer masculinity (as a consumer-based identity) had made possible.

Conclusion

Video games were invented by computer nerds, but it was only when games were made to shed some of their nerdiest trappings that they became accessible enough for the mainstream and allowed the gamer to develop as a form of nerd masculinity that was more in touch with American popular culture. While computer nerd masculinity was important to the US economy as innovators in the technology industry, the gamer was essential to the US economy as a very dedicated consumer. In the process of creating this dedicated consumer base, video game print publications and video game companies shaped gaming around masculine fantasies to make their simulations appealing which lead to the identity of the gamer being closely associated with masculinity.

In the 1990s a flourishing video game zine culture of independent faneds (fan editors) producing their own home-made magazines and trading them shows how gamers began to participate more directly in the discourse of the gamer’s identity and culture that had previously been shaped by professional writers.⁴⁸ The tone of these zines was influenced by the edginess

and white-male focus of 90s gaming culture and this tone was also brought to the Internet by people like Rich Kyanka who started his career editing and writing for the gaming site *Planet Quake* and then founded the humor site and discussion forum *Something Awful* which was a major source of the gatekeeper nerd sensibility that will be explored in the next chapter.⁴⁹

The idea of the “cool nerd” that had developed through gaming culture lead to an elitism in early Internet culture. Nerds would treat the Internet like a high school where they got to be the cool kids and the bullies and developed an aggressive rhetorical style to police the boundaries of the many online communities which they considered to be their territory. Ultimately, by shaping the gamer identity around fantasies of male strength, power and heroism and showing nerds a way to get closer to mainstream “cool,” the gamer provided the base of confidence from which nerds attempted to exercise a more complete hegemony over the Internet than they had ever tried to exercise over a digital culture space before.

CHAPTER 3

GATEKEEPER NERDS: PRESUMED HIERARCHIES AND NERD MASCULINITY

This chapter is about the gatekeeper nerd, a term I'm coining in order to conceptualize the authority and entitlement that white male nerds claimed for themselves on various platforms and online communities throughout the history of the Internet. Gatekeeper masculinity developed at a time when the vast majority of people using the Internet were white men who could be described (often self-described) as nerds. The sensibilities and attitudes that informed gatekeeper nerd masculinity developed when the Internet felt like a private nerd enclave, and the gatekeeping began as soon as people who were not part of the white male nerd subculture started accessing the Internet. Gatekeeper nerds enjoyed the opportunity to exercise social power *over* those new people by controlling the discourses that constructed social norms and social experiences online. There was a brief period of Internet history in which gatekeeper nerds got to experience their revenge of the nerds moment, when the culture of the Internet was geared more toward *their* strengths than anyone else's, a configuration of factors known as "cyber-separationism" in which the Internet was treated as an independent space, not bound by the social hierarchies of so-called "real life."¹ This was the zenith of "digital boyhood" for the gatekeeper nerds, a state which allowed them to escape [from] the rule-bound nature of work, the community, and other cultural formations" and create their own cultural formations to which they could pressure everyone else to adapt.²

The performance of the gatekeeper nerd persona depended on a demonstration of masculine traits, like aggressive rhetoric, which were supposed to entitle their bearer to a

dominant role in an online social community, and also depended on a nerdy expertise on the norms, values and functions of the platform on which the community existed. Based on these traits, gatekeeper nerds presumed the authority to police the content, interaction and self-expression that could take place on the platform. The subjectivity of the gatekeeper nerd has its roots in the privileged status granted to white men and boys by the video game industry and the early Internet access and feeling of intellectual distinction granted to white male nerds by American higher education.³ I will present case studies of the discourse of gatekeeping and hierarchy that have operated on the Internet through the years and trace their historical origins and the conflicts that have surrounded them as manifested by expressive online texts from the Internet's participatory culture.

Gatekeeper nerds were young men and boys who were living out a revenge of the nerds fantasy online based on social dynamics very similar to media stereotypes of American high schools, in which they got to place themselves at the top of high-school-like social hierarchies they imagined and constructed online.

The revenge of the nerds as a popular mythology in American culture is crucial to understanding the culture of masculinity that unfolded and developed online in the 2000s. Nerdy young middle class white men were in a position to have significant influence over a social environment (the world of *online* socializing), but instead of pursuing a utopian ideal of an accepting and pleasant social environment, they pursued an environment that was just as aggressive and hierarchical as the high school social environments in which most of them likely came of age.

The reason why the revenge of the nerds narrative is so potent is that it is based on a social structure that reminds nerds of their experience in high school. There are equivalents to

cool kids, nerds, and bullies and the revenge of the nerds narrative puts nerds in the cool kid/bully position for a change. Pop culture stereotypes of high school social dynamics are the symbolic world upon which a lot of nerd masculinity is built. It is made up of the same kind of social hierarchy, but juxtaposed to the adult world.⁴ For example, a manifesto of nerd masculinity which circulated online in the 2000s imagines a dismayed man saying to a community of nerds online “I used to beat the crap out of punks like you in high school/college!” and then the author, Robert Jung, replies to his imagined interlocutor by explaining how the tables have turned and the nerds were atop the online social hierarchy: “You may have owned the playing field because you were an athlete. You may have owned the student council because you were more popular. You may have owned the hallways and sidewalks because you were big and intimidating. Well, welcome to our world.”⁵ Jung’s text demonstrates the ways in which the indignities of high school weighed heavily upon a lot of nerds, and structured the way they thought about themselves and others. This was likely a response to adolescent trauma that was being refashioned as masculine toughness by being run through a filter of resentment and revenge.

In using their nerd traits to their advantage for online social power and influence, nerds were taking advantage of the affordances of the early World Wide Web, which tended to favor nerds’ strengths and downplay their weaknesses. On the early Internet, your appearance, physical strength and toughness, and wealth were not on display like they are now on contemporary social media. You had to rely on rhetoric, wit, intelligence and rationality, which were traits in which gatekeeper nerds took pride.

The reason why nerds chose revenge instead of constructing a utopian society online is probably because since nerds were mostly white men who were straight, cisgendered and middle

class, they were very close to fitting in with conventional hegemonic masculinity. They had all of the privilege which was required to be hegemonic, they just couldn't quite perform masculinity in the most conventional, traditionally accepted ways in "real life," so they prized the Internet as a place where they could simulate a performance of normative masculinity in the same way they'd simulated it in video games, except in this case, instead of simulating a masculinity far removed from their regular experience, they could simulate something closer to an idealized version of themselves. As the satirical wiki site written largely by gatekeeper nerds called *Encyclopedia Dramatica* puts it, The Internet provided "basement-dwelling nerds [with] a place to feel cool."⁶

While the Internet is a mediated space, and every moment of self-expression and interaction takes place through some form of media text, the nature of the predominant genres of text online has changed over time, and nerds have both adapted to this change at certain times and sought to resist it at other times. The largest changes had to do with the boundary between the "real world" and the Internet. And in their most ambitious act of "gatekeeping," the nerds tried to keep the Internet/real world boundary intact in order to maintain the affordances it offered them. In other words, when the boundary between the real world and the Internet was clear, it was because the Internet did not resemble the real world. It was more anonymous and text-based, and gatekeeper nerds felt a sense of social solidarity amongst themselves and *against* everyone else, as well as a sense of cultural influence and the belief that they inhabited a subcultural space that was just for them.

On the cyber-separationist Internet, nerds felt a newfound sense of confidence and self-esteem, but the more the Internet became like the offline social world, the less possible it was for

gatekeeper nerds to maintain the feeling that they were superior to the attractive and popular people who had made them feel insecure in the offline world.

In this chapter, I argue that the gatekeeper nerd was a version of nerd masculinity spawned by white male nerds' belief that they were the ideal subject for the Internet, and that they were in control of Internet *culture*: it felt utopian, but only if you were a straight, white, cisgendered able-bodied man. I contend that nerds had been fantasizing about a space in American culture, where they could experience this feeling of exclusivity mixed with belonging, ever since the origination of the revenge of the nerds myth. However, as the cyber-separationist Internet that felt like an escape from the "real world" was replaced by social media platforms that focused on real world forms of validation (based on physical appearance, popularity, etc.) the nerds tried to resist, which began the patterns of nerd masculinity aggression that have developed into a full-on nerd culture war and backlash against marginalized people in the present day.

The Earliest Forms of Internet and White Male Ubiquity: How the Gatekeeper Nerd Got His Power

Every form of networked computer communication leading up to the World Wide Web was a thoroughly nerdy (and white and male) endeavor. The earliest Internet was actually called the ARPANET and was a product of the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the United States department of defense. Despite its military origins, the project was run by civilian scientists in ARPA and researchers at public research universities. The Internet as we know it today owes its existence to this early networking project which was used by less than 100 scientists when it was first connected in 1969, and Steve Crocker, who was a graduate student at UCLA recalls, "It was such a small community that we all got to know one another."⁷ This insular group was made up almost entirely of white men.⁸ This was a structural problem rather

than an intentional lack of diversity, but it has serious implications all the same, now that the internet is basically the virtual infrastructure of American life. The Internet was created for white male nerds in ways that made it comfortable and functional for them, because no one else was expected to have a reason or desire to use it. Unfortunately, as the userbase of the Internet has diversified, a lot of white male nerds have resisted and made the Internet unwelcoming for anyone other than themselves. Even as the Internet became available to more people, it was still not welcoming to anyone who was not considered the default user: tech-savvy white men.

In 1980 Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis at Duke University wanted a similar experience to the scientists who were privileged enough to have access to the ARPANET, so they created Usenet, which they called “the poor man’s ARPANET. Usenet connected three computers at Duke and the University of North Carolina and then expanded to universities and other computer-focused institutions all over the country.⁹ While this slightly democratized networked computing by making it available at a large number of American universities, it was still confined mainly to people at universities who had the inclination and ability to use it.

Meanwhile in the computer and electronics hobbyist community, an invention called the BBS or Bulletin Board System, created in 1978 by Ward Christensen and Randy Suess, two computer hobbyists in Chicago, allowed people to set up their computer as a server to which other computer users could connect via modem in order to leave messages for each other, upload and download files and a number of other functions. Essentially they were precursors to the message boards or forums that would be popular on the World Wide Web in the 90s and 2000s, and they democratized computer networking even more than Usenet. But Kevin Driscoll who wrote the definitive history of Bulletin Boards Systems explains that “The demographics of BBS users appears to have tracked with the broader adoption of personal computers in the United

States, skewing in favor of white men” and that “single white men were nearly twice as likely as other groups to report using bulletin boards.”¹⁰

The Eternal September: The Internet Was Not Just for Nerds Anymore

Not only were white men the overwhelming presence on these early computer networks, but the barriers to entry for getting online meant that nearly everyone on these early versions of the Internet was a nerd, in the sense that they were experienced and comfortable with computers. However, everything changed in September of 1993 from the nerds’ point of view. The first time the rules and norms of interaction became a major point of contention was a moment known in Internet folklore as “The Eternal September.” In order to historicize the Eternal September, we need to understand the context in which Usenet was typically accessed. It was largely computer savvy people who had access to Usenet, nearly all of whom were either college students or college graduates because access was mostly available on campus at universities that were connected to the network. Because the pool of Usenet users drew so heavily upon universities, September of each year was a time in which there was a large influx of new users who had to be acculturated or acclimated to the rules and norms, the “netiquette,” of Usenet. Because Usenet was an entirely text-based medium, all social training of new users had to be done in the form of rhetorical persuasion which, given the computer-based setting, tended to involve a certain geek-masculinity style of communication in which displays of technological savvy and intellectual one-upmanship were common.¹¹ Bringing the behavior of new users into accord with netiquette (a portmanteau of “Internet” or “network” and “etiquette”) tended to involve the tactics of flaming (teasing, insults) and trolling (baiting new users to respond in a way that would reveal their “newbie” status and make them feel as if they did not belong to the group).¹² These

were seen as gentle but firm, and necessary, pressures placed on new users each September, a mild hazing which everyone had to go through at first, and which kept Usenet communities (known as “newsgroups”) operating smoothly.

In September 1993 America Online and some other online services gave their users access to Usenet, and this was a pivotal moment in the history of Internet culture which summoned the gatekeeper nerd into being.¹³ That year, there was a flood of new users who lacked the Internet savvy of the early adopters and veteran Internet users worried that these newcomers would not be assimilable into the norms and customs of netiquette. The problem was that AOL, as an online service accessible to the mainstream public, had far more members than Usenet, and Usenet experienced an overwhelming flood of users who did not conduct themselves as Usenet veterans would have liked.¹⁴

AOL users had no prior experience with highly self-organized Internet communities like Usenet newsgroups which were governed by netiquette, which arose through collective decision-making in the community and then was codified by community leaders who wrote it up in documents called FAQs (“Frequently Asked Questions”). AOL users were used to experiences curated for them by America Online. Since they tended not to be university students who were introduced to Usenet by people who already understood what newsgroups were and how they worked, AOL users were considered to be disruptive to the normal functioning of Usenet. With the influx of inexperienced AOL users to Usenet, the power dynamic of elite users disciplining the “newbies” fell apart because knowledgeable users were now outnumbered by new users.¹⁵ Dave Fischer, a user of the computing newsgroup alt.folklore.computers coined the phrase “Eternal September,” in a post that said “September 1993 will go down in net.history as the September that never ended.”¹⁶ What he meant was that AOL had broken the cycle of

assimilation in which the influx of new users was controlled and organized by the academic calendar. With millions of AOL users gaining access to Usenet any time they wanted it, the structure in which Usenet “newbies” were exposed to rites of passage in an orderly way, on a set timetable was no longer possible.¹⁷

Looking back on the events of 1993, more than 20 years later, Dave Fischer who had originated the concept of the Eternal September was able to see the point of view he had shared with his fellow Usenet nerds as elitist gatekeeping. "When you're deeply immersed in an elitist clique," he said, "it often feels like you're in an open welcoming community. From your perspective, everything's great."¹⁸ While it does seem that many gatekeeper nerds grow out of their exclusionary attitude like Fischer did, each period of Internet history has a new generation of gatekeeper nerds, and the cycle continues.

The term “Eternal September” became a meme that established the idea that Internet culture had a history. It is a dividing line that reflects an elitism and a belief that the growth of Internet access to a more diverse userbase plunged the ‘culture’ of the Internet into a postlapsarian state, an attitude that virtually guarantees culture war and which still shows up when the experience of using the Internet changes or an online community sees a large influx of new users. The Eternal September meme creates a sense of “us. vs. them” and posits an earlier moment in the history of Internet culture, when the Internet supposedly belonged only to nerds and was a well-governed, and self-governed space (“the world's largest functioning Anarchism” as user Paul Callahan called it)¹⁹

One of the reasons many participants in Usenet communities were not sympathetic to new users’ difficulties may have been that they *liked* playing the role of rejector and gatekeeper. The Eternal September is a reverse version of the Revenge of the Nerds dynamic, because

instead of rising to the top of pre-existing hierarchies, in this case, the nerds created their own environments which other people wanted to join, and the nerds got to be gatekeepers. They were able to practice the same kind of rejection and judgment that they felt had been meted out to them in other domains, like the social environments of high schools and colleges. And just like the characters in the *Revenge of the Nerds* film, these elite Internet users were able to see their harmful behaviors through a lens of “meritocracy.”

The rhetoric used to defend the gatekeeping which Usenet veterans wanted to practice against newcomers was based in old American tropes of anti-immigrant and anti-black rhetoric which involved depicting white male users as the victims of encroaching outsiders who would damage their communities. When Usenet opened up to AOL users, a less elite and less technically-literate crowd, one user wrote “I must admit I get nervous when I hear the increasing news coverage of the Internet” because it might cause a “swarm of incoming tourists” who would destroy the “pristine tropical island” of the Internet by turning it into the equivalent of “a commercial wasteland of tacky hotels.”²⁰ This was a computer science graduate student at an elite university metaphorically comparing himself and his fellow Internet users to island natives whose home is given over to the desires of wealthy tourists. It’s troubling to see someone so easily and comfortably make this comparison between Internet early-adopters and people who are subject to neo-colonial practices, because it does not account for the radically different racial and economic implications of the two situations being compared. It makes a simple one-to-one comparison which disregards history, culture, and power. This is typical of American white masculinity: white American men tend to ignore historical context so that they can conceptualize something like affirmative action as unfair to white men rather than as an attempt to repair the impact of historical inequality. In the real-world versions of the scenario described, the islanders

are usually black or brown and the settlers or tourists are usually white. The tourists rich and the islanders poor. Therefore, as a metaphor applied to Usenet, it only makes sense if race is disregarded: a standard move of colorblind racism which is often practiced by white American men in order to preserve their privilege without acknowledging the fact that their actions cause further marginalization to disadvantaged groups.²¹

In response to charges of elitism, this person says “One need not be elitist to express concerns of being drowned by sheer numbers.”²² This discourse resembles anti-immigrant rhetoric in that the sense that people moving into a new place is described almost as a form of violence toward the people who already dwell there (“drowned,” “swarm”). Esther Dyson, a board member of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit organization that claimed to protect the rights of Internet users, said that the Internet “needs to be subdivided into smaller neighborhoods. There should be high-class neighborhoods. There should be places that parents feel are safe for their kids.”²³ This is another unsettling metaphor, because in America, such locations as “high-class neighborhoods” and “safe neighborhoods” are dog whistles which signify white exclusivity and wealth. Not to mention that the name of the Electronic *Frontier* Foundation evokes colonialist white settlements where the Other is not welcome and the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link, or WELL, one of the earliest online social communities, was “protected by a ‘gate’ that won’t open without a password or a credit card.”²⁴ So it was almost literally a gated community where money or connections are the ticket for entry. In an article introducing the World Wide Web to the general public, Phillip Elmer-Dewitt argues that the trend of people trying to “carve out safe, pleasant places to work, play and raise their kids” on the Internet will replicate the trend “that created the suburbs” in “real-life” offline America.²⁵ What he does *not* mention is that if his analogy were to hold true, and the Internet turned into the American

suburbs, this would make the Internet a white, middle to upper class enclave, which, predictably, turned out to be largely true for a long time.²⁶

Stepping Onto the Platform: Setting Up a Revenge of the Nerds on the World Wide Web

The world wide web was supposed to be utopian. That's what Americans were told in the 1990s.²⁷ Web access became available to the American public in 1993 and was much more accessible than its precursors Usenet and BBS.²⁸ In 1996, a cyberutopian activist named John Perry Barlow wrote a utopian manifesto called "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." The text is addressed to "Governments of the Industrial World . . . on behalf of the future"²⁹ and owes no small amount of its tone and content to Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changing"³⁰ when Barlow writes, "I ask you of the past to leave us alone" and "You are terrified of your own children, since they are natives in a world where you will always be immigrants."³¹ The text oscillates between the 2nd person, talking to the governments of "flesh and steel," and the first person plural, a "we" from "Cyberspace, the new home of Mind."³²

Barlow wrote the declaration in response to The Communications Decency Act in which the American congress sought to censor pornography on the Internet,³³ an act which he referred to as "hostile and colonial measures" by "distant, uninformed powers."³⁴ The odd thing is that Barlow frames this call for independence in a way that makes the same omissions as the original American Declaration of 1776. He speaks on behalf of a "we" which he never defines and on behalf of "the dreams of Jefferson, Washington, Mill, Madison, DeToqueville, and Brandeis."³⁵ A collection of dead white men who promulgated a liberty *for* white men made possible by the oppression of everyone else. Several of the men whom Barlow cites as exemplars of American liberty actually owned slaves. Once again, from a white male perspective, the Internet was a utopian site of freedom, and in his imagination, Barlow saw it being constructed based on the

principles of the American founding. And while it is true that Barlow tried to circumvent racial politics by writing, “our identities [in cyberspace] have no bodies”³⁶ and theoretically, those identities would not be subject to the kinds of inequalities that had been historically based in embodied identity, by failing to guarantee racial equality, gender equality, and other forms of identity-based equality, Barlow was imagining a model of liberty that would be constructed along the same lines as the original American Declaration of Independence, which had enshrined inequality in one of America’s founding documents by the exact same omission. In America, where the structures to reproduce inequality are already in place and running smoothly, to not address inequality for specific marginalized groups simply keeps the inequality machine running.³⁷

But Barlow was a powerful and influential member of the techno-utopian inner circle of the 90s. He even wrote the “Declaration” from the exclusive World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland where elites in the world of business and politics gather annually to discuss the fate of the world. What did the average nerd on-the-ground think about the World Wide Web and his place in it? For that, we turn to another manifesto: “Welcome to the Internet” by Robert “redpaw” Jung, a computer programmer who decided to lay down the law for the World Wide Web on the website he shared with several friends.

While this chapter has thus far been concerned with the kind of abstract white masculinity that is the presumed default whenever personhood is discussed in American or Western cultures without reference to race or gender,³⁸ Jung’s text represents a moment where white, male nerd masculinity is being *performed* textually instead of just implied, which means the case studies of white nerd masculinity will start to take on more detail and texture as the chapter progresses.

It should also be noted that I don't mean to single out particular participants in the discourse of Internet culture even though I will inevitably analyze particular texts with particular authors. For the most part, the critiques in which I engage are critiques of the discourse in which these individual texts participate more than critiques of the individuals writing the texts. In other words, we don't know if the authors of these texts would still endorse their original words, and since there is no canon of the most significant Internet texts, I must select texts that are representative of larger trends in online discourses of nerd masculinity. My goal is to subject to critique those discursive patterns for the inequalities they create and the harm they cause. I think this caveat is important because of the heavy emphasis I am about to place on a text by an author (Robert Jung) who is not a public figure. I've chosen the text because it is preserved from the year 2000 and most of the Internet content of the early 2000s has been lost, because the websites that housed it no longer exist or are not maintained. It's become a cultural commonplace that nothing on the Internet ever goes away, but anyone who researches the Internet can confirm that this is untrue. Furthermore, Jung gives voice to attitudes that were prevalent among his demographic of young white men online during the time in which he was writing.

Jung's manifesto "Welcome to the Internet" has the effects of the Eternal September written all over it. It is aggressive from the beginning in a way that feels like a pre-emptive strike and seems like a reaction to several years worth of dealing with new people coming online and not knowing netiquette. It reads like a disgruntled IT guy turned high school bully, which brings me to an important point about this text. It represents a moment in the unfolding history of Internet culture in which the Internet was no longer being used only by white men with a "nerdy" background and personality, but had also not yet been adapted by social media platforms to be fully user-friendly for non-nerds.³⁹ This meant that instead of being elitist toward an abstract and

absent Other, as nerdy men had been for most of the history of Usenet and BBS, nerds now had the opportunity to actually direct their elitism *toward* other people, and Jung sure did seem to relish that opportunity.

Released in 2000, the title of Jung's text, "Welcome to the Internet," clearly indicated an expectation that a lot of new people would be coming online in the 21st century and would be in need of an orientation to this new digital world. Jung decided to be stern, and offer an introduction to the Internet that used "tough love" to discipline the willing and drive away those who refused to follow the pre-established norms of online communities as Jung understood them. This was a kind of "older brother" masculinity, in which someone with more experience is explaining the Internet to you, but makes no promises to be patient and mocks you if you are not quick to learn the social norms established by him and his friends. This will be a common feature of online communities throughout the rest of this chapter.

Jung leans hard into the exclusionary aspect of gatekeeper nerd masculinity from the beginning of his text. His first sentence is placed in its own paragraph as though intended to give it special emphasis. "No one here likes you" It says.⁴⁰

The people who were already online in the 90s would have been the nerds who were early adopters and tech savvy and they had already established a culture for the Internet, as far as Jung was concerned, and they did not want ignorant new people disturbing their carefully crafted ecosystem in which the nerds had actually gotten to make the social rules. Therefore, Jung enumerated the practices, norms and standards which "noobs" (new Internet users) would be expected to follow. The way in which Jung explained the norms of the Internet, as he saw them, suggested he had already decided that ninety-nine percent of the people who were new to the Internet in 2000 would not fit in with the expectations of experienced 'net users and would need

to be mocked, harassed, and driven away. In an attempt to scare off anyone who wasn't tough enough and wasn't already part of the nerd masculinity clique, Jung explained that the experienced Internet users, the "nerds" and "geeks" to use Jung's own words ("we already know exactly what we are"), would "offend, insult, abuse, and belittle the living hell" out of any new Internet user.⁴¹ This would be the default greeting which nerds would direct toward new people who were assumed not to be nerds and were just getting started online.

Even though he could have used the anonymity afforded by the Internet to fake being a conventionally hypermasculine man, Jung so embraces the revenge of the nerds pop culture myth that he excitedly depicts himself as a nerd who is able to turn the tables on those who may have bullied him in the past. He portrays himself as a nerd who is able to leverage his nerdiness to defeat others in rhetorical combat. He imagines that the entire Internet is full of nerds like him who will prevail in textual conflicts with people who would have been considered more masculine than the nerds in any offline space. He imagines a dismayed man saying to a community of nerds online "I used to beat the crap out of punks like you in high school/college!" and then the author, Robert Jung, replies to his imagined interlocutor by explaining how the tables have turned and the nerds were atop the online social hierarchy: "You may have owned the playing field because you were an athlete. You may have owned the student council because you were more popular. You may have owned the hallways and sidewalks because you were big and intimidating. Well, welcome to our world." Jung's text demonstrates the ways in which the indignities of high school weighed heavily upon a lot of nerds, and structured the way they thought about themselves and others. This was likely a response to adolescent trauma that was being refashioned as masculine toughness by being run through a filter of resentment and revenge.

Unlike John Perry Barlow, who wrote from the point of view of a vague abstraction (“we”) to another abstraction (“the government”),⁴² Jung made his message and its target audience clear when he wrote “welcome to our world” in which “Things like athleticism, popularity, and physical prowess mean nothing.” When he wrote “our world,” it was clear that the “we” being described was nerds, and the “you” being addressed was jocks or “the popular kids” from high school and college, and their adult counterparts.⁴³ Jung granted online power to the nerds by writing “those who wish to rule, learn.”⁴⁴ In other words, people used their intellect and learning ability to acquire power and influence online, and these were traits nerds were assumed to have and the people who had been mean to nerds were assumed *not* to have.

The text was circulated as a manifesto about the ethos of the Internet practiced by hardcore users toward those who were new to the Internet or were more casual in their Internet use. For example, the administrator of a web forum dedicated to the cult classic Dreamcast video game *Shenmue* writes,⁴⁵ that if users “don’t like how ‘strict’ and whatnot my forum [r]ules are, possibly because this is the first forum they ever visited, here’s a nice little read”⁴⁶ and he posts a link to Jung’s “Welcome to the Internet.” Daemos, the forum administrator, explains that the message of “Welcome to the Internet” “goes out specially for n00bs” but clarifies that he is *not* referring to “newbs, which are a good thing).” In other words, Daemos appreciates new users coming into his forums, but the distinction between “newbs” and “n00bs” is that n00bs are people who “lack manners in online mediums.”⁴⁷

Daemos’ claim that Jung’s inflammatory statement could be intended to address something as mild as “people who lack manners”⁴⁸ is revealing of a tolerance of abusive communication as a way of disciplining people who don’t behave exactly the way that pre-existing Internet communities wanted them to. Even those who did not participate in this

aggressive rhetoric passively accepted it in a way that created a chilling effect. For example, when it comes to women's participation in androcentric online cultures, Megan Condis argues that "it is the widespread acceptance of [harassment and] trolling by the Internet at large that acts as the most effective deterrent" to the participation of women and other marginalized groups.⁴⁹

Resisting the Normalization of the Web: The Cultural Politics of Gatekeeper Nerds

The social environment favored by men like Robert Jung and the people who circulated his text was fragile. It was dependent on the limitations of the Internet and the affordances which those limitations allowed to men of a nerdy background and disposition. For example, it had its origins in a text-based anonymous Internet where nerds could construct their masculinity through discourse and rhetoric in ways that made them feel closer to a fantasy of hegemonic masculinity. However, even though the cyberutopians like John Perry Barlow liked to celebrate the virtuality of the Internet and its differences from the "real world," ever since the advent of the World Wide Web when people began to see commercial possibilities in the Internet, it was always tending toward further integration with the "real world." For example, from the second half of the 1990s up until 2002, the Internet experienced what was called the dot-com boom in which online commerce companies were springing up constantly to sell people goods and services through the Internet. While the boom ended in a bust, and most of those companies weren't successful, their existence makes it clear that there was a widespread public opinion that the Internet and real world should be blended together. E-commerce was one of the clearest indicators that the virtuality of the Internet should meet with the materiality of the "real world."⁵⁰ When the dot com boom ended, web 2.0 took its place at the center of conversations about the future of the Internet. Web 2.0 represented the idea of participatory culture online in which amateurs would create the majority of online media content.⁵¹ Web 2.0 can be represented by the 2000s

popularity of blogs and the naming of “You” as *Time* magazine’s person of the year in 2006, and then later by the ever-increasing ubiquity of social media.⁵²

The proliferation of social media eroded the boundary between “real life” and the Internet “Gradually and then suddenly” to borrow a phrase from Ernest Hemingway.⁵³ Meanwhile, gatekeeper nerds were trying to keep cyberspace separationism alive. They had a sort of reactionary counter-movement against the practices of mainstream social media. Their counter-practices against the erosion of the line between online and offline life were enforcement of anonymity, mockery of anyone who took the Internet too seriously and treated it like “real life” or like it impacted the “real world” (which, of course, it did), and the adoption of personas and irony that prevented anyone from seeing their real selves or expecting them to be serious. In other words, their actions attempted to preserve, the “ambivalence”⁵⁴ of the Internet and a state of “digital boyhood” for themselves, a space of “escape, fantasy, extension, and utopia, a space away from feminism, class imperatives, familial duties, as well as national and political responsibilities.”⁵⁵

**You Are Not Here, And You Need to Get Out: The Gendered Enforcement of Anonymity
by Gatekeeper Nerds**

In the same way that nerdy men were able to feel like the only users of the Internet by virtue of an abstract description of online personhood which assumed they were the only people online, women; people of color; and queer people were *excluded* by the same type of abstraction. Two very popular and foundational memes in the vernacular cultures of influential internet communities perpetuated this exclusion toward women: “There Are No Girls on the Internet” and “Tits or GTFO.”

Memes have often been called the “building blocks of digital culture”⁵⁶ and, therefore, targeted memes intended to make the Internet a hostile and unwelcoming place to a certain person or group can be very powerful and damaging. Meme culture was often a way for men to build power in groups by influencing everyone’s experience of the Internet on a very basic level.

In the 2000s the Internet was widely presented as a space that belonged to adolescent boys and men in their 20s. One meme image circulating on message boards in this era laid out a description of the assumed primary online demographic like this: “YOU ARE: = male = Age 15-25 = Straight = Grew up somewhere in the middle class playing tons of video games = Above-average intelligence but an underachiever = Racist to some degree = Non-Religious.”⁵⁷ When paired with “There Are No Girls on the Internet” This meme provides a clear understanding of the fact that a lot of boys and young men thought the Internet was just for them and were basically *allowed* to believe that. As Ryan Milner writes,

I was one of the legion of pop-culture obsessed geeky gamer kids who set the barbed, absurdist, ironic tone on sites like Something Awful, 4chan, and eventually Reddit . . . I never even questioned whether the buzzing collectives on my screen were comprised of people like me. Why wouldn’t they be? I was a suburban American white dude, and so until I heard otherwise I got to assume everybody was like me.⁵⁸

The phrase “There are No Girls on the Internet” originated as a half-joking warning about the possibility that anyone claiming to be a woman in the text-based anonymous world of the early Internet might actually be a man. The phrase was a commentary on the fact that due to the anonymity of the early Internet, you never knew who you were talking to and anyone could take on any identity they chose. A popular New Yorker cartoon illustrated this idea without using

gender. It showed two dogs using a computer while one told the other “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”⁵⁹ There were also many popular images that showed someone talking online to someone they believed to be female only to show in another image that the person actually presented as male. Of course, there also was a stereotype that the Internet was almost exclusively populated by men, that it was a “sausage fest,” to quote the article about this meme from the online wiki encyclopedia *Know Your Meme*.⁶⁰

An infamous anonymous post on the website 4chan ties “There Are No Girls on the Internet” and “Tits or GTFO” together, and argues that the phrase “There Are No Girls on the Internet” means that, in online communities, “the advantage of being a girl does not exist.”⁶¹ The user defines that advantage as the idea that people “pay attention to you and . . . pretend what you have to say is interesting” if you are a woman because they want to have sex with you. The writer of this post is claiming that because sex is not possible with someone you interact with on the Internet the way it might be in real life, no one will flatter women merely as a ploy to get sex. They argue that anyone revealing their gender as female in anonymous online spaces like 4chan is only doing this because they are “begging for attention [and] . . . want [their] girl-advantage back.”⁶² The post’s author finally explains that there is “one way you can get your ‘girlness’ back on the Internet [which] is to post your tits,” and they explain that this rule or social norm is intentionally “degrading” because it is “an admission that the only interesting thing about you is your naked body.” They summarize this rule with the phrase “tits or GET THE FUCK OUT.”⁶³ Lest this should seem like an idiosyncratic idea dreamt up by a particularly misogynist 4chan user, it should be noted that “tits or Get the Fuck Out” otherwise known as “Tits or GTFO” was a community norm of 4chan, especially the subsection of the site called “/b/” to such an extent that it was included on another anonymous post that became even more infamous within 4chan

culture, and even in the broader online culture, called “The Rules of the Internet.”⁶⁴ While it must be acknowledged that these are not “rules” of the site in any official sense, such that they were enforced by the administrators, the phrase “Tits or GTFO” was regularly deployed against women who posted in 4chan threads and made mention of their gender.⁶⁵ Defenders of the phrase sometimes claimed that it was a way of promoting equality, by creating genderblind communities online, but critics explained that “‘There are no girls on the internet’ is a cheap way of wrapping sexism in the appearance of fairness.”⁶⁶

Tits or GTFO was a practice of disciplinary surveillance over the female body against any woman who dared to show herself, trying to punish the woman by demanding more than she wants to show. Any time someone entered a thread on 4chan and identified herself as a femanon, or female 4chan user, other participants in the thread would begin spamming (rapidly posting) the phrase “Tits or GTFO” which is an acronym meaning “Tits or Get The Fuck Out,” in other words, users demanded that the woman share an image of her breasts (and provide some kind of evidence to verify her identity) or else leave the thread. Because 4chan is anonymous, the woman would not really need to leave the thread. She could continue posting without again raising the subject of her gender identity and she would be left alone, because no one would know she was female. This was a way of preserving what white male forum users saw as an enforced equality that was unique to anonymous spaces on the Internet. On 4chan, no one knew your name, gender, race, or any other identifying features, so, theoretically, everyone would be treated in a way that reflected the merits of their contribution to the community. However, like colorblind racism, this logic was an instance of inequality masquerading as equality, because by keeping everyone unidentified, the culture of 4chan enforced the assumption that everyone on the 4chan imageboards was a straight, white male because that is the assumed default identity

within cultures like America whose dominant ideology is based on liberal, universalized individualism. The kind of flimsy logic that supported the claim that Tits or GTFO was egalitarian became especially prevalent when the gatekeeper nerd's power to gatekeep was slipping. They saw themselves as standing in defense against the vanity which social media was bringing to the Internet, which they associated with women,⁶⁷ and they tried to police the territory they wanted to claim as exclusively theirs by using an argument that didn't hold up to the slightest scrutiny.

You Can't Be Serious: Mockery, Cynicism and Digital Boyhood on the Deep Vernacular Web

The gatekeeper nerds wanted to preserve the affordances of cyberspace separationism,⁶⁸ the situation in which the Internet felt separate from "real life" and was governed by an attitude of play, also referred to as "digital boyhood,": "a safe haven from the social contract" which allows them to "return to a pre rule-bound space"⁶⁹ They created a sort of parallel culture alongside the mainstream Internet called the deep vernacular web which exists "in comments spaces, discussion forums, and other minimally governed regions at 'the bottom of the Web.'"⁷⁰

Early in the transition between the dot-com boom and web 2.0, these spaces were more central, they were hubs in a much more *decentralized* Internet. People were still going to a wide variety of websites instead of experiencing the Internet through a small handful of apps like they tend to do now with Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok and Twitter. Important vernacular culture sites for nerd creativity, like Newgrounds and Something Awful, started in the late 1990s and still exist, though they are nowhere near as popular as they once were.⁷¹ Something Awful spawned the online imageboard called 4chan, which spawned a lot of the most popular and influential memes in 2000s and early 2010s Internet culture,⁷² but these subcultures rapidly came

into tension with the rise of social media, which was based on a different set of values and offered very different affordances for building masculinity personas which were basically an accelerated version of the values of masculinity in the offline American culture.

In the 2000s and 2010s, The subcultures of deep vernacular web sites like 4chan and Something Awful were feeling the ground of Internet culture shifting beneath their feet, even as they were the “meme factory” supplying the Internet with the building blocks of its culture, as Christopher Poole, 4chan’s founder said in 2009.⁷³ They’d had a brief moment in which they were able to live out the revenge of the nerds fantasy represented in Jung’s “Welcome to the Internet,” because they were driving so much of the discourse of Internet culture, and basically got to be the ones to define the vernacular culture of the Internet.

However, events like the growth of social media profiles which were tied to one’s real life identity, and smartphones which brought the Internet deeply into everyday life, made the differences between the Internet and the “real world,” cyberspace separationism, start to disappear. One deep vernacular web apologist who goes by Glink on YouTube claims that with the iPhone, “Apple Started a Dark Age of the Internet.”⁷⁴ The word which consistently comes up in the comments on Glink’s videos, where people wax poetic about their Internet nostalgia, is “escape.” For example, “I miss the time when the internet was like a whole different world. The time when it had [its] own culture, [its] own people, [its] own humor, and when it was an escape.”⁷⁵ In other words, when it was a space for digital boyhood, an escape from the “real world.

Gatekeeper nerds engaged in the gatekeeping process of trying to maintain the separationist boundary between “real life” and the Internet as much as they could. They resisted the erosion of the boundary between the two in a way that was *deeply* grounded in the playful

and irresponsible mode of digital boyhood. They figured that the real world was serious, a space of “feminism, class imperatives, familial duties, as well as national and political responsibilities,” so their strategy to keep the real world separate from the Internet was to *refuse* to take the Internet seriously.⁷⁶ This attitude was especially manifested in Something Awful’s slogan, “The Internet Makes You Stupid” which served as a header on the website to remind users of that “fact” each time they visited, and also 4chan’s ironic refrain, “The Internet Is Serious Business,” which they repeated whenever someone appeared to be taking the Internet too seriously.⁷⁷ Whitney Phillips often attributes this phrase to being used by Internet trolls who would likely be using the phrase to rationalize their harassment of other people by claiming that the stakes of their actions are low, but I’m more interested in the implications the phrase has for the average gatekeeper nerd who is not necessarily trolling people, but is, in fact, afraid of seeing the Internet actually *become* serious business.⁷⁸

While “There Are No Girls on The Internet” and “Tits or GTFO” and concepts like “fake geek girls,” as well as the acceptance of trolling, were ways of alienating people who were considered outsiders or Others in the deep vernacular web spaces, the gatekeeper nerds also policed the behaviors of *insiders* in deep vernacular web spaces.⁷⁹ Two quick case studies will show how one of the communities of the deep vernacular web policed people who threatened the gatekeeper nerd’s revenge of the nerds fantasy and his performance of aggressive Internet masculinity.

The first internal conflict on the deep vernacular web around the discourse of cyber-separationism that I will examine as a case-study is a discussion thread on the Something Awful forums called “Hi I’m Neil and I’m an internet celebrity :)” from 2008.⁸⁰ This thread was part of a tradition on the Something Awful forums known as a “helldump,” and is notable because the

community was trying to discipline Neil Cicierega for violating the rules of cyber-separationism, but he went on to become a popular artist with a cult following on the Internet. In other words, this was a case of gatekeeper nerds resisting the inevitable shift from an anonymous Internet based on digital boyhood to an Internet that was an extension of the offline world, in which one's real-world identity was important to one's status online.

Helldump 2000 was the name of the subforum in which other Something Awful users tried to shame and discipline Neil Cicierega for breaking with cyber-separationism. The user-created Something Awful Encyclopedia (SAclopedia) explains that this subforum was created by Something Awful founder Rich Kyanka in 2007, so that people could “let out [their] inner nerd aggression on fellow posters and threads.”⁸¹ It was a sort of public stockade in which to humiliate as well as “profile and insult” any forum member whom a lot of people disliked, in an attempt to “force [them] into online anonymity and / or reclusiveness.”⁸² As such, this Helldump thread makes for a good case study of the discourses of cyber-separationism which gatekeeper nerds sought to uphold for the sake of their performance of masculinity, which relied on anonymity and on not taking the Internet too seriously. Cicierega was seen to have violated those principles by trying to build a brand and identity for himself as an artist on the Internet.

Neil Cicierega actually shows up in the thread and responds satirically to his detractors by poking fun at himself, and they mostly take him seriously and miss the joke, so ultimately, he comes out of the interaction making everyone else look silly. What's important about the conversation is what it reveals about the gatekeeper nerds trying to preserve the integrity and affordances of the deep vernacular web. The participants in the helldump were trying to resist the idea that Internet fame had any legitimacy because it threatened the “digital boyhood” fantasy of an Internet that was an *escape* from your real identity, where things nerds struggled with, like

popularity, didn't matter. Instead of the aggressive, cynical nerd masculinity that prevailed in the deep vernacular web, Neil was building a brand for himself as a wholesome, fun and friendly nerdy man, and they found that threatening to their values.

It may seem odd that a group of people who expended so much time and energy on an Internet forum would mock someone for caring too much about the Internet,⁸³ but according to cyber-separationist discourse you were supposed to use the Internet *without* caring, because that was what made it a fantasy space of play, where you could act out your masculine aggressions against others without real consequence and didn't have to worry about things like popularity or likeability that you might have struggled with in real life. Thus one user criticizes Cicierega because his “entire life is by[,] for and about the internet,”⁸⁴ and another criticizes him for “think[ing] meeting the guy who invented [the popular meme] LOLcats is like having an audience with the pope”⁸⁵ and mocks his “desperate cries for attention [from] the internet.”⁸⁶ These critiques were tenuous even in 2008, as social media was ramping up and becoming more ubiquitous in our lives, but they seem downright absurd in the 2020s when so-called “Internet fame” is the only kind of fame young people seem to care about, if they even make any distinction between that and any other kind of fame.

In perhaps the most harsh critique, a Something Awful user asks Cicierega, “does it bother you as an artist . . . that you'll outlive your cultural contribution by over an order of magnitude?” The user went on to say that Cicierega was guilty of “defining [him]self through the most insubstantial of trends.”⁸⁷ However, what Cicierega's career ultimately shows is that the discourse of cyber-separationism upheld by the gatekeeper nerds was bound to fail. They thought that Neil Cicierega was deluded about seeking to make a name for himself on such insubstantial and transitory places like Internet platforms. But *now*, people make statements like the following,

culled from comments on Cicierega's videos: "Neil Cicierega is the grandfather of meme culture"⁸⁸ And even more effusively: "Neil Cicierega is at the absolute CORE of the internet. He's like the heart of this entire operation. It's kind of incredible how much reach a single person has, even if you don't realize they're the one behind the scenes."⁸⁹

Cicierega's trajectory shows that a revenge of the nerds based on the Internet as a separate space where the nerds made the rules was unsustainable. Gatekeeper nerds wanted to freeze time and maintain the anonymous Internet in the deep vernacular web's supposed "golden age," which we can see by examining the vast discourses of Internet nostalgia. The gatekeeper nerds were losing the feeling of nerd empowerment that the World Wide Web had afforded them in its earlier days (as expressed by Robert Jung in "Welcome to the Internet").

Two final case studies will show how the gatekeeper nerd masculinity of the deep vernacular web was based on contradictory elements which made it unworkable and destined to be condemned to the margins of Internet culture on "the bottom of the web" in spite of the pretensions of its users to be a driving force of Internet culture.⁹⁰ Jon Hendren and iDubbbz both found themselves alienated from the values of the deep vernacular web when they were attacked for exposing the contradictions between the deep vernacular web's "digital boyhood" and the offline understanding of American hegemonic masculinity.

Jon Hendren's bona fides as a deep vernacular web contributor were very solid. He was known for being "one of the strongest advocates for FYAD during his time as [an] admin[istrator]."⁹¹ FYAD stood for Fuck You And Die and was one of the most controversial spaces on the deep vernacular web but was also revered by most deep vernacular web participants as a creative wellspring of deep vernacular web content and a major example of gatekeeper nerd masculinity. The entire site of Something Awful was known for being

intimidating because of rules which required each user to be interesting and funny, or else be banned from posting on a temporary or permanent basis, but when it came to the enforcement of those rules, FYAD was the most stringent of all: the ultimate gatekeeper nerds.⁹²

However, Hendren eventually found himself on the wrong side of FYAD's aggressive mockery. Hendren (known as DocEvil on the forums) was mocked, emasculated and body-shamed through 101 pages worth of comments when a silly and harmless prank he played backfired and left him looking socially awkward and lacking in self-confidence.⁹³

Hendren decided to tweet at Steve Harwell, lead singer of the band Smash Mouth, asking him to eat 24 eggs in a row on camera for \$20.⁹⁴ It was an absurdist joke, but then the influence of the Something Awful community made itself felt beyond the borders of the forums, when hundreds of people started tweeting at, calling, and emailing Steve Harwell pledging to donate money to charity on Harwell's behalf.⁹⁵ Harwell challenged the people who were incessantly contacting him, saying that if they could raise \$10,000 for St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital he would eat the eggs. The money was raised and a rather bizarre event took place in San Jose, California in which celebrity chef Guy Fieri cooked two dozen eggs and Steve Harwell did his best to eat them.⁹⁶ Unfortunately for Hendren, there was video footage of the event in which he was called on stage where he clearly felt shy and uncomfortable, and the Something Awful users mercilessly mocked him for appearing too nerdy and not masculine enough in public. The gatekeeper nerd's masculinity was based the affordances of the early Internet, like anonymity and being able to perform masculinity exclusively through text. Hendren's prank gave up those affordances. A FYAD user said "he pranked himself. [He flew] too close to [the] sun."⁹⁷

The gatekeeper nerd was supposed to appear smugly superior to others in line with the tone Robert Jung affected in “Welcome to the Internet,” but one FYAD user accused Hendren of acting “like a tight lipped effete milky baby pouting around on his cell phone the whole time which ruined the ironic air of superiority that was supposed to make it funny.”⁹⁸ Because of this, Hendren was judged by his peers to have failed in the performance of masculinity and was socially sanctioned in what C.J. Pascoe calls “repudiatory rituals”⁹⁹ in which “the specter of failed masculinity”¹⁰⁰ is warded off by his peers in this deep vernacular web community. Pascoe developed these ideas in a study of masculinity in an American high school, and the style of rhetoric and humor that prevailed on FYAD was tinged the with aesthetic style and the values of high school masculinity. According to Pascoe, the homophobic and emasculating mockery directed at Hendren by his FYAD peers was a “discourse with which boys discipline themselves and each other through joking relationships” which was “central to the formation of a gendered identity for boys.”¹⁰¹ These slurs tended to be applied to any boy or young man who showed signs of “failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength or in any way reveal[ed] weakness or femininity.”¹⁰²

One FYAD user states that, “out of all the gay things he did w/ smash mouth the gayest thing he did was never post in this thread”¹⁰³ which is essentially equating gayness with the supposed lack of confidence Hendren displayed by not facing down and challenging those who were mocking him, either by poking fun at himself or by mocking them back. Confidence is a trait highly associated with masculinity in the popular imagination and in this case, “gay” is being used to signify “not masculine” as it so often was on the Internet in the 2000s and early 2010s. Someone extends this insult by saying he acted like a “faggot” and should have stood with a “confident posture instead of slouching like a homo.”¹⁰⁴ “A boy could get called a fag for

exhibiting any sort of behavior defined as unmasculine” in the high school which C. J. Pascoe studied.¹⁰⁵

However, while the gatekeeper nerds of FYAD interpreted the situation in which Jon Hendren found himself in a cruel and insulting way, the rest of the Internet saw the whole situation as a silly and positive event. It was fun and amusing and it attracted a crowd and raised tens of thousands of dollars that were donated to St Jude’s children’s hospital and Hendren got to write a cool article on *Vice* about it, which the editors said made him “our favorite new columnist.”¹⁰⁶ He was driven away from Something Awful, but he became very popular for his jokes on Twitter, a site/app which wound up being a lot more influential than Something Awful in the long run. While it was influential for a while, the cyber-separationist discourse was bound to become marginal within the attention-economy of the Internet, because within that discourse, *memes* receiving attention was considered good, but individual people receiving attention was considered bad, and this attitude inevitably fell out of favor as social media continued to grow. What’s more, Hendren’s performance showed that the men who were engaging in the high school level humor of FYAD and “Smash Mouth Eat the Eggs” were not grinning trickster figures who had an air of superiority about them, they were awkward young men.

There was actually one man online who managed to take the style of gatekeeper nerd masculinity and practice it even after the affordances of the deep vernacular web like anonymity and a text based Internet, were all but gone. This man showed his face and did not use a pseudonym, but did not fully hide his name.¹⁰⁷ While iDubbbz was able to zero in on other YouTubers’ exact vulnerabilities to make his attack, he guarded his own personal information assiduously which made it hard for people to retaliate against him. This was presumably something he learned from the deep vernacular web, where any vulnerability will be used for an

attack, like we saw with Neil Cicierega and Jon Hendren. He called his reticence about his personal life a strategy for “being online” based on not giving people ammunition to “chat shit back” to him.¹⁰⁸ In a climate where YouTubers tried to create what many perceived as phony intimacy with their viewers, iDubbz took the hegemonically masculine approach of keeping his private life to himself, which made him seem rebellious against the sentimentality of the faux intimacy on which YouTube depends. Instead of relying on the medium of text to deliver his message while concealing his slight, less-than-intimidating physical frame, he made videos in which he performed for the camera. He is known on YouTube as iDubbz, and he managed to practice a deep vernacular web form of gatekeeper nerd masculinity on the mainstream platform of YouTube, after the heyday of the deep vernacular web was arguably over.

As a straight white, able-bodied cisgender man who used every slur imaginable on camera without experiencing social repercussions, iDubbz somehow managed to harness the affordances of online anonymity without even being fully anonymous. He did so through irony and the adoption of a nerd masculinity persona that had been made possible by the discourses of the deep vernacular web which had preceded iDubbz’s entry onto the scene of YouTube. He basically took the style, attitude and rhetoric of the anonymous 4chan shit poster and acted it out in front of his camera. Like Donald Trump with the *Access Hollywood* tape in which he bragged about sexual assault without losing his chance to be president, iDubbz was able to leverage the privilege of whiteness and masculinity, simply by not apologizing for the harmful things he said and did.¹⁰⁹

iDubbz made his name on YouTube with a series of videos called Content Cop in which he would choose a YouTuber whose videos he considered subpar (usually someone who was also disliked by a large segment of YouTube viewers) and would critique their work in an

extremely performative way involving skits, costumes and other multimodal approaches. He drew on the power and aggression inherent in American policing in order to frame himself as an authority who policed the quality of YouTube content. In his first Content Cop video, he says, “I’m the Content Cop. I’m here to make sure everyone’s content is up to par, and if not, I’ll bring them to justice.”¹¹⁰ Using policing as a metaphor, iDubbbz claims the authority to limit the behavior of others and engage in violence sanctioned by a larger body like the state, though in this case, instead of the state, it’s the YouTube commentary community. Every American community has a police force and iDubbbz was the self-appointed police force of the community of YouTube. Since iDubbbz did not actually have the authority to enforce punishment on violators of his standards for YouTube, he had to criticize them in a way intended to make people lose respect for them and make them do the worst thing you can do to a YouTuber: unsubscribe.

In his first Content Cop video, iDubbbz called a black man the N-word. He did not use the “hard r,” which is generally accepted to be the more racist version because it was the version used by slave owners and other racist white people throughout American history. He used the version of the word that many black Americans use amongst themselves which ends with an “a,” but because he was not black himself, to presume the right to use the word is symbolic of a belief that his white privilege would prevent him from having to answer for that offense. He later used the “hard r” in other videos, always with a rationalization, saying that he was quoting someone else or he was saying it to make a point about offensive language. His major case for being able to say whatever he wants, which he called, “a phrase that most logical people can get behind”: “It’s either all okay, or none of it’s okay,” that “no words are off limits” and “black people . . . choose to get offended by [anti-]black slurs.”¹¹¹ He is listing subject positions from which people

might take offense at certain language and says “Black people can choose to get offended by black slurs, Asian people can choose to get offended by Asian slurs, [and] white people can choose to get offended by black slurs.” The unexpected twist at the end of his statement, in which it is implied (correctly) that there are no slurs against white Americans which have the same historical implications or social potential to do harm, reveals the privileged position from which iDubbbz was speaking while he was gatekeeping the right of people to feel wronged by language used against them. He even tried to cloak his transgressions in terms of “logic” as gatekeeper nerds were so often wont to do. This dodging of responsibility reflects what Jane Hill calls the “everyday language of white racism” in which the person using racist language does believe they are racist, so their *language* cannot be racist either. It would only “be racist in the mouth of a racist person” and if you are offended or see the language as racist, then you “lack a sense of humor.”¹¹² Like the Internet trolls with whom they often shared so many attributes, gatekeeper nerds “frame themselves as sole authority over what their words mean” and blame the victim of their “humor” for being harmed by it.¹¹³ In fact, fifteen years earlier, in the text I’ve taken as a representative example of early gatekeeper nerd discourse, Robert Jung was already writing that if you were offended by his words, “it’s the TRUTH, not these words, that hurts your feelings. Don’t ever even pretend like I’ve gone and hurt them.”¹¹⁴ While gatekeeper nerds like iDubbbz could harm other people with language, they were mostly immune to any form of retaliation that used the medium of words, which shows how their whiteness, masculinity, and other privileged positions gave them the power which they used to harrass, insult and abuse other people online. iDubbbz gleefully shows comments on his videos and in fanmail he received in which viewers call him slurs that are typically used against black people, gay people, and people with mental disabilities.¹¹⁵

While gatekeeper nerds used their whiteness and masculinity against people whom they saw as Other online, they also established their masculine credibility by policing the behavior of other white male gatekeeper nerds to be more in line with hegemonic masculinity. iDubbbz's most famous and beloved Content Cop video was his takedown of a notorious YouTube bully named leafyishere who was known for mocking children and neurodivergent people. iDubbbz symbolically ousted leafyishere from the community. Many observers believe that iDubbbz ended the viability of leafy's career on YouTube by damaging his credibility with his fans. Even if iDubbbz did not literally end his career, he made the decisive critical statement that leafy was no longer welcome in the YouTube "community" with his video called "Content Cop – Leafy."

iDubbbz opens the video with a disclaimer, saying, "I want to let all the newcomers to my channel know that I'm perfectly fine with bullying."¹¹⁶ Bullying is a way of exploiting the vulnerabilities of others to place oneself above them in a social hierarchy, and the premise of iDubbbz's video is that leafy is a bully who commits the cardinal sin of having open vulnerabilities for which he too can be bullied. The problem with this logic is that it suggests that if leafy were not vulnerable himself, his bullying of vulnerable people would be OK. iDubbbz actually confirms this moments later. He says, "my only stipulation with bullying is that you also have to not be a pussy."¹¹⁷ Using the term "pussy" is a strategy among young men to emasculate each other by associating the other man with femininity, since in this case, the "pussy" or vagina is serving as a synecdoche for woman, and by calling a man a woman in a patriarchal society like America, you are suggesting they should be disqualified from the powers and privileges afforded to masculinity. This recalls masculinities scholar C.J. Pascoe's claim that "for boys, achieving a masculine identity entails the repeated repudiation of the specter of failed masculinity,"¹¹⁸

because if a bully is not seen as superior to those whom he bullies “That takes a lot of oomph out of your bullying”¹¹⁹ according to iDubbbz.

iDubbbz presented a form of hegemonic masculinity to his fans whether he intended to or not. It was perhaps not the most typical form of hegemonic masculinity, but it was a hegemonic masculinity for the Internet, in which one did not have to be physically strong, but rather had to display strength and dominance using the rhetorical tools of Internet trolling: a keyboard warrior masculinity. iDubbbz was part of a cultural wave online that Angela Nagle describes as characterized by “the aesthetics of counterculture, transgression, and nonconformity”¹²⁰ which “hides itself from interpretation through a postmodern tonal distance.”¹²¹ He was not really all that different from leafyishere in this way, which really kind of undermines his ability to critique someone like leafy in the long run. iDubbbz built his masculinity from the sense of invulnerability he acquired by getting away with saying and doing outrageous things on camera without getting “canceled” at a time (the mid-2010s) when tensions around “canceling” were especially high and many young men on the Internet were invested in resisting people who they saw as overzealous “Social Justice Warriors.”

For example, when a former fan tries to explain the power they believed iDubbbz held, their go-to example is always his ability to say the n-word without it ending his career.¹²² Young white men on the Internet were able to say just about anything without serious consequences, but that one word was off-limits and this small check on their freedom felt, to them, like a huge imposition. Ultimately, being a white man on the Internet and saying the n-word (with what is called a “hard ‘R’”) is the ultimate way of showing that you refuse to adapt your behavior to what anyone else thinks, the ultimate display of the edgy “IDGAF” (“I Don’t Give a Fuck”) attitude that is popular among certain groups of young white men online. The ostensible fearlessness

which this behavior displayed functioned as a performance of hegemonic masculinity in the Internet world.

iDubbbz's reputation changed very rapidly, though, when people found out his girlfriend had started an account on the website OnlyFans. Onlyfans is a site on which people can post exclusive photo and video content that users can pay a subscription fee to access. It is not exclusively intended to host adult or pornographic content, but the site's reputation centers on that kind of content, and iDubbbz's wife, Anisa Jomha, was intending to post a type of photos called "lewd" which are sexually suggestive pictures that do not feature full nudity.¹²³ iDubbbz had never said that women should not sell photos of themselves on Onlyfans, but he was accused by his fans of hypocrisy, because in the process of building of a brand of masculinity based on a daring refusal of "political correctness," iDubbbz had created an audience in which a large percentage of the group was culturally conservative, and thus invested in traditional masculinity.

After attacking many other YouTubers for hypocrisy, iDubbbz found himself in a position where he was accused of hypocrisy himself. Many of iDubbbz's fans were disappointed when their favorite keyboard warrior "allowed" his girlfriend to have an OnlyFans. They saw him as being emasculated by this. The hypocrisy of which iDubbbz was being accused was difficult to pin down because he had not gone on record against women posting this kind of content on the Internet; in a video responding to the controversy, iDubbbz says "I don't know why everybody thinks I made a stand [against sex work]."¹²⁴ In an interview with Ethan and Hila Klein on their H3 Podcast, Klein says to iDubbbz that he thinks "a lot of people who are criticizing [the Onlyfans situation] are just happy to find an opening to criticize you"¹²⁵ and iDubbbz agrees. But what gets left out is that this is exactly the kind of attitude iDubbbz cultivated with his own videos. He criticized YouTuber Tana Mongeau for being hypocritical

because she used the N-word on video and then criticized iDubbbz for using the same word years later.¹²⁶ While it's perfectly fair to criticize someone, especially a white person, for using that word, iDubbbz was not criticizing Mongeau for the word itself, which was a word he used with apparent glee in several of his videos. He was calling her a hypocrite based on her criticism of *him* for using a word which she had also used herself. However, Mongeau has admitted that her earlier use of the word was wrong and is not known to have used it again. iDubbbz meanwhile ends his video with an attempt at justifying his own use of the N-word, which he uses many times in his Content Cop video about Tana.

iDubbbz established a frame of mind for his audience in which contradicting one's own past statements or behaviors was to be considered a bigger offense than using the N-word. This is the kind of white androcentric logic Whitney Phillips associates with Internet trolls. "the goal of this method" Phillips writes, "is to be cool, calm, unflinchingly rational; to forward specific claims; and to check those claims against potential counterarguments, all in the service of defeating or otherwise outmaneuvering one's opponent(s)."¹²⁷ Every claim is subjected to logic above all else. Any statement which does not contradict itself is logically valid, which means that self-contradiction was the biggest crime in the Content Cop's law book. Ethical considerations were often secondary. iDubbbz's argument for the acceptability of himself as a white man saying the N-word is the biggest example of how he allowed ethics to be subsumed by his version of logic.

The fact that the gatekeeper nerd tactics were turned against *him* and his tactics of rooting out supposed hypocrisy were aimed at his relationship with his girlfriend was a major reason why iDubbbz became disenchanted with the cyber-separationist logic which had enabled his actions. The other major factor in his disenchantment was encounters with the "real world" that

showed him that there really *was* no separation between the Internet and the offline world, and that he was doing harm to real people.

In the year 2023, iDubbbz has made a series of statements that amount to a deconstruction of the gatekeeper nerd persona rendered from inside the mindset of a (former) gatekeeper nerd. “I was being very bigoted in a lot of my videos, and I justified it because I didn’t think it was too serious” he says, echoing the gatekeeper nerd belief that nothing on the Internet is to be taken too seriously.¹²⁸ He says that, “I had a very Wild West mentality when it came to online behavior. Like, ‘People are gonna do what they wanna do. People are gonna say what they wanna say. And I can pretty much do the same, because it’s the Internet.’”¹²⁹ However, the harassment his then-girlfriend, now-wife faced based on the community and culture that iDubbbz cultivated with his gatekeeper nerd values was one of the main things that changed his mind about gatekeeper nerd attitudes. He admits, “I don’t think I’ve still fully acknowledged how responsible I am for the amount of harassment that Anisa has had to deal with.”¹³⁰

The other factor that caused iDubbbz to move away from gatekeeper nerd masculinity was his encounters with what he refers to as “real life” and the “actual world.”¹³¹ He moved away from a lifestyle of “sitting in [his] bedroom for nineteen hours creating a hit piece on someone.”¹³² He has “personally outgrown” his old gatekeeper nerd content because his “view is a little bit wider now and [he sees that] the world is a little more complicated.”¹³³ He describes encounters with fans who would come up to him in real life shouting the N-word and he realized he had cultivated an audience of “anti-social basement dwellers.”¹³⁴ They were holding up a mirror to him which allowed him to see the “the anti-social basement-dwelling incel” within himself and start trying to exorcise him.¹³⁵

He also had to face his harmful language and behavior being mirrored back to him by marginalized people as well. He describes a transgender fan approaching him for a picture while saying “I know you probably don’t like transgender people” which surprised him and caused him to reflect on the ways his videos and his online persona had created that impression. His gatekeeper nerd persona was so successful that he was gatekeeping marginalized people away from him without even trying to or intending to do so.¹³⁶ Finally, he was even forced by men of color to confront his use of the N-word when he was a guest on their podcast and he credits the compassionate way they confronted him with helping him feel that he could acknowledge his mistakes publicly and change.¹³⁷

The ways in which every performance of cyber-separationist gatekeeper nerd masculinity has fallen apart or been abandoned over time shows that the discourse around that particular form of masculinity is based on fantasy and ideology that does not stand up to scrutiny or contact with the “real world.” The narrative of the revenge of the nerds that has circulated so widely in American culture made the belief in the gatekeeper nerd masculinity possible, but the fact that the Internet became so central to American life stripped away the affordances of cyber-separationism that had made gatekeeping possible. This made the deep vernacular web and the cyber-separationist ethos into fringe aspects of Internet culture which led to a lot of the bitterness and anger that will be expressed in the figure of the maladaptive nerd in chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4

THE MALADAPTIVE NERD: BASEMENT DWELLERS, KILLERS, JOKERS, AND TROLLS

In earlier chapters, I've traced tonal shifts in the "revenge of the nerds" narrative from comedic (computer nerd), to playful (gamer) to exclusive (gatekeeper). Throughout each of those eras of nerd masculinity's history, white male nerds had a special place within American popular culture which was ceded to them through the passive assent of other Americans. First computers, then video games, then the Internet. Other people still participated in those areas of culture, but it was generally accepted that nerds were the primary keepers of those domains and that the culture industries would strive to meet the desires of white, male nerds. Nerds came to feel entitled to their domains in popular culture and assumed that they were on an upward trajectory of cultural power and influence, since they were subconsciously guided by the ideology of "the revenge of the nerds" and had seen representations throughout their entire lives of how smart, awkward white men used cleverness to reach the top of America's ostensible meritocracy: a 21st century tech version of the American dream with all of the race and gender-based omissions that had attended the *original* American dream story.

When women, queer people, and people of color entered these cultural domains in sufficient numbers to make their presence felt, they brought new perspectives with them based on different life experiences, and they described nerd subcultures from those perspectives. I have coined the term "maladaptive nerd" to explain the response of white male nerds to the new

discourses which a more diverse group of participants brought to nerd cultures. Many white male nerds were maladaptive in two ways. First, they could not adapt to the changing shape of nerd cultures. Second, when white male nerds saw their subcultures through the eyes of people whose social positionality put them more in contact with the rest of American culture outside of nerd enclaves, many nerds saw themselves to be poorly adapted to the norms of the larger American culture and American masculinity. Maladaptive nerds engaged in cultural politics of reactionary backlash in response to the shame and frustration caused by their struggle to cope with cultural change. Those subjective feelings, and the maladaptive nerd's response to them had significant consequences for everyone in American culture and Internet culture, because ultimately, by trying to reserve a space for straight white men to escape from the rest of the society, maladaptive nerds ended up fighting for a heteronormative, white supremacist and male supremacist separatism in digital culture.

By picking up the thread of nerd masculinity after the “golden years” of the deep vernacular web which was so beloved by gatekeeper nerds, we rejoin the story of nerd masculinity at an especially acute moment.¹ During earlier periods of Internet culture's history, white male nerds felt they were part of a special clique enjoying a playground constructed just for them. It felt like a high school where *they* got to be the cool kids. As the Internet was reshaped to meet the needs of a more diverse user base, maladaptive nerds started feeling left behind. Feeling left behind is a position from which white American men have traditionally launched a backlash against women and people of color and developed a sense of themselves as victims. The maladaptive nerds launched a backlash of their own, but unlike previous American culture wars, this was the first one to take place largely within digital culture.

American scholars first began studying the phenomenon of white men expressing feelings of victimhood in the early 1990s when white supremacist domestic terrorism brought renewed attention to white male rage.² David Savran opens his 1998 book, *Taking It Like a Man*, with the Oklahoma City Bombing by Timothy McVeigh which he labels as “only the most glaring example” of the “white male backlash” of the 1990s which “announces the ascendancy of a new and powerful figure in U. S. culture: the white male as victim.”³ Now, in the 21st century, the domestic terrorists America faces tend to be nerds who were radicalized on the Internet: young men like Elliott Rodger or Dylann Roof who perform mass shootings.⁴ While McVeigh had to delve into an underground community of radical right-wing militias and an esoteric print culture of white supremacist, anti-government writing, Dylann Roof was able to be radicalized by the Google algorithm from the comfort of his home, as his searches and clicks led him to more and more inflammatory material about black Americans, and Elliot Rodger was radicalized by misogynistic online communities which fast-tracked him toward extreme levels of bitterness and hatred that exploded in violence.

Unlike earlier studies of the discourse of a crisis of white American masculinity, which tended to take blue collar workers and “middle managers without college degrees”⁵ as the reference point for “an enduring image of the disenfranchised white man [which] has become a symbol for the decline of the American way,”⁶ this chapter will take as its reference point the image of young men who have dropped out of the mainstream of American society not because they felt they had lost their place in their communities and families, but rather had lost their place within digital culture. I call them maladaptive nerds because of their struggle to adapt to the culture around them in spite of their privileged structural position. Susan Faludi described the maladaptive men of the 1980s as the result of a “loss of economic status—as millions of

traditional ‘male’ jobs that once yielded a living wage evaporated under a restructuring economy.”⁷ On the other hand, the maladaptive nerd’s frame of reference for men’s place in American culture was not based on the 20th century manufacturing economy. Instead of feeling like they are failing at the patriarchal role of raising a family, these men never had families in the first place and are radicalized not so much by a misinterpretation of their own life experience, like the laid off factory worker may have been, but rather by the immense amount of misogynistic and racist ideology which is shared and circulated by other men online and by the deep loneliness that plagues everyone in an America that is heavily mediated and lacks any sense of community, but which can easily be channeled into entitled anger for white men who have grown up believing in the privilege and entitlement implied by revenge of the nerds as a form of the American myth of meritocracy.⁸

David Savran’s book documents the dropping out of earlier masculinized American counterculture movements like the beats and hippies, but those men dropped out as an act of rebellion focused on a goal of transcending limitations they saw in American society. The new dropouts, maladaptive nerds have a sense of hopelessness, and they drop out to pursue a consumerist lifestyle that has been sold to them through gaming culture and other forms of pop and nerd cultures. Many of them participate in a new, digitally informed version of the backlash toward women and people of color which was observed in the 1990s by writers like Susan Faludi.

The dark kernel of toxic masculinity that is being expressed by maladaptive nerds now was always present in the revenge of the nerds cultural narrative. Even the original 1980s version of the story, which was supposed to be fun and silly had many elements of toxic masculinity. The climax of the first film is a sexual assault that is played off as a joke within the context of

the movie and is used to bolster the image of the nerds as they move closer to hegemonic masculinity. The woman who is tricked into a sexual act, thinks she is with her boyfriend and not the nerd, but is in awe of his prowess when she finds out who he is and says “Are all nerds as good as you?” which he answers in the affirmative.⁹ Even the article that coined the phrase “revenge of the nerds” was accompanied by a magazine cover that objectified women by depicting them as proof of the nerd’s success, draped over him admiringly while he ignores them.¹⁰

The word “revenge” always harbored darkness and implied violence which was disguised by the use of the phrase revenge of the nerds in largely tongue-in-cheek ways. In the 1980s, the ways in which nerds didn’t fit in were portrayed as comedic, but now the maladaptive nature of many white male nerds is revealed to be dark. The maladaptive nerd feels he has nothing to lose and wants to lash out at other people, with physical, psychological, or rhetorical violence. This chapter will focus on several symbolic examples of how the maladaptive nerd is shaped and created by discourse as a figure that exercises hegemony through backlash, including, an autobiographical text by the mass shooter Elliot Rodger, an online harassment campaign called GamerGate, the popular debate over the commodification of the mythologized mass shooter in the discourse around the film *Joker* and finally, the backlash politics exercised on Twitter by Elon Musk

This progression from Rodger to GamerGate, to *Joker* and Musk depicts the idea of the maladaptive nerd and the way in which a darker version of the revenge of the nerds narrative went from fringe to mainstream, played out before larger and larger audiences, and was thus validated within the attention economy or “economy of visibility” by which the American media

landscape operates, in which to be seen on a certain scale within certain contexts is to be validated.¹¹

Glink and the Golden Age: Internet Nostalgia as Maladaptive Practice

By the 2010s, the deep vernacular web, the version of the Internet where nerdy young white men felt most at home, still existed, but they felt that it was more of a fringe element of popular culture. A YouTube video by the video essayist who goes by the name Glink demonstrates a lot of young men's reaction to a felt sense of the loss of what they saw as their special place within Internet culture. The video is called "The Golden Age of the Internet is Over."

Published in 2019, Glink's video essay certainly struck a chord with a lot of viewers since it has been viewed over two million times and has more than 19,000 comments. This means that the comments section of Glink's video is a gathering place for people who share his nostalgia and feeling of loss regarding an earlier stage of Internet culture. As of the moment in which I'm writing this, in 2023, people are still watching and leaving new comments on the video and replying to each other.

Glink and his commenters are not disinterested sources of historical perspective, but studying the particular shape of their biases reveals a lot about the ideological nature of maladaptive nerd nostalgia in digital culture. Furthermore, Glink and his fellow nostalgia peddlers are maladaptive nerds, because of their application of nerd traits and activities like intense focus, periodization and categorization to the ways in which they do and do not fit into the current Internet culture.

Glink periodizes the golden age of the Internet as 2000-2010, which just happens to coincide with his childhood.¹² The Eternal September concept from the previous chapter shows

that everyone will have their own idea of when Internet culture was at its best, and was best suited for their own individual needs and interests (which they then tend to project onto the majority of Internet users).

These nerds used to feel that the Internet was *for them* and now they don't, and their feelings drive a powerful discourse. They position themselves as stewards of Internet culture, the heroes of the story who, alone, recognize where our digital society has gone astray. One commenter wrote, "Nerds, Gamers, Bloggers, Content Creators. Long ago, the four corners of the internet lived together in harmony. Then, everything changed when the Corporations attacked."¹³ Another collaborated by adding, "Only the geek, master of all four elements could stop them,"¹⁴ The idea is that young men: nerds, gamers, content creators, etc, had built up an organic culture of grassroots creativity and community which has been called the "deep vernacular web."¹⁵ This description of Internet culture sounds almost wholesome, but this kind of depiction of the maladaptive nerd as reluctant hero protecting freedom on the Internet is what mobilized a lot of young men for the toxic harassment campaign known as GamerGate in 2014.

The maladaptive nerds' attitude: thinking they know what's best for everyone on the Internet, and their feeling of entitlement to make that decision for everyone else stems directly from the nostalgic, almost postlapsarian discourse about nerds and Internet culture propagated by maladaptive nerds, because of how individualistic that discourse is, and how much it prioritizes the experience of one type of person: primarily straight, cisgendered white men. Glink praises the Internet during his idea of the "golden age" for offering the highly individualistic virtues of "personalization, customization and self-expression."¹⁶ He calls the earlier Internet a "new frontier" and a "wild west," referencing ideas from American history that are usually only appealing to a mindset informed by white masculinity, in the sense that the person has to feel

privileged and entitled to take advantage of the unprotected nature of the “new frontier” and not in need of protection from the lawlessness of a “wild west” environment.

Glink and his viewers believed that the Internet had been “a way to escape reality . . . like [video] games”¹⁷ but eventually it became “a digital copy of [American] society.”¹⁸ What this means was that only the aspects of reality that maladaptive nerds cared about had been welcome online, and issues they did not care about were not discussed in the online spaces where they spent their time. The maladaptive nerds lived out a fantasy of what Derek Burrill calls “digital boyhood,” defined as a “mode of regression . . . allowing escape, fantasy, extension and utopia, a space away from feminism, class imperatives, familial duties as well as national and political responsibilities.”¹⁹ Like participants in “digital boyhood,” the maladaptive nerd feels entitled to escape the real world and avoid its complexity. The toxic element that the maladaptive nerd *adds* to digital boyhood is the resistance to other people using the Internet and digital tools in ways that compromise the maladaptive nerd’s ability to “escape” reality. It doesn’t seem intentional in the case of Glink and his commenters, but by following the implications of terms like “wild west,” “escape” and “new frontier” and combining those with a nerd culture that is so often taken for granted as being white and male, it begins to look like people who weave utopian fantasies about the earlier Internet are implicitly imagining a separate cultural space for white men, which becomes especially unsettling when we think about how important the Internet is for *everyone’s* daily life.

Ryan Milner, describing the 2000s gatekeeper era on the deep vernacular web, writes “I was a suburban American white dude, and so until I heard otherwise I got to assume *everybody* [on the Internet] was like me.”²⁰ This ignorance is understandable, because Milner is writing about his teenage years, but the maladaptive nerds are fighting to *keep* the Internet this way. We

can think back to the classical liberal imagery of the Electronic Frontier Foundation and John Perry Barlow where the internet user is represented as the kind of “abstract, universal” human that always gets represented in Western cultures as a white man, and we can think forward to the recent tweet by Elon Musk, calling the terms “cis” and “cisgender” a slur and threatening to ban people who use those words from Twitter. We can see that this kind of falsely colorblind, white, heteropatriarchal separatism functions at both the ground level of young white men organizing together to harass people online, and the top level of tech industry power.

Some of these commenters still believed that video games provided an escape for them in ways that other parts of Internet culture did not, however, a lot of maladaptive nerds in the 2010s also felt that there were people trying to take away video games as a source of escape for maladaptive nerd men. As is so often the case in American culture, women and people of color represent the invasion of reality into the fantasy image white men have of white masculinity, because they make demands for equality and expose the limitations of the white male perspective. The maladaptive nerd has to believe he sees everything clearly, and that he rejects American society just as much as he believes the society has rejected him. He cannot blame himself for feeling ill-equipped to reckon with the world around him, or else his heroic fantasy will collapse. As this chapter continues, I will demonstrate the more and more intense expressions of rage that built up among maladaptive nerds and the exclusionary backlash which nerds launched against women and people of color. It will be clear that maladaptive nerd conflicts were being played out and validated on a larger and larger stage in American popular culture.

Elliot Rodger: The Twisted World Of Maladaptive Misogyny

One of the ultimate symbols of the maladaptive nerd is Elliot Rodger, sometimes known as the “virgin killer” in tabloid press coverage²¹ and sometimes as “Saint Elliot” among communities of angry involuntarily celibate (incel) men who watched his YouTube videos and read his manifesto, *My Twisted World*. Rodger committed mass murder as revenge upon women and a society which he felt had rejected him because he could not find a woman willing to be his girlfriend or have sex with him. Rodger was a gamer and nerd who killed people out of a sense of thwarted entitlement to women’s bodies. He was biracial, but he identified with his white ancestry and expressed white supremacist beliefs which aligned him with the toxic white masculinity of the maladaptive nerd. “How could an inferior, ugly black boy be able to get a white girl and not me?” he writes, “I am half white myself. I am descended from British aristocracy. *He* is descended from slaves.”²² While his biracial identity may have prevented Rodger from staking a full claim to the unmarked status of white masculinity, he went out of his way to *mark* his claim to white masculinity and the status he felt it gave him. He even reaches back rhetorically into the history American white supremacy by expressing a disgust toward the idea of black men having sex with white women and invoking slavery in an attempt to devalue black masculinity.

Rodger found the massively multiplayer online fantasy role-playing computer game *World of Warcraft* to be a “sanctuary . . . for most of [his] teenage years.”²³ He describes the game as an escape into “a more exciting life” when his *real* life “was getting more and more depressing all the time.” He says that *World of Warcraft* “would fill in the void.”²⁴ Like all maladaptive nerds, Rodger disconnected himself from the society around him and its demands,

but then expressed indignation when he found that he was ill-equipped to interact with other people.

Rodger dedicates a shocking amount of time to writing about *World of Warcraft*, considering the fact that the text is supposed to explain his decision to commit mass murder, so it is obvious that the game was very important to his inner life and his interpretation of his experiences. *World of Warcraft* is his escape, and it becomes one of the ultimate symbols of his maladaptive nature.

He builds up his character to be very powerful and participates in “one of the best guilds” in the game. At the same time, the game becomes a symbol of his isolation.²⁵ He calls it his “only source of joy left in the world” and identifies as a “addict.”²⁶ He often plays for fourteen hours a day and his friends think of him as “the guy who was ‘always on [*World of Warcraft*].”²⁷ Eventually he finds out his only real world friends have left him behind and even excluded him when they played *World of Warcraft* together. “Even in [the game]” he says, “I was an outcast, alone and unwanted.”²⁸ Little by little, he finds that “the game’s ability to alleviate [his] sense of loneliness [is] starting to fade.”²⁹ Still, he continuously returns to the game, in spite of knowing “how unhealthy and time-consuming” it is for him.³⁰ Rodger’s *World of Warcraft* addiction illustrates the ultimate paradox of the maladaptive nerd. They immerse themselves further and further into escapist fantasies in spite of the fact that those fantasies take them further from the feelings of belonging which they claim to crave.

The final time Rodger quits the game will sound familiar. Rodger expresses attitudes, and falls into a mode of discourse, that recalls the gatekeeper nerds as they felt like their grip on Internet culture was slipping in chapter 3, and recalls the people expressing nostalgia for an earlier online experience at the beginning of *this* chapter. He indicates that there was a

“disturbing new player-base.” Like an Eternal September for *World of Warcraft*, “the game got bigger with every new expansion that was released, and as it got bigger, it brought in a vast amount of new players . . . ‘Normal’ people who had active and pleasurable social lives.”³¹ The ultimate insult for Rodger is the fact that some of these new players start “bragging online about their sexual experiences with girls . . . And [using] the term ‘virgin’ as an insult to people who were more immersed in the game than them.”³² This hurts Rodger because it strikes at what he sees as the core of his identity.

Rodger’s virginity defines his sense of self and it is clear that he has fully internalized the American hegemonic masculine ideal in which a man’s value is largely defined by sexual prowess and conquest. Like so many of the nerds discussed in this dissertation, he is symbolically positioned closely enough to hegemonic masculinity (in this case because of his family’s wealth) that he feels compelled to pursue those ideals instead of rejecting them. For example, Rodger has a friend who is also a virgin and seems able to accept himself. However instead of taking that friend as an example of how to find self-acceptance and self-compassion, Rodger’s commitment to the ideology of hegemonic masculinity leads him toward anger and violence. He writes, “I was very perplexed as to why he didn’t feel any anger towards girls for denying him sex. He should be just as angry as I am . . . To be angry about the injustices one faces is a sign of strength.”³³ The language of “injustice” is a way of recontextualizing his virginity, which would otherwise be seen as failure within the framework of American hegemonic masculinity, and attempting to cast himself as a hero standing up for himself.

Rodger’s case is important because it shows that the anger which maladaptive nerds feel about the loss of their felt sense of belonging with nerd cultures or digital cultures is not as trivial of an issue as it may seem. For the observer who can look at the maladaptive nerd’s situation

with critical distance, their complaints are clearly common, petty grievances. Unfortunately young men like Rodger don't *have* that critical distance. They are limited by their experiences as what one representative 4chan poster calls a "21st century digital boy," a young man who cannot integrate into the society around him because he was "maximally sheltered from any real life experience."³⁴ The 4chan poster is responding to someone lonely, frustrated and angry like Rodger, and he is also describing *himself*. The 4chan post is shown as a screenshot in a documentary about 21st century digital boys, and the screenshot comes from an online community *full* of 21st century digital boys. Maladaptive nerds express their frustrations through conflict about seemingly trivial aspects of pop culture, but what they are really expressing, through their myopic and digital frame of reference is a larger sense of loss and lack of belonging, a lack of community, which is endemic to all people in American society, but becomes especially dangerous when blended with the entitlement of maladaptive nerd masculinity.³⁵

Like the rest of the examples from this chapter, Rodger articulates his complaints through the discourses of justice, injustice and entitlement without regard to the actual ethics of the situation those concepts are being used to describe. This lack of self-awareness is also very true of the next example I will analyze: GamerGate, which similarly fought for on behalf of *injustice*, and used unethical behavior under a banner of "ethics in games journalism."³⁶

GamerGate: Maladaptive Cultural Politics

GamerGate began about three months after Elliot Rodger's misogyny-motivated terror attack in which he killed six people and wounded fourteen. There was a large amount of ideological overlap between Rodger's manifesto and the GamerGate movement, and it is strange to think that he might have participated in GamerGate and might have found a sense of purpose

in it. The movement had the same kind of twisted grandiosity and sense of lonely misogynistic nerds reframed rhetorically as heroes that is seen in Rodger's manifesto. The GamerGate movement was the first to show the hegemonic power of maladaptive nerd masculinity and its backlash tactics because of the massive scale the movement achieved through its use of networked online communication and mastery of online media manipulation.

GamerGate was a reactionary movement against women and people of color in gaming culture and the video game industry. It is helpful to frame it in terms of hegemony, because the nature of GamerGate as a backlash shows how hegemony is "inherently unstable [because] [it] is a temporary settlement and series of alliances between social groups that is won and not given [and] needs to be constantly re-won and re-negotiated."³⁷ GamerGate was a response to a shift in the workings of white masculinity's hegemony in the world of video games. Political hegemony and cultural hegemony are interrelated, and GamerGate was part of a culture war with political implications.

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have explained that in order to participate in politics, people need a narrative that constructs a social antagonism between two parties that is based on a perception of inequality.³⁸ The narrative of GamerGate gathered up a political coalition of gamers, right wing ideologues and other nerds and pitted them against a collection of imagined figures who are always the enemy of American conservative backlash: marginalized participants in identity politics whom the right believes have already *achieved* equality but want *more* than equality. A backlash against the marginalized makes sense for a conservative political program forwarded by members of society's hegemonic group, because it's the only way to construct a narrative from which it would look as though marginalized people benefit from inequality. White male gamers still exercised overwhelming cultural influence in video game culture, but their

power was not *complete*, so they told a story about a cohesive culture of white masculinity in gaming that outsiders were seeking to rupture for no reason other than resentment.

In reality, video game culture had changed from being a relatively homogeneous culture into several overlapping cultures, the two most prominent of which were the “AAA” games made by large corporations and the independent games made by small companies and even single individuals like Zoe Quinn. The culture of independent games began to grow in the first two decades of the 21st century, because new game-making software, easy access to coding knowledge on the Internet, and easier access to computing power meant that anyone could make a video game. While the mainstream video game industry, a multi-billion dollar business, operated like the Hollywood film industry, cranking out only surefire hits with known audiences, the stakes were low for indie game developers and they could experiment and make games that small audiences would enjoy.

One of these indie game developers was Zoe Quinn, and her game *Depression Quest*³⁹ kicked off the global harassment campaign of GamerGate, because the critical acclaim it received was threatening to the idea of a white-male-nerd stranglehold over the content of video games, and Zoe Quinn, a queer feminist making a game about mental health problems, was exactly the kind of person they did not want challenging their hegemony over video games. Video games were supposed to be an escape from the political conflict that straight white men associated with women, feminism and queerness and an escape from the banal, real-world problems they would have associated with mental illness and mental health.⁴⁰

GamerGate was a backlash against those who wanted to bring diversity to the culture and the content of games, and Zoe Quinn became a target because her success, her openness about her sexuality, and her queerness looked, to white men who considered themselves the

“traditional” gaming demographic, like an intrusion of elements they did not want in their culture. The only problem with gaming culture which Quinn *didn't* represent was the exclusion of people of color, but that is because (as Quinn herself has pointed out) the white women who were targeted by GamerGate got much more media coverage than the people of color in the same position.⁴¹

GamerGate began when Quinn’s ex-boyfriend Eron Gjoni accused her of having sex with game journalist Nathan Grayson in exchange for a good review of her game, *Depression Quest*. That accusation was the centerpiece of a roughly 9,000 word narrative of their relationship.⁴² Gjoni posted his screed on the Something Awful forums. The moderators of that site removed the post, but once something incendiary has caught the attention of a lot of people online, it is difficult, if not impossible to make it go away. A link to the wordpress blog which hosted Gjoni’s post began circulating on 4chan, an anonymous imageboard with some of the most lax moderation policies on the Internet and a community that liked to explore the fringes of free speech and play beyond the bounds of decency.

While “The Zoe Post” was arguably the beginning of the GamerGate phenomenon, I would like to focus on another moment early in the GamerGate timeline, because of the ways in which it focused the spotlight and the conflict onto maladaptive nerd masculinity. This moment was when a series of video game writers claimed that the particular white masculinity which had been associated with the term “gamer” was no longer the only constituency for gaming culture, nor even the most important one.

This critique solidified GamerGaters’ understanding of how other people saw them and led to a replay of the traditional backlash politics practiced by American men who think their culture is trying to leave them behind. Conservatives were able to mobilize white male gamers

around “crisis of white masculinity” rhetoric that had been developed in the 1980s and 90s (ironically, in that case, the discourse arose in response to the transition from a manufacturing economy to an information economy in which computer nerds had thrived). No less of a far-right American figure than Steve Bannon recalled the events of 2014, saying “You can activate that army. They come in through [G]amer[G]ate or whatever and then get turned onto politics and Trump.”⁴³ This was Bannon’s thinking as he channeled GamerGate’s energy and anger through messages on his influential website *Breitbart News*.

In September of 2014, Because of the ways in which a lot of online trolls had been harassing prominent women connected to the games industry, like Zoe Quinn and the media critic Anita Sarkeesian, a large number of media outlets that covered technology and culture published articles critiquing “gamer culture” for its misogyny and its exclusionary practices. The overall thrust of these articles was that the “gamer,” a mainstay not just of nerd culture, but also industry thinking and marketing rhetoric, had outlived its usefulness as a construct because of the toxicity that had accrued to the gamer as a symbol.⁴⁴

The writers of these articles claimed that the video game industry was diversifying and no longer had to rely solely on “traditional” gamers and their very narrow tastes. Maladaptive nerds were finding themselves to be maladaptive in entirely new ways, as the culture which had once centered them was now moving beyond them. It wasn’t just the rhetoric that was making maladaptive nerds feel threatened, it was also the fact that a new culture of indie games and casual games was developing, largely without their input. Men who identified as hardcore gamers did not believe most casual and indie games were “real games,” so they saw the fans and developers of those games as interlopers in gaming culture who would shift the culture toward *their* preferences if they grew too large in number.

Gamers felt they were being betrayed by an industry to which they had been loyal. They believed companies were capitulating to political pressures for publicity reasons and making changes to the kinds of games they released in order to serve social justice-related demands rather than seeking to create quality games. GamerGaters likely felt that the games industry had depended on them and their consumption while it was growing, but now that it is a mass culture phenomenon the culture and industry were rejecting "traditional gamers."

One of the *actual* reasons "traditional gamers" became less important was that the industry was doing what every capitalist industry does: expanding to new markets (in the form of new customers). GamerGaters felt they had suffered because of taking on a gamer identity when it wasn't cool to do so. They felt they had been bullied and judged harshly for their gamer identity, and they felt the industry owed them in exchange for their sacrifices and support. But now, from their point of view, people who hadn't paid those dues wanted to have a say in video game culture.

In the video "Why #GamerGate is So Important to Me," YouTuber Sargon of Akkad says that "Nobody in the wider world was interested" in video games until recently, and "They've got no right to be meddling in games because they are *not* gamers."⁴⁵ In the comments, Cheap Smokes and Coffee writes that "gamers were looked down upon [as] Nerds. Basement dwellers. Virgins. Losers."⁴⁶ Commenters like Cheap Smokes felt that for many years, most people did not care about gaming, and even mocked them for being gamers, but now suddenly it felt like everyone had something to say about how games and gaming culture should be. For that commenter, "It was a call to arms. And we heard that call and we said: 'We will fight.'"⁴⁷ They felt that their cherished identity was being attacked, but the combat and competition that was so commonly featured in video games had prepared maladapative nerds for a metaphorical battle.

They believed that their claims of authentic gamer status were being undermined and thus an antagonism had been constructed in the minds of maladaptive nerd gamers which would allow them to be mobilized for cultural politics.

Gamers had already experienced many moments of feeling like their hobby or culture was being threatened, so they were "trained to be defensive" because, as Torill Mortensen writes, "The gamergaters had grown up actively engaging in a hobby where they were on the one hand catered to by increasingly inventive designers and creators and at the other hand vilified by the value-conservative who feared what this seductive new medium might lead to."⁴⁸ The moral panics about gaming that had started with *Death Race* in the 70s,⁴⁹ and continued with the Senate Hearing on video game violence in 1993 that led to the creation of the ESRB, as well as the work of anti-gaming lawyer Jack Thompson in the 2000s, had familiarized gamers with the idea that someone might want to police the content of games and gotten them used to resisting those people.

This sense of ownership and entitlement among white male gamers had been cultivated for marketing purposes. The building of an "authentic gamer" identity that we saw in chapter 2 in publications like *Electronic Games* magazine eventually developed into the gatekeeping and backlash politics that drove GamerGate. The games industry and gaming press built up the concept of authenticity around the gamer identity and eventually they created a monster who saw themselves as entitled and considered anyone whom they saw as an "outsider" to gaming culture to be unworthy of participation.⁵⁰ Gamers had been turned into gatekeeper nerds by the marketing and press coverage which had turned their hobby into their identity, but then the marketing strategies changed, and the press writing about video games wanted to branch out beyond the homogeneous white male audience. Meanwhile those who did not want to adapt to

these changes in gaming culture and adjacent nerd/geek cultures became maladaptive nerds geared up for culture war.

The marketing of tech, like game consoles, had also cultivated an us vs. them mentality which made it easy for GamerGaters to transition from console war to culture war. With the console wars that were started by marketers for Nintendo and Sega in the 90s and escalated by XBOX 360 fans and Playstation 3 fans in the 2000s, in an environment where animosity was networked and spread easily, hating other people for their gaming console preferences was a widespread “us vs. them” movement of aggression that was based in video game culture, so there was already a precedent for gaming-based animosity to spread and escalate online.⁵¹

Furthermore, the mainstream media was used to mining obscure and weird Internet subcultures for content by this point: 4chan memes spreading to mainstream pop culture was a precursor to the attention that GamerGate got in the mainstream media. By this point in time, there were many reporters covering a “tech” or “Internet culture” beat who could be counted on to pick up and circulate stories about significant conflicts taking place online like GamerGate.

Game Over: Gamers Face Criticism

Within the early collection of articles about how the identity and image of the “gamer” was over, an article by Leigh Alexander, published on the website *Gamasutra*, was the one that drew the most attention and controversy, probably because it was very strongly worded and was written by a woman. It was uncompromising in its criticism and the gamers likely recognized a lot of hard truths in what she said.

This emblematic article announcing a sea change in the culture of video games was called “‘Gamers’ Don’t Have to be Your Audience. ‘Gamers’ Are Over.” It was a scathing critique of the figure of the “gamer” which had long been held to be the archetypal audience and consumer

for games and games journalism. Alexander critiqued gamers for everything from their mindless consumerism to their fashion sense. She wrote that they “don’t know how to dress or behave” and “know little about how human social interaction and professional life works.”⁵² By critiquing their ability to function in society on the most basic levels, Alexander outlines the concept of the maladaptive nerd and makes it clear that the games industry and culture is moving beyond them.

Alexander seemed to be drawing on the semiotic well of the nerd as “basement dweller.” She even evoked the basement as a symbol when talking about where gamer entitlement came from: She writes, “Suddenly a generation of lonely basement kids had marketers whispering in their ears that they were the most important commercial demographic of all time.”⁵³ This was especially inflammatory for maladaptive nerds, because their insecurity about their maladaptive nerd masculinities could be so easily summed up by the figure of the basement dweller as a cultural image. Even worse, this was coming from someone they thought was supposed to be on *their* side since she was writing for a gaming publication.⁵⁴ As I’ve shown in chapters 2 and 3, gaming and Internet culture were two spaces in which white male nerds and geeks had previously felt in control of their own image, and now a woman was holding up a mirror that represented them in ways they did not like. The image of the basement dweller reminded maladaptive nerds they had failed to meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity when the identity of the gamer had previously allowed them to sidestep judgement by those standards and still feel masculine.⁵⁵

Gamers expected criticism from outsiders. As explained earlier, they were used to people not taking video games seriously, and not taking *them* seriously as adult men who based their identity on video games. But as, perhaps, the ultimate male consumers in a postmodern consumer society, adult male gamers had felt that they were essential to a fast-growing sector of

the American economy and culture, just as factory workers felt when the United States had a large manufacturing economy, and now their consumerism was being turned *against* them by people whom they associated with the commercial system of designing and promoting video games.

The basement dweller is a stereotype frequently attributed to nerds or gamers and is perhaps the ultimate symbol of the maladaptive nerd. The basement dweller lives with his parents and is unable to grow up and live an independent life out in the world. In American culture, people are valued based on independence and economic or professional accomplishment, and this is also a key feature of American hegemonic masculinity, so the stereotype of the basement dweller is an especially stigmatized figure.⁵⁶ Because the basement dweller is depicted as a failure financially, socially, and in terms of masculinity, he is really digital culture's equivalent of the image of laid off factory workers who were shown in articles and books about the "crisis of (white) masculinity" in the 1980s and 90s.

The reason why *this* aspect of GamerGate is so important to the study of the maladaptive nerd, is not because it's the most important aspect of GamerGate as a cultural phenomenon. Overall, it is much more significant that many women and people of color were harassed, threatened and made to feel unsafe and unwelcome in an industry that was actually greatly benefitting from their presence and input.

However, the battle over the interpretation of the "gamer" identity and its cultural representation is important to this study because it shows that a large part of the force driving GamerGate was a battle for hegemonic power over gaming culture because of the important role gaming played in the establishment of nerds as an acceptable form of American masculinity.

The increasing popularity and ubiquity of gaming in American culture meant that gaming was no longer stigmatized in-and-of itself as an activity for adults. It wasn't gaming itself that was being critiqued, it was actually a critique of white masculinity and the abuse of cultural influence by white men that was being forwarded by the writers who criticized the figure of the "gamer" as a cultural touchstone.

Separating gaming from white masculinity felt like a loss to white male nerds for whom the image of "gamer" had been an important source of identity and belonging when they felt unable or not allowed to identify with their whiteness and masculinity. In the comments of Sargon of Akkad's video about GamerGate, a viewer called MatrixQ5 theorizes that a lot of people don't identify with their whiteness or masculinity, but "In the case of [#GamerGate](#) . . . the SJWs attacked something that is a precious identity to a lot of people: gaming."⁵⁷ What this commenter does not realize or does not acknowledge is that the reason why separating gaming from whiteness and masculinity is a threat is *because* identifying as a gamer had been a way to also identify with whiteness and masculinity as a nerdy man in a way that felt authentic. Gamers rarely got to feel a part of "traditional American masculinity," but with the increasing popularity of video games, gamer masculinity felt increasingly accepted as an economic and culturally significant identity, until gaming became *so* mainstream that the small base of hardcore white male gamers was no longer needed to support the industry, and a larger demographic of more diverse "casual gamers" became central.⁵⁸ Leigh Alexander even described hardcore gamers with language that felt similar to the "white masculinity in crisis" rhetoric directed toward the laid-off angry white men of the 1990s who were left behind by globalization. She wrote that their "identity depends on . . . aging cultural signposts" and that they "don't own anything, anymore."

Worst of all she calls “gamer” “a dated demographic label that most people increasingly prefer not to use.”⁵⁹

GamerGaters felt that the media was against them at all levels, from ordinary Internet users making comments all the way to popular primetime television shows (like *Law & Order SVU*⁶⁰ and *The Colbert Report*⁶¹) which broadcast episodes criticizing GamerGate. GamerGaters felt that journalists were conspiring against them in a coordinated effort to take them down. They thought people like Anita Sarkeesian would influence the video game industry to stop making the kinds of violent, exciting, big-budget masculinized games that hardcore gamers enjoyed. They were afraid games would all have to be “woke,” and they felt they were being demonized by representations like the GamerGate themed episode of *Law & Order SVU*: “Intimidation Game.”⁶²

Game journalists openly expressed their embarrassment about gamer culture in very direct language, language that GamerGaters found insulting and hurtful. GamerGaters felt as though the masculinity of gamers was being challenged in a lot of the criticisms against GamerGate and wanted a chance to prove themselves as formidable. The idea that people other than those who fit with the conventional image of gamers were trying to comment on the gamer identity made gamers feel threatened and caused an identity crisis. The identity crisis was also caused by the demand of other people to be allowed into cultures that white male nerds thought belonged exclusively to them. They saw GamerGate as a struggle for control over their identity and their culture, and in a way, it *was*. There was more power and influence at stake than outside observers might think. Like so many of the cultural conflicts I’ve studied in this dissertation, this one had much larger social implications. All of popular culture involves a struggle for power: who gets to be heard and seen. As Zoe Quinn writes, “having a voice online matters--and abusers

want to drive the voices they don't like out of the conversation."⁶³ As one 4chan user put it when "The Zoe Post" was first published, "I don't want her to die, I just want [her] to get the fuck out of the [video game] industry."⁶⁴

GamerGaters seemed to enjoy the excitement and feelings of power they got from being involved in a culture war, drawn to it by the same impulses that had made them participate in console wars on behalf of their favorite companies. GamerGaters wanted the excitement and catharsis of a culture war and they wanted to shut up the people whom they saw as trying to change gaming culture. "They wanted to destroy "the other" anywhere they found it" Ian Danskin argues.⁶⁵ They wanted to make sure the kind of games they liked would continue to be made and would dominate the conversation of gaming culture. They wanted to continue to be treated with respect and deference by the games industry. They claimed that what they really wanted was meritocracy in gaming and that they cared about whether games were "good" or not, by hardcore gamers' standards, not whether or not games they were "inclusive."⁶⁶

GamerGaters were able to see themselves as the good guys because they saw their targets as the villains. Gamers convinced each other they were being attacked and were just fighting back, or at least that's the way they tried to present themselves to the world. With everything known about GamerGate, it is inevitable to ask how they could possibly portray themselves as the good guys. They tried to justify their victimization of people whom they considered acceptable targets. For example, Leigh Alexander had "attacked" gamers by writing her "Gamers Are Over" article before *they* attacked *her*. They spread Zoe Quinn's ex-boyfriend's claims that she cheated on him and called her every misogynist slur imaginable. They claimed that the people who were trying to police the inclusivity and "political correctness" of the games industry did not even play video games and thus had no place to really speak about their content.⁶⁷ They

also downplayed the seriousness of what was happening to GamerGate's victims. Right wing pundit Milo Yiannopoulos wrote that "there is no evidence that any violent threat against a prominent female figure in the media or technology industry has ever been credible – that is to say, that any feminist campaigner on the receiving end of internet trolling has ever been in any real danger" and claimed that GamerGate victims were "using death threats to get sympathy."⁶⁸ Leigh Alexander writes that "Mostly it's just internet threats. Yes, sometimes the dudes actually show up, but mostly it's just internet threats,"⁶⁹ but her point is not that those who downplay these Internet threats are *correct* in doing so, her point is something more like what Zoe Quinn writes in order to explain why Internet threats are so devastating in a time when the Internet is such a vital part of so many people's everyday life: "All of the sites I used--to keep in touch with my global network of friends and loved ones, the places that are a fundamental part of my life--were now flooded with messages threatening to rape me and telling me to kill myself."⁷⁰ Again, the Internet, gaming, nerd and geek cultures are by no means trivial or "fringe" elements of American culture, which is why maladaptive nerds went from console wars, to online culture wars, to participating in the alt-right via GamerGate's connection with Milo Yiannopoulos, Steve Bannon and *Breitbart* news. GamerGate engaged in typical anti-feminist tactics, used both online and offline to discredit women, and this shows that GamerGate in particular, and toxic geek masculinity in general are "the technological branch of men's rights activism."⁷¹

"You Get What You Deserve": *Joker* as a substitute for *Revenge of the Nerds*

Another pop culture text that became a locus of culture war was Warner Bros.' 2019 film *Joker*. Unlike the other texts and case studies in this chapter which involved relatively insular nerd-culture conflicts and came to the larger public's attention only because of their notable violence and misogyny, *Joker* was mainstream and notable from the very beginning as a major film

featuring a star actor and a connection to the Batman universe, which is one of the most popular intellectual properties in the world.

The film's main character, Arthur Fleck, played by Joaquin Phoenix, is a representation of the maladaptive nerd. The film focuses on his failed masculinity as he lives with his mother, loses his menial job, seems to be a virgin and struggles with his mental health. He is an anti-hero, whom the director, Todd Phillips, indicated was not really meant to be taken as a role model, but there was always the possibility of angry young men reading the film differently.⁷²

Before its release, the film was extremely controversial. It was considered likely to incite violence, and these fears did not come out of nowhere. They had been seeded by years of threatening behavior from white, nerdy men, both on and off of the internet: everything from GamerGate to Elliot Rodger's mass shooting in Isla Vista because he could not lose his virginity, and especially James Holmes' shooting at the movie theater while *The Dark Knight Rises* was showing in Aurora, Colorado in 2012. The families of victims of the Aurora shooting even wrote an open letter expressing their concerns about the film's incendiary potential.⁷³

When people saw the trailer for the film and read a leaked script, they thought it was a fable of what is becoming an unfortunate new American tradition: the mass shooter. Even though the film itself doesn't contain a mass shooting, it appeared to be about a white man who considers himself to be marginalized and tries to take revenge on the society he believes has wronged him. It was a textbook image of the maladaptive nerd engaging in a backlash. It appeared to make that story into a larger than life myth, not dissimilar to the way *The Revenge of the Nerds* became a cultural myth about young nerd-identified men. Like *Revenge of the Nerds* many observers seemed to fear that *Joker* was going to show an underdog who appears to *deserve* revenge for the wrongs that had been done to him, which was considered a recipe for

inciting alienated young white men to attack people. Warner Bros. even felt compelled to release a statement saying that:

Warner Bros. believes that one of the functions of storytelling is to provoke difficult conversations around complex issues. Make no mistake: neither the fictional character Joker, nor the film, is an endorsement of real-world violence of any kind. It is not the intention of the film, the filmmakers or the studio to hold this character up as a hero.⁷⁴

One of the memes that spread from the film was a clip of Joaquin Phoenix as Arthur Fleck in the Joker makeup in which he says “You get what you fucking deserve” and then shoots a talk show host in the head for mocking him.⁷⁵ In fact, a more complete contextualization of the dialogue in this scene makes it seem even more connected to incels, mass shooters and the “revenge of the nerds.” Fleck says, What do you get when you cross a mentally ill loner with a society that abandons him and treats him like trash?! I'll tell you what you get! You get what you fucking deserve!”⁷⁶ This longer excerpt of the dialogue was not incorporated in the meme, because it renders the meaning of the scene with more specificity and makes it harder for the meme to be applied in a larger range of contexts, plus it renders the meme grim and serious in a way that would limit its spread (most memes spread through humor), but the larger implications of the scene, a white man who considers himself victimized and takes revenge, hovers in the background of the meme whenever it is shared. This kind of dark energy tends to accrue to *most* memes related to the Joker, whether this version, the one played by Heath Ledger in *The Dark Knight*, or others, which is likely why Joker has become such a popular figure for maladaptive nerds to use as a fantasy on which to project themselves.⁷⁷ He turns his maladaptive nature into

masculinized power through violence, as they would like to do, hence the threats of violence that are always directed toward women in harassment campaigns like GamerGate.

Toward the end of the film, during a riot galvanized by anger toward the city of Gotham's wealthy residents and inspired by Fleck's murder of three rich men on the subway, a large crowd stands around Fleck, in his full Joker costume and makeup, cheering him on as he dances on top of a police car. The scene is meant to show just how many people in Gotham felt exactly like Joker did. He's crazy, the scene suggests, but not that crazy. While he ends up confined to a mental institution, there are a lot of other people roaming around Gotham ready to continue the chaos he helped to incite.⁷⁸ Observers of the film's marketing campaign feared that upon release the film could trigger a similar dynamic of inciting or inspiring young men to act out impulses based on aggrieved white masculinity. The U.S. Military even issued a warning about possible incel shooters at screenings of the film based on their gathering of intelligence.⁷⁹ In fact, the film almost seems to encourage that, by working a copycat angle into the script (in the film, many people throughout the city are inspired to wear Joker masks and cause chaos), especially with a character whose image and behavior is so prone to spreading memetically over the Internet.⁸⁰

However, criticism of the film spread in a similarly viral way. Because of the fears associated with it, the film became a source of intense scrutiny before it was even released, and a fierce debate over the ethics of the film took place on twitter. Alex Abad-Santos reported that at the time when the debate was at its height, "the only people who have seen the movie thus far are select film critics and festivalgoers. But most of the conversation surrounding Joker is among those who haven't seen it."⁸¹ While this may make the studying the Twitter debate surrounding *Joker* seem less than useful, it actually makes the debate a rich site for generating knowledge and

understanding, because we can read public anxieties from the moment in which the film's trailers first started appearing, all the way to the post-release opinions. We can examine the discourse *around* the film, the circulation of the film's promotional materials as a symbolic cultural action, and the ways in which the very *idea* of the film took on a life of its own and had a rich and complicated meaning beyond the actual text of the film. We can follow Hamilton Carroll's explanation of "Popular culture [as] a complex and variegated terrain on which the concerns of society at large can often be mapped."⁸²

The discourse around *Joker* was a microcosm of the debates about who owns or controls Internet culture more broadly and the cultural politics practiced by certain groups. Some people on Twitter, mostly white men, wanted to see the film as a mere piece of entertainment and enjoy it as such. They sought to depoliticize the film in alignment with Derek Burrill's claims that digital culture permits an escape into what he calls "digital boyhood" where men can "return to their adolescence to play without the responsibilities of adulthood."⁸³

In order to maintain this feeling of privileged escape, men must be able to see digital culture as an apolitical space, however they must suppress other points of view in order to *maintain* this apolitical façade, which is *itself* a form of politics. As examined earlier in this chapter, this desire to be apolitical always runs the risk of turning a debate about pop culture into a forum for white supremacist, patriarchal ideology of separatism derived from the cyber-separationism studied in chapter 3. This is because, in these situations, the maladaptive nerds are ascribing cultural politics exclusively to women and people of color and then trying to forbid cultural politics, which is only one step away from trying to forbid women and people of color from participation in public discourse.

For the sake of convenience, for the rest of this section I will refer to those who expressed critiques of *Joker* as “critics” and I will call those who sought to defend the film against those critiques “anti-critics,” to signify both the resistance they expressed toward criticisms of *Joker* and their resistance toward the idea of popular cultural criticisms based in cultural politics. I recognize that the anti-critics may well have practiced cultural-politics-based debates in other contexts, such as criticizing films that featured protagonists played by people of color or women,⁸⁴ but in the context of the debate over *Joker*, these individuals tended to hold the position that political critiques of popular culture were off limits.

The anti-critics believed that political criticisms of *Joker* were not relevant to the film as a work of popular culture, made for entertainment purposes. Their message boiled down to this: “If you have a problem with the film, don’t watch it.” On the other hand, The people criticizing *Joker* were pushing for a more inclusive Internet culture that celebrated the benefits of diverse participation and did not interpret everything through a straight, white, male lens.

The critics of *Joker* wanted the anti-critics to simply consider what *Joker* looked like from other points of view. Even if the *Joker* anti-critics disagreed with *Joker* critics, the *Joker* critics wanted the anti-critics to acknowledge that they could understand why *Joker* looked threatening from marginalized perspectives, while *Joker* anti-critics refused the demand that they should ever have to take on that empathetic point of view. This was especially concerning to *Joker* critics, because if the *Joker* anti-critics were not willing to consider other points of view when the stakes were relatively low, since the conversation was about a piece of entertainment, then how could marginalized people expect straight white men to understand their point of view when the stakes were high, for example, when black Americans were being murdered by the police or women and LGBTQ people were having their rights stripped by the Supreme Court?

This was another case of maladaptive nerds weaponizing their myopic worldview by routing discourse *around* marginalized points of view without acknowledging those perspectives and depicting themselves as rational for doing so.

This was a situation where marginalized groups were seeking recognition. In this case, they wanted recognition of their experiences and the validity of their worldview. For the anti-critics, it was easy to depict *themselves* as the rational ones, because they followed the path of the least resistance, saying that popular culture texts should be viewed as mere entertainment without larger implications which is the standard practice for most people approaching a film made by a major studio. *Joker's* affiliation with superheroes, historically associated with light entertainment and children's media, made this approach even easier to justify.

Both sides of this debate are very informative if we want to understand cultural conflicts like GamerGate as well, because GamerGate was driven by a similar desire, on the maladaptive nerd side, to forbid social justice-oriented politics from gaming culture, and the targets of GamerGate harassment had a similar view as the critics in the *Joker* debate. They believed the form and content of games had larger social and political implications that should be addressed. Ultimately, both sides of the debate recognized, whether consciously or not, what was really at stake. Neither the critics nor the anti-critics wanted to give up control over the terms of debate about popular culture representation to the other side, because they understood that mass market popular media like *Joker* is critical to the shared code America uses to understand itself. The texts that get made by powerful companies like Warner Bros. and are invested with massive budgets and attention come to represent and shape the collective fantasies of American culture. The continued creation of texts that center white men's emotional lives allow white men to feel as though they are still the central focus of American culture. White male audiences are unlikely

to think of the films this way, but we can understand this state of mind better through their reaction to *critiques* of the kind of films that target white masculinity most specifically. Fantasies created for straight white men that feel like they are made *at the expense* of women, queer people, and people of color have dark implications for America's national self-image and shared cultural imagination. The cultural imagination is never *fully* shared. Many people are left out altogether, and a large number of people get only a small amount of representation within that imaginary, so pop culture representation feels important, especially as many people feel increasingly powerless to participate in governmental politics, or to have their voices heard by those who are supposed to represent them in government.

In that kind of a climate, *Joker* was important because it was connected to the world of comic books and superheroes which is one of the only true mass culture phenomena left in America that draws a large and diverse audience and seems to be consumed by almost everyone. This is important in an increasingly fragmented and filter-bubbled culture. The film sought both popular appeal with comics fans, and respect and prestige by taking on a somber tone and attempting gravitas that made the film look like it was seeking the prestige of an Oscar winning film.

The idea that a film that felt so threatening and insulting to many observers could achieve massive popularity and prestige and have massive production and marketing budgets behind it was something that critics wanted to push back on. @[hold_vintage](#) tweeted that the decision makers at Warner Bros. "obviously think there is a lot of money to be made off this super shitty character type."⁸⁵ The critics saw themselves as small voices raised against a corporate goliath, while anti-critics seemed to see them as more powerful and influential than they really were, because anti-critics had a sense that studios were starting to make films that were targeted toward

the people they called “SJWs” (Social Justice Warriors) the 21st century name for what was called “political correctness” in the 1990s. This was the same fear expressed by GamerGate participants who believed that “SJWs [were] a blight on gaming . . . [who] want[ed] to force their narrative and views into every game and genre.”⁸⁶

The critics of *Joker* were reading subtextual messages into the trailer and the film that they thought were *implied* by the film. Messages which they believed the film wanted to send, but couldn't state directly, about how white men with hard or lonely lives deserved more sympathy than anyone else, about how incels could be heroes.

Meanwhile, those who opposed the critics of *Joker* were insistent that the film could not *mean* any of those things because it didn't *say* those things, by which they presumably meant that those things were not stated in the dialogue. It was a battle over different principles of interpretation. White supremacy and patriarchy depend on being able to imply messages about the power of white men, because it is no longer socially or culturally acceptable to state those messages directly. Those messages can be delivered effectively through implication, while the speakers of those messages maintain plausible deniability. Often the producers and disseminators of those messages are not even conscious of their role in this process. Those implications were what the critics of *Joker* were picking up on. *Joker* felt, to a lot of people, like a cultural validation of the maladaptive nerd on one of American culture's largest available stages, and even though the violence which people thought might accompany the film never materialized, the figure of Arthur Fleck (AKA Joker) will likely be used in maladaptive nerd memes for years to come.

Conclusion: Elon Musk and Backlash Politics: A Nerd in Power is Still a Nerd

Elon Musk became popular because of the classic American fantasy that technology will save us by fixing society's problems.⁸⁷ Musk sold himself as a problem solver, from Paypal, to Tesla to SpaceX. On March 25, 2022, he tweeted out a poll that said, "Free speech is essential to a functioning democracy. Do you believe Twitter rigorously adheres to this principle?"⁸⁸ With a sense of drama, he added, "The consequences of this poll will be important. Please vote carefully."⁸⁹

Like so many maladaptive nerds before him, Elon Musk wanted to depict himself as the hero who was going to fix the Internet. Like gatekeeper nerds, Musk valued free speech because it allowed him to perform gatekeeping better, by policing who could participate comfortably on the platform. For example, Musk recently claimed that he considers the terms "cis" and "cisgender" to be slurs and stated that he will punish Twitter users for referring to people by those terms.⁹⁰ He wrote this in response to a user named James Esses who complained about being called "cis" by "trans activists."⁹¹ Esses, who publishes a homophobic and anti-trans newsletter called *TRANSparency*,⁹² thanked Musk for "standing up for reality."⁹³ What Musk is *really* doing is attempting to edit reality to make the Internet a "digital boyhood" escape again, like Glink and his viewers lamented about losing in "The Golden Age of the Internet is Over."

But even if Elon Musk is a gatekeeper nerd, how could he be a maladaptive nerd when he is one of the richest men in the world? Elon Musk is a maladaptive nerd because his personality and identity is largely shaped around the anxieties about not fitting in. He displays the insecurities of the maladaptive nerd on the largest possible stage, in fact, he literally *bought* the stage in the case of Twitter, but that does not prevent a large percentage of the platform's users from mocking him constantly. @bocxtop writes, "elon musk spending \$43 billion to stop getting

bullied on twitter when he could've simply been less annoying is insane.”⁹⁴ Elon Musk is undeniably powerful, but he cannot force people to like him, and his case is instructive because his desire to be liked and to be cool shows that the sensibility of the maladaptive nerd operates independently of power and wealth.

As I have been demonstrating throughout the cultural history I've unfolded over the course of this dissertation, white male nerds in American culture are in a troubled relationship with hegemonic masculinity. They have the power and privilege of white masculinity and many of them have the privileges of wealth and influence (Musk has more power and privilege than almost everyone else in the world). However, once a straight white American man is hailed as a nerd, he will always feel apart from the hegemonic masculinity which he considers his birthright and many nerds will attempt to participate in the enforcement of hegemonic cultural norms of race, gender and sexuality in order to feel closer to hegemonic masculinity.

CONCLUSION: THE LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF NERD MASCULINITY'S IMAGINATION

There has long been a tendency, in American representations of nerds, to depict computing and gaming as exclusively white, male domains, and the legacy of those representations are still being untangled.¹ However, in spite of the blindspots and ethical problems that have always been a part of nerd masculinities (particularly white nerd masculinities), one element of the computer nerd and gamer that has been lost in the gatekeeper and maladaptive nerds is a faith in the future. As my third and fourth chapters demonstrate, white male nerds have become some of the most reactionary young men in American society in the 21st century. They are taking their cues from the culture around them, which has so often replaced imagination and hope with nostalgia and rehashed rhetoric. American popular culture is awash in both blinkered nostalgia and a digital version of the same old “white men in crisis” narrative that is now many decades old.

The novel *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline is a great example of the failure of imagination that keeps the problems of American nerd masculinities in motion. The novel takes place in a dystopian future America, in 2045 where nostalgia reigns supreme. The novel shows the protagonist, Wade Watts, and his friends living their lives completely in a virtual reality world called the OASIS. Between the ubiquity of the digital in general, and the virtualization of nearly all of everyday life during the COVID-19 pandemic, it makes a lot of sense to consider *Ready Player One* as only slightly removed from our current reality.

In the non-fictional America of the 2020s, young people's imaginations have been replaced by the constant images and sounds coming from electronic screens. They no longer learn to use their imaginations in the ways children used to. See, for example, the trend of "reality-shifting," very popular with teens on Tik Tok, in which they claim to rely on popularized notions of quantum mechanics to shift to a "different reality" but they refuse—or are unable—to acknowledge that they are simply using their imaginations.² Instead, they claim they are actually *visiting* the worlds of the Harry Potter novels, the anime *My Hero Academia*, or any number of other media properties. They cannot even imagine a *new* world to visit, and would rather visit a world based on an existing media property. Similarly, in video games like *Little Big Planet*³ and *Dreams*⁴ on the Playstation 3 and 4, when players were given the opportunity to create anything they could imagine, the most popular creations were reproductions of Super Mario levels and other well known pre-existing characters and games. The imagination is redundant now. In her book *Boys and Sex*, about the changes in sexual maturation for a new generation of young men, Peggy Orenstein cites a teen who says "I have a friend who was a legend among the high school crew team. He claimed that he'd stopped using porn completely. He said 'I just close my eyes and use my imagination.' We were like 'Whoa! How does he do that?'"⁵ It had literally never occurred to them (excluding this one boy) to use their imaginations to generate sexually stimulating images.

For the first time in human history, the imagination might be less powerful than our technologies of representation. This is the direction in which American culture is headed, but *Ready Player One* depicts a future American society that has already fully replaced its imagination with virtual reality. Even Ernest Cline, *Ready Player One's* author doesn't use his imagination all that much in the writing of the novel. Instead of imagining a new world, as

science fiction writers used to do, he cobbles a world together out of old pop culture from his own youth. In the novel, the entire American culture becomes pervaded by the nostalgic memories of one tech billionaire named James Halliday, but in the real world, Cline is asking us to devote many hours to reading about *his* pop culture obsessions, since Halliday is the creation of Cline's mind.

When OASIS's creator James Halliday died in 2040, it was revealed that he had written in his will that whoever won a contest he was putting on would gain control over the OASIS as well as all of Halliday's personal fortune. The contest is about the value of nostalgia. Whoever can most fully immerse him, her or their self in nostalgia for the popular culture of the 1980s is the most likely person to win Halliday's contest. This is because Halliday has hidden an "easter egg" within the OASIS that players must solve complex riddles and difficult challenges to acquire, and the riddles are all based on American pop culture references from Halliday's youth. Whoever finds the egg first wins the contest. It appears that millions of people looked for it, but the novel begins five years after Halliday's death and no one has even solved the first riddle.

When he died, Halliday's journals were released to the public and people started poring over them like Holy Texts because it was implied that knowing Halliday's interests, and knowing how his mind worked would be the best way to solve the puzzles behind which the Easter Egg was hidden. The mind of one straight white male tech billionaire becomes the fount of all global culture as a frenzied urge to win the contest makes people all over the world start studying the life and mind of James Halliday. Halliday was obsessed with the more nerdy aspects of the American, British, and Japanese pop culture of his youth in the 1980s, and because of the money and power at stake, millions of people take an interest in 80s pop culture and it seems to become the main form of popular culture around the world.

Because of Halliday's contest, the world becomes absorbed in "digital boyhood." Not only does everyone participating in the contest enter a state of digital boyhood, they enter one man's digital boyhood in particular: that of James Halliday. Remember that Burrill defines digital boyhood a state of being that American men can access by using digital technology in a playful mode in order to "return to their adolescence to play without the responsibilities of adulthood."⁶ The few quotes Ernest Cline provides from Halliday illustrate his proclivity for entering a digital boyhood state, for example, after the prologue, the book opens with the following epigraph which is supposed to be from Halliday's journal: "Being human totally sucks most of the time. Videogames are the only thing that makes life bearable."⁷ Here Halliday implies that he is completely unhappy with all aspects of life except the ability to escape into videogames. This escape from the "real world" with its responsibilities is exactly what digital boyhood is about.

James Halliday had retreated in the last 10 years of his life into a hermetic state in order to work on the OASIS and to craft the contest that would take place in the OASIS after his death (it must be remembered that the contest is part of the virtual reality of the OASIS, which means it all had to be coded and produced within the game before Halliday died since he seems to be the only person who worked on it, in order to keep it a secret). He locked himself away in his office and dove into the world of his youth, crafting challenges based on his favorite childhood movies and arcade video games, and he ensured that a large portion of the world's population would become absorbed in the pop culture of his youth *too* because he made such absorption essential to the contest.

Ernest Cline, also has ambitions to deliver a message that we should not neglect the real world just to retreat into the Internet, which is odd because, it seems like Cline has to take

readers on a journey through the deepest reaches of fanboy obsessiveness about the Internet and pop culture before they can learn the lesson that “real life” is more important than the Internet and pop culture fantasies. Maybe readers are supposed to realize that because the deep immersion into cyberspace and pop cultural space is supposed to put us off of those things, like the old story about a parent catching their child smoking cigarettes and making them smoke the whole pack so they’ll never want to smoke again.

The message of moderation does not seem to have reached young men, though, when it comes to technology use, at least if we believe those who are rewriting “crisis of white masculinity” narratives for the Internet age. Consider the way researcher Jean Twenge represents a certain type of young man in her study of Generation Z. She presents a finding that “by 2016, one out of four men in their early twenties was not working”⁸ “What are these nonworkers doing instead of working or going to school?”⁹ Twenge asks ominously. Her answer is that they are playing video games. She is describing boys and young men who are in a state of Derek Burrill’s digital boyhood with the same tone of alarm used by American public guardians who disapproved of video games in earlier decades. Twenge quotes economist Erik Hurst who says “The life of these nonworking, lower-skilled young men looks like what my son wishes his life was like now: not in school, not at work, and lots of video games.”¹⁰ In other words they are living out the daydreams of a young boy because of the ways in which, Hurst says, “technological innovations have made leisure time more enjoyable” and “more attractive” than work.¹¹

Twenge also cites Michael Kimmel, who discusses video games in a book chapter called “Boys and Their Toys,” which automatically slants interpretation toward childishness and regression, even though a wide range (perhaps the majority) of video games are marketed toward

adults. Kimmel's concept of Guyland is *also* a lot like Burrill's digital boyhood. It's a state of being, a mindset into which young men tend to fall from ages 16 to 26. While digital boyhood is a state to which any man can regress at any time, Kimmel is focused more specifically on the growing-up process and how it is being slowed down for American men by the culture around them and the messages they receive from it. Discussing video games and other media, Kimmel writes,

All these distractions together comprise a kind of fantasy realm to which guys retreat constantly . . . to escape, even for a few hours a day, their tedious, boring and emasculating lives. They're avoiding the daily responsibilities of adulthood that in their minds first begins with being a conscientious student and then morphs into being a loving and attentive husband, an involved father, a responsible breadwinner. They are escaping what they think of as the burdens of adult masculinity.¹²

Kimmel worries that "Escape from daily life often becomes their top priority."¹³

As the rights of marginalized people in America are stripped away more and more on a daily basis, from abortion laws, to laws against LGBTQ+ people freely expressing their identities or getting gender affirming care, to the Supreme Court's ruling against affirmative action, white male nerds are still using the privilege to escape from the world. Even the most powerful nerds in the world are tempted to retreat, as Mark Zuckerberg sinks billions of dollars of Facebook money into a virtual reality environment that looks like it's going nowhere and Elon Musk is getting involved in an endless series of meaningless arguments on Twitter. Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk have even tried escaping into outer space!

As climate change and economic struggle put increasing pressure on all Americans in the coming years, the temptation toward escapism and nostalgia will be strong, and nostalgia may be the next version of white male nerd hegemony. We might call this figure the nostalgia nerd. Kayla McCarthy has pointed out that “The popularity of *Stranger Things*, *Super 8*, *Ready Player One*, and arcade bars are likely not entirely due to nostalgic Gen-Xers who are seeking to relive the glory days of childhood. There are, in fact, many young adults who engage with these kinds of experiences and who did not grow up in the 1980s.” She calls this “appropriated nostalgia.”¹⁴ and I suspect this sentiment will grow stronger and more prevalent over time, as the 1980s and 90s come to seem more and more ideal in the rear-view mirror. However Ben Lerner’s novel *The Topeka School* stands as a warning that the 1990s (and likely the 80s too) were the time when the toxic masculinity so prevalent on the Internet was first developing the forms it would take when it showed up online. For example,

The problem for [Adam] in high school was that debate made you a nerd and poetry made you a pussy--even if both could help you get to the vaguely imagined East Coast city from which your experiences in Topeka would be recounted with great irony. The key was to narrate participation in debate as a form of linguistic combat; the key was to be a bully, quick and vicious and ready to spread an interlocutor with insults at the smallest provocation. Poetry could be excused if it upped your game, became cipher and flow, if it was part of why Amber was fucking you and not Reynolds et al. If linguistic prowess could do damage and get you laid, then it could be integrated into the adolescent social realm without entirely departing from the household values of intellect and expression . . .¹⁵

The passage quoted above from *The Topeka School* demonstrates a *nerd* version of the “violent identity crisis among white men” about which Lerner has said he was writing. This identity crisis was “taking place at the same time as American Empire had supposedly brought history to a benevolent end”¹⁶ in the 1990s. The end of history refers to the fall of the Soviet Union and the belief that America had dispensed with its last truly powerful ideological enemy (communism) and would now face little of the turmoil or angst of earlier decades like the 1960s and 70s. This sense that there would be no more major wars or economic disasters, no more threat of nuclear war is the source of a great deal of nostalgia, but the tranquility didn’t last, and even the nerds who are most nostalgic for the 80s and 90s would experience the trauma of events like 9/11 and the Columbine massacre, and would get swept up in the Angry White Men phenomenon documented by Michael Kimmel.¹⁷ For those who might feel “appropriated nostalgia” or even real nostalgia for the 1990s as a world with less of the problems caused by digitally mediated culture, Lerner’s Adam Gordon serves as a reminder that even without digital culture like social media, young white American men faced very similar frustrations, had similar privileges and social blinds spots, and they reacted to their frustrations in ways similar to the gatekeeper or maladaptive nerd.

Ben Lerner’s protagonist, Adam, represents a nerd who is repurposing his intelligence and linguistic skills (from debate and poetry) into forms that his peers recognized as masculine (rhetorical combat and freestyle rap). By funneling his nerdy verbal skills and intelligence into aggressive forms of communication that are used to establish his place above other men in a hierarchy, Adam is doing the exact same thing as the gatekeeper nerds in my second chapter.

My point is that while American nerd masculinity does change with cultural and historical developments, we also must pay close attention to the ways in which it stays the same.

As long as the original insecurity about the nerd's relationship to hegemonic masculinity is still there at the core of the nerd masculinity identity, the white male nerd will continue to channel that insecurity into cultural politics that favor the patriarchal, white supremacist status quo.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

¹ See Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018).

² David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (New York: Verso, 1991).

³ Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*. 2nd ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 82.

⁴ On these functions of nerds, see Boynton, Michael. *Performing Nerd: The Nerd Stereotype in American Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Books, Forthcoming), 12; and Ron Eglash, "Race, Sex and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters." *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002).

⁵ GamerGate was an online movement in 2014 in which a large group of people (mostly white men) mobilized online to harass and threaten prominent female figures in the video game industry.

⁶ Hamilton Carroll, *Affirmative Reaction: New Formations of White Masculinity*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 7.

⁷ Nell Irwin Painter, *The History of White People*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), ix.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein, (New York: Routledge, 2001). Regarding the application of Adorno's ideas to online participatory culture texts, see, Mike Watson, *Can the Left Learn to Meme?: Adorno, Video Games, and Stranger Things*, (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2019), 2. On structures of feeling, see, Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-35.

⁹ Michele White, *Producing Masculinity: The Internet, Gender, and Sexuality*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 10.

¹⁰ Burr Settles, "On 'Geek' Versus 'Nerd'," *Slackpropagation*, (blog), June 3, 2013, <https://slackprop.wordpress.com/2013/06/03/on-geek-versus-nerd/>.

¹¹ IFL Science. 2023, <https://www.iflscience.com>.

¹² Boynton *Performing Nerd*, 2.

¹³ Connell, *Masculinities*, 67.

¹⁴ Sara Mills, *Discourse*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 11.

¹⁵ Lori Kendall, the pioneer of studying nerds, offered a definition of the nerd stereotype that *revolved* around computers: they are "socially inept and undesirable" (usually) white men with a particular passion and expertise for computers. See, Lori Kendall, "White and Nerdy:

Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 3 (2011), 519.

¹⁶ Connell, *Masculinities*, 135.

¹⁷ Paul Ciotti, “Revenge of the Nerds.” *California*, July 1982, http://paullall.blogspot.com/2006/01/revenge-of-nerds_113846198461764091.html.

¹⁸ Connell, *Masculinities*, 73.

¹⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* eds. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, trans. Hoare and Smith, (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

²⁰ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2001).

²¹ Chris Barker and Emma A. Jane. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2016), 12.

²² Barker and Jane, *Cultural Studies*, 602; see also, Antonio Gramsci, “Critical Notes on an Attempt at Popular Sociology” in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 419-72; Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2000), 62.

²³ James W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity: Formulation, Reformulation, and Amplification*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 24-28.

²⁴ Tim Carrigan, Raewyn Connell and John Lee, "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity," *Theory and Society* 14, (1985).

²⁵ Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); Connell, *Masculinities*.

²⁶ Connell, *Masculinities*, 77.

²⁷ Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity*, 29.

²⁸ On "hailing" and "interpellation," see Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 174.

²⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 151.

³⁰ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 151.

³¹ Kendall, Lori. "The Nerd Within: Mass Media and the Negotiation of Identity Among Computer-Using Men," *The Journal of Men's Studies* 7, no. 3, (1999): 356.

³² Kendall, "The Nerd Within," 356.

³³ Kendall, Lori. "Nerd Nation: Images of Nerds in US Popular Culture." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, (1999): 279.

³⁴ Kendall, “The Nerd Within,” 260.

³⁵ On shared cultural codes, see Hall, Stuart. “Introduction” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Thousand Oaks: CA, SAGE Publications), 4.

³⁶ According to Michael Boynton, the nerd actually has a much longer history in American culture which predates computers, but I argue that while the ingredients for the nerd stereotype already existed, the term “nerd” applied to a particular type of media image or person on a consistent basis did not enter mainstream culture until the 1970s and did not see ubiquitous usage until the 1980s. See, Boynton, *Performing Nerd*, 135.

³⁷ Technomascularity, a term coined by Carly Kocurek, can be “Characterized by youthfulness, a high level of technological knowledge and intelligence, fierce competitiveness and independence, and a willingness to disregard rules and standards,” see, Carly Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 141.

CHAPTER 1

REVENGE OF THE COMPUTER NERDS: A BEGRUDGINGLY ACCEPTED ADDITION TO AMERICAN HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

¹ This note refers to a blog post by Ciotti in which he describes his experience while writing the article. Subsequent notes will refer to the article itself, though both have the same title. For the blog, see Paul Ciotti, “Revenge of the Nerds.” *Voxcrook*, (blog), 4 July 2014, <https://blogvoxcrook.blogspot.com/2005/05/revenge-of-nerds.html>; for the article, see Paul Ciotti, “Revenge of the Nerds,” *California*, July 1982,

http://paullall.blogspot.com/2006/01/revenge-of-nerds_113846198461764091.html. The article, as provided by Ciotti, does not contain page numbers, so they will not be included in my subsequent citations.

² Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick*, (Boston: Loring, 1868).

³ The kicker is a large block of text, a few sentences long, which “acts as a bridge between [the] headline and [the] body” of the article. See Nikola. *Magazine Designing*. March 26, 2013, <https://www.magazinedesigning.com/magazine-page-elements/>.

⁴ Ciotti, “Revenge of the Nerds,”

⁵ Ciotti, “Revenge of the Nerds”

⁶ Ciotti, “Revenge of the Nerds.”

⁷ Ciotti, “Revenge of the Nerds.”

⁸ Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2000).

⁹ Ciotti, “Revenge of the Nerds.”

¹⁰ Doug Rossinow, *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

¹¹ *Revenge of the Nerds*, directed by Jeff Kanew (1984; Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2007), DVD.

¹² Raewyn Connell. *Masculinities* 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 79.

¹³ James W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity: Formulation, Reformulation, and Amplification*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 28.

¹⁴ Benjamin Nugent. "The Word *Nerd* and the Growth of the Guy in High Pants and Glasses." In *American Nerd: The Story of My People*, (New York: Scribner, 2008), 55-72.

¹⁵ "Are You a Nurd?" *National Lampoon*. no. 55, 1 October 1974.

¹⁶ For commentary on this poster, see Michael Boynton, *Performing Nerd: The Nerd Stereotype in American Popular Culture*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Books, Forthcoming); Kathryn E. Lane, "How Was the Nerd or Geek Born?" in *Age of the Geek: Depictions of Nerds and Geeks in Popular Media*, ed. Kathryn E. Lane, (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 1-18.

¹⁷ *Saturday Night Live*, season 3, episode 10, "The Nerds," directed by Dave Wilson and James Signorelli written by Dan Akroyd, Anne Beats and James Downey, featuring Dan Akroyd, Robert Klein, Bill Murray and Gilda Radner, aired January 28, 1978, https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B00C175J9C/ref=atv_hm_vid_c_vJb2Rv_1_20.

¹⁸ For another analysis of this sketch, see Lane, "How Was the Nerd."

¹⁹ Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

²⁰ “Are You a Nurd?” *National Lampoon*.

²¹ “Are You a Nurd?” *National Lampoon*.

²² “Are You a Nurd?” *National Lampoon*.

²³ “Are You a Nurd?” *National Lampoon*.

²⁴ Even though there *is* a female nerd in the sketch, played by Gilda Radner, she is largely assimilated into the boyish nerd culture by the other two nerds, like “Pizza Face” played by Bill Murray who puts her in a headlock and gives her “noogies” as though she’s his younger brother.

²⁵ *Saturday Night Live*, season 3, episode 10

²⁶ *Saturday Night Live*, season 3, episode 10

²⁷ “Revenge of the Nerds” IMDb,
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088000/?ref=fn_al_tt_1.

²⁸ See lee_eisenberg. "I'm PROUD to be a nerd." "Revenge of the Nerds: User Reviews," IMDb, May 9 2005, www.imdb.com/title/tt0088000/reviews and other users reviews on the Internet Movie Database.

²⁹ Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, The Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 13.

³⁰ Anne H. Knight, "Computer Anxiety: One Way to Handle It," *Creative Computing* 5, no. 9, (1979): 74-75.

³¹ Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans*, 21-24.

³² Shoshana Zuboff, *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power*. (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 3-5.

³³ Michael Boynton. "Chapter 3: Nerds in Space! (and on Computers!): Science, Technology, and Intelligence in the Late 50s & 60s" in *Performing Nerd*, 114-153. Boynton provides a thorough analysis of the media images which shaped the impressions of computers held by the average American in the 1950s and 1960s.

³⁴ Michael Z. Newman, *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 115.

³⁵ Newman, *Atari Age*, 115.

³⁶ Adrienne LaFrance, "When People Feared Computers," *The Atlantic*, 30 March 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/03/when-people-feared->

[computers/388919/](#); even college professors could be subject to computer anxiety: See, Ellen W. Noid, “Fear and Trembling: The Humanist Approaches the Computer,” *College Composition and Communication* 26, no. 3, (1975). This article has special novelty value from a 21st century point of view, especially for college composition instructors, who probably cannot imagine doing their job without computers.

³⁷ Adrienne LaFrance, “When People Feared Computers,”; Erik Sandberg-Diment, “The Executive Computer; Video Disks Catch on at the Office,” *The New York Times*, September 1, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/09/01/business/the-executive-computer-video-disks-catch-on-at-the-office.html>

³⁸ Lori Kendall, “‘White and Nerdy’: Computers, Race and the Nerd Stereotype,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 44, no. 3, (2011): 521.

³⁹ This book had many editions with various titles, but the first American edition was titled, *The Life of Dr. Benjamin Franklin, Written by Himself*. (Philadelphia: Benjamin Johnson, 1794).

⁴⁰ Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick*.

⁴¹ While the men who were part of these “revenge of the nerds” stories often made a lot of money as well as gaining cultural and social cachet, these cannot really be called rags-to-riches stories, because the computer access and education required to be successful in the technology industry meant that most of these men were already economically privileged.

⁴² See Jon Gold, “‘Revenge of the Nerds’ turns 30.” *Arizona Daily Star*, July 7, 2016, https://tucson.com/entertainment/revenge-of-the-nerds-turns-30/article_2f1fbba0-9fc6-56bf-80e8-871dfd620dde.html; Garin Pirnia, “12 Fun Facts About *Revenge of the Nerds*,” *Mental Floss*. 20 July 2019, https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/651598/best-gifts-2021?utm_content=infinitescroll1. I believe the idea that Paul Ciotti’s article was the one that

inspired the film is my own discovery, because other sources describe an article that inspired the film without specifying what the article *was*. For example, in the *Arizona Daily Star* article, Jon Gold writes, “the script was developed after the producers had read a magazine article in Los Angeles about Silicon Valley, where long-ignored computer geeks were gaining respect. . . . The article, which would eventually lend its title to the movie, convinced the producers they were onto something.”

⁴² See the cover of *California*, July 1982. It is accessible at “Revenge of the Nerds.” *Voxcroak*, (blog) July 4 2014, <https://voxcroak.blogspot.com/2005/05/revenge-of-nerds.html>

⁴³ However, Bill Gates’s immense power tested the limits of what nerds could get away with in the public eye, and in the 1990s he had trouble shaking his image as a tyrant of the software industry. See Randall E. Stross. *The Microsoft Way: The Real Story of How the Company Outsmarts Its Competition*. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1987); John Heilemann, *Pride Before the Fall: The Trials of Bill Gates and the End of the Microsoft Era*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

⁴⁴ Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity*, 28.

⁴⁵ Artz and Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*, 143.

⁴⁶ Jaime J. Weinman, “The King of ‘Slobs vs. snobs’: Ivan Reitman Reinvented a Hollywood Genre, Then Did It Again,” *The Toronto Star*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/analysis/2022/02/15/the-king-of-slobs-vs-snobs-ivan-reitman-reinvented-a-hollywood-genre-then-did-it-again.html>.

⁴⁷ *Animal House*, directed by John Landis (1978; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1998), DVD.

⁴⁸ *Caddyshack*, directed by Harold Ramis, (1980; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 1997), DVD.

⁴⁹ *Police Academy*, directed by Hugh Wilson (1984; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 1997), DVD.

⁵⁰ Ben Schwartz, “Knock Yourself Out: ‘Punching up’ in American comedy,” *The Baffler*, no. 31, 2016.

⁵¹ This scene actually features a sexual assault because Lewis is wearing a mask and impersonating Betty’s boyfriend when they have sex. While this is a very important aspect of the film and is very deserving of the strongest critique, I am analyzing the images of nerds which the film offered to audiences in the 1980s, so I am focusing on the way in which the filmmakers wanted the audience to interpret the scene, as a demonstration of sexual prowess, based on the positive reaction the character of Betty is portrayed as having in the film.

⁵² *Revenge of the Nerds*, directed by Jeff Kanew.

⁵³ Jeff Kanew, Robert Carradine, Timothy Busfield and Curtis Armstrong. “Audio Commentary” *Revenge of the Nerds*, Panty Raid Edition, directed by Jeff Kanew, (Los Angeles, CA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2007), DVD. Twentieth Century Fox, 2007.

⁵⁴ *Revenge of the Nerds*, directed by Jeff Kanew.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of the gatekeeping role served by the nerd identity and its strong ties to white masculinity, see Ron Eglash, "Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters." *Social Text* 20, no. 2, (2002).

⁵⁶ *Revenge of the Nerds*, directed by Jeff Kanew; Emily Flitter, “Microsoft Leaders Warned Bill Gates over ‘Inappropriate’ Emails,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/18/business/bill-gates-microsoft.html>.

⁵⁷ The first film featuring John Rambo is called *First Blood*, directed by Ted Kotcheff (1982; Los Angeles, CA: Orion Pictures, 1998), DVD.

⁵⁸ *Rocky*, directed by John G. Avildsen, (1976; Los Angeles, CA: United Artists, 1997), DVD.

⁵⁹ *Porky's*, directed by Bob Clark (1981; Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox, 1998), DVD.

⁶⁰ *Risky Business*, directed by Paul Brickman (1983; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 1997), DVD.

⁶¹ Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994). Jeffords provides a study of the overwhelming focus on hypermasculinity in 1980s Hollywood cinema; on teen sex comedies, see Timothy Shary. *Generation Multiplex: The Image of Youth in American Cinema Since 1980*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).

⁶² See the cover of *California*, July 1982. It is accessible at “Revenge of the Nerds.” *Voxcrock*, 4 July 2014, voxcrock.blogspot.com/2005/05/revenge-of-nerds.html.

⁶³ “Cover line” is a term for the text on the cover of a magazine that serves as a preview of the articles the issue contains. See “Skills,” *The Magazine Project*, <https://themagazineproject.weebly.com/skills.html>.

⁶⁴ *California*, July 1982.

⁶⁵ *California*, July 1982.

⁶⁶ *The Nutty Professor*, directed by Jerry Lewis, (1963: Hollywood, CA:Paramount Pictures, 2000), DVD.

⁶⁷ *California*, July 1982.

⁶⁸ Lee Butcher, *Accidental Millionaire: The Rise and Fall of Steve Jobs at Apple*, (New York: Paragon House, 1988), 112-113.

⁶⁹ Butcher, *Accidental Millionaire*, 112-113.

⁷⁰ Butcher, *Accidental Millionaire*, 112-113.

⁷¹ Paul Andrews. *How the Web Was Won: How Bill Gates and His Internet Idealists Transformed the Microsoft Empire*, (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), 8.

⁷² James Wallace and Jim Erickson. *Hard Drive: Bill Gates and the Making of the Microsoft Empire*. (New York: Wiley, 1992), 67.

⁷³ Wallace and Erickson, *Hard Drive*, 67.

⁷⁴ *Pirates of Silicon Valley*, directed by Martyn Burke, (1999; Atlanta: GA, TNT, 2005), DVD.

⁷⁵ Richard Dyer, *White*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 223.

⁷⁶ "Net Surf: On Hating Microsoft." *Wired*, April 1, 1996, <https://www.wired.com/1996/04/net-surf-14/>.

⁷⁷ Stross, *The Microsoft Way*, 1.

⁷⁸ Stross, *The Microsoft Way*, 4.

⁷⁹ Stross, *The Microsoft Way*, 44.

⁸⁰ Stross, *The Microsoft Way*, 45.

⁸¹ Stross, *The Microsoft Way*, 45.

⁸². Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1997), 226.

⁸³ Stephanie Ricker Schulte, *Cached: Decoding the Internet in Global Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 166. "Bill Gates and Microsoft were linked, personifying computer technology through the biography of one of its innovators."

⁸⁴ Jennifer Edstrom and Marlin Eller, *Barbarians Led By Bill Gates: Microsoft from the Inside: How the World's Richest Corporation Wields Its Power* (New York: H. Holt, 1998), 31.

⁸⁵ Mac History, "1984 Apple's Macintosh Commercial (HD)," February 1, 2012, video, 0:59, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtvjbmoDx-I&ab_channel=MacHistory.

⁸⁶ Edstrom and Eller, *Barbarians Led By Bill*, 47.

⁸⁷ Edstrom and Eller, *Barbarians Led By Bill*, 34-35.

⁸⁸ Wendy Rohm, *The Microsoft File: The Secret Case Against Bill Gates* (New York: Times Business, 1998), xii. "Like Rockefeller, Gates at various points has expressed his opinion that since he created markets, he should rightly own them. To both men market share was everything. Never mind all the short-term freebies and price cuts they had to give. Both knew it would all pay off down the road, as competition was eliminated and they were increasingly free to operate as they pleased."

⁸⁹ Edstrom and Eller, *Barbarians Led By Bill*, 42.

⁹⁰ Edstrom and Eller, *Barbarians Led By Bill*, 32.

⁹¹ Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" 228.

⁹² Wallace and Erickson, *Hard Drive*, 2-3.

CHAPTER 2

THE GAMER: SIMULATING HEGEMONIC AMERICAN MASCULINITY

¹ *Star Wars*, directed by George Lucas (1977; Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2004), DVD.

² J. M. Graetz, "The Origin of Spacewar," *Creative Computing* 7, no. 8, (1981).

³ Stewart Brand, "Spacewar: Fanatic Life and Symbolic Death Among the Computer Bums," *Rolling Stone* 7, 1972, 50-58.

⁴ Brand, "Spacewar," 50-58.

⁵ Brand, "Spacewar," 50-58.

⁶ Brand, "Spacewar," 50-58.

⁷ Steven Levy, *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*, 25th anniversary ed., (Sebastopol, CA: 2010), 43.

⁸ Scott Cohen, *Zap!: The Rise and Fall of Atari*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 16.

⁹ *Computer Space*, Nutting Associates, 1971.

¹⁰ *Pong*, Atari, 1972.

¹¹ Quoted in Cohen, *Zap!*, 16.

¹² Cohen, *Zap!*, 29.

¹³ Kayla McCarthy, “Remember Things: Consumerism, Nostalgia and Geek Culture in *Stranger Things*,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 52, no. 3, (2019): 665.

¹⁴ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1989), 285.

¹⁵ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 285.

¹⁶ *Space Invaders*, Taito, 1978.

¹⁷ *Pac-Man*, Namco, 1980.

¹⁸ Jerry Buckner and Gary Garcia, “Pac-Man Fever,” recorded 1981, track 1 on *Pac-Man Fever*, Columbia/CBS Records, vinyl LP.

¹⁹ Bruce Apar, “A Message to Readers of E. G.” *Electronic Games*, Winter 1982, 6.

²⁰ *Electronic Games*, Winter 1981.

²¹ Frank Laney Jr., “Welcome to ELECTRONIC GAMES.” *Electronic Games*, Winter, 1981, 6.

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²³ “Video Games!: The Entertainment Revolution,” 38.

²⁴ “Video Games!: The Entertainment Revolution,” 38.

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²⁶ Joel Selvin, “How Writer-Director’s Career Got Rolling,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 10, 2000, <https://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/How-Writer-Director-s-Career-Got-Rolling-2706013.php>.

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²⁸ Bill Kunkel and Frank Laney Jr. “What’s Next for Electronic Games?” *Electronic Games*, Winter 1981, 36.

²⁹ “Player’s Guide to Programmable Videogames.” *Electronic Games*, Winter 1981, 38.

³⁰ “Video Games!: The Entertainment Revolution,” 38.

³¹ Michael Z. Newman *Atari Age: The Emergence of Video Games in America*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), 2.

³² Advertisement for *Stampede*. *Pixelated Arcade*. March 1982, www.pixelatedarcade.com/games/stampede.

³³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972; London: Penguin 1990), 146. Citations refer to the 1990 edition.

³⁴ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 174.

³⁵ MYSATURDAYMORNINGS, “Stampede Atari 2600 1981 Commercial,” YouTube, July 17, 2012, video, 0:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yeQlaBsl6jg&ab_channel=MYSATURDAYMORNINGS

³⁶ *Gunfight*, Taito, 1975.

³⁷ *City Slickers*, directed by Ron Underwood (1991; Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1999), DVD.

³⁸ Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans*, 12.

³⁹ Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 55; Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans*, 12. Kocurek’s work brought Connell’s idea to my attention.

⁴⁰ Kent, Steven L. *The Ultimate History of Video Games: From Pong to Pokemon and Beyond – The Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*. (Roseville, CA: Prima, 2001), 468.

⁴¹ Rob Crossley, "Mortal Kombat: Violent Game That Changed Video Games Industry." BBC, June 2, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-27620071>.

⁴² L R, "Senate Judiciary Hearing on Violence in Video Games," YouTube. December 6, 2021, video, 2:48:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veMw1jfsZaw&ab_channel=LR.

⁴³ *Night Trap*. Sega, 1992.

⁴⁴ *Mortal Kombat*. Midway, 1992.

⁴⁵ *Doom*. id Software, 1993.

⁴⁶ L R "Senate Judiciary Hearing on Violence in Video Games."

⁴⁷ Eric Vero, "From Console Wars to Flame Wars: The Evolution of Masculinity in Video Games." (master's thesis, University of Waterloo, 2018), 52.

⁴⁸ Chris Kohler papers, Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play at The Strong, <https://archives.museumofplay.org/repositories/3/resources/151> Accessed July 07, 2023. This collection provides a great overview and insight into the gaming zine culture during the 1990s.

⁴⁹ Dale Beran, *It Came From Something Awful: How a Toxic Troll Army Accidentally Meme'd Donald Trump Into Office*. (New York: All Points Books, 2019), 40-41.

CHAPTER 3

GATEKEEPER NERDS: PRESUMED HIERARCHIES AND NERD MASCULINITY

¹ On cyber-separationism, see Daniel de Zeeuw and Marc Tuters, “Teh Internet Is Serious Business: On the deep vernacular web and Its Discontents,” *Cultural Politics* 16, no. 2, (2020): 214-232.

² Derek Burill, *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 3.

³ For an description of the privileged treatment provided to white male gamers by the video game industry see Leigh Alexander, “‘Gamers’ Don’t Have to Be Your Audience. ‘Gamers’ Are Over,” *Game Developer* August 28, 2014. <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/-gamers-don-t-have-to-be-your-audience-gamers-are-over-#close-modal>; on the ways in which American computer culture was marked as the domain of white male nerds: see Ron Eglash, “Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters,” *Social Text* 20, no. 2, (2002).

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⁵ Robert “redpaw” Jung, “Welcome to the Internet,” *Deelight.net*, 16 January 16, 2000, <https://deelight.net/editorials/redpaw/welcome.shtml>.

⁶ “Internets,” *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, last modified February 28, 2019, <https://encyclopedia.dramatica.online/Internets>

⁷ Stephen D. Crocker, “How the Internet Got Its Rules,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/07/opinion/07crocker.html>.

⁸ The two women who made contributions to the ARPANET were Elizabeth Feinler who ran the Network Information Center at the Stanford Research Institute and Radia Perlman who created the Spanning Tree Protocol which made the networking of computers much more stable and efficient. See Elizabeth Feinler, “The Network Information Center and Its Archives,” *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 32, no. 3, (2010): 83-89; Radia Perlman, “An Algorithm for Distributed Computation of a Spanningtree in an Extended LAN,” *ACM SIGCOMM Computer Communication Review* 15, no. 4, (1985): 44-53.

⁹ Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben, “The Evolution of Usenet: The Poor Man’s ARPANET,” *First Monday* 3, no. 7, (1998), <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/608>.

¹⁰ Kevin Driscoll, *The Modem World: A Prehistory of Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), 21.

¹¹ Whitney Phillips calls this style of rhetoric “androcentric.” See Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 42.

¹² Elyse Graham, “Boundary Maintenance and the Origins of Trolling,” *New Media & Society* 21, no. 9, (2019): 2029-2047.

¹³ The difference between the Internet and online services was that, until 1993, “online services” like AOL, Prodigy and Delphi gave their users access to content they could access by connecting to a network, but it was a *proprietary* network owned and curated by the individual company, so the users of these services did not have the freedom to connect to the other networks (primarily Usenet) that were open to outside connection.

¹⁴ For a thorough recounting of the Eternal September, see Wendy M. Grossman, “The Year September Never Ended” in *Net Wars* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 4-17.

¹⁵ On the conflict between veteran Usenet users and AOL users, see Wendy M. Grossman, “The Making of an Underclass: AOL,” in *Net Wars* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 31-41.

¹⁶ Dave Fischer, January 25, 1994 (8:58 PM), comment on Jeff Robertson, "longest USENET thread ever," alt.folklore.computers, January 19, 1994, <https://groups.google.com/g/alt.folklore.computers/c/wF4CpYbWuuA/m/jS6ZOyJd10sJ>

¹⁷ Grossman, *Net.wars*.

¹⁸ Quoted in Jason Koebler, “It’s September, Forever,” *Vice*, September 30, 2015, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/nze8nb/its-september-forever>.

¹⁹ Paul Callahan, January 8, 1994, (11:50 PM), comment on Joel Furr "Run! It's the Delphioids!" alt.folklore.computers, January 7 1994, (9:27 PM), <https://groups.google.com/g/alt.folklore.computers/c/47W6Q3S-ZD8/m/RV0csrWhf6cJ>.

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²³ Quoted in Philip Elmer-Dewitt, "Battle for the Soul of the Internet," *Time*, 144, no. 4, July 25, 1994.

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²⁵ Elmer-Dewitt, "Battle"

²⁶ On the historical white exclusivity of American suburbs, see Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2017); on historical disparities of Internet access based on race, class and other factors in America, see Jan van Dijk, *The Digital Divide*, (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020).

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1-46; Thomas Frank, "Preface: A Deadhead in Davos," in *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Democracy* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000); Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, The Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

²⁸ "World Wide Web Timeline." *Pew Research Center*, March 11, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/03/11/world-wide-web-timeline/>

²⁹ John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." *John Perry Barlow Library, Electronic Frontier Foundation*, 8 February 8, 1996, <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>

³⁰ Bob Dylan, "The Times They Are A-Changing," recorded October 1963, Track 1 on *The Times They Are A-Changing*, Columbia, vinyl LP.

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³² Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace."

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³⁴ Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace."

³⁵ Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace."

³⁶ Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace."

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⁴⁰ Jung, “Welcome to the Internet.”

⁴¹ Jung, “Welcome to the Internet.”

⁴² Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace.”

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⁴⁴ Jung, “Welcome to the Internet.”

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⁴⁸ Daemos, “Welcome to the Internet.”

⁴⁹ Megan Condis, *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture*, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 35.

⁵⁰ On the dot-com boom and the effects of e-commerce on Internet culture, see Megan Sapnar Ankerson, “E-Commerce Euphoria and the Auteurs of the New Economy (1998-2000),” in *Dot-Com Design: The Rise of a Usable, Social, Commercial Web* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 121-159

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⁵⁶ Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 175.

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⁶⁷ Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-right and Trump* (Washington: Zero Books, 2017), 112. Nagle argues that “female vanity” is “violently rejected in [4]chan culture because it is the defining feature of so much of mainstream social media and online culture.”

⁶⁸ Zeeuw and Tuters, “Teh Internet Is Serious Business.”

⁶⁹ Burill, *Die Tryin*’, 29.

⁷⁰ Zeeuw and Tuters, “Teh Internet Is Serious Business,” 215; Joseph Reagle. *Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

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⁷² Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, 21. “from about 2003 to 2011, subcultural trolls on and around 4chan’s /b/ board were responsible for creating, or at the very least amplifying, nearly every popular meme on the Internet.”

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⁷⁷ Sometimes 4chan’s slogan was made to appear even less serious through variations like “Teh Internet is Serious Business” or “Teh Internets is Serious Business.” Also, it should be noted that the Internet culture wiki *Know Your Meme* attributes the phrase to a forum called General Mayhem, but I’m particularly interested in its use on 4chan, and by 4chan users, since that is by far the more influential site and community. See “The Internet is Serious Business.”

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⁷⁸ Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, 68.

⁷⁹ On the acceptance of trolling, see Condis, *Gaming Masculinity*, 35; On the misogynistic stereotype of fake geek girls, see Susanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).

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⁹⁴ Jon Hendren, "June 4, 2011: Smash Mouth." *Something Awful*, June 4, 2011, <https://www.somethingawful.com/twitter-tuesday/tt6-4-2011/1/>.

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⁹⁸ manyak, October 12, 2011, (10:51 PM), comment on a Loving Dog, "Aauuuuuugh yeah folks, Docevil here."

⁹⁹ C.J. Pascoe, *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 65.

¹⁰⁰ Pascoe, *Dude, You're a Fag*, 5.

¹⁰¹ Pascoe, *Dude, You're a Fag*, 54.

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¹⁰⁴ banyak. October 14, 2011, (9:33 AM), comment on a Loving Dog, "Aauuuuuugh yeah folks, Docevil here."

¹⁰⁵ Pascoe, *Dude, You're a Fag*, 57.

¹⁰⁶ Editor's note in Hendren "In The Club... with Jon Hendren."

¹⁰⁷ While iDubbbz kept his last name private, his first name, Ian, is widely known. Furthermore, because he appeared on camera, his identity will always be connected to the videos he made.

¹⁰⁸ AnthonyPadilla. "iDubbbz Addresses Controversial Past." YouTube, March 10, 2023, video, 37:33, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9Ct5nKarIU&t=4s&ab_channel=AnthonyPadilla.

¹⁰⁹ iDubbbz *did* recently apologize, repudiated his earlier content as morally wrong, and took down the most offensive videos, but I am studying his work and his persona as a historical text, part of a socially constructed discourse that exists independently of his current feelings

about it. His apology can be found here: iDubbbzTV. “I Miss the Old iDubbbz.” YouTube, May 18, 2023, video, 17:25, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRkCfOuW_u0&ab_channel=iDubbbzTV.

¹¹⁰ iDubbbzTV. “Content Cop – Busting JINX RELOAD.” YouTube, December 13, 2015, video, 12:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrhWjEoRuBA&t=6s&ab_channel=iDubbbzTV

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¹¹³ Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, 97.

¹¹⁴ Jung, “Welcome to the Internet.”

¹¹⁵ For an example of iDubbbz being called a racial slur and a homophobic slur and turning it into a joke, see iDubbbzTV. “FAN MAIL Christmas Special – Bad Unboxing.” YouTube, December 25, 2015, video, 10:48, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CILtecVvI3Q>; For an example of iDubbbz being called an ablist and homophobic slurs and turning *those* into a joke, see iDubbbzTV. “Indiegogo Excrement - \$2000 SJW Laptop.” YouTube, November 14, 2014, video, 10:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oji9sBvdU7o>.

¹¹⁶ The video was deleted by YouTube for bullying, funnily enough, but a reupload can be found at Comment Police. “Content Cop – Leafy (Reupload).” YouTube, December 11, 2019, video, 18:52, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e08xNRqr2HU&t=862s&ab_channel=CommentPolice.

¹¹⁷ Comment Police. “Content Cop – Leafy (Reupload).”

¹¹⁸ Pascoe, *Dude You’re a Fag*, 5.

¹¹⁹ Comment Police. “Content Cop – Leafy (Reupload).”

¹²⁰ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 28.

¹²¹ Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 30.

¹²² Nux Taku. “The Man I Looked up to Most - Pimp to Simp (iDubbbz).” YouTube, March 30 2020, video, 21:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9yhQL3cVPyc&list=PLrds_GMSMOeKQ2d_zIF5wJn4QFRKOsX&index=16&t=149s&ab_channel=NuxTaku

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CHAPTER 4

THE MALADAPTIVE NERD: BASEMENT DWELLERS, KILLERS, JOKERS, AND TROLLS

¹ Whitney Phillips Describes the “Golden Years” of deep vernacular web culture sites like 4chan as “2008-2011.” See Phillips, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things*, 49.

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CONCLUSION

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