ANASTASIA SALTER & BRIDGET BLODGETT

TOXIC GEEK MASCULINITY IN MEDIA

SEXISM, TROLLING, AND IDENTITY POLICING

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Preface

Geek-centered and inspired productions have accelerated their march into the mainstream with many recent events—including the success of Marvel's cinematic universe, the rising popularity of video games, and even theatrical screenings of episodes of *Doctor Who*—all bringing geek culture into the spotlight. This rising power and visibility has brought renewed attention to the geek identity's hostility to marginalized groups, including, but certainly not limited to, women. The marginalization of women in geek culture can seem odd when viewed numerically: women compose a large part of the audience of these media. However, they are underrepresented among creators, and mostly invisible or secondary in the works themselves. We examine the state of geek cultural identity and the self-fulfilling prophecy of "geekdom" as a space where women are continually marginalized and instrumentalized instead of given voice. Our focus is on reading digital popular culture as a testimonial and manifesto of geek identity. Examining the identity politics and construction of the geek "hero" can reveal the ways in which these texts across media are encoded with a defensiveness of geek as other that is out of touch with the reality of culture. In turn, this disconnect has grave consequences for the space of women and men both in these texts and communities, as has recently been demonstrated through movements such as Gamergate. These expressions of toxic masculinity and identity policing have given rise to a question from both the media and the community: what aspects of geek culture provide rich fuel for these surges of hostility?

The authors of this work both identify as American geeks and fans as well as scholars dedicated to media studies through different disciplinary lenses.

The franchises, stories, and heroes under discussion here are the same characters that we have grown up with, plastered on office walls, and followed through adaptations and remakes. We have stood in line for the *Star Wars* prequels, attended midnight launch parties for *Harry Potter* novels, and even sat in a theater for a special showing of the extended editions of the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. And yes, we've written fanfiction, obsessively followed shipper tags and fan artists on Tumblr, and engaged in many heated late-night debates over the adaptation choices of *Game of Thrones*. The heroes under examination here are our heroes: the characters we grew up with, and are still growing up with, should not be immune from analysis and critique. While we acknowledge that some critics might be concerned with the positioning of two women-assigned authors of a study on geek masculinity, we believe that this study is not merely concerned with toxic geek masculinity but with the continual rejection and negative framing of femininity within geek spaces: it is impossible to discuss one without addressing both. Throughout, we engage and reject the false binary of masculine/feminine as well as the identities of man and woman: we understand "man" and "woman" to be identity categories including both cis and trans men and women. However, representations of cis men and women dominate geek media, and representation of trans men and women as well as nonbinary, genderqueer, and other gender-nonconforming people remains a distant goal that this discourse of toxic masculinity plays a role in restricting. As we've navigated our own identities as fans, academics, and geeks, we have been continually aware of the challenges of the outsider, and it has informed much of our previous collaborative research on the positioning of non-cis man as other in STEM and the games community.

Our intention is to explore how geek identity has taken assumptions of marginalization as foundational. The perceived status of geek identity as marginalized and threatened even as geek culture has become mainstreamed are contradictory forces at play in the current battle over the renegotiation of the geek identity. To understand this construction, we will look at the very nature of the hero in geek-marketed media, both in spaces marked for science fiction and fantasy and in narratives that seek to reflect geek culture back at itself. These dueling visions of geek-as-victim and geek-as-hero give rise to the hypermasculine geek, an identity forged by rejecting both feminine-marked culture and constructions as well as the traditional athletic male aesthetic. We explore how this identity's relationship to established cultural hierarchies makes it difficult for geekdom to reconcile itself with its new dominant position in pop culture even as it remains dedicated to an identity as the outsider hero: an archetype seen everywhere from

Supernatural to *Firefly* to *Doctor Who*. The challenge to this archetype by those the geek community views as outsiders results in tensions and struggles sending ripples throughout both popular culture and the larger STEM community. These have become more and more pronounced with geek culture's apparent increasing significance and visibility. Over the past few years, we have witnessed the rise of gamer collectives dedicated to excluding women and feminists through movements such as Gamergate, increased attention to hostilities towards women at comic and film conventions, and the continual harassment and threats towards women across geek media who become visible as producers or fans.

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Introduction: Actually, It's about Toxic Geek Masculinity…

Flip the channels in the early evening and, inevitably, sitcom after sitcom will fill the screen. Surprisingly, one show dominates the current schedule of repeats. *The Big Bang Theory* (Cendrowski 2007–) follows the lives of a group of scientists who spend much of their time in a California apartment filled to the brim with all the hallmarks of geek culture. First-time viewers of the show might be surprised that nearly everyone is even more socially awkward than geeky-friend sitcom characters such as dinosaur-loving Ross of *Friends* (Crane and Kauffman 1994–2004) or architect Ted from *How I Met Your Mother* (Fryman 2005–2014). Unlike the relatively tasteful apartments of the love life-obsessed characters of those other long-running sitcoms, the California dwelling of *The Big Bang Theory*'s central geeks, Leonard and Sheldon, is dominated by technology. Superhero models stare down from the bookshelves, a telescope is clearly visible, and iconic t-shirts of comic heroes and video game characters are a frequent wardrobe choice. In one episode, the exaggerated pixelated breasts of a woman fill the screen of a multiplayer video game as the show's three central young white men, dressed in appropriately geeky shirts and wearing glasses, look on. Their conversation centers on the video game character:

Leonard Hofstadter:	We're supposed to be encouraging women to study science. Can you at least play a less sexist game?
Sheldon Cooper:	I don't see anything sexist. She can handle a battle-axe as well as any man.

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Howard Wolowitz: And she has mammary glands that can breast feed a family of thirty and have enough milk left over to open a Baskin-Robbins.

Sheldon Cooper: Mother, warrior princess, small business owner, I see glass ceilings shattering all over the place. (Cendrowski 2013)

In this episode, entitled "The Contractual Obligation Implementation," the show takes on the marginalization of women in the sciences by sending three of its geeky male-scientist leads back to middle school to talk to girls about scientific careers. Their plan is hatched in part over a console game whose hypersexualized avatars reflect the stark realities and entrenched binaries of women's roles in geek spaces. As the conversation above demonstrates, the characters are deeply lacking in self-awareness regarding their roles in a sexist workplace, and this same lack of understanding is constantly played for humor. As the episode continues, the two geeky female love interests are brought in on the phone to be the voice of women mentors speaking to the middle-school girls about their potential future careers in science. However, their words come at a distance, and are undermined by the circumstances shown to the camera: the women are taking a trip to Disneyland, costumed as princesses and re-applying their lipstick even as they share the familiar refrain that brains are just as important as looks. This episode is typical of the type of empty feminism that often shows up in geek culture. Sheldon's words are particularly familiar: "I don't see anything sexist. She can handle a battleaxe as well as any man" suggests that the construction of the woman as avatar to primarily appeal to a masculine gaze is perfectly equitable as long as she has the same strength. Likewise, the show's own geeky women characters are presented as scientific equals to most of the leading geek men, but their protestations of the importance of brains over beauty are undermined by their pursuit of ultra-feminine Disney princess costuming. The point is further undermined when the women are shown shortly after using their princess-ified selves as fuel for sexual encounters with their male counterparts, who in most cases are immediately drawn to the "princess" with a fervor otherwise rarely displayed. In aggregate, the episode's message about women geeks ends with their reduction to objects for the masculine gaze, not unlike the very avatar of the battleaxe-wielding fantasy woman in Sheldon's video game.

The Big Bang Theory has already had an impressive run on television, with ten seasons as of 2017 and no end in sight: as of March 20, the show was renewed for two more seasons (Andreeva 2017). Throughout the show's

impressive arc, we see many similar moments that pull into the foreground the construction of the binary of masculine and the feminine in geek culture. *The Big Bang Theory* revolves around four male scientists whose social awkwardness, physical frailty, and obsession with comic books and science fiction mark them as "epic" geeks. On paper, they seem an unlikely crew to fuel one of the more successful television comedies of the past decade. They occupy classic archetypes fully, with continual jokes surrounding their inability to engage in or understand sports and their general lack of attractiveness to women. However, the show's blend of humor and wish-fulfillment in the form of attractive women love interests for the leads has proven a strong draw for viewers and, importantly, captured geek identity at a time of its transitioning headfirst into mainstream culture. Characters on *The Big Bang Theory* are strongly typed as either geek or non-geek, and various guest characters are continually brought in as a reminder of an alternative masculinity that these four (encumbered as they are by all the limitations that go with geek identity) cannot hope to participate in. Leonard's love interest and neighbor Penny, cast in the role of the waitress "beauty" to the scientist geeks "beasts," often partners with men who represent a more traditional hypermasculine ideal as expressed through physical dominance, an interest in sports and beer, and a complete disdain for the intellectual and "geeky" past-times of the main group. The psychological concept of the hypermasculine as defined by Parrott and Zeichner (2003) has its roots in the exaggeration of masculine cultural stereotypes, usually with a corresponding hostility towards the feminine, as chiefly characterized in American popular culture through the jock or "bad boy." The dichotomy of *Big Bang Theory*'s geeks and jocks suggests that this elevation of the hypermasculine is still intact; yet, in the show's cultural clashes, the geeks usually win. In his 2011 update to his book on *Nerds*, David Anderegg noted the show as part of the increasing visibility of nerd and geek stereotypes:

> The show demonstrates that people who are gifted in science and math also love comic books, have no social skills and no sense of humor, and cannot get a girl no matter what … The progress supposedly represented by *The Big Bang Theory* is that nerds and geeks are no longer presented as hateful or disgusting … they're harmless.

The audience is invited to laugh with and at them as they fumble through encounters with women and society and yet still somehow get the girl.

The idea of the extremely geeky male lead flexing his particular form of masculinity to craft social and sexual success is nothing new: one iconic

example is *Revenge of the Nerds*, a 1984 comedy centered on a fraternity of geeks trying to gain a place on their college campus (Kanew). *Revenge of the Nerds* continually pitted traditional masculinity in the form of the highly athletic fraternity of "jocks" against its group of nerds, who together represented both a rejection of the traditional hypermasculine and a new form of fraternity, still offering a highly masculine space but with different requirements for entry. The movie takes the battle between geeks and jocks to a next level by looking not just at student conflict but at institutional power struggles, as the jock-turned-university leader wields all the power and the geeks are pitted against the institution itself. This model suggests that geeks are defined by their powerlessness within traditional spaces, and thus have to carve out and build their own institutions and definitions of masculinity in which to excel. Thirty years later, this alternate form of hypermasculinity has manifested much more broadly in popular culture, while keeping its distance from the traditionally feminine. The fundamental concepts of the film are still so resonant that the film provided the foundation for the narrative of Pixar's 2013 *Monsters University*, which featured two young monsters leading a misfit band of unthreatening fraternity brothers through a monstrous version of the Greek Games (Scanlon). Thus, while the geek who gets the girl many not be a new narrative, the geek who gets the sitcom lead and the space of cultural icon does represent a major shift.

That shift represents a geek cultural revolution. In addition to these "geeks" at the center of a mainstream sitcom, we can see top-box office-earning and critically acclaimed comic book movies on an unprecedented scale, British science fiction shows with tie-in clothing lines at Hot Topic, television coverage of video game tournaments, new *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* movies receiving constant attention, and plenty of editorials proclaiming the age of the geek. The consumer aspect of geek culture has grown particularly dominant, as fandom has emerged from being viewed as an outsider culture to an integral part of the experience of media. Social media has particularly enabled this trend, as viewers of the same show gather using hashtags on Twitter, share memes and insider knowledge on Tumblr, and complain bitterly about bad season finales or cliffhangers on Facebook. These are platforms built and powered by geeks that have relied upon geeks as a base of support for building their cultural capital. Visibly consuming and displaying one's love of geek culture is now not only normal but easier than ever before. Some of this can be viewed as an inevitable consequence of the increasing importance of technology and tech-related culture to the success of any individual, particularly in American culture: the web and its influence on business is inescapable. It is significant that devices once associated with

geekdom are now not only mainstream but indispensable parts of everyone's daily workflow and social habits. However, this transition reflects more than just the increased visibility of cultural spaces once labeled as the terrain of geeky fans alone.

This mainstreaming of geek culture has followed a similar cycle of recuperation, as Hebdige (1999) observed in his seminal work on subcultures. However, while Hebdige looked at subcultures where subcultural signs of significance were conveyed primarily through things like dress and music, the major mass productions emerging from geek culture have taken the form of media adaptations. Superhero sagas have leapt from comic book stores to morning cartoons to cult films to blockbuster chart-toppers, while video games and even the occasional science fiction or fantasy novel launches at midnight to large groups of fans. The narrative media of geek subculture space, once a way to identify and commune with fellow geeks, has inarguably leapt into mainstream culture. This process of recuperation has inevitably spawned resistance, which is particularly found in the drawing of stricter boundaries around geek identity and geek-coded spaces to keep outsiders out.

Defining the Geek

Geek is a contested term: it is a label that gets applied to others and historically is associated with mockery and outsider status. The term is particularly US centric, and might be understood in other contexts as nerd, fanboy or fangirl, otaku, etc. But over the last two decades it has shifted significantly to become an insider label: a self-identified term that brings with it a connection to an apparent subculture that is increasingly dominant both in popular media and in US economic and cultural structures. The story of geeks and geek masculinity is thus an essential part of the story of masculinity as represented in media more broadly. This popularity and mainstreaming means the term is currently overused and widely applied; however, its origins reveal an essential alignment with a type of toxic straight white masculinity that is rooted deeply in current cultural struggles.

Following the history of increased computer dependency in parallel to the mainstreaming of geekdom leads us back to the young Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, both precursors of today's geek-as-savior and leader tropes. These two geek icons provided the inspiration for their own popular culture spin-off in the form of *The Pirates of Silicon Valley*, a made-for-TV movie that originally aired on TNT and chronicled the birth of the central empires of early Silicon Valley and with it the birth of a tech and

start-up culture that would elevate geekdom into something financially desirable and world changing (Burke 1999). The film cast young Noah Wyle and Anthony Michael Hall against one another, taking the stories of Apple and Microsoft's founding and shaping them into mythology. These real-world geek icons became part of the fabric of geek identity, helping to perpetuate the archetype of the geek: socially awkward, glasses-wearing white men—but now with the potential to emerge from their parents' basements and garages to craft the technologies of the future. Like the nerds in *Revenge of the Nerds*, these geeks were heralded as disrupting existing institutions, in this case of business and technology. The narrative of the undesirable, marginalized outsider was becoming the story of tomorrow's tech titans. This film was only one facet of the cultural force that these geeks would represent: other movies, such as *WarGames* (Badham 1983), *Hackers* (Softley 1995), and *Sneakers* (Robinson 1992), featured similar young white male geek heroes in fictional stories.

The web itself is filled with testaments to the formation of geek identity and culture during these early days. In 1994, a website called The Armory launched from a self-labeled "geek house" in Santa Cruz, California. The website was typical of the early web—minimalist in design and assuming a degree of technical interest and competence on the part of the user. The Armory is host to a number of purity tests, a concept that originated from written checklists to determine a person's lack of purity through yes or no questions. As of 2017, the site is still home to several of the first definitive purity tests placed on the web: the Nerd Purity Test and the Geek Purity Test (DuBois 1994). The two tests put into focus the categories of nerd and geek as imagined by the self-labeled group of test creators: while the nerd tests focus primarily on knowledge, the geek purity test consists of a hundred questions. Both tests reflect the contested territory of nerd-versus-geek as social labels, as debated heavily by the early web community. The first twenty-seven questions on the Geek Test are social and include:

- Do you not have a girl/boyfriend?
- Do you relate better to computers than to people?
- Do you like your computer more than life itself?
- Do you treat your computer better than your significant other? (The Armory 1994)

As a testament to geek stereotypes, these social questions remain revealing, suggesting that even if a geek defies odds and manages to have a relationship, that relationship will still be made difficult by the very nature of

the geek's obsession and lack of social skills. *The Big Bang Theory*'s Sheldon Cooper acts as a living embodiment of most of the elements identified on this list. The second set of fifty-six questions are more technically focused, covering ownership of technology and knowledge of programming languages and including the memorable and highly gendered question "Is your computer's case size comparitive [*sic*] to your manhood (a phallic symbol)?" (The Armory 1994). The remaining 46 questions devolve further, suggesting that true geeks have poor personal hygiene and questionable public behavior:

- Do you change your sheets less than once a month?
- Do you adjust yourself in public?
- Do you piss all ove [*sic*] toilet seats in public places?

While the nature of purity tests involves progressing to extremes for humor, there's an earnestness to the set of questions and the very idea of the test as determinant. This collection of requirements still offers a glimpse into a common definition of geekdom, even twenty years later. The test ends with the reminder "The more yes answers you give, the more Geek you are. If you got 0%, then you too can work for UCSC" (The Armory 1994). A low Geek or Nerd test purity score (that is, a high level of geekdom or nerdiness based on the test standards) remains a marker of pride and used to be included on forum signatures and profiles. Likewise, Robert Hayden's "Geek Code" evolved as a way to recognize different types of geeks, with the last official version published in 1996, while the concept has lived on. Such tests suggest the quantifiable and shared identifiers that united geek culture with the rise of the Internet as a communal geek space, enabling feelings of exclusivity and power particularly as computers, and thus the tools of geeks, became more essential to everyone's life. The very existence of these tests and quantifiers suggest an anxiety of belonging and identity formation with very structured measures for inclusion and the promise from those on the other side of the computer screen that you are not alone. They also form the basis for an explicit ranking system by which members can measure their own centrality to the community and judge those less aligned.

Users of the Internet have thus been frequently associated with geek subculture despite the fact that everyone who participates in mainstream American culture is now living a life integrated with and by the web. From the early archetypes of the Internet user, a number of on-screen geek and nerd archetypes were born. Lauren Rosewarne (2016) surveys these exhaustively in her examination of media stereotypes of Internet users,

suggesting the hierarchy of portrayals has splintered to include the Netgeek, Neckbeard, Cyberbully, Hacker, Cyberpredator, and Cyberperv, with the Netgeek typically portrayed as the most harmless of the lot. All of these stereotypes are associated with masculinity: as Rosewarne observes, "since its inception, the Internet has largely been thought of as male—dominated by men, shaped by men, *understood by men* [original emphasis]. Certainly, as illustrated via the high number of male netgeek characters, the Internet is still frequently presented on screen as gendered" (39).

In her study of masculinity among computer-using men during the era of geek codes and forums Lori Kendall (1999) noted how "nerds" on computer forums—themselves young and mostly white—worked to emphasize their own masculinity while distancing themselves from women and sexuality. Studies of geeks more recently have noted how little has changed: Éva Zékány's survey of the geek in cyberspace noted that across all definitions of "geekiness" masculinity remains a defining quality (Zékány and Cerwonka 2011). While the Geek Test described above made some efforts at gender inclusivity, the masculine-typed behaviors still dominated many of the questions. This is despite the apparent contradiction between geek-signifiers and the expressions identified with masculinity. If anything, computer-aided interactions seem to be an opportunity to perform the hypermasculine (particularly through aggression and violence) without possessing any of the associated physical qualities, as Erica Scharrer's (2004) analysis of gender and aggression in video game advertisements as of 2004 suggests: "male characters were often presented as very muscular … [and] the pursuit of danger as thrill was fairly common. Further, the number of male nonhuman characters in the ad was associated with violence, providing a link between masculinity and physical aggression." Scharrer's analysis suggested only some correspondence with other hypermasculine markers (such as callousness toward sex and the manliness of violence), but those themes find their expression in video games themselves.

This tension between the geek stereotype portrayed in the Geek Test and touted even in self-identified geek culture and the hypermasculine characters geeks embody through popular culture narratives is one site of cognitive dissonance in geek identity. Video game narratives offer heroic male avatars and passive women: Yi Mou and Wei Peng's (2008) examination of video game trailers noted that "female characters are predominantly supporting characters, who are either to be rescued or assistants to the leading male character … the attire and body image of the female characters are often very sexy … yet male characters are portrayed in a normal or masculinized

way." This echoes trends in popular culture, particularly the science fiction and fantasy genres often associated with geekdom and included as part of the knowledge and identity sections on many geek and nerd tests. Likewise, pop culture holds recurring examples of the geek turned hero, often through either redefined masculinity or context. In *The Last Starfighter* (1984) a teenage white male arcade game virtuoso is picked up by a head-hunting alien to fight battles in space; in *Captain America*: *The First Avenger* (Johnston 2011) and *Spider-Man* (Raimi 2002) wimpy, geeky men are abruptly transformed into traditional icons of hypermasculine power. These characters perform the same type of heroism that gamers can embody through avatars like Duke Nukem and Commander Shepard (discussed in Chap. 4), adopting qualities rarely associated with the stereotypes of geekdom.

Playing at Hero

In most of these narratives, geeks either play or are encouraged to identify with the hero. Popular culture reinforces the connection between geeks and heroic icons, particularly superheroes. When Sheldon, Leonard, and the rest of the *Big Bang Theory* crew dress up for Hallowe'en, they don the costumes of the superheroes they worship in comics. Penny's presence in the group (portraying Wonder Woman) along with her current boyfriend (as Superman) aids them in winning a costume contest as the Justice League of America. The episode begins with the four geeks meeting Penny's boyfriend Zack and noting his lack of intelligence:

Zack:	No, I'm almost sure that it was the Discovery Channel. It was a great show. They also said dolphins might be smarter than people.
Leonard:	They might be smarter than some people.
Zack:	Well, maybe we can do an experiment to find out.
Sheldon:	Oh, that's easy enough. We'd need a large tank of water, a hoop to jump through, and a bucket of whatever bite-sized treats you find tasty.
Zack:	I don't get it.
Leonard:	A dolphin might.
Zack:	Oh, I see. You guys are inferring that I'm stupid.
Sheldon:	That's not correct. We were implying it. You then inferred it.
Zack:	Let's go.

Penny: You know, for a group of guys who claim they spent most of their lives being bullied, you can be real jerks. Shame on all of you.

The contrast between Zack and Sheldon suggests a strong dichotomy in hegemonic masculinity-versus-geek masculine stereotypes: Zack is athletic, successful with women, and dumb, while Sheldon is wimpy, socially incapable, and generally marked by his indifference to women. The binary leaves no room for friendship or overlap: Zack and Penny are of value to the group for their physical resemblance to Wonder Woman and Superman in winning the costume contest, but that is where the resemblance and connection ends. As Penny's comment declares, the bullied have become the bullies, secure in the inaccessibility of their references and discourse to an outsider with insufficient knowledge to participate. Sheldon and Leonard are almost gleeful in this display of superiority—a display not unlike those that take place online in forums and social media every day.

If this discussion of bullying and purity tests makes geek identity sound trapped in adolescence, that's only appropriate. It is no coincidence that many of the works dominating geek culture right now belong to the category of "Young Adult," which Patty Campbell (2010) has defined as being primarily concerned with "becoming an adult." The process of becoming an adult in American popular culture is associated with acts of rebellion, with defining oneself against and within society through group identity. The popular image of the geek is adolescent, or arrested adolescent, thanks in part to the assumption of a stunted maturity that accompanies a stronger relationship with a computer than with other people. The worlds of comics are continually rebooting, often with their own adolescent heroes experiencing their rise to manhood as with Peter Parker's lesson that "With great power comes great responsibility." This leaves comics caught in transitional struggles, but with no consequences or maturity waiting on the other side: even the most dramatic development can be rewritten, and characters rarely age to face the long-term outcomes of their decisions. Similarly, the geeks for whom these characters act as role models are left without a figurehead to help navigate the deeper waters of adulthood and its associated responsibilities. This can lead to taking the opposite moral from Spiderman's motto—"With no power comes no responsibility"—a slogan found on posters for Kevin Smith's movie about arrested geeks, *Clerks II* (2006). Lacking in any guidance, they seek out the only path of discovery they really know, rehashing the struggle for adulthood repeatedly instead of leaving it behind for a new type of personal growth. Many of the genres associated with geek culture (primarily, science