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Abstract

For thirty-five years or so, the press has periodically announced the “revenge of the nerds.” But categories like nerd and geek have no essential definitions; rather, they index social relationships. I define “nerd culture” as a field generated by practices of connoisseurship and criticism oriented towards cultural forms like comic books, games, and certain literary and media genres. Existing studies typically focus on representations of nerds or on individual communities of practice, ignoring either real people or the field’s full scope. This dissertation, by contrast, analyzes one Canadian city’s “nerd-culture scene.”

First, I examine institutions sustaining the scene. Community organizations and specialty retailers circulate valued subcultural capital, such as knowledge and collectibles, and act as infrastructures for the scene’s reproduction. Individuals working in these spaces mediate between producers and consumers, configuring the scene through their gatekeeping labour. But they operate under constraints, as well—not least that their dispositions are shaped by their own experiences of nerd culture.

Second, I interviewed individuals involved with one or more nerd-culture practices. All interviewees evidenced a “scholastic disposition” informed by their experiences of schooling. This lay theory of education also influenced how they interpreted their participation in nerd culture. Accounts of their “careers” in the subculture, from initial recruitment and deepening engagements to eventual durability or decline, are also examined. Finally, I analyze their experiences of community among nerds. Community-making is a routine feature of their participation but is also subject to external limitations such as time, money, and adult responsibilities.

Practitioners’ shared orientations enable them to produce relatively communalized social relationships, even in an individualizing consumer society. The so-called mainstreaming of nerd culture offers opportunities to extend the scope of these relationships but also threatens these communities’ autonomy. This dissertation makes explicit the practical—and therefore morally significant—character of nerd culture, providing a basis for policy-makers, community leaders and ordinary participants to defend these media-oriented practices and their related goods.

Keywords: nerds; geeks; mass media audiences; practice theory; qualitative methods
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My dissertation argues that community is a collective accomplishment, and eight years in grad school has only reinforced that conclusion. I should especially like to thank Sara Grimes, Leslie Meier, Neil Narine, and Jamie Rennie; Danielle Deveau, Dylan Mulvin, Siobhán Quinn, and Becky Scott (to evil!); the members of my Dissertation Support Group; and Catherine Hart, Masa Iwase, Chris Jeschelnik, Maggie Macaulay, Jay McKinnon, Marcos Moldes, Rob Prey, Milan Singh, Scott Timcke, Graeme Webb, Jeff Whyte, and Ayaka Yoshimizu—thanks for the lulz, guys. Outside the School of Communication’s tight embrace, I want to thank Lydia Cruttwell, Tracy Russell and Dave Wager, the gang at the Vancouver Comic Jam, and my extended circle of internet pals.

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Transcription Notation

Interview transcripts are presented using a highly simplified version of the notation system originally developed by Gail Jefferson and widely used by conversation analysts. Quotations have been edited slightly for clarity, length. Except for simple substitutions to disguise identifying information, changes and omissions are indicated with [brackets].

underline Underlined text indicates emphasis or stress
...

Ellipses indicate a pause

you know? Question marks, particularly in the middle of a sentence, indicate rising intonation

um:, uh:: Colons indicate a prolongation of the previous syllable or sound, with more colons signifying longer time

hh, 'hh Aitches indicate an exhalation or, when preceded by a tick, an inhalation; longer breaths are signified by additional letters

((laughs))) Double parentheses indicate a non-verbal utterance or action

( ), (word) Single parentheses indicate unclear audio; text enclosed in single parentheses is a possible hearing of the unclear word or phrase
Glossary and List of Acronyms

anime  Japanese animation, whether produced for television, direct-to-video release ("original video animation") or feature-film distribution.

APA  “Amateur Press Association.” Sometimes pronounced “appa” rather than spelled out as an acronym. A means of organizing the production and distribution of fanzines. Each contributor sends copies of the pages they have produced or a complete zine to a volunteer who collates and mails the collected contributions to the association’s members.


campaign setting  In RPGs, the fantasy world in which the game takes place. Often refers to professionally produced settings, such as D&D’s Forgotten Realms, which are available as a series of reference books. More successful settings have been licensed for use in other media, such as comic books and video games. Some GMs prefer to devise their own settings.

casual game  A genre of digital game, often played on mobile devices (smartphones and tablets) or social media websites (e.g., Facebook). The distinction is with the genres and platforms preferred by self-identifying “gamers,” which typically involve more specialized skills and longer play sessions.

CCG  “Collectible Card Game.” A game that uses of specially produced playing cards and generally involve players in one-on-one play. Collecting cards, which are distributed more or less randomly but may sometimes be bought through a secondary collectors’ market, and assembling decks before play are a major components of the game. The three most popular CCGs are Magic: The Gathering, Yu-Gi-Oh!, and Pokémon. The CCG version of Legend of the Five Rings (also a campaign setting for D&D) was also encountered during fieldwork.

con  A convention.

cosplay  A form of fan activity that involves dressing up as characters from comics, film/television, and video games. Originally associated with otaku, cosplay is increasingly a feature of Western cons.

D&D  The role-playing game (RPG) Dungeons & Dragons. One of the earliest and most successful RPGs, D&D is now published by Wizards of the Coast (also publishers of the CCG Magic: The Gathering).

DM  “Dungeon Master.” The term used in D&D for a Game Master, or GM.

European game  See German game.

fanzine  An amateur magazine. Some covered a genre/form as a whole (e.g., SF or comics), while others focused on individual creators or programs. Often exchanged in a quasi-barter system (either traded for another fanzine or for
some contribution to a future issue) or sold for a nominal fee.

**filk**  
Fannish music. Like traditional folk music, to which it is implicitly compared it often makes use of familiar and popular tunes as settings for new lyrics. These often reference or parody SF&F texts or fan culture. “Filksings” are common features at cons.

**floppy**  

**GAFIA**  
“Get Away From It All.” To gafiate is to take a hiatus from fan activity.

**German game**  
An approach to board-game design popularly associated with German designers and publishers. Well-known examples include *The Settlers of Catan* and *Carcassonne*. In contrast to “Ameritrash” games, they tend to reduce the influence of chance, limit game length, and emphasize strategic decision-making and/or resource management. Many have become available in North America, and they are increasingly influential on North American designers.

**GM**  
“Game Master.” In an RPG, the player responsible for devising the scenario and controlling all game and story elements other than the characters controlled by other players. Some players and GMs adopt a playfully antagonistic relationship, with players claiming their function is to undermine or disrupt the GM’s plans and the GM attempting to devise situations that will kill at least some player characters.

**graphic novel**  
A book-length comic. The term is perceived to hold more legitimacy than comic book and is closely associated with more “literary” cartoonists.

**LARP**  
“Live-Action Role-Playing” or “Live-Action Role-Playing game.” A variation on RPGs in which players dress up in costumes and enact the game with their bodies in a physical space.

**manga**  
Japanese comics. Most are serialized in anthology magazines and subsequently collected in a *tankobon* several chapters at a time. Long-running series may produce dozens of *tankobon* volumes. A number of North American companies (some of which are subsidiaries of Japanese publishers) publish manga under licence.

**miniatures game**  
Sometimes referred to as “tactical” or “strategic” miniatures games or “miniatures wargaming,” miniatures games use scale models to represent characters or units involved in a combat scenario. Play is one-on-one, and game boards typically feature model terrain. Some players simulate or recreate historical battles, while others play fantasy or sci-fi themed games (e.g., *Warhammer*, *Warmachine* and *Blood Bowl*). Most games require players to purchase metal models and paint them; as in a CCG, planning the collection of units that make up your army is a significant part of the game. There are also a number of collectible miniatures games (e.g., *D&D Miniatures*) in which cheaper, plastic models are sold randomly in packs.

**MMORPG**  
“Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game.” A genre of digital game distinguished by a persistent virtual world in which many players can be
active at the same time.

mundane Non-fans. The level of derogation implied varies between speakers. Traditional among SF fans; also used in the SCA, though “modern” is officially preferred.

NES “Nintendo Entertainment System.” The “original” Nintendo video game console, popularly believed to have resurrected the home gaming market. Known as the Famicom (“Family Computer”) in Japan.

otaku Often considered the Japanese equivalent of nerd and geek, though it has a distinct history and connotations in Japan. Some Western fans of manga and anime have adopted it for themselves.

RPG “Role-Playing Game.” Developed in the 1970s as an off-shoot of miniatures games intended to give players more control and investment in individual characters, RPGs typically pit a group of player characters against a GM. In D&D and similar games, player characters have a stable set of attributes, and their success or failure in performing actions in the game are resolved through dice rolls. Other RPGs may use different game mechanics or rely entirely on a consensus of the players. Sometimes referred to as “tabletop” or “pen and paper” RPGs in order to distinguish them from a genre of digital game, some examples of which borrow directly from “traditional” RPGs.

SCA “Society for Creative Anachronism.” An international organization dedicated to re-enacting various aspects of medieval life. Western martial arts, such as swordfighting and archery, are a particular focus, but “arts and science” (i.e., crafts and material culture) are also well represented.

SF, SF&F “Science Fiction,” “Science Fiction and Fantasy.” Genres of literature and media. Science fiction works are sometimes categorized by a continuum between “hard” (i.e., in greater accordance with known physical laws) and “soft” (i.e., less concerned with scientific accuracy or based on the “soft” sciences). Fans also debate boundaries between sci-fi and fantasy. Some authors and readers prefer “Speculative Fiction,” which sidesteps distinctions between hard and soft SF or sci-fi and fantasy but includes genres like alternate history.

SMOF “Secret Master of Fandom.” Both a term of admiration for people heavily involved in the organizational work of SF fandom (esp., planning cons) and a term of censure for self-important fans who overestimate their contribution to fandom.

SWG “Star Wars Galaxies.” A licensed Star Wars MMORPG produced by Sony Online Entertainment.

trade paperback A book-length collection of previously serialized comics, usually a story arc from an on-going comic-book series. Often called a “trade,” as in “waiting for the trades” (i.e., not purchasing each issue, or floppy, as it is published).

WoW “World of Warcraft.” A very successful fantasy MMORPG produced by Blizzard Entertainment.
Introduction: The NES Buckle

In the summer of 2005, I went to the Toronto Comic Arts Festival (TCAF). This event has since become one of the premiere conventions for independent and alternative comics and graphic novels in North America, but at that time TCAF was just getting started. Its main exhibition space was a tent in a parking lot behind Honest Ed’s, and panels and lectures were dispersed across a handful of nearby cafés and bars. So, although it had serious ambitions—the 2005 festival was only the second TCAF, and it was already sponsored by Scholastic Books, municipal and provincial arts councils, and the Dutch ministry of foreign affairs, among others—it was nonetheless a cozy affair.

Determined to impress the other enlightened comics aficionados that would be in attendance, I put on the NES Buckle I had recently ordered online.1 A NES Buckle is exactly what it sounds like: a belt buckle made from an old Nintendo controller. As I walked through the artists’ tables and made my way between the venues, TCAF attendees stopped me again and again to tell me that my belt buckle was “awesome,” a fact that did not surprise me at all, given both its novelty as an accessory made from “upcycled” e-waste and its intrinsic cleverness as a reference to the old television series, Captain N: The Game Master.

The surprise came later in the day, when my wife and I decided to leave TCAF and do some window shopping on the fashionable Queen West strip. We did a tour of the neighbourhood’s art galleries and browsed some of its shoe stores. Here, in Toronto’s hipster Shangri-la, I continued to receive enthusiastic compliments on my NES Buckle from

1 As of this writing, the buckles are still available for purchase at www.nesbuckle.com.
people whose haircuts undoubtedly cost many times more than the buckle itself. I didn’t know the people who stopped to talk to me at TCAF, but these were strangers in a much more profound sense, and, while I had basked in the attention of my fellow comics fans that morning, I experienced these comments with deep suspicion. “This is ours,” I sputtered at my wife, who patiently endured the little identity crisis that interrupted our pleasant afternoon, “it’s not for them!”

I had always assumed that “nerdiness” was a trait that set some people apart from others. It had certainly seemed that way during my high school years as an awkward overachiever who got up early to watch Saturday morning cartoons and then played Dungeons & Dragons late into the night, and that was what so many of the media representations I had grown up with led me to expect. Despite the Nintendo Entertainment System’s massive popularity with children and families (and that of video games more generally in the decades that followed), I imagined that nostalgic attachment to it twenty-odd years later was restricted to a much smaller group, a subculture for whom eight-bit video games, twenty-sided dice, old cartoon theme songs, and comic books were objects of connoisseurship. Seeing its characteristic signs being taken up by mainstream, let alone cool, people forced me to reflect more carefully on a set of tastes, beliefs, and cultural practices that I had heretofore taken for granted.

As I examined these preconceived notions and borderline prejudices, I came to think there might be a research project somewhere in all this. I thought the tangle of fandoms we call “nerd culture” would make a particularly fruitful case for examining people’s relationships with media culture and shifting hierarchies of value. I still think that’s the case, but in retrospect it is my own shocked reaction that seems most in need of explanation: Why should I be surprised that mass audiences respond to what are, in the end, products of the mass media? Why did I resent this example of mainstreaming while I
welcomed another (viz., the comics festival from which I had just come)? And, not to put too fine a point on it, what did it matter if the audience that appreciated this stuff was wider than I had thought it was?

This dissertation is the final product of that line of reasoning. It is an attempt to describe nerd culture as it appeared in one Canadian city in the early years of the twenty-first century. Along the way, I also hope to say something about how practices oriented towards media and cultural goods can generate a sense of belonging for their practitioners. I think looking at the subculture of nerds and geeks has something to teach us about community-making in modern societies. If it is indeed true, as I shall suggest below, that consumer culture tends to individuate the members of these societies, then the question of how social relationships might be “re-communalized” is a non-trivial one, however trivial the means to that end may seem at first glance. I want to start backing up these claims by situating my work within a “tradition of inquiry” (MacIntyre 1988) in the social and cultural sciences.

RESEARCH PROBLEM: RE-COMMUNALIZING THE SOCIETY OF CONSUMERS

Modernity’s impact on community is one of social science’s original research problems. Scholars writing from a variety of theoretical and political positions have argued that modernity represents a break from the forms of social life that characterized earlier eras. Ferdinand Tönnies ([1887] 2001), for example, famously made the theoretical distinction between community (Gemeinschaft) and civil society (Gesellschaft), which is also captured somewhat differently in Durkheim’s ([1933] 1997) concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity. These distinctions have also become common features of lay theories. In each case, an order based on affective experiences of commonality is contrasted with one based on rationalized, functional differentiation. These concepts were taken to describe the
fundamental difference between modern European societies and either their historical antecedents or some primitive “others”—and never the twain should meet.

However, as Anthony P. Cohen (1985, 24–25) suggests, this is a profound misreading of the classical theorists, for whom community and society were not mutually exclusive but only “differing, but complementary modes of social life.” This is perhaps clearest in Weber’s treatment of the problem. Picking up where Tönnies left off, it was his insight that community and society were not empirical or even ideal-typical objects but, rather, transformations that social relationships undergo:

**The formation of community** (‘Vergemeinschaftung’) shall refer to a social relationship if and to the extent that the orientation of social action—whether in the individual case, or average case, or as a pure type—rests upon subjectively felt (affectual or traditional) mutual belonging (Zusammengehörigkeit) of the participants.

**The formation of association** (‘Vergesellschaftung’) shall refer to a social relationship if and to the extent that the orientation of social action rests upon the rationally motivated (either value-rational or instrumentally rational) balancing out of interests or upon similarly motivated linking of interests. (Weber 2004, 343–44; italics in original)

The conventional translation (courtesy of Talcott Parsons) of the keywords from this passage rendered Weber’s verbal nouns as simple adjectives—“communal” and “associative” relationships, rather than “communalization” and “societalization”—reinforcing the view of community and society as finished objects on either side of a great divide between the past and present (Swedberg 2005, 12, 43). But things look very different once we restore the dynamic core of Weber’s concepts. The interesting question, then, is not whether a given formation more closely approximates a community or a society or how we can secure solidarity against creeping anomie, but rather, how is it that a social relationship is experienced as either relatively communalized or relatively societalized?

But community is not just a thorny definitional problem for professional social scientists. It looms much larger as an object of anxiety or a symptom of some fundamental social
malaise. The issue is not community *per se*—as Raymond Williams ([1977] 1989, 112) has suggested, “Community is unusual among the terms of political vocabulary in being ... the one term which has never been used in a negative sense”; everyone is in favour of community, or at least some communities—but rather the nagging feeling that it is slipping from our grasp. Although communitarian nostalgia may seem conservative or even reactionary, these concerns cut across ideological divides:

Through the 1980s and 1990s, critics on both the right and left worried that community was jeopardized by individualism. Traditionally, conservatives thought the remedy was to return to traditional communities that offered moral guidance and provided individuals with anchors in a sea of relativism. On the left, community was treated as means to political empowerment and equality: by participating in public life individuals could improve their ability to see the world from perspectives other than their own and thereby take responsibility for the needs of the less privileged. (MacGregor 2010, 37)

Community bears the weight of all our hopes and dreams for a humane social order, whatever that might mean. Conservatives define it with reference to the intimate sphere of the family and the private sphere of voluntary associations against the public sphere of the state. For progressives, it represents civil society and local forms of self-government as opposed to the market and the field of electoral politics. Yet there is an overlapping consensus among social critics of all stripes that modernity tends to destabilize and undermine communities, and—as MacGregor intimates—the culprit usually fingered is “liberal individualism.”

Liberals\(^2\) attribute modernity’s economic, political, and cultural dynamism to the loosening of the ties that bind individuals—to traditions as much as other people. One of the bourgeoisie’s greatest achievements has been, in Marshall Berman’s (1982, 94) words, “to liberate the human capacity and drive for development: for permanent change, for

\(^2\) In the sense of “adherents of the political philosophy of liberalism” rather than “left-wing.” See Taylor (1995) on the liberal-communitarian debate in both its political and ontological guises.
perpetual upheaval and renewal in every mode of personal and social life.” Yet the liberal individual was not lying dormant under the accumulated weight of tradition and obligation, just waiting to be released upon the world. As Charles Taylor has argued, *contra* this “subtraction story” (2004, 64), the individual had to be produced:

> We can probably be confident that on one level human beings of all times and places have shared a very similar sense of “me” and “mine.” ... It is probable that in every language there are resources for self-reference and descriptions of reflexive thought, action, attitude.... But this is not at all the same as making “self” into a noun, preceded by a definite or indefinite article, speaking of “the” self, or “a” self. This reflects something important which is peculiar to our modern sense of agency. The Greeks were notoriously capable of formulating the injunction “gnōthi seauton”—“know thyself”—but they didn’t normally speak of the human agent as “ho autos,” or use the term in a context which we would translate with the indefinite article. (1989, 113)

The invention of the individual in this distinctive sense was not merely the affirmation of some fundamental truth of the human condition that we always knew anyway, but rather a Copernican revolution in social ontology. Moreover, individualism constitutes a “social imaginary” (2004, 23–24) because it is a horizon concept delimiting the sorts of social relationships that are possible (or even thinkable) in the modern age:

> This notion of independence carries consequences for the kind of community of which we are capable. Understood as unencumbered selves, we are of course free to join in voluntary association with others, and so are capable of community in the cooperative sense. What is denied to the unencumbered self is the possibility of membership in any community bound by moral ties antecedent to choice; he cannot belong to any community where the self itself could be at stake. (Sandel 1984, 86–87)

The critics paint a bleak picture of an increasingly anonymous, ephemeral, precarious, and instrumentalized form of life. On this view, modern society is entirely bereft of the resources for human fulfilment that are imagined to have once been available in communities, and this tendency reaches its apotheosis in the marketplaces and brandscapes of (post)modern consumer society. In place of authentic community, we have only “lifestyle enclaves” (Bellah et al. 1986), “proto-communities” (Willis 1990), “club cultures” (Thornton 1993).
1996; Redhead 1997), “brand communities” (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; O’Guinn and Muñiz 2005), or “tribes” (Maffesoli 1996; A. Bennett 1999; Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007). All that was solid melted into air, all that was holy has been profaned, and, like so many Robinson Crusoes, liberal individuals are thrown back on their own personal resources to make something of themselves.

And yet, despite successive waves of ever-greater disembedding (Polanyi [1944] 2001; Taylor 2004), people find meaning in their everyday lives. This cannot be easily written off as false consciousness, cultural hegemony, or some corporate conspiracy to trick us into believing that life is worth living. Indeed, recognizing alienation presupposes at least some frisson of unalienated experience. The meaningfulness of everyday life—and of the social relations it comprises—is a collective social accomplishment. As A. P. Cohen (1985, 118) puts it, “whether or not its structural boundaries remain intact, the reality of community lies in its members’ perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity.” Thus we may still ask, paraphrasing Zygmunt Bauman (2008, chap. 1) and not at all rhetorically, “What chance for community in the globalized society of consumers?”

In a short, unpublished essay, Walter Benjamin (1996, 732) described the cultural condition of his generation, which had been traumatized in the trenches of the Great War and subsequently lived through rapid social and technological change, as “a new kind of barbarism”:

Barbarism? Yes, indeed. We say this in order to introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism. For what does poverty of experience do for the barbarian? It forces him to start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further, looking neither left nor right. Among the great creative spirits, there have always been the inexorable ones who begin by clearing a tabula rasa.
Elements of this fragment were later incorporated into the resume for his unfinished project on the Paris arcades, but the same dynamic threads its way through much of Benjamin’s thinking. At times, he is optimistic about the opportunity to “make a new start,” at times he seems more nostalgic for what has been cleared away, but there is simply no going backwards.

I’m suggesting that the problem of modernity is much the same. There is no way back to “authentic community,” which is always already gone anyway. Instead, this dissertation will investigate how ordinary people do community-making with the cultural resources available to them. The nerd subculture provides one example of what communities shaped by distinctly modern social practices, such as those oriented towards consumer goods and cultural commodities, might look like.

OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

In this section, I want to say a few words about my general methodological approach and the study’s research design. I also briefly introduce the research sites and the interviewees whose accounts I will draw on throughout the dissertation. Profiles of all research participants may be found in Appendix A (p. 279).

Phronetic Inquiry and Qualitative Research

Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) has persuasively argued that the principal intellectual virtue of social-scientific inquiry is phronesis, a Greek word variously translated as “prudence,” “practical wisdom,” or “practical judgement.” Distinct from the intellectual virtues proper to the natural or applied sciences, phronesis concerns the kinds of knowledge needed to make good decisions: "Phronesis goes beyond both analytical, scientific knowledge (episteme) and technical knowledge or know-how (techne) and involves judgements and decisions made in
the manner of a virtuoso social and political actor” (2). Phronetic inquiry aims to enrich democratic deliberation with “pragmatically governed interpretations of the studied practices” (140). Orienting social-scientific practice to *phronesis* rather than *episteme* has significant consequences for method, favouring situated accounts of social phenomena as meaningful contexts for action over “law-like generalizations.”

With these goals in mind, I draw on traditions of qualitative, interpretive social research in my project. Careful attention to qualitative dimensions of social life makes it plain that the “objects” of research are in fact thinking, meaning-making subjects. This is expressed methodologically in my work by treating my informants as practitioners and as practical reasoners. The full importance of the first point will be made clear in chapter 2, but for now it suffices to say that people are social agents pursuing goals, making choices, and grappling with problems that confront them in their life. Regarding them as passive objects on which processes (including processes of measurement) are carried out will hopelessly distort our picture of social life. Rather, and this returns me to the second point, they interpret and explain the situations in which they find themselves. As Andrew Sayer (2005, 70) points out, we can’t avoid dealing with the beliefs that the people we study hold, even if we don’t believe them ourselves:

As with any kind of practical sense, lay understandings do not have to be consistent or correct.... However, it is important to appreciate what lies behind those everyday terms.... Since lay understandings face social researchers both as an object of explanation (explanandum) and rival explanation (explanans), we need both to understand lay concepts ... and to use a consistent set of sociological concepts to analyse them.

This can be formulated many ways; anthropologists talk of cultural categories, sociologists might refer to a folk sociology, and philosophers of science distinguish agents’ first-order interpretations from the second-order ones produced by professional explainers such as themselves. I’ll mostly talk about such concepts and understandings as “lay theories.”
Morris, Ames, and Knowles (2001) review this idea’s use in psychology, noting that they operate at different levels of abstraction and generality and can vary across cultures, domains of social life, or both. But this analogy between the practical reasoning that goes on in everyday life and “the scientist’s process of reasoning from theories” (143) is particularly apt, given my interviewees’ tendency to theorize about themselves and their activity in explicitly intellectualized terms. They, like all people, act in the world, and they act on the basis of more or less coherent theories about themselves, society, and other people.

Research Design

This study uses the set of methods that Lofland et al. (2006) tentatively refer to as “naturalistic research,” “fieldstudies,” or simply “fieldwork.” The bulk of the study’s data is derived from a series of semi-structured interviews as well as some passive and participant observation, which allowed me to compare interviewees’ accounts of their activities with my own experiences. There were two separate phases of fieldwork. In the first, I explored the local context of what I have come to call a “nerd-culture scene.” In the second, I examined the experiences of “ordinary” participants in that scene. The two phases are intended to qualify one another and ought to be understood relationally even though they were carried out in a linear sequence.

Phase 1 focused on specialty retail stores and voluntary organizations associated with nerdy activities in the city (Table 1). Organizations were approached based on their prominence within the scene—that is, I saw their events advertised or someone I spoke to about the study suggested that I should approach them. One group is primarily concerned with forms of media fandom (ORG1), one with comics (ORG3), one with gaming (ORG4), and one (ORG2) embraces both media fandom and gaming. Stores were initially approached according to the same criterion of local prominence; however, as I recruited participants, I
Table 1. Summary information, phase 1 research sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Primary informant</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Est.</th>
<th>Location(s)</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ORG1</td>
<td>ORG1-p1</td>
<td>Nerdy film society</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Movie theatre, artist-run centre</td>
<td>Screening-based events (e.g., retro cartoons, Ghostbusters, Star Trek, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORG2</td>
<td>ORG2-p1</td>
<td>University anime and gaming club</td>
<td>197X</td>
<td>Suburban university campus</td>
<td>Weekly screenings, game nights, and cosplay workshops. Screenings usually followed by social activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORG4</td>
<td>ORG4-p1</td>
<td>Gamers’ networking organization</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>Annual convention and semi-regular in-store game days. On-line forum for coordinating private and public gaming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STR1</td>
<td>STR1-p2</td>
<td>Game store</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Commercial street</td>
<td>Demo copies and gaming tables. Weekly board game night.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STR2</td>
<td>STR2-p1</td>
<td>Game store</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Shopping mall (&quot;downtown&quot; of suburban community)</td>
<td>Demo/rental copies and gaming tables. Weekly board game night, schedule of collectable card game (CCG) and collectable miniatures game tournaments. Periodic release events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STR3</td>
<td>STR3-p1</td>
<td>Comic store</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Commercial street</td>
<td>No regular, formal activities. Informal social uses constrained by space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STR4</td>
<td>STR4-p1</td>
<td>Game and comic store</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Commercial/residential area</td>
<td>Regular tournaments and game day/night for miniatures, CCG, and board games. Periodic release events. Informal social uses among comics customers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STR5</td>
<td>STR5-p1</td>
<td>Comic store</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Major downtown shopping street</td>
<td>No regular, formal activities. Long hours to accommodate downtown foot traffic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

attempted to build points of comparison and contrast into the study. Of five stores, two primarily sell games (STR1 and STR2), two primarily sell comics (STR3 and STR5), and one is substantially involved in both markets (STR4). Stores are located in different kinds of neighbourhood (relatively urban versus relatively suburban) and are of different ages (the oldest was established in 1974, the youngest in 2008). In each site, I interviewed store owners or managers and group organizers and conducted limited participant observation. I also attended two local conventions (Anime Con and SF&F Con) during this time frame but
did not conduct interviews in these sites. This phase lasted between, roughly, September 2009 and June 2010.

After taking some time to analyze the data I generated in the first part of my fieldwork, I re-contacted my interviewees and asked them to recommend some of their customers or members that they would describe as either “typical” or “atypical” of their communities, leaving them to define these terms in whatever way seemed salient to them. Some directly recruited people that they knew, others provided me contact information for likely candidates, and in a few cases retailers asked for a poster they could display instead. I also received some assistance recruiting among fandoms that had not been included in the first phase from people who found the description of my study that I had posted on my website and circulated my call for participants on email lists. In the end, I constructed a sample of six participants in the nerd-culture scene (Table 2). They represented a range of communities of practice (e.g., comic-book readers, media fans, science fiction and fantasy [SF&F] fans, role-playing and miniatures gamers, massively multi-player online role-playing game [MMORPG] players, medieval re-creationists), three broad age cohorts, and were evenly split between men and women. Most considered themselves to be “middle class” (although definitions of this term were varied and generally vague), all were Caucasian, and two self-identified as bisexual. I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with each of the six informants. I also conducted a home visit with most participants in order to view and discuss collections of subculturally relevant goods and engaged in participant observation with them as they were willing and able to accommodate. Phase 2 took place between April and October 2011.

Having transcribed interviews and typed up my fieldnotes, I began analyzing the data I generated. In qualitative research, the purpose of coding is to manage data, organizing empirical material for subsequent analysis. Codes were generated inductively by reading
and re-reading the text and attempting to describe and summarize each paragraph. I assembled a code book as I went along and periodically reviewed it to ensure consistency of use, but it was not prescriptive. With the first phase’s data, these procedures were carried out manually. The second phase generated enough material that I began using the HyperResearch software package to manage data, apply codes, and retrieve coded extracts; however, the analytic procedure remained fundamentally the same.

With initial coding complete, I reviewed the material several times, following hunches and guesses I had made earlier during the fieldwork to see where they led. Some codes had to be refined, breaking a catch-all category into more fine-grained variations. Others were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Nerd-culture activities</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barry</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>• SF&amp;F fan&lt;br&gt;• medieval recreationist&lt;br&gt;• gamer (RPGs and digital games)</td>
<td>Self-employed research chemist. Roman Catholic, active in Knights of Columbus. Aspiring novelist and screenwriter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>ORG1-p1</td>
<td>• SF&amp;F fan&lt;br&gt;• gamer (<em>Dungeons &amp; Dragons, World of Warcraft</em>)</td>
<td>Self-employed but on maternity leave. MA in Women’s Studies about fan-fiction writers. “Nerd family.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Fox</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>STR5</td>
<td>• comic-book reader&lt;br&gt;• gamer (<em>Warhammer, RPGs, and digital games</em>)&lt;br&gt;• SF&amp;F fan</td>
<td>Video game writer with freelance writing projects. Social circle mainly friends from post-secondary diploma program in game design.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiera</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>• SF&amp;F fan&lt;br&gt;• gamer (<em>Star Wars: Galaxies</em>)&lt;br&gt;• medieval re-creationist*</td>
<td>Single mother of three on disability benefits. Interest in Celtic music. Aspiring writer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solo</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>ORG3-p1</td>
<td>• comic-book reader*&lt;br&gt;• TV fan&lt;br&gt;• SF&amp;F fan</td>
<td>University student. Interest in working in media/cultural industries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wedge</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>ORG1-p1</td>
<td>• gamer (<em>Blood Bowl, RPGs, board games</em>)&lt;br&gt;• SF&amp;F fan&lt;br&gt;• medieval re-creationist*&lt;br&gt;• comic-book collector*</td>
<td>Project manager at software developer. Computer science background. Married with young daughter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Activity “dormant” at time of research
grouped together, forming a kind of typology under some new category. Occasionally, I would export all of the material to which a particular set of codes had been applied and read them through until I felt I understood what people were saying to me and how it related to other things I had been told or had witnessed myself. Having lived with the material for some time, I could then start selecting and shaping it into the argument that follows.

**OUTLINE OF ARGUMENT**

As I’ve set up the problem, this dissertation has two main objectives. The first is to produce a sociologically and ethnographically informed description of what I’m calling “nerd culture.” There is an existing literature on many of this subculture’s component activities, but very few studies even gesture at how they fit together in the way that (as the nerd stereotype suggests) we recognize they do. My empirical contribution involves fleshing out, in some detail, the social and organizational foundations of this culture, as well as interpreting the cultural categories of its members in order to show what they and their varied hobbies hold in common. The second objective is to advance a different way of thinking about the activity that takes place around media and cultural commodities. It is on this understanding of audiences as participants in cultural practices that my account of community-making hangs. The relevance of this account for other research dealing, explicitly or implicitly, with media audiences is my major theoretical contribution. The dissertation is divided into two major parts, and the first deals with some problems of definition.

As Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1991) suggest, the first step in any social research project is securing an “epistemological break” with pre-conceived notions by generating a provisional definition of the object of study. I take this dictum seriously, although empirical reality seems to keep defeating my attempts to develop a neat definition.
In this case, media representations and stereotypes of nerds are proverbial elephants in the room and the obvious starting point. Indeed, the image most people name when someone says **nerd** is the horn-rimmed and horny protagonists of Jeff Kanew’s 1984 film, *Revenge of the Nerds*. More recently, however, as many have come to believe that the nerds have not only had their revenge but—borrowing from the title of a television documentary on the PC revolution—“triumphed,” the popular picture of nerds and geeks has taken on three distinct but complementary forms. These emphasize, in turn, the business success that derives from mastering new technologies, changing codes of masculinity, and pop-culture expertise. But, although these tropes put a more subtle spin on it, they continue to implicate and reproduce a relatively static stereotype of who nerds are and what they’re like.

Debates about the meaning of the nerd in popular culture may have little to do with the lived experience of actual nerds, and so I asked my interviewees what **nerd** and **geek** mean to them. Their answers don’t provide a clear definition either, but looking at how they frame their arguments shows the issues at stake. Some of the surprises and contradictions can be accounted for by considering the social context of the interview situation and the “boundary work” (Lamont 1992; 2000) that is done by claiming, denying, or qualifying these “membership categories” (Sacks 1992). Terms like **nerd**, **geek**, **fan**, **gamer**, et cetera are used tactically in order to establish “consubstantiality” (K. Burke 1969) or social distance and to manage the potential negative inferences that a hearer might make. Because identity is so evidently entangled with social processes of distinction it proves a poor basis for defining nerd culture.

As a response to these definitional difficulties, I turn to practice theory in chapter 2. This loose tradition in social theory takes what people do as the primary social object. It represents an important alternative to approaches such as subculture theory (e.g., Hall and
Jefferson [1975] 2006; Gelder 2005) that focus almost exclusively on the meaningful content of cultural expression. In particular, I draw on the theory of social practices developed by the Aristotelian philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre ([1981] 2007). On this view, a practice provides the basis not only for shared understandings but also, because it is a moral theory, intersubjectively valid ethical norms. I suggest that what the people we conventionally call nerds and geeks do might be considered a specific kind of cultural practice located in the sphere of consumption and actively engaged in forms of connoisseurship and criticism. I call them “consummative practices” and make an initial case that, having distinctive internal goods, forming communities and traditions, creating and relying upon institutions, and generating a sense of identity, they conform to the MacIntyrean schema. But at this level, nerd culture as a set of practices is a merely analytical construct, and so I introduce the concepts of subcultural fields and subcultural scenes as empirical objects that can be studied.

In the second part of the dissertation, I return to the empirical case study. I start by describing some features of the field of nerd culture. Existing studies of fan communities suggest that they are constituted by the circulation of specialist knowledge and collections; these specific forms of cultural capital are used to define competent participation and status. But the field also relies on a set of resources and infrastructures, such as commodities and markets, interaction and venues, and communication and networks, for its ongoing reproduction. Voluntary organizations and specialty retail stores like the ones I have studied are important hubs in the distribution of these capitals and resources. They are bound to one another (among others) by relationships of dependence, sponsorship, and cross-promotion that give force to the sense of the scene as a shared space or milieu. The people who actually keep these institutions running can be thought of as “cultural intermediaries” facilitating the activities that take place in the field of nerd culture.
However, their mediating work is embedded in experiences of participation as gamers, comic-book collectors, media fans, and so on. This analysis of the nerd-culture scene’s institutions and intermediaries provides some necessary context for discussing how individuals actually make sense of their participation.

In many ways, the dissertation culminates in my discussion of findings from the second phase of fieldwork (chapter 4). The argument to this point has focused on defining the contours of nerd culture and its “conditions of possibility,” but here I identify some features of ordinary participants’ experiences that contribute to creating and sustaining a sense of community out of the raw material afforded to them by nerd culture. I start by identifying what I call, after Bourdieu, a “scholastic disposition” in my interview data. By this, I mean a tendency to interpret a wide variety of experiences, including forms of participation and aesthetic tastes, in an intellectualized mode. Next, I examine my informants’ accounts of their “leisure careers” and of what a “community of nerds and geeks” might mean to them.

When people talk about belonging to a community, they typically talk about sharing something with other members and about the sense of belonging that follows from these communalized relationships. Community is both performed and imagined: The experience of community is a shared, practical orientation to existing social relationships and a set of discourses about them. These relationships are sustained by perfectly ordinary activities conducted alongside the focal practices around which the community coalesces, but they can prove quite fragile, as participation is always limited and conditioned in a number of ways.

In conclusion, this dissertation points to some of the ways that cultural practices, provide frameworks for community-making. Their products will never be “traditional” communities, reborn; as collective expressions of individual tastes and spaces for the public performance of private interests, they are a different kind of social formation created from
the resources of modern media culture. At least, that’s what I found when I paid attention to the events and activities that go on in the nerd-culture scene. Some might consider their association with the lower and weirder genres of popular culture a sign of their triviality, but trivial culture, when enrolled into a practice, can become a forum for elaborating individual and collective identity projects. Understanding these communities, their conditions of possibility, and the meaningful practices that take place within them will help us grasp the possibilities and potential limits of re-communalizing our everyday experience of consumer society.
Part I.
Nerds, from *Asthma* to *Zork*
1. Discourses of Nerd Identity

“What is a nerd?” Louise Duncan of Markham, Ontario, asked this question in a 1979 letter to the editor of The Globe and Mail, complaining about the paper’s use of what was at the time unfamiliar slang. More than thirty years later, this question is still a good place to begin. Despite the term’s relatively recent coinage, nerds seem always to have been with us in one guise or another. It is tempting, for example, to read them into Richard Hofstadter’s (1966, 7) claim that “resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it” has always been an element of Anglo-American culture. But the figure of the nerd is much more specific than a general antipathy towards the vita contemplativa.

As Lori Kendall (2011, 519) writes, “The image of the nerd persists in our culture because of the richness of references, and the plethora of narratives to which it connects.” It is defined not only by contrast with “practical men” but also by specific stereotypes. Nerds—and their close cousins, the geeks—are strongly associated with particular interests and activities, such as collecting comic books, playing certain kinds of games, being fans of certain texts or genres, and showing interest in science and technology. These interests are pursued in a characteristically fastidious or fanatical way to the detriment of a “healthy” or “well rounded” life. Most versions of the stereotype also include certain physical attributes (e.g., sallow skin, myopia, a scrawny or pudgy physique) and social behaviours (e.g., interpersonal awkwardness and ignorance of social niceties). But once we get past the crudest caricatures, it becomes difficult to put our finger on what makes a nerd, however easily we know them when we see them.
Defining nerdiness has also exercised self-identified nerds and geeks. A well-known example is the “Geek Hierarchy” by Löre Sjoberg. This flowchart, produced for a comedy website, diagrammed how different kinds of geeks perceive themselves to be “less geeky” than others. More recently, an anonymously authored Venn diagram circulated widely on the web; it defined *nerd*, *geek*, *dork*, and *dweeb* in terms of varying combinations of intelligence, obsession, and social ineptitude. In a similar vein, a cartoon from Randall Monroe’s popular webcomic *XKCD* opines that it is geeks and nerds who care most about defining the differences between the two terms (Figure 1.1). As Monroe humorously suggests, these definitions ought to be seen as expressions of nerd culture rather than knowledge about it.

Existing academic studies of nerd culture have explored the ways that popular discourse constructs these stereotypes and, in the best of them, how people negotiate them in their everyday life (Bucholtz 1999; Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz 2006; Eglash 2002; Kendall 1999a; 1999b; 2000; 2011; McArthur 2009; Tocci 2009). However, the object of study is generally taken for granted in these works. In *The Craft of Sociology*, Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1991) warn social scientists against the dangers of reproducing concepts and categories of just this sort of “spontaneous sociology”—that is, common-sense notions of “human nature” and “how the world works” that we all use in everyday life. Like lay theories of nerd culture, these concepts are part of the social world, and they themselves demand sociological explanation.
According to Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1991), researchers need explicit definitions of their objects of study in order to provide the distance required for reflexive, critical research. Constructing a provisional definition begins by examining concepts given by popular discourse and our own experience:

In fact, to the extent that ordinary language and certain scholarly uses of ordinary words constitute the main vehicle for common representations of society, it is clear that the most indispensible preliminary for the controlled development of scientific notions is a logical and lexicological critique of ordinary language. (14)

The point is not to debunk “first-person explanations” in favour of abstract theoretical entities or causal mechanisms (Martin 2011); it is, rather, that we don’t always know what we’re doing and we don’t always act as we think we should. Interrogating lay theories of social life clears the ground for a more intentional description and, thus, a better understanding of the object. In this chapter, I attempt to clarify the categories nerdy and geek, looking first at media discourse and then at interview data from my study.¹

THE LIFE CYCLE OF HOMO NERDENSIS

SHIERA: [It’s] funny that we were talking about clades earlier because in terms of -doms, geekdom is a kingdom of, you know, culture. You’re dealing with a ... so you’ve got your—science fiction is your kingdom, and then you’ve got your different trees and phylums and families in there. I think you could draw a very confusing ([laughs]) interrelated branch tree of ... what—

BMW: Homo nerdensis.

SHIERA: Yes. ([laughs]) It would be interesting, as a visual guide. But they’re already out there. There’s flow charts, there’s Venn diagrams, there’s—you know, there’s all kinds of visual ways of looking at it.²

To paraphrase Raymond Williams ([1958] 1989, 11), there are no nerds, only ways of seeing people as nerds. That is to say, terms like nerdy and geek—however much they have become naturalized in our everyday social taxonomies—are labels. Sometimes they are

¹ See the introduction, esp. tables 1 and 2, and Appendix A for information on study participants.
² See guide to transcription notation, above, p. x.
applied to people (or fictional characters), and sometimes they are claimed by their bearers, but, like all labels, they are defined in use and subject to change over time.

Benjamin Nugent’s (2008) *American Nerd* provides a detailed investigation of the emergence of the nerd or geek in popular media. He names Mary Bennett of *Pride and Prejudice*, Gussie Fink-Nottle of P.G. Wodehouse’s Jeeves stories, Walter Denton of *Our Miss Brooks*, and a menagerie of “Snerds,” “nurds,” and “Wedges” as nerds *avant la lettre*. However, my interest lies less in the pre-history of the terms than in the uses made of them once they entered into the common lexicon—who gets called a nerd or a geek, in what contexts, and with what connotations?

To begin, I wanted to (very roughly) gauge how widespread this way of describing people really is. I performed a number of searches in the LexisNexis Academic major world publications database. Figure 1.2 shows the results, in terms of number of documents retrieved per year, between the earliest available references (1977 for *nerd*; 1975 for *geek*)
and 2009. There are important limitations to this method but it suffices to demonstrate a pattern of increasing prevalence. Nerd is initially the more common term, but geek overtakes it in 1999. The small number of hits in the 1970s and early 1980s—along with Ms. Duncan’s confused letter to the Globe—suggests that these labels were still relatively obscure as recently as thirty years ago.

The etymology of nerd is unknown. The earliest use cited by the Oxford English Dictionary is the Dr. Seuss book If I Ran the Zoo, in which it is used as a nonsense word. A 1951 Newsweek article is the earliest attribution in something like the contemporary sense, noting that Detroiter now use it to refer to those who once would have been “drips” or “squares.” In an instalment of the New York Times Magazine column, On Language, devoted to collegiate slang, William Safire (1980) speculated that “[its] origin is probably in a 40’s variation of ‘nuts’—as in ‘nerts to you’—and a ‘nert’ became a ‘nerd,’ probably influenced by a rhyming scatological word.”³ Subsequent instalments of On Language repeat this as fact, although Safire never provides any evidence in support.

Geek’s origins are somewhat clearer. It was once a technical term for a carnival sideshow act in which the performer bit the heads off of live chickens, and this use is still current in the 1970s and ‘80s. Geek is used much less frequently than nerd during this period, and its use grows more slowly. A number of early references are articles about “Classy” Freddie Blassie, the professional wrestler and composer of the novelty song, “Pencil Neck Geek.” The term is popularized somewhat in 1984 by the release of Sixteen Candles, in which the omega male played by Anthony Michael Hall is known only as “The Geek,” but it does not receive, quantitatively speaking, anywhere near the same boost as nerd does in the same year and that following.

³ Id est, “turd.”
The film *Revenge of the Nerds* (Kanew 1984) is widely credited with cementing the popular image of nerds and geeks. According to Christine Quail (2011, 463), *Revenge* is the *locus classicus* of the antagonistic “hip/square dialectic” in popular culture: “In this film, the nerds try to gain social power, or become ‘cool,’ by starting a fraternity; their nemeses are the popular jocks, who humiliate and hurt the nerds, with the nerds seeking revenge.” It is comparable to the earlier *National Lampoon’s Animal House* (Landis 1978), but *Revenge*’s Tri-Lambs are scientific prodigies rather than All American misfits—Animal House’s Deltas are also low-status students, but they’re not in the same league academically. Nevertheless, *Revenge of the Nerds* remains a carnivalesque campus romp in the “gross-out” tradition (see King 2002). Its celebration of the spazzes, dorks, and geeks (to quote head nerd Lewis, played by Robert Carradine) papers over its sexism, racism, and homophobia, and like other early depictions of nerds in pop culture, once they “man up” and confront their tormentors, “they can discover … that they … are actually like everyone else, and are accepted by their peers” (Bach 2006, 77).

I stress the connections to a larger tradition of film comedy because the nerd theme in *Revenge* seems, ultimately, little more than a gimmick. Its real impact is that it branded a particular image—thick glasses, short-sleeved white button-up shirt, pocket protector, and braying laugh—with the word *nerd*, and did so in a very popular venue:

> That image from that movie really that’s what, when you ask—I asked my sixteen-year-old and my twelve-year-old to define geek and nerd, and they both gave me that image. They were in different rooms, so I’m like, “What does it mean to you? What is a geek? What is a nerd?” And they gave me the same definitions I had, which you know they probably pick up from me because you learn your language from your parents, mostly. But I thought it was interesting that they both immediately went to *Revenge of the Nerds*, and I think my twelve-year-old’s only seen the movie once. But he has that clear image associated with that word[....] (Shiera)
Revenge remains a common reference point to this day. The film was mentioned more frequently by my interviewees than any other example of nerds in popular culture, and its particular version of the nerd/geek stereotype was universally recognized, if then rejected:

The stereotypical one is ... ah basically someone that is intelligent, someone that has a large social problem, that doesn’t know ... that’s not a jock. Um I mean, if you look at the ... at movies such as Revenge of the Nerds [...] that’s the stereotypical definition for nerds. (STR2-p1)

I think for me nerd is ... and will always be Revenge of the Nerds because, again, that’s what I grew up with. (Diana)

I think geek has really been reclaimed by the culture. I think nerd has, but to a lesser extent because there is that Revenge of the Nerds impression that gives people images to go with ... The word nerd means a picture in people’s minds. (Shiera)

Barry also mentioned a similar representation, Louis Tully (Rick Moranis) of the Ghostbusters movies, and many referred to The Big Bang Theory, the CBS sitcom about a group of physicists, as a contemporary equivalent. In any case, all these images were dismissed as stereotypes and caricatures with little relevance to the lived experience of interviewees’ and their peers.

Moreover, representations of nerds and geeks have changed in important ways over the last twenty-five years. Discourses of nerd identity have arguably split into three major variants: first, we have discussions of nerds’ earning power in the knowledge economy; second, representations of nerds have been used as a lens for interrogating masculinity; third, many assert that nerds have become the new arbiters of pop-culture success. On paper, these subspecies of the “revenge” discourse are somewhat at odds—Asperger’s-ish techno-geeks versus sensitive new-age guys versus ironic hipsters—but in practice they often support one another.
“Be nice to nerds. You may end up working for them. We all could.” These words, taken from a commentary by culture warrior Charles J. Sykes and later expanded into a book-length polemic against the evils of “feel-good education” (2007), sum up the changes that the “revenge” discourse underwent during the 1990s. The quotation was cited in a number of newspaper articles during the period, either alone or as part of a longer list of hard-nosed maxims about “real life.” It seems to express the anxieties felt by many about the transformation of the economy—and, gradually, everyday life—by computers, peaking with the dot-com boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s. But it transmutes them into cultural and moral terms, by suggesting that the “normal” and “popular” kids from high school (i.e., “you”) will now get their comeuppance at the hands of the kids who were scorned and marginalized but mastered this new technology. The nerds have their revenge not only in whimsical competitions between college fraternities but also in life outcomes.

This note makes its way into Revenge of the Nerds III (Mesa 1992) when Stan (Ted McGinley), a former jock and now an administrator at the college, “realizes” that his use of computers for work means that he has become a nerd (Kendall 1999a), and this is the frame “academics and journalists typically discuss when describing how ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ can now be positive terms” (Tocci 2009, 141). It is telling that Sykes’s words have been frequently attributed to Bill Gates:

I suspect this rule is one of the reasons so many people thought the original fourteen rules were written by Bill Gates, the planet’s most famous billionaire.

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4 Of thirty-five documents retrieved from LexisNexis Academic using some version of the quotation, twenty-six were attributed to Gates, two to Sykes (both correcting the mistake), and seven were not attributed. According to the “urban legend reference,” Snopes.com (Mikkelson and Mikkelson 2010), it was widely circulated by email beginning ca. 2000; this erroneous email is the undoubted source for most of the articles retrieved.
nerd. Face it, he was exactly the kind of guy you’d give wedgies and never sit next to at lunch if the cool kids were around.

So there’s a life lesson, because think about the stock options he might have traded for your Twinkie. (2007, 110)

Science, technology, and computers have, like other fields requiring advanced study, often been associated with eggheads and nerds. Interviewees, whatever their own level of proficiency, perceive their fellow nerds as early adopters—if not the originators—of technological innovations (“Personal computers used to be only [used by] fans, and now everybody uses them for their everyday life,” Barry). And the combination of technical mastery and business success is one widely accepted explanation for perceived shifts in nerds’ cultural status.

Two made-for-TV movies help elucidate this particular construction. *The Triumph of the Nerds* (Sen 1996) is a three-part documentary about the origins of the personal computer written and presented by Silicon Valley gossip columnist Robert X. Cringely. The opening credits sequence features crude animations of pudgy, acne-afflicted teenagers playing *Space Invaders*, eating pizza, and fiddling with electronics in their parents’ garage. They are laughed at by kids in varsity jackets, but are soon riding in limousines with their notebook computers and portable phones like proper business tycoons. Cringely covers the hobbyist origins of the microcomputer industry, the rise of Microsoft in the PC software business, and the fall of Apple Computer.5 *Pirates of Silicon Valley* (M. Burke 1999), produced for cable network TNT three years later, mines this same history for drama, revealing the seamy underbelly of the PC revolution. The movie alternates between the volatile Steve Jobs (Noah Wyle) and lighthearted Steve Wozniak (Joey Slotnick) of Apple and Microsoft’s Gates (Anthony Michael Hall), Paul Allen (Josh Hopkins), and the frat-boyish Steve Ballmer (John

5 Produced in 1996, the film predates the “Jobs II” era of Apple, its resurgence in personal computers, and, with the iPod, iPhone and iPad, new-found successes in consumer electronics.
Di Maggio). It focuses on Apple’s early successes and Gates’s climb to the top by “stealing” the look and feel of the Macintosh operating system to make Windows.

The films have distinct differences in tone, as befits the different audiences for PBS documentaries and cable dramas. For one thing, despite Cringely’s constant efforts to identify himself as one of “us” and not a nerd, he does take time to explain some rudimentary aspects of computer science along the way. However, both assume that the subject matter will not be intrinsically interesting to a general audience; instead, they frame the history of personal computers as a business story. Thus, the triumph of the nerds turns out to be, borrowing Sut Jhally’s (1984) memorable phrase, a “spectacle of accumulation.”

For example, Ballmer, acting as a present-day narrator for the Microsoft half of Pirates, intervenes in one scene to sing it out as “the instant of creation of one of the greatest fortunes in the history of the world.” Similarly, Triumph describes the creation of the first spreadsheet application, VisiCalc, as “bringing together for the first time the seduction of money with the power of microcomputing.” This is part of a larger theme: The needs of corporate America and the average user gradually wrest control of the industry from the nerds who just want to have fun with computers.

_Sensitive Nerd-Age Guys: Homo nerdensis blandus_

The information revolution lends computer-savviness a new importance. However, despite arguments that technological expertise serves as “an alternative route to traditional masculine appeal for men who might not be able to compete in other manly arenas” (Tocci 2009, 203), we must remember that computers are cultural as well as technical artefacts:

More masculine technologies tend to be seen as concrete, massive, and having direct physical effects. The more abstract artifice of science does not seem nearly so testosterone-drenched; it is easy to see how the artificial spaces of mathematics and computing can be framed in opposition to manly identity. (Eglash 2002, 51–52)
Despite Gates’s fortune and *Pirates of Silicon Valley*'s best efforts to portray its creation as a macho rivalry with Jobs, the feminization of information technology may still reinforce nerds’ “omega male” status. As Steve Ballmer says in *Pirates*, having money and being cool are not necessarily the same thing. Or, as Quail (2011, 461) puts it, “the nerd moniker has historically been used as a way of distinguishing, and discrediting, a particular expression of nonhegemonic masculinity and favoring the more hegemonic, consumer-viable contrast.” If hegemonic masculinity comprises physical toughness and strength (Connell 1995), then slippage from quiet and studious to weak and wimpy seems almost inevitable. However, from the ashes of the “sensitive new-age guys” and “enlightened males” of the 1980s and ’90s emerged a new, alternative masculinity, one sometimes described by the press as “nerdy but nice.”

A number of recent films have staged an encounter between these “nice nerds” and more conventionally “masculine” men. These include *About a Boy* (Weitz and Weitz 2002), *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (Apatow 2005), *Superbad* (Mottola 2007), *Role Models* (Wain 2008), and *I Love You, Man* (Hamburg 2009). Most are what Alilunas calls “dude flicks,” a larger set of films “which feature desperate, anxious white men[; they] are nearly always comedies, and construct their humor from the inadequacies and failures of white male masculinity” (2008, under “Dude Flicks”). They combine characteristics of gross-out and romantic comedy subgenres, mixing conventionally “guy”-oriented humour with an interest in personal relationships. Many feature a shared constellation of creators and actors, such as producer/director Judd Apatow and actors Steve Carell, Paul Rudd, and Michael Cera. But the films I have in mind are distinguished by a narrative of emotional transformation, not only for their nerdy leads but also for the men around them.

To take one example, Steve Carell, who has made a career playing good-natured doofuses, stars as Andy, the titular forty-year-old virgin. Andy works at a big-box electronics store and
spends his time—mostly alone—playing video games, painting wargames miniatures, and curating his collection of action figures. When one of their poker buddies drops out one night, his co-workers Jay, David and Cal (Romany Malco, Paul Rudd, and Seth Rogen) take pity on Andy and invite him along. In the course of the evening’s locker room talk, Andy inadvertently reveals his virginal status. Although he must endure some mockery at first, the guys vow to help him solve this “problem,” giving him relationship and grooming advice with comically disastrous results. Quite outside of his colleagues’ schemes, Andy strikes up a romance with Trish (Catherine Keener). As their relationship develops, it becomes apparent that Andy’s coaches in the masculine arts are themselves emotional wrecks. Andy’s honesty and sincerity, not their pick-up artist–style tips and tricks, enable him to overcome his neuroses and forge a viable relationship. But at a crucial point in the film’s final act, Andy has had a fight with Trish and is confronted by Jay, David, and Cal who, like Dickensian ghosts, tell him to reconcile with her rather than pursuing a one-night stand (as they had earlier advised him to do). The film ends with a wedding and, after its consummation, an over-the-top musical number—“Aquarius” from Hair adding the grace note to the movie’s male liberation subtext.

Although Andy’s nerdy hobbies evoke conventional portrayals of geeks as socially awkward loners who can’t relate to women, The 40-Year-Old Virgin and its ilk seem on the whole a sympathetic portrayal of nerdy masculinity. In these films, at least, nerds can win at love without recourse to tricks (à la Revenge) or wealth to “make up” for their geekiness. Yet there is a seeming expectation that, like Andy who sells his action figures on eBay to pay for the opulent ceremony, they make some compromises with “mainstream” sensibilities and tastes in order to fit in. This is often portrayed as “growing up,” as though when they were nerds, they spake as a child, understood as a child, and thought as a child, but when they became men they put away nerdish things.
Chic Geeks: Homo nerdensis hipsteris

As 2008 turned into 2009 and I was preparing to begin this study, a poster began appearing around my home campus. It imitated a dictionary entry and read as follows (boldface and italics in original):

**Geek** [gēk]
*(plural geeks)*

*noun*
1. **enthusiast**: a person who has a high interest in and places great importance on a particular interest or subject
2. **non-conformist**: one who obsesses over matters considered trivial by the general public
3. **revolutionary**: a potential for making scientific, political, social changes of a sweeping or extreme nature
4. **well-groomed**: someone of particularly fine attractiveness

*Editor’s note: As of Jan 26, 2009*

*Geek is the new chic.*

These posters advertised Geek Week, a student-organized event to promote science programs among students who had not yet decided on a major. Despite this goal, science is only mentioned once on the poster, grouped in amongst other kinds of “revolutionary” changes. Nonetheless, we are assured of the proverbial chicness of geeks. In some ways, this portrayal of nerds emerges from the technogeek discourse, as Tocci (2009, 201–2) notes:

Thanks to figures like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, our notion of the computer geek as potentially wealthy was well in place by the 1990s.... Arguably, however, it was the dot-com boom that truly promoted the idea that geeks weren’t just financially secure, but jet-setting, extravagant, even kind of cool.... In this view, geeks aren’t just making money off hard work; they can afford to play around and show up work late thanks to their wildly successful careers.

That is, tech jobs became “cool” jobs in the late 1990s and early 2000s (see, e.g., Liu 2004; N.S. Cohen 2009). However, the rise of the “hipster nerd” seems to draw even more on the understanding of geeks as pop-culture savants. The phrase “geek chic,” which has become increasingly common in journalistic accounts (Figure 1.3), captures the surprising and contradictory nature of the trend with great economy.
In *Revenge of the Nerds*, the final event of the Homecoming Carnival (which determines the presidency of the Greek Council) is a musical performance, and the Tri-Lambs win the crowd over with a mix of Devo-esque electronica and rapping, courtesy of gay black nerd, Lamar (Larry B. Scott). Although the nerds are at the bottom of the college social ladder, they are apparently in the *avant garde* of culture. Many interviewees discussed the impact of technology to *explain* the destigmatization of nerd culture; however, the *evidence* they offered more often refer to the (perceived) success of nerdy genres and texts with mainstream audiences:

Well, take for example, you’ve got the *Transformers* movie. Like, what is that, the highest money-making movie of all time or something? That *at least* has to show something, like that has to be somewhat mainstream. Like, *Spider-Man*, too. Same deal. There’s a lot of geeky uh things that do well—popular, like in money and stuff, and that at least has to *indicate* something. It certainly isn’t the ... like, it can’t be just 10% of the world being geeks and then making ... like billions of dollars for these movies, right? (Wedge)
I think *Lord of the Rings* winning the Oscar for the best picture. Like, that’s kind of a big, flashing neon sign that this has gone mainstream, you know? (Diana)

BMW: There’s been a lot of talk in the news, with articles like, “BAM! POW! Comics aren’t for kids anymore! Comics are becoming more mainstream.” And you get celebrities sort of saying, “Oh, yeah, when I was in high school I was really into this—”

STR4-p1: Who’s that—? STR4-p2, was it you who was telling me about some famous celebrity who teaches all of his friends to play D&D?

BMW: Is it Vin Diesel?

STR4-p1: Yeah!

STR4-p2: Yeah.

STR4-p1: Vin Diesel is like, “I love D&D!” Oh, I’d love to play—

STR4-p2: He started—he loves video games, too. He started his own game company.

STR4-p1: I would love to play D&D with Vin Diesel.

Whether measured by commercial success, critical acclaim, or the cachet of celebrity, these comments suggest that the cultural products for which nerds and geeks have traditionally been the primary audience are taking on a new importance in popular culture.

The commercial and critical success of science-fiction, fantasy, and superhero genres at the box office and on television in recent years, the growth of the gaming market (especially, console games and MMORPGs), and the re-evaluation of comics and graphic novels as an artistic form have all underscored the idea of nerds and geeks as having their fingers on the pulse of popular culture. This sort of cutting-edge cultural expertise has traditionally been the marker of hipness (see Thornton 1996). At the same time, the nostalgia machine of popular culture has, for the last decade, been pre-occupied with the children’s culture of the 1980s and 1990s, a period during which sci-fi and fantasy themes were prominent and video games were introduced to the market. The mainstream’s nostalgia for what nerds have always loved has resulted in an unprecedented convergence. Even the neo-classical nerds of *Big Bang Theory* have been given an updated image—their slim-fitting t-shirts, messenger bags, and thick, plastic frames indistinguishable from those worn by the
fashionable figures that grace street-style blogs like *The Sartorialist*. As a result, “pockets of popular discourse are arguing that nerdy is the new ‘cool’”:

Take, for example, the character of Seth Cohen (played by Adam Brody) on the hit youth television series *The OC*... . The show portrays Cohen as a somewhat geeky teen, especially in his subordinate power relationships with other characters in the hierarchy of teen social groups. His squareness is marked by a love for comic books, sci-fi, drawing, and Converse All Stars, the shoe of nonjock kids everywhere. (Quail 2011, 466)

However, Cohen is “not a complete outcast but rather a semipopular, witty, wealthy, cute character who dresses very stylishly and who does, in fact, ‘get the girl,’ the popular one at that” (466–67). Conversely, the Fox series *Glee* explicitly positions its main characters as losers. Early episodes feature the show-choristers being routinely thrown in dumpsters and having Slurpees hurled in their faces by football players, and the cheerleading coach torments them on a weekly basis. However, these supposed outcasts are, as a rule, played by implausibly good-looking actors. In these cases, it’s as if casting directors were sent a memo explaining that *geeks* means nothing more than men 10 pounds under or women 5 pounds over the average weight of young Hollywood talent.

At least some nerds have reacted to these new portrayals with hostility. For example, Solo reports that a male friend of hers “hates Seth Cohen because he made it really hard for real nerds because now all the girls expect ... Adam Brody and what they get is ... not Adam Brody.” According to Tocci (2009, 4), the “emergence of ‘geek chic’” can be read as either the “culmination” or the “undoing” of geek culture as “a collective identity.” The novelist and lifestyle writer Russell Smith (2007) puts it more starkly:

And that’s maybe because nerdiness itself is cool, especially right now. ... A geek no longer means someone with no social skills, but someone with specialized knowledge. People say, for example, “I’m a wine geek” to mean “I’m middle class,” or “I’m a finance geek” to mean “I’m quite rich.” People proudly say, “I have these dweeby interests” to mean “I’m educated.” The phrase “geek chic” has become so overused in magazines it almost means simply fashionable.
If this is what *geek* means to the average person today, then it is no surprise that one nerd’s mainstream acceptance is another’s banalization.

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In an episode of the British office sitcom, *The IT Crowd* (Linehan 2008), Jen (Katherine Parkinson), the manager of the Reynholm Industries’ IT department, is charged with producing a sexy calendar (for charity) by her boss Douglas (Matt Berry), who is angling for a knighthood on the basis of corporate philanthropy. Jen can’t bring herself to do the girlie calendar he’s expecting, but she reasons that “the whole nerd thing” is “very in at the moment” and fills it with cheesecake photos of weedy, bespectacled men. When the calendars return from the printers, however, Jen discovers that rumours of the triumph of the nerds have been greatly exaggerated:

> Douglas: And I think I speak for all men here when I say, I can’t wait to get that box open and feast my eyes upon its *sexy contents!* ((laughs)) Whoa! Someone’s played an awful prank; *there’s nothing here but gloomy pictures of morons*!

> Jen: No, not morons, *geeks*. They’re sexy now—you know, *geek chic*.

Douglas: *Geek chic*? I want to tear my eyes out!

Although media discourse has undoubtedly changed over the period in question, these changes—related to technological and economic transformations, new images of masculinity, and the re-ordering of the hierarchy of cultural forms—continue to implicate a relatively static stereotype of the nerd or geek. In reviewing the articles retrieved from LexisNexis, I was struck by the cyclical recurrence of the revenge of the nerds trope. However, reporting on geeky subjects frequently asserted that they, whatever they are,
aren’t “just for nerds anymore” (Figure 1.4); the phrase is often a quote, thereby distancing the journalist from endorsing, for example, computing (including the internet and ICTs), the sciences (including engineering and math), topics related to fandom (including SF&F literature and media, conventions, &c.), digital games, or nerdy hobbies like birdwatching and cycling. But, in any case, this construction reinforces the old figure of the nerd, in contrast to the “ordinary folks” who can now enjoy or make use of whatever it is without fear of being outcast. In Quail’s (2011, 471) words, “the ‘tyranny of hip’ forces even nerd identity to attempt to transform, though a nexus of hegemonic identity construction and commercial culture obsessed with a masculinity that emphasizes sexual prowess and 

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Figure 1.4. Not (just) for nerds (anymore): Documents retrieved per category

Source: LexisNexis Academic major world publications database, “not W/2 for nerds” before 1 January 2010, manually filtered and coded

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6 The following subjects merited one article each and are omitted from the figure: Latin, carrying a notebook, wearing ID holders, orthodontic appliances, public transportation, business journalism, productivity, public policy books, and reading in general.
conquest. ... Such imagined transformations typically fail." In the end, these discourses may tell us more about “mainstream” culture than they do the subculture in question. The real experiences of so-called nerds are something else entirely, and to understand them one must let them speak for themselves.

**TALK NERDY TO ME: NERDINESS IN CONVERSATION**

As we’ve seen, *nerd* and *geek* carry a great deal of discursive baggage. I now want to examine how study participants actually used these and related terms to classify themselves and others. In interpreting their statements, I shall draw on membership categorization analysis (MCA), which is one strand of conversation analysis that has developed out of the work of Harvey Sacks (1972; 1979; 1984; 1992). But I’ll begin by looking at the ways interviewees define the meaning and legitimate uses of words like *nerd*, *geek*, and *fan*.

*It’s All Geek to Me: Defining Categories*

Ethnographic interviewing seeks to understand the meaning of cultural categories, and one important way we make meaning is through contrast. During second-phase interviews, I asked whether and, if so, how interviewees distinguished between *nerd* and *geek*. I also tried to pay attention to how people used them throughout my fieldwork. A single, “correct” definition cannot be extracted from their answers, but this prompt elicited arguments and explanations that may elucidate how nerd culture’s meaning is produced. Because of the question’s form—and a widespread belief in the distinction’s importance (Tocci 2009,

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7 See also Hester and Eglin (1997a) and Antaki and Widdicombe (1998). My thanks to Simon Locke for drawing my attention to this literature.
answers often involved a series of oppositions, with each dyad mapped onto an assumed difference between *nerd* and *geek*.

For example, a common pattern reserved one of the words for the subject of someone’s interests and the other for the ways they pursue or express them. As Barry put it, “*Geek* kind of refers to the interest, and maybe *nerd* kind of the approach”; however, he also associates *nerd* with a “professional meaning”: “Somebody can be a *nerd* at their job as a scientist or a librarian or all those nerdy professions.” Solo said she considered them more or less interchangeable, though they once held more distinct connotations:

> It used to be more ... *nerds* were more specific, socially awkward ... or smart. *Nerds* were smart, and *geeks* were weird. And that was the main difference. [...] I’d find myself saying, “Oh, I’m sort of a *nerd*,” and then I’d say, “Well, no, actually I’m more of a *geek* because I’m not that smart. I’m not smart enough to be a *nerd*. *Nerds* are more socially awkward, and *geeks* just like nerdy things.” But I haven’t used that in a really long, long time.

These comments suggest that certain things are *geeky/nerdy a priori*, while others are not but can be made the object of a *nerdy/geeky* interest. Diana provides an example of this dynamic at work:

> DIANA: I think that if you’re a fan of video games, I think that that makes you [a *geek*], but just playing? My parents play first-person shooters, weirdly enough, but does that make them *nerds*? I don’t think so. But they’re not fans of it. They’re not obsessively hunting it down.
> BMW: So, there’s kind of a distinction between the things that you do and the way that you do them?
> DIANA: Yeah, maybe.
> BMW: Um, would that apply to something like tabletop role-playing? Is there a way to play *Dungeons & Dragons*—
> DIANA: And not be a *nerd*? (laughs) I don’t think so. Maybe it’s just the fringe, the peripheral thing. Like, computer games. Computers can be used in ways that aren’t *nerdy*, right? Because they’re just useful. There’s no way to play *D&D* that isn’t ... its only purpose is to be *nerdy*. (laughs)

When discussing video games, the quality of engagement with gaming is more important in terms of constituting *nerd/geek* identity (“they’re not fans of it”), but content is paramount and overrides any other consideration when discussing RPGs (“There’s no way to play *D&D*
that isn’t [nerdy]”). Objects and activities conventionally associated with nerds can, at least theoretically, be separated from a nerdy interest in them if they are perceived to have some other function or are diffused enough among “normal” people. But assigning such closely related words to both the content of leisure interests and the form they take confuses rather than clarifies things, as in Solo’s statement that “geeks just like nerdy things.”

In some comments, however, interviewees considered “approach” all-important and used nerd and geek to distinguish between different styles of engagement with cultural goods and leisure activities. In these cases, the contrast was between relatively individualized and social, specialized and broad, or obsessive and casual engagement. For example, Shiera and Wedge both considered “geeks” more social and “nerds” loners:

I think geek has now become an umbrella, and a positive umbrella term, and nerd [...] is] much more about groups of individuals as opposed to ... an overall, an actual community, an actual interactive and self-supporting organization[....]

(Shiera)

But for me geek, geek tends to be um ... someone who is very interested in a subject, can be quite vocal about it, and is social about it, I guess? whereas, to me, a nerd is more ... The social aspect isn’t quite as strong, and it’s more a personal intellectual pursuit, like you might have a book nerd or a literary nerd or a philosophy nerd or something like that. Someone who gets really engrossed in a subject, but it tends to be a more personal pursuit, rather than a group or a social or sharing with others sort of thing. (Wedge)

Diana offered a similar opposition but flipped the terms of reference:

I think the best definitions we heard was geeks are more technological and very specific. Like, they’re very passionate about one thing, like you get engineering geeks, and they’re very specific about very narrowed, and where nerds are more generalists. They’re just kind of interested in nerdy type things, you know, but [...] the label of nerd was more about the more educated kind thing but generalists, where geeks were ... “I only do engineering, or I only do that kind of thing.”

Of course, this is not a merely etymological argument. Distinctions between relatively individualized and relatively sociable forms of engagement, like all of these distinctions, often take on an evaluative character.
Many conventionally nerdish or geeky attributes are still negatively valued, but participants also believed that the “hierarchy of pop culture” (Mr. Fox) is shifting in their favour. This changing status is registered in linguistic usage. As Shiera insisted, “The pejorative connotations are fading.” However, insofar as some remain in the mix, many participants attempted to control their application, generally reserving positive connotations for the term *geek* and assigning negative ones to *nerd*:

I would also tend to see sort of … *nerd* as a bit more negative connotation for me, just just because of the sort of all-encompassing nature that I have assigned to that, I guess, where they tend to not have a lot more, a lot of other interests. So, they tend to be kind of one-dimensional or that sort of thing. (Wedge)

And *geek* just has a more positive connotation for me, so I’m not offended by the use of them, but I will probably use the word *geek* more than *nerd*. (Diana)

*Nerd*—when someone calls themselves a nerd, they’re not usually meaning it in a positive way and they’re also not pointing to their friends and going, “We’re all nerds.” I do hear “we’re all geeks,” and it’s not a bad thing. (Shiera)

There were some exceptions, however. Shiera corrected her claim that people do not self-identify as nerds, saying she had encountered some people at conventions who used *nerd* in the way that she uses *geek*. This led her to conclude that although “they’re not quite interchangeable,” the terms’ meanings are “getting closer.” Meanwhile, Barry preferred *fan* to either one. Although he identified with certain senses of *nerd*, given his career as a research chemist, he argued that *fan* is an emic category and, therefore, a more accurate label: “as far as hobby goes, I guess *fan* is more accurate, and it’s something that’s used within science-fiction fandom. It’s how people refer to themselves.” By contrast, *nerd* and *geek* “might be a bit more negative because they might … they carry implications of somebody being overly preoccupied with something at the expense of so-called real life.”

But, however positive one or both of these words have become, no one showed any difficulty improvising examples of negative stereotypes or usages:
Um just kind of like ... the thirty-year-old undershaven guy living in his mom’s basement playing video games in his underwear while eating Cheetos kind of things. (ORG4-p1)

You do run into the occasional troglodyte, which is that slovenly unkempt guy who spends nine hours a day playing Warcraft or whatever—trolling message boards. That is an unfortunate stereotype that does actually exist. (Mr. Fox)

And, at the same time, the terms can also function as a kind of membership badge. As Diana, who elsewhere describes herself as a “closet nerd,” said when asked whether she used *geek* and *nerd*, “It depends on what group of friends I’m with. [...] Like, when I’m talking with my geek friends? Yeah! Like, when we’re playing D&D and stuff, those are terms that we use, you know.”

In these cases, members either do not have to worry about negative connotations, which are presumptively excluded by their conversational partners’ own insider status or ironically taken on board as self-deprecatory humour:

I certainly tend to put a more positive spin on the term myself. I’ve probably used it in sort of a negative connotation myself, but it’s not, it would probably more of a joking sense or something like that, for me. (Wedge)

So I just kind of generally say that we organize events that are ... well, nerdy. I usually use the n-word. (ORG1-p1)

I think there’s this weird kind of self—again, self-deprecating trend to reinforce *geek* culture by clinging to those stereotypes of social awkwardness. And often as a joking thing [...] or informing your behaviour based upon it. Like, for example, the stereotype is that when people get together to play games, there’s Mountain Dew and pizza and Cheetos and stuff like that. [...] I see people kind of reinforcing that, like, “Oh, I’m a geek, I’m going to a role-playing game, I should reinforce that tradition by getting some junk. And when I talk about games and promoting events, I should be like, ‘Grab your Cheetos!’ and stuff like that. (ORG4-p1)

It would be used in a more humorous sense. Somebody who was kind of half-apologetically saying that um ... they follow the genre maybe a bit too much. ((laughs)) But it would be more in a humorous sense. (Barry)

This was certainly the case in the interviews themselves, where even participants who explicitly claimed not to use *nerd* or *geek* in everyday speech did not hesitate to use them
while talking to me about their leisure activities and the people they meet through them.

Their use both as insults by outsiders and accepted self-identifications by insiders led some
to draw parallels to the “reclamation” of language as a tactic of identity politics:

DIANA: Or ... what else would we say? If you’re making fun of someone, just gentle
mocking, you could say, “Oh, such a nerd.” But not in a derogatory way. Like, that would be a positive ...
BMW: So, it’s a little ironic, I guess?
DIANA: Yeah, or like an insider. You know, like, I [as a bisexual woman] can call
somebody a fag whereas a homophobic person can’t call them a fag. Just reclaiming the term kind ... kind of thing.

Yeah, language evolution and the reclamation of pejorative terms. I noted that most of the: studies of course have been around racial terms or gender terms[.....] For the most part, they state that reclamation of a term is done by the community itself. The only other way it happens is by over-usage. [...] When you’re talking about a gender pejorative or a racial pejorative, you have a clear image in mind[.....] It’s someone of a particular racial background or a particular gender or a particular um you know ... and that’s interesting because part of the reason that ... the gay movement has reclaimed the terms gay and queer success?fully is because they don’t have an image associated with them. There is the stereotype [of] the limp-wristed, light-in-the-loafers, ( ) wearer, but they’ve managed to show that not everybody who is gay fits those [...] they’ve reclaimed the term, I think, fairly successfully. One of the things that I noted in that study was that um they talk about ... when you reclaim or when a group reclaims a term um of self-reference ... usually it’s only members of the group can use it without it being insulting. And the classic is the n-word. You can’t use that ... unless you are and fit, and it, then it becomes a term of brotherhood, of shared, “we’ve both been through the same wringer,” and that’s what it does for them, it allows that. (Shiera)

Although the examples of pejoratives aimed at racialized and sexual minorities are well known—particularly for the control that these communities exert over legitimate uses and users of these slurs—that Diana and Shiera draw parallels to specific, political interventions in the process of semantic change (i.e., re-appropriation rather than simple melioration) also suggests that they conceive of nerd culture as a marginalized minority group subject to stigma and discrimination. Thus, whether or not these comparisons are justified, they indicate the complicated status that these terms have among participants in contemporary nerd culture, despite the “geek chic” discourse presented in the mass media.
From this discussion, it seems there is no generalizable, consensus definition of either *nerd* or *geek*. Although all participants could use these terms “fluently” and I have identified some recurring patterns in how they are used, explicit attempts at definition were often internally inconsistent. This is not a failing on the part of the interviewees. Rather, it points to the limits of focusing solely on what they said rather than examining the social work their statements accomplished in the specific contexts in which they produced them.

*Membership Categories and Identity-Inference Management*

What is at stake when someone identifies herself as a nerd or geek? In their study of subcultural identity, Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) found that young people who looked as though they might belong to well-known subcultures (punk, goth, &c.) refused their invitations to identify as members. In making sense of these unexpected denials, they “started to treat these data not as accounts produced by ‘punks’, or ‘gothics’ or whatever” but re-framed their analysis to “[explore] how it was that specific subcultural identities became salient in specific moments in the accounts” (2). Membership categorization analysis (MCA) was the major theoretical resource for this change of perspective. This approach sees categorization as a basic method for the ordered production of social life, including conversational interaction.

Interviews are, of course, not naturally occurring examples of conversation, but they draw on many of the same linguistic and social competences, and the ways they vary from ordinary talk-in-interaction can be specified. While Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) believe subjects could reasonably infer that they had been singled out because of their distinctive styles of dress, my interviewees were fully aware of my research questions from the start. In phase one of the study, interviewees were approached as a function of the subculturally oriented organizations for which they worked or volunteered; in the second
phase, interviewees responded to a call for participation or an invitation from someone else. Thus, the categories **nerd** and **geek** were always already salient to the interview—indeed, *not* bringing them up would have been an accountable omission (e.g., "If you deny that you’re a nerd, then why did you volunteer for a study about nerds?"). This presents interviewees with a problem of identity management. As Sacks (1992, 172) says of a group of teenaged hotrodders, “What we want to see, in formulating the problem that they have, is what it is that they seem to see as the things they have to come to terms with”; two points drawn from MCA can help make the problem’s outlines clear.

Membership categorization analysis is one tradition of conversation analysis inspired by Harvey Sacks. As Hester and Eglin (1997b, 3) explain, “The focus of MCA ... is on the use of membership categories, membership categorization devices and category predicates by members ... in accomplishing ... ‘naturally occurring ordinary activities.’” Central to this project is the concept of a “membership categorization device,” which Sacks (1972, 218–19) defines as

> any collection of membership categories containing at least a category, which may be applied to some population containing at least a member, so as to provide, by the use of some rules of application, for the pairing of at least a population member and a categorization device member. A device is then a collection plus rules of application.

One of the first devices introduced in Sacks’s lectures is the “MIR device,” where “'M’ stands for membership, 'I’ stands for inference-rich, and ‘R’ stands for representative” (1992, 41). These three components can be parsed quite easily, but they add up to a method of practical reasoning that is both robust and economical. First, membership categories belong to sets:

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8 The other—and perhaps better known—wing focuses on the rules ordering the production of talk-in-interaction (i.e., everyday conversation). Watson (1997) argues that sequencing rules and categorization are two sides of the conversation-analysis coin—which was Sacks’s analytical method, too.
By that I mean that whatever number of categories a set contains, and without regard to the addition or subtraction of categories for that set, each set's categories classify a population. ... The names of the sets would be things like sex, age, race, religion, perhaps occupation. And in each set are categories which can classify any member of the population. (40)

For example, the categories baby, mommy, and daddy are conventionally heard as part of the collection family, whereas shortstop would (usually) be heard as referring to a different collection (1972, 219). Second, Sacks explains that “a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about the society is stored in terms of these categories” (1992, 40), including what he calls “category-bound activities” and the broader MCA literature refers to as “predicates.” These predicates make sense of social life and are reversible, allowing us to apply membership categories when we observe particular characteristics or behaviours or to predict characteristics and behaviours based on categories:

Clearly, the notions of category membership and social identity are crucially linked. ... Thus, when we talk of a person's social identity, we are also referring to their membership of a special category, and this in turn will provide the bases for the legitimate (that is, conventional and warranted) imputation of motives, expectations and rights associated with that category and its incumbents. ... Categories, then, are "inference rich"; and participants in interaction display their orientation to the kinds of inferences which may warrantably be drawn about them by virtue of their membership of categories. (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995, 70)

Third, Sacks suggests that "any member of any category is presumptively a representative of that category for the purpose of use of whatever knowledge is stored by reference to that category" (1992, 41). So, although the stated purpose of the interviews was to draw some conclusions about nerd culture based on interviewees' responses—that is, to infer category-bound activities from them—the presumption of representativeness cuts both ways: Having offered themselves as subjects to whom the categories nerd and geek could be applied, interviewees also created an opportunity for those categories’ conventional predicates to be applied to them.
But membership categories are ambiguous since the same word may be heard as different categories depending on the context. Or as Sacks puts it, “the same categorial word is a term occurring in several distinct devices, and can in each have quite a distinct reference” (1972, 220). *Nerd* and *geek* have a range of different connotations, such that they potentially belong to more than one device. On the one hand, we have the terms’ traditional uses within status systems (especially, the one constituted by school cultures [Milner 2004]) to designate one social identity or group among others. This is partially captured in Kendall’s (1999a, 264) description of *nerd* as one of the “specific malfeasances on the continuum of masculine improprieties.” On the other hand, the triumph of the nerds discourse and subsequent enlargement of the terms’ vernacular uses has introduced another connotation. If heard with this sense, then *nerd* and *geek* are more likely to be taken as describing a quality of interaction with some text, genre, or practice. Particularly when qualified (e.g., “music nerd” or “reality-TV geek”), they seem to belong to a collection like *kinds of consumer or audience segments*, and often carry connotations, *inter alia*, of authentic passion for something. However, this second collection has not replaced the first. Both are available and more or less reasonable hearings of the same words, depending upon the context in which they are employed.

In sum, the interview situation positioned interviewees as presumptive representatives of the membership categories *nerd* and *geek*, but they could not know for sure (at least at the beginning) how these categories were being used and heard by the interviewer. So, the problem they faced was limiting the scope for negative inferences to be drawn from their category membership. I want to highlight two distinct tactics available: on the one hand, they could assert and perform their basic “ordinariness,” defusing negative inferences; on the other, they could draw symbolic boundaries between different kinds of participant, shifting negative predicates onto others.
Like Common People

One obvious way to limit negative inferences is simply to refuse the “presumptive representativeness” of category membership, but outright refusal was not an available option in this situation. Instead, some interviewees tried to position themselves (and others “like” them) as people who were basically ordinary in spite of their participation in nerdy activities and events. In Sacks’s (1984, 414–15) terms, they took on the “job” of “doing ‘being an ordinary person.”’ Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995, 100) identified similar tactics in their interviewees’ denials and dodges:

Rather than stating explicitly the relevance (or irrelevance) of a particular categorical identity, she is making available certain inferences about her identity via the design of her utterance. So she does not address the prior question as a member of a subcultural category; instead, her utterance is designed to display that she is addressing the question as any normal person would.

Not only did these putative punks and guessed-at goths not offer subcultural labels when asked to describe their style, the ways they chose to talk about, frame, and categorize their activities tended to emphasize their continuity with those undertaken by ordinary people. My interviews subjects also affirmed their normalcy, particularly when they were asked to make generalizations about nerd culture.

For example, not only did Mr. Fox explicitly state that he does not use the terms nerd and geek in ordinary conversation, but he also insisted on the basic ordinariness of so-called nerds and geeks, as can be seen in the follow extracts:

BMW: So, if that sort of popular image—the glasses with the tape on them, the pocket protector, the slide-rule—if that’s this sort of ridiculous stereotype, are there any ... images or characters that you feel better reflect your experiences of—

MR. FOX: Of what a nerd looks like?

BMW: Yeah, of what the people you really encounter in comic-bookstores and video game related events, are like?

MR. FOX: You got a mirror? That’s what people who are nerds are like. Having a ... different hobby than most people doesn’t change how you look. You’re still a regular person.
There’s a whole spectrum ... You don’t like the same thing in nerd culture that you wouldn’t like in any other culture. You know. There’s jerks, idiots ... just generalized humanity.

BMW: I’m wondering if you could maybe describe some of the [...] kinds of conversations that you might have.

MR. FOX: We talk about everything.

BMW: Okay.

MR. FOX: Yeah, well, we have the ((laughs)) normal topics of conversation of any group of friends. “What’s so-and-so up to? Can you believe this happened in the world?” Regular people talk. A lot of Warhammer, though, because ... my friends are big into that.

BMW: So, regular people talk, plus Warhammer.


I mean ... to me, it is not a defining characteristic of who I am, so ... it’s less essential that I be accepted or ... marginalized. Probably makes me a bad nerd.

In each of these extracts, Mr. Fox performs a neat bit of rhetorical judo, deflecting my questions about nerd culture by denying that there is anything special to comment on.

When activities that might be viewed as distinctive to nerds are mentioned—such as his references to Warhammer, comics, and video games in the third extract—he treats them as if they were just another example of “regular people talk.” Although Mr. Fox used this tactic the most, he was by no means alone in attempting to normalize nerd culture in interviews. For example, asked if he saw people become “too involved” in nerdy activities, Barry responded, “It’s the same for everything,” while Solo repeatedly described herself as “the everyman.” Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) and Locke (2011) have pointed to the problem of reconciling expressive individualism with group membership, and particularly memberships from which people are liable to infer unthinking conformity. Identifying instead with a group so broad that it encompasses potentially everyone is a way to solve this problem9—after all, what inferences can one warrantably make about the “everyman”?

9 Notwithstanding the “geek exceptionalism” discussed below.
However, the categories *nerd* and *geek* are not entirely negative. As we’ve seen, a host of positive discourses have become attached to nerd culture in the last twenty years, and interviewees themselves routinely attribute positive traits such as intelligence and enthusiasm to participants in nerd culture. But claiming *these* predicates requires some kind of (at least tentative) acceptance of membership. Introducing a division between “basically normal” participants, on the one hand, and “abnormal” ones who can be associated with all the negative predicates, on the other hand, was one way to address this dilemma. Again, Mr. Fox provides a good example of this in action:

**MR. FOX:** You will see big groups of normal-ass looking people who are like, “Yeah, we are not stereotypes. See, look at us all. There’s diversity, cultural ... ethnic and everything. We’re all different people from all walks of life who share a common interest. It doesn’t make us weirdos.”

**BMW:** Okay. Um. Changing um—

**MR. FOX:** Unless you’re a cosplay guy. Those guys are weirdoes ... Oh, [M] is not gonna like that. She’s a ... friend who cosplays.

According to this account, nerd culture is a microcosm of society at large and so diverse that nothing concrete can be said about them, except for one sub-group that can be easily dismissed as "weirdoes"; however, this group includes a friend of his, which immediately calls this judgement into question. Similarly, Solo believed that members of “mainstream culture” perceive her as a “hardcore” participant, but her own judgement is quite different: “I look at me and I’m like, ‘The people I’ve seen!’ Like, I’m not like that.” The situational logic deployed in these brief quotations points to the problem of policing the border between the subcultural and the mainstream, or between “normal-ass looking people” and “weirdoes.”

Such distinctions are fundamental to both lay and professional theories of subcultural groups. Sarah Thornton (1996) criticizes the complicity between self-consciously “underground” subcultures (read: their self-appointed spokespeople) and a certain breed of left-populist academic research on youth cultures:
Dichotomies like mainstream/subculture and commercial/alternative do not relate to the way dance crowds are objectively organized as much as to the means by which many youth cultures imagine their social world, measure their cultural worth and claim their subcultural capital. (98)

That is to say, the idea of the “mainstream” or “dominant” culture is an artefact of subculturalists’ ideologies rather than an empirical social object. Although Muggleton (2000, 64–65) takes issue with her references to “objective characteristics,” he too disputes the doctrine of mainstream versus subcultural youth: “there are no ‘hardcores’ and ‘preppies’ in any ‘realist’ sense, only members who construct themselves as the former and their contemporaries as the latter, a process which ... is reciprocal in its effects” (101–2).

Despite these differences in their theoretical vocabularies, both arguments suggest we must look more closely at how distinctions are actually made and what they accomplish for the people making them. How does one separate the subcultural sheep from the mainstream goats and the ordinary wheat from the dorky chaff? In the dance-club scene Thornton studied, for example, participants who claimed a masculinized and “classless” hipness discriminated against a caricature of working-class femininity that was labelled as mainstream. Presumably, a different logic is at work in nerd culture.

Warsies are from Mustafar, Trekkers are from Vulcan

Despite claims of normalcy, interviewees still made distinctions between their contemporaries—that is, to quote Kendall (2011, 510–11), between good and bad nerds:

In the Wizard of Oz, Glinda’s first and crucial question to Dorothy is “are you a good witch or a bad witch?” This question applies also to nerds. The bad nerd—asocial, bitter, too smart for his own good—might cause harm. The good nerd—lacking in social skills but still friendly, willing to use his intelligence to help others—just needs a little “dating advice.” This distinction might reflect concerns about computers as well. While recognizing the advantages of computers in multiple contexts, people still fear the potential harm they can do.

In the real world, of course, this question is about more than just computers; people draw on a variety of principles and criteria to decide between the “nice nerds” and the
“basement-dwelling troglodytes.” Categorization is obviously an important way we manage information about the social world but, because we act on the basis of categorical distinctions, it also produces social divisions. Michèle Lamont’s studies of upper-middle class (1992) and working-class (2000) men show how “symbolic boundaries”—whether moral, socio-economic, or cultural in nature—are constructed according to culturally specific rubrics, which then become reasons to associate with or avoid others. In order to elicit examples of such “boundary work” in action, I borrowed from Lamont and asked interviewees to talk about their fellow geeks, focusing on those they like or dislike and whom they consider similar to or different from themselves (1992, 18; 2000, 4).

If the frequency a characteristic was mentioned is any indication of its importance, then being interesting is the trait most valued by my interviewees. However, a specific construction of “interestingness” is evident in their responses: They say they like and admire intelligent people (“When I think about my friends, there’s a certain level of intellectual capability and flexibility,” Shiera) who are good conversationalists and can speak with authority on a range of topics (“I don’t enjoy spending time with people that […] can’t hold a conversation or don’t know about a lot of different interests[…],” Wedge), expressing distinctive, reasoned, and unconventional opinions (“My gaming group, for instance, is—if you ask all four of those guys the same questions, you would get crazy different answers. So, that’s what I like about my friends … is their diversity of opinions,” Mr. Fox). These qualities not only distinguish individuals; they are also used to describe nerd culture or fandom as a whole:

Fandom is often more educated than many other interest groups and have wider interests. So, you might get to talking about stuff that has nothing to do with the actual fannish activity, but that you both happen to know about. (Barry)

I don’t see many examples of the mindless consumers in those milieux [i.e., fan communities], in that genre I don’t see it. […] You’re dealing with a slightly
elevated level of intellect here—you’re not dealing with people who are mindless; you’re dealing with people who read fiction that is ... thought-provoking and scientific or thought-provoking and imagination-provoking. (Shiera)

In these comments, Barry and Shiera define a cultural boundary on the basis of education and intellect that echoes criteria for individual interestingness. One might even say that the pervasive belief among participants that nerds are, on the whole, more rational and discriminating in their tastes than the “average” person constitutes a geek exceptionalism that stands in sharp contrast to other claims that nerds are just like everyone else.

Shared tastes are also important to interviewees’ boundary work, as would be expected when investigating a taste culture. For example, although he emphasized the diversity of opinion amongst his peer group, when Mr. Fox was asked to describe someone he considered similar to himself (according to any measure he should like to use), he cited someone who “shared a lot of the same opinions about comics, movies, that kinda thing.” These common points of reference provide many of the opportunities to perform “being interesting” in the way discussed above:

If you don’t have anything to talk to someone about, then what kind of a relationship can you have with them? You don’t have to share every single hobby or every single interest, but you have to have some kind of common ground, or else you’re stuck saying, “Nice weather.” ((laughs)) You know? Like, you’re stuck at the very superficial, so you have to be able to relate to each other with common thoughts, common interests, that kind of idea. (Diana)

That is to say, everyone agrees on the importance of being a good conversationalist, but this is defined in such a way as to privilege those who participate in nerdy activities; it is shared tastes that allow people to get beyond the “very superficial.” This suggests the importance of the events, venues, and personal connections through which they are able to encounter others who share their interests.

Indeed, tastes provide a cultural commonality that can overcome other boundaries, including moral ones. For example, conservative Catholic Barry occasionally encounters
significant disagreement with other fans over political and religious opinions, as well as
differences in lifestyle (e.g., he is teetotal and prefers to attend dry events); however, shared
interests provide a means for setting aside those disagreements: "Yeah, they’d be people
that aspects of their personal lives I strongly disagree with, but I ... keep the conversation on
fannish things that we have in common." In these cases, one set of boundaries ("fannish"
versus "mundane") trumps others (Christian versus atheist, conservative versus liberal or
libertarian, &c.).

Another important characteristic is enthusiasm or passion for one’s interests. Again, this
value is seen by many as constitutive of nerd/geek identity:

> Enthusiasm is a big, big, big factor in maintaining a friendship that starts out
> based on an enthusiasm, a fandom. [...] When I’m low and down, I don’t want
> someone to go, “Oh, I know how you feel, I’m low and down, too”; I want
> someone to go, “I’m sorry to hear that—look at this cool thing!” Not to distract
> me but to be excited about—genuinely excited about something they just did or
> saw or read. I want to be—and that fires me up, that gets me—that’s my
> kickstart. So, enthusiasm’s a big part of why my friendships with the people that
> I have the deeper friendships with, why they work. (Shiera)

BMW: Can you unpack the idea of, you know, “being a cool guy” a little bit more?
MR. FOX: Oh, god. ... All right, being a cool guy? is ... I would say it’s earnestness.
BMW: Earnestness?
MR. FOX: Yes. A frankness about yourself, you know, you’re like ... you make no excuses
and you don’t try to cover the genuineness about your opinions about things.
You don’t try to cover up, you don’t try to enjoy things ironically. You just say,
“Yes, I enjoy these things. I enjoy comic books. I’m a fully functioning adult who
enjoys graphic novels or films or games.” It’s just being who you are and not
trying to cover it up.

Sometimes, shared interests are not enough, and participants call for their peers to make
genuine, immediate, and unself-conscious expressions of enthusiasm. Suspicion of "studied"
tastes is somewhat surprising, given the high value usually ascribed to education and self-

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Slang used by some study participants: “From an adjective meaning ‘commonplace and routine,’
this has become a fannish noun describing the majority of the human race that is content with
familiar types of literature and thinking. Frequently used with disdain to describe people who
denigrate fandom because it differs from the mainstream" (Sanders and brown 1994, 268).
improvement by nerds. However, genuine enthusiasm stands in for a larger set of oppositions. For example, it is closely associated with positively valued characteristics such as reasonableness and breadth. Without these, nerdy enthusiasm can become fanatical, on the one hand, or narrow-minded, on the other:

Uh fanboyism is the biggest thing cause ... you can’t rationalize with those people! You can’t present an intellectual argument? to them. It-it’s fanaticism is essentially what it is. You can’t argue with that. You can’t beat crazy with smart. You either have to out-crazy it ... or walk away. (Mr. Fox)

I think we all have this trait, and it is—it doesn’t build friendships, it-it is to insulate, it’s to [become] insular. “I love this and it’s wonderful and it’s fantastic, and I don’t care what you think about it because I love it and it’s wonderful and it’s fantastic” ... to not be open-minded, to be close-minded ... I think it was endemic in the early days of-of the establishment of geekdom, in the Star Trek versus Star Wars ... the “versus.” (Shiera)

These negative traits are also closely associated with stereotypes of socially inept geeks. For example, responses to prompts about people interviewees disliked often turned on problems of etiquette—that is, people who are so wrapped up in their own interests and concerns that they fail to regard others as “everyone” knows one should. The ability to separate between those who can and cannot play well with others thus assumes more importance than abstract commitments to studiousness.

Nerds and geeks are guilty no less than Thornton’s clubbers of making distinctions between “good” and “bad” participants. In interview data, displaying interestingness, shared interests and reference points, genuine enthusiasm, and some measure of social facility is generally portrayed as normal (and, moreover, calibrated to the speaker’s own expectations of social conventions rather than some outside standard), while their absence in some individual is often discussed as though it were a personal failing on their part. It is as if one side of the boundary is cultural and the other moral. Compare, for example, these two extracts from an interview with Diana; in the first, she describes some qualities of geek
friends she most enjoys spending time with, while the second defines her minimum standards for gaming group members:

    Well, I think actually that kind of hits on the key thing is we get along with them when we’re gaming, but we also get along with them when we’re not gaming. And they’re willing to ... to take that leap? you know? to try to get along with us not gaming? I think would be the people that I always feel closer to, you know, or that I like the best. If we get along with them, if we have kind of the same ... sense of humour and outlook on like kind of thing, and then they’re also willing to be non-geeky.

    DIANA: So, I guess it’s willing to learn—knowledge of the game, willing to learn, and at least some social, sociability ([(laughs)]) you know. At least somewhat social and not a total ... I don’t know what to say that isn’t going to be offensive! ([(laughs)])

    BMW: Well, what comes to mind first?

    DIANA: Like, just a total—not a total geek! You know, like just able to interact socially with people.

    BMW: Dork? Is this [when you would use dork]?

    DIANA: No, it would be geek, actually. Geek would be the, like, ((nasal voice)) “Eeee! That’s not how you do it!” You know, that kind of geek. But it’s more like some sociability, like ability to interact with people and not ... and not be so stuck in their ways that they can’t—just ability to be part of a communal, a communal storytelling. Like, as with the one person that’s in the game that I’d love to get out, I’ll never game with him because he’s not part of the communal storytelling.

There is a distinctively moral evaluation going on in the second quotation. Although Diana talks about the “ability” to interact with people and to participate in the communal storytelling experience that is a role-playing game, the tone she adopts to castigate those who lack that ability suggests a failure to exercise appropriate agency and act as one ought to. Thus, positively valued traits are portrayed as unremarkable—indeed, as more or less essential qualities of “good nerds”—while negatively valued traits constitute a moral boundary, which allows “bad nerds” to be discounted as unrepresentative of authentic participants.

    Such value judgements are more than simply “boo/hooray” terms (cf. Ayer 1952). The symbolic boundaries performed in conversation index the processes through which people articulate their “consubstantiality” (K. Burke 1969) with other participants—or, more
precisely, a subset of them. When interviewees use terms like *nerd* and *geek*, when they portray their activities as basically ordinary and unremarkable, and when they distance themselves from others, they are negotiating not only the discursive framing of nerd culture but also who they will acknowledge as their true peers. As Burke explains:

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is identified with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so.

Here are ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is “substantially one” with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another. ...

A doctrine of consubstantiality, either explicit or implicit, may be necessary to any way of life. For substance, in the old philosophies, was an act; and a way of life is an acting-together; and in acting together, men have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial. (20–21)

Group membership is perceived and performed through “acting together” in everyday life.

The sense of consubstantiality produced by this process is a threshold: On one side are people we perceive as like us in some specifiable and nontrivial way; those on the other side are different, though the significance of these differences varies between cases. To put it another way, boundary work obeys a logic that is situated in particular social relationships—those given by nerd culture’s place in the social world as well as the interview context in which these data were generated.

In this chapter, I began seeking a provisional definition of the object of study—that is, when I say this dissertation is about nerd culture, what do we understand that to mean? Like others before me, I began from representations of nerds and geeks in the press and in popular media. But it soon became clear that defining nerd culture is much more complicated than counting newspaper articles or analyzing movies because, in actual practice, who gets called a nerd or a geek and what that means depends on what the speaker is trying to accomplish. My interviewees routinely switched from denying the relevance of these labels, to exalting them as markers of cultural distinction, to using them
as indicators of moral failings, and back again. Thus, it seems that nerd culture cannot be defined (at least, not solely) by examining what people say about it. In the next chapter, I shall attempt to put the dissertation on surer foundations by looking at subcultural practices.
2. From Subcultures to Subcultural Practices

In the previous chapter, I tried to define nerd culture using media discourses about nerds and geeks and the lay theories of my interviewees. Neither proved wholly adequate to the task. It’s not that media representations have nothing to tell us about our cultural environment or that the interviewees’ accounts are somehow incompetent, but they are accounts of situated practices and forms of practical reason that always exceed attempts to articulate them in language. Bent Flyvbjerg suggests that phronetic inquiry “focuses on practical activity and practical knowledge in everyday situations” because “practice is ... more fundamental than either discourse or theory” (2001, 134). So rather than speculating further about what nerd identities mean, let’s look to the contexts that produce them.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of subculture theory’s applicability to nerd culture. I then review some recent developments in practice theory, drawing in particular on Alasdair MacIntyre’s ([1981] 2007) account of social practices. I shall argue that nerd culture is a set of practices in (more or less) the MacIntyrean sense. This theoretical discussion will provide the tools needed for understanding the empirical case that lies at the centre of this dissertation.

WHAT’S WRONG WITH SUBCULTURE THEORY?

A few times now, I have referred to nerd culture as a “subculture.” I’m not alone: for example, J. A. McArthur (2009, 69) writes that “the term subculture has some applicability to the community of geeks on the Internet.” It is used in everyday language to identify a kind of social group that is defined by its lifestyle and seen as somehow opposed to the set of lifestyles we call "mainstream.” It’s become part of our informal social theories, but since it has a formal, academic literature behind it I ought to clarify what I mean when I say
subculture. The dominant model of subculture theory was developed by researchers at the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s. It promised to link the new subcultural styles that emerged in the youth cultures of postwar Britain with social structure.¹ However, this promise might be too good to be true.

The central idea was that working-class youth subcultural styles expressed structural contradictions of their class position. For example, the skinheads and mods embodied their members’ divergent trajectories: the former identified with a nostalgic version of working-class community and masculinity, symbolized by bovver boots, Ben Sherman shirts, and hate crimes (Clarke [1975] 2006); the latter, with the emerging world of middle-class hedonism, represented by tailored suits, Vespa scooters, and amphetamines (Hebdige [1975] 2006). Neither could accomplish in reality what it “magically” resolved in style (P. Cohen [1972] 2005, 89), but the academic analyst, armed with the latest Continental theory, could transmute differences of lifestyle into “semiotic guerilla warfare” that disrupted the dominant culture (Eco quoted in Hebdige 1979, 105). Thus, these styles were held up, not simply as evidence of political discontent, but as themselves a sort of political intervention or expression of political will. But the lack of meaningful victories against the dominant culture suggests these claims may be exaggerated. They may have “disrupted” the reproduction of the singular hierarchy of middlebrow culture, but the fact that venture capitalists can proudly display their tattoos and hedge fund managers can listen to punk rock suggests that it was no great loss to the dominant classes. Indeed, cultural pluralism

has proven an environment conducive to capital accumulation in post-industrial economies.²

Despite their best intentions to reform the paradigm, scholars associated with the "post-subcultures" moment of the late 1990s³ radicalized this tendency. Where Birminghamian subcultures research was Romantic, the post-subcultures literature is equally so but substitutes individual expression and pleasure for class experience. Speaking empirically, it is possible that the kinds of working-class youth subcultures studied by the Birmingham researchers in the 1970s were converted into more fluid, ephemeral neo-tribes by the '90s. But, in fully embracing the liberatory (more in the sense of "self-actualizing" than "emancipatory") potential of postmodern style, post-subcultures researchers abandoned the basic tools of social analysis that would allow such claims to be properly investigated:

The discourse of style has outlasted many other aspects of the CCCS work, recuperated through recent attempts to situate subcultural practices within a post-modern milieu. ... Social and cultural practices, condensed to mere processes of signification, are consequently viewed through theories inadequately predisposed to consider the complex intersection and layering of institutional, industrial, material, social, spatial and temporal dimensions and relations that facilitate and circumscribe a given social formation’s operation. (Stahl 2003, 27)

The fact that some cultural formations exhibit postmodern ephemerality and fluidity does not entail that ones with relatively high levels of "cultural substance" have ceased to exist. As Paul Hodkinson (2002, 28) puts it, "Contrary to postmodernist emphasis on the fluidity of consumer culture, then, the intention here is theorize a notion of subcultural groupings of substance." It's an intention I share. Hodkinson goes on to suggests that subculture still

² For related critiques of the oppositional potential of various forms of consumption and expression, see Frank (1997), Heath and Potter (2004), and Binkley (2008).
³ Note the publication dates of, e.g., Thornton’s Club Cultures (1996), Redhead’s Subculture to Clubcultures (1997), Hetherington’s Expressions of Identity (1998), Muggleton’s Inside Subculture (2000), and the edited collections, The Post-subcultures Reader (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003) and After Subculture (A. Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004).
captures sociologically significant characteristics of at least some groups or scenes that display relatively high levels of “consistent distinctiveness,” “identity,” “commitment,” and “autonomy.” Nerd culture may be called a subculture in this sense, which seems to me typical of the term’s use in ordinary language, without taking on board the whole Birminghamian system. But of course even the most anti-essentialist accounts of post-subcultural style assume some kind of distinctive cultural expression—how else could they identify what they’re talking about? The real issue is what one means by a group.

Muggleton (2000, 65) is certainly right that subcultures are not social groups in the usual, “realist” sense, since they “do not have objective characteristics and boundaries.” Self-identification is the only clear criterion for membership and is always contestable by other self-identified members. Yet the term, whether in ordinary language or academic theory, clearly—if imprecisely—designates something. For American sociologists and criminologists, it provided a way of accounting for “the role of the social structure and the immediate social milieu in determining the creation and selection of solutions” by actors to “problems” they experienced (A. K. Cohen [1955] 2005, 52; emphasis in original). Hence, it was an operational concept, as can be seen in Gordon’s (1947) early definition:

>a sub-division of a national culture, composed of a combination of factorable social situations such as class status, ethnic background, regional and rural or urban residence, and religious affiliation, but forming in their combination a functioning unity which has an integrated impact on the participating individual. (40; emphasis in original)

T. S. Eliot (seemingly) independently coined the term “to signify the culture which pertains to the area of a divided part of Christendom,” so that, for example, the English church constitutes a sub-culture of Latin Christianity ([1948] 1962, 74). And what the CCCS theorists called a subculture was a style comprising dress, music, slang, and ritual homologously related to some specific fraction of the working class, while their post-subcultures successors loosed style from any social-structural mooring. In each case, there
is an intuition that a particular pattern of behaviour can only be explained as the expression of something else, something “larger” if more diffuse and obscure, which seemingly eludes formal theory’s ability to grasp it satisfactorily. The gap between intuition and operationalization suggests that thinking more carefully about the activities and practices that compose and generate these phenomena may shed new light on the problem of definition.

**PRACTICE THEORY**

A “theory of practice” sounds like an oxymoron, but philosophers and theorists have been thinking about action since at least Aristotle (Knight 2008b). However, the ideological separation of intention and act, mind and body, effected by the Reformation and Enlightenment tended to eclipse practice. Inescapably situated and embodied, practice is hard, perhaps impossible, fully to capture in formal postulates and logical propositions. As Bourdieu (1990, 86) famously put it, “Practice has a logic which is not that of the logician.”

Nevertheless, as cracks began to appear in the edifice of positivist–epistemic social science during the latter half of the twentieth century, practice made a comeback. At the beginning of the twenty-first, some even began to speak of a “practice turn” in social theory (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and von Savigny 2001). It is to be hoped that this is not simply the latest intellectual fad, for it addresses some core problems in social and cultural theory:

An unkind account of this development might regard “practice” as part of the debris produced by the disintegration of Marxism, a concept carried by refugee theorists who have found new homes in various “post-Marxist” forms of sociology and social theory. But a much kinder account of the basis of the current interest in practice can be given, and should indeed be accepted. Accounts of societies as practices may be regarded as attempts to remedy the technical deficiencies of the idealist forms of theory that hitherto were dominant in this context. (Barnes 2001, 17)
That is to say, turning to practice is one attempt to counter various reductionist theoretical traditions. Moreover, it holds out the promise of transcending some conceptual antinomies that have bedevilled modern social and political thought, such as the unresolvable divides between structure and agency, group and individual, or order and change—problems that haunt the subcultures literature as much as general social theory.

However, a grand, unified theory is not yet on offer, for the “refugee theorists” of practice draw on a dazzling array of intellectual sources. At one end of the spectrum, the social ontologies of Bourdieu’s (1977; 1985; 1990; see also Warde 2004) field theory and Anthony Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory are substantially founded on notions of practice and practical consciousness. At the other, for ethnomethodologists and many anthropologists, practices provide a way of describing how the texture of everyday life is produced without reference to explicit norms. Ranged between these poles one finds appeals to practice in fields addressing themselves to scholar–practitioners, such as education, business and organization studies, nursing, social work, and so on. Yet, despite this diversity, there are some family resemblances among practice approaches. Unsurprisingly, they treat social practices as the basic unit of analysis:

Practice accounts are joined in the belief that such phenomena as knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions, and historical transformation occur within and are aspects or components of the field of practices. The field of practices is the total nexus of interconnected human practices. The “practice approach” can thus be demarcated as all analyses that (1) develop an account of practices, either the field of practices or some subdomain thereof (e.g., science), or (2) treat the field of practices as the place to study the nature and transformation of their subject matter. (Schatzki 2001, 2)

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4 As we have already seen, the practical production of social order in discourse is one of the overriding concerns of ethnomethodological conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis as developed by Sacks and his followers.
This “field of practices” is an attempt to reconfigure some of social theory’s basic components. On this view, practices are not new objects of inquiry but a better account of how the social world is reproduced and transformed from day to day. Macro-level theoretical constructs are ways of describing chronically reproduced features of practices, while micro-level phenomena typically attributed to individual agency are only intelligible in terms of ordered social practices.

Before proceeding further, two points will clarify technical uses of the term from its more ordinary senses. First, Reckwitz (2002), appealing to a distinction in German vocabulary that English lacks, differentiates between “practice” (Praxis) and “practices” (Praktiken; singular, Praktik). The former is “merely an emphatic term to describe the whole of human action”—the vita activa as opposed to the vita contemplativa—while the latter refers to specific social practices (249). For example, while praxis by definition encompasses everything that is not theoria, philosophical and scientific enquiry is obviously a Praktik. Second, within the category of Praktiken, one may distinguish between “dispersed” and “integrative” practices (Schatzki 1996). The former are “dispersed among different sectors of social life” and include such practices as “describing, ordering, following rules, explaining, questioning, reporting, examining, and imagining” (91). They compose a repertoire of generic social competences that agents use to get along in everyday life. Integrative practices, by contrast, are “the more complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life,” examples of which include “farming practices, business practices, voting practices, teaching practices, celebration practices, cooking practices, recreational practices, industrial practices, religious practices, and banking practices” (98). Practices of this type articulate behaviours, competences, intentions, activities, and even other (dispersed) practices together such that an agent could not explain his or her conduct without reference to the whole practice. Borrowing from Borgmann (1987), I’ll sometimes
refer to the integrative practice around which people gather as a “focal practice” in order to
distinguish it from the many dispersed practices in which they also engage.

My contention is that the phenomena we have conventionally called subcultures may best
be understood as articulated sets of integrative practices within the specifically “cultural”
domains of social life (most commonly, lifestyle and cultural consumption). Thus, while
practice approaches have much to recommend themselves in general, my focus is on much
narrower slice of the field of practices.

In treating this particular kind of Praktik, MacIntyre’s distinctive approach, which Beadle
(2008) refers to as the “goods–virtues–practices–institutions schema,” is particularly useful.
Alan Warde (2005, 135, 150n4) notes that “general theories of practice ... tend to be
idealized, abstract and insufficiently attentive to the social processes involved in the
creation and reproduction of practices,” while empirically oriented ones deploy the concept
in “an ad hoc and descriptive fashion,” as a placeholder for as-yet uncategorized phenomena
rather than “a thorough and purposeful application of theory.” Here, MacIntyre’s virtues
become apparent. Attentive to empirical detail but simultaneously grounded in a general
social theory and philosophical anthropology, he bridges the gap between a general
recognition of praxis, on the one hand, and the analysis of specific practices, on the other.
Moreover, as an element of a specifically moral theory, MacIntyre’s account is not merely
descriptive but also normative. MacIntyre not only takes seriously the moral claims
immanent in social practices but also provides resources for thinking about the necessary
conditions for the good life in a capitalist and bureaucratic society, and thus helps to
identify an important site for political intervention.
MACINTYREAN PRACTICES AND THE GOODS OF NERDINESS

Alasdair MacIntyre (b. 1929) is best known today as a leading advocate of virtue ethics in moral philosophy. He began his career as a member and critic of various Marxist movements in Britain associated with the New Left (Knight 1998, 2), though he has spent most of his working life in the United States. In an important early paper in *The New Reasoner*, he argued that ex-Communists turned “moral critics” of the USSR, such as those rallying to the banner of “socialist humanism” or converting to neo-conservatism, were doomed to failure unless they could develop an ethical theory that was genuinely alternative to both collective and individualist instrumentalism:

What has to be done positively is to show that there is a third moral position. ... If it is to avoid the defects of a purely empirical approach, it will have to provide us with the insights of a general theory without falling into the dogmatic ossifications of Stalinism. If it is to avoid the arbitrariness of liberal morality, it is going to have to provide us with some conception of a basis for our moral standards. (MacIntyre 1958, 37)

He eventually found his “third position” in a framework that Kelvin Knight (2007, 224) has called a “reformed and revolutionary Aristotelianism.” Central to this project is his conception of social practices as the ground of human flourishing.

MacIntyre thus introduces an important twist to teleology: “What is novel about *After Virtue* is not its famous rejection of Aristotle’s ‘metaphysical biology’ but its proposition that some new teleological justification of morality must be elaborated in its place. What the book substitutes for ‘metaphysical biology’ is social theory” (Knight 2008a, 40). As MacIntyre ([1981] 2007, 23) himself writes, every “moral philosophy ... characteristically presupposes a sociology.” For MacIntyre as much as Aristotle, a human life is understood in

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5 See Dworkin (1997, chaps. 1 and 2) on the dissident Communist historians’ wing of the British New Left and Ehrman (1995, esp. chap. 2) on American “new conservatives” and their relationships to the pre-war Popular Front and the radicalizing left of the 1960s.
terms of the ends it seeks to attain. However, these ends are not, as Aristotle supposed, biologically given but socially produced. Social practices create contexts where people can discover, elaborate, and reason together about their ends:

MacIntyre proposes his sociology of practices as the presupposition of a “narrative” and teleological conception of the self, in which the person's desires are educated and her actions unified through her quest for the good life. This good is not stipulated at the start of her life but something that, insofar as her life is coherently recountable and intelligible, she progressively understands as she advances toward her goals, so that she can explain how she advanced from who she was to who she is, and to what future condition she intends to progress. (2008b, 42–43)

Although this introduces a degree of social construction to ethics, MacIntyre’s position is not relativist because practices have their own, historically bounded rationality. They constitute goods and virtues, and thus provide a basis for making normative claims that are intersubjectively valid but not merely consensual. He defines a practice as

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. ([1981] 2007, 187)

This conception clearly goes beyond simple behaviours or activities, and even many of Schatzki’s integrative practices would fail to meet such a stringent definition. However, MacIntyre does not exclude any domain of social life as a site of practice a priori: “arts, sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, the making and sustaining of family life, all fall under the concept” (188). It may seem presumptuous to speak of excellence, virtue,­

6 MacIntyre (1999) has since reconsidered the biological basis of the human condition, but this does not substantially alter the sociology of practices’ role as a replacement for Aristotle’s spurious biology. While our natural capacities and vulnerabilities provide some standards by which to judge flourishing, they do not determine the particular aims of individual lives. For these, we must still look to socially instituted practices.

7 See MacIntyre (1988) on the “rationality of traditions” and the grounds for translating and adjudicating between competing traditions.
and human flourishing with respect to reading comic books, watching *anime*, or playing RPGs, but I nonetheless want to argue that the “serious leisure” (Stebbins 1992) of nerd culture represents a kind of practice.

**Consummative Practices**

BMW: What about, like, *computer nerd* or *computer geek*?
WEDGE: Yeah. I think I’ve used both terms. I’m just trying to figure out the difference. I guess, to me, a computer geek would be someone who plays a lot on the computer, tends to game or LAN parties and that kind of stuff, whereas a computer nerd would be someone more like an intense programmer. Like, someone who’s really into Linux or really into kernel design and that kind of stuff would be more of a computer nerd to me. And again that’s more “academic,” even though it doesn’t necessarily need to be part of an institution or anything like that.

BMW: So, it sounds like when you use *geek* there’s often a level of playfulness?
WEDGE: Yeah, sort of more jovial and … definitely, *hobby* is a good word to use. I guess, *nerd* for me would be something that’s more all-encompassing. Like that’s kind of all they do, maybe? Like if you have someone who—like a computer nerd who really likes to program—it’s hard to tear him away from the computer. That’s what they like doing. Whereas someone who’s a geek, they really like those things and they like sharing those things, but they’ll go do other things. And that to me is part of the connection, too.

As we have already seen, a common criterion for the application of the terms *nerd*, *geek*, and *fan* is level of commitment (however that may be contextually defined). To call someone a computer nerd or geek is, as Wedge suggests, to make a claim about the depth and character of their personal investments in a hobby or leisure interest—whether considered admirable or pathological by a given speaker in a given case. Such commitment is a hallmark of what Robert Stebbins (1992) has termed “serious leisure” and distinguishes fanboys, gamer geeks, and Trekkers from comic-book readers, board-game players, and the occasional viewer of *Star Trek*. He discusses serious leisure in contrast to both regular, paid employment (i.e., “work”) and “casual” or “unserious” leisure:

Briefly, serious leisure can be defined as the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its
special skills and knowledges…. [It contrasts] with a bewildering array of casual forms, such as sitting at a foot-ball game, riding a roller coaster, taking an afternoon nap, watching television, observing a fireworks display, going on a picnic, and so on. (3)

The distinction between “serious” and “casual” leisure activities is, however, one of kind rather than degree. For example, Stebbins considers watching television casual leisure despite the fact that the average Canadian spends more than twenty hours watching television each week (Statistics Canada 2006). This is a great deal of time to devote to any single activity, but we presume that most people watch television primarily to entertain or divert themselves, and not to acquire and express “special skills and knowledges.”

In other words, serious leisure involves activities that, while taking place within the private sphere of consumption, go beyond “mere” consumption. It is not difficult to see the parallels between these forms of committed, engaged leisure and the conception of practices outlined in *After Virtue*. In examining how some people pursue at least some of their interests as audience members and consumers through “coherent and complex form[s] of socially established cooperative activity” (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 187), I want to suggest that they rely on sophisticated forms of connoisseurship and criticism—or, what I call consummative practices.

The idea of consummativity was introduced by Jean Baudrillard (1981) as a form of “consumption power” parallel to the classical Marxist conception of labour power. Beyond simply avoiding the tubercular connotation of “consumptive,” Baudrillard’s coinage puts greater emphasis on the active, agentic side of consumption and reception. People do not simply use up (“consume”) commodities; they complete (“consummate”) them in use. Take, for example, the proverbial distinction between a “house” and a “home.” The former is the

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8 This is not to say that television cannot be pursued “seriously” but only that there is a distinction between watching TV and being a dedicated fan of some show, actor, genre, or whatever.
end point of a commodity chain that serves the profit-motive of a real-estate developer; it is merely a physical structure until transformed by being inhabited, which involves the material and immaterial labour of its residents (e.g., painting the walls, arranging furniture, and the investments of time and emotion that is “home-making”). When applied to cultural commodities, this view closely resembles the “active” or “resistive” theory of media audiences. Active-audience theory accomplished a Copernican revolution in media and cultural studies. Whereas the conventional wisdom assumed mass-media texts (and their producers) transmitted or otherwise imposed meaning on audiences—as in the infamous “hypodermic needle” metaphor—for active-audience theorists, the moment of reception had its own relative autonomy: audience agency may be qualified or constrained, but it cannot be ignored entirely.

But despite its paradigmatic status for generations of media, communication, and cultural studies scholars, active-audience theory has also been criticized for its “banality” (M. Morris 1990), “pointless populism” (Seaman 1992), and studied indifference to policy issues (T. Bennett 1992; Cunningham 2002). The concept of a consummative practice gives new shape to the activity of audiences and helps us to move beyond merely seeking traces of agency in everyday life. For example, scholars have long debated the validity of subcultural theorists’ interpretations of youth styles: Are members of youth subcultures “really” expressing opposition to the dominant culture through their choice of clothing and music, or is the analyst projecting political meaning onto basically inconsequential fads? This

9 The paradigm has a number of sources within British cultural studies, such as Birmingham School subcultures theory (especially Hebdige’s [1979] appropriation of bricolage from Levi-Strauss), Hall’s ([1980] 2001) encoding/decoding model, and Willis’s (1990) concept of “made messages.” However, it probably owes its prominence in North America to the influence of John Fiske; see, e.g., his discussion of shopping as a form of resistance to capitalism in Reading the Popular (Fiske 1989).
remains a diverting topic for the armchair critic, but taking consummative practices
seriously means looking at their “form”—that is, how they are organized and reproduced,
and what they actually accomplish in the social world—as much as their content. It may still
be fair to describe acts of reception as a kind of activity, but focusing our attention on sites
where the immaterial labour of audiences and consumers takes the form of a practice—and
where it is treated as a practice-like phenomenon by participants themselves—will help us
move beyond looking for the resistance hiding behind subcultural styles and isolated acts of
“reading against the grain.”

*Participatory Culture and the Goods–Virtues–Practices–Institutions Schema*

This section proceeds on two fronts. At the same time as I introduce the major components
of MacIntyre’s theory of social practices, I shall also make a *prima facie* argument that nerd
culture conforms to the schema. I shall return to many of these issues in more detail in
subsequent chapters; for now, I rely on published accounts of nerd culture to make the case
that nerd culture is a set of consummative practices. Chief amongst these will be Henry
Jenkins’s studies of the “participatory cultures” of fandom (inter alia, 1992; [2006] 2008;
2006; Jenkins et al. 2009). While I do not endorse every aspect of his conception of
participatory culture—in particular, its overemphasis on cognition—\(^\text{10}\)—he points towards
some features of the distinctive forms of life and structures of feeling produced by geek
cultures; more than any other major scholar, Jenkins demonstrates that the “goods of
nerdiness” are genuine goods.

\(^\text{10}\) While Jenkins (Jenkins and Hills [2001] 2006, 24–26) has addressed criticisms that he and other
“first generation” fan scholars emphasized cognition (i.e., meaning production and interpretation)
over emotion, his more recent treatments of participatory culture in terms of online collaborative
projects, “collective intelligence,” and media literacy skills tend to transpose situated features of
participation in particular practices—the Bourdieusian “feel for the game”—into cognitive
categories and skills.
MacIntyre’s neo-Aristotelian philosophy turns on the pursuit of the ends or goods of human life through participation in practices. He argues that every practice involves two different kinds of goods, those internal to the practice and those external to it. In After Virtue, this distinction is established with the memorable thought experiment of teaching a precocious seven-year-old to play chess (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 188–89). At first, the child must be encouraged and cajoled to participate, and so a treat—a piece of candy, say—is offered every time she plays a game. In time, however, she may come to appreciate the artfulness of the game, the particular kinds of strategic thinking it calls forth from her and the satisfaction of having played well, and, as she does, the sugary inducements become less and less important to her. In this illustration, then, the collection of skills and pleasures “which cannot be had in any way but by playing chess or some other game of that specific kind” are goods internal to the practice of chess, while the candy (which represents such “real world” incentives as money, status, and power) is a good external to it (188).

The distinction between internal and external goods accords with powerful and widely held moral intuitions about the importance of activities or projects undertaken “for their own sake,” rather than for the material or status rewards they might furnish. Thus, a healthy practice is understood as autotelic (i.e., “an end in itself”) by its practitioners. While external goods may be achieved through other means, internal goods are only realizable in particular practices and are only recognizable to practitioners who have experienced them (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 188–89). Importantly, internal goods are also, in a way, public goods:

External goods are ... characteristically objects of competition in which there must be losers as well as winners. Internal goods are indeed the outcome of competition to excel, but it is characteristic of them that their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice. So when Turner transformed the seascape in painting or W. G. Grace advanced the art of batting in cricket in a
Because practitioners in a given practice share in one another’s achievements, there is an intersubjectively justified basis for evaluating—or, at least, for reasoning about—success or failure with respect to the practice’s distinctive ends. As examples of goods that could be considered internal to the consummative practices of nerd culture, I shall discuss two broad categories here: those related to the reception and criticism of media and cultural goods and those related to alternative forms of social organization and being that are cultivated within the subculture.

Reception and criticism

In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins (1992, 277–78) argues that “fandom involves a particular mode of reception” and “a particular set of critical and interpretive practices.” The former comprises close attention to a text and “a mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance,” while the latter involves “preferred reading practices” that are “playful, speculative, subjective.” Although he treats these as separate characteristics of fandom, they are intimately related. Michael Saler (2004, 139) also captures something like this close-yet-distant, playful form of reception in his discussion of the “ironic imagination”:

The ironic imagination is related to Coleridge’s explanation that we experience poetic fiction in an enlightened age through “the willing suspension of disbelief.” But those who use the ironic imagination do not so much willingly suspend their disbelief in fictional characters or worlds, as willingly believe in them with the double-minded awareness that they are engaging in pretence.

Saler sees this mode of self-aware self-delusion as one strategy for re-enchanting modernity, which developed not only in enlightened poetic fiction but also in “fantastic texts written for adults” combining “the spirit of play and make-believe” of Victorian children’s literature with a veneer of rationalism in order “to facilitate their readers’ immersive experience” (141–42). Significantly, these “fantastic texts,” such as Rider Haggard’s *She* or
Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and Professor Challenger stories, were direct antecedents of the pulp science-fiction that gave birth to the first organized media fandoms. By introducing paratextual elements such as footnotes, maps, photographs and realistic illustrations, and translations from imaginary languages, authors invited their readers to fantasize but to do so rationally. In this respect, “these late Victorian and Edwardian spectacular texts were the precursors of the internally consistent virtual worlds of our contemporary media, like Star Trek, Star Wars, and online computer gaming worlds, all of which have become imaginative habitations for millions” (Saler 2004, 145). Spectacular texts reward readers who engage with them on their own terms—that is, with an ironic imagination that employs the traits Jenkins et al. (2009, xiv) call “play,” “performance,” “simulation,” and “transmedia navigation.” As audiences practise the goods of reception and criticism, producers can assume greater degrees of sophistication and further develop the possibilities of persistent and consistent narrative worlds. This in turn challenges audiences’ capacities, prompting at least some of them to become yet savvier readers, and so on.

Studies of fandom have emphasized fans’ textual productivity, their “particular forms of cultural production, aesthetic traditions and practices,” including writing fan fiction, producing fan art, composing and performing “filk” music, and sampling and re-mixing audiovisual media. Fans “appropriate raw materials from the commercial culture but use them as the basis for the creation of a contemporary folk culture” (Jenkins 1992, 279). While the influence of these forms of cultural production on contemporary media culture should not be overestimated, neither should their central role in fan communities be underestimated. In any case, they must be seen as expressions of the modes of reception

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11 Not to mention the diegetic “universes” of comic books, the apocryphal and/or deutero-canonical worlds of fan-fiction, or alternate reality games.
12 Fannish “folk” music (see Jenkins 1992, chap. 8).
and reading practices cultivated by fandom. This involves the set of skills Jenkins et al. (2009, 55) call “appropriation”—that is, the “process by which students learn by taking culture apart and putting it back together.” The expressive and communicative powers resulting from playful relationships with the media environment number among the goods of participatory cultural practices.

**Alternative sociability**

Fandom also provides resources for imagining alternative social relationships. This relates partly to the content of fannish media. As Jenkins (1992, 281) puts it, “Science fiction has often been discussed as providing readers with the image of a better world, an alternative future, an ideal against which to measure contemporary life but also a refuge from drudgery and constraint.” Similarly, one way of reading fantasy re-vivifies ideals associated with a noble past, and superheroes posit a world where those with great power feel also the weight of great responsibility. However, these goods are not only pursued with respect to media content but also with respect to the structure of fandom itself: “Fandom functions as an alternative social community” (280). I want to focus on two examples of how nerd cultures not only provide a social network but also point towards a set of norms that are alternative to mundane society, if not necessarily opposed to it.13

First, participants in nerd cultures often espouse meritocratic values. Tocci (2009, 192) associates this with a framing of nerd identity in terms of “genius,” a common way of coding idiosyncratic tastes and activities as distinctive rather than deviant:

Geeks have their own systems of values structured around rationality and intelligence whose intersection with more broadly recognized standards for “success” may be incidental at best. Geeks who subscribe to a “genius” image or stereotype often understand their identities in terms of idealized and

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“meritocratic” political and intellectual ideologies, rule- and system-based thinking skills, and a playful sense of technical curiosity.

Unlike status systems that reward attributes like appearance, athletic ability, or charisma, geek cultures claim to recognize intellectual achievements and contributions to shared projects, which are viewed as matters of substance and not mere accidents. As Robert Coulson (1994, 13) puts it in an insider account of science-fiction fandom, “fans judge people by their speech, writing, and actions; appearance, career, and status in the world at large are more or less irrelevant.” These claims are associated with Enlightenment conceptions of disinterested and universal reason, and it is no surprise that Costello and Moore’s (2007, 131) respondents say they prefer TV shows that “make them think” or that fandom is often portrayed as a contemporary version of the republic of letters. Like the ideal speech situation (Habermas 2001, 97–99), the difficulty of realizing these ideals in no way undermines their normative force.

Second, nerd culture has been a space within which some participants have been able to explore a range of alternative gender norms. For men, who have traditionally made up the majority of participants, nerd identity provides an alternative to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987; [1995] 2005; see also chap. 1, above). On the one hand, the nerd as genius trope is arguably a way of substituting the intellectual for the physical as determinant of masculine prowess. On the other hand, geeky enthusiasm provides an alternative affective repertoire to the sangfroid demanded by masculine “coolness.” However, because nerdy

14 Skillful communication may prove an axis of discrimination in its turn. See Bucholtz (2001) on “hyper-white” speech among nerd-identified high school students and Bury (2005, chap. 3) on linguistic capital among female television fans online.
16 Indeed, like the early modern public sphere (Habermas 1989; M. Warner 2002), fandom emerged from cultures of correspondence. E.g., early fan communities were facilitated through letter columns and the reciprocal exchange of private letters, fanzines, and amateur press associations.
masculinity also reproduces forms of sexism and homophobia from the wider culture, it should be regarded as a “subordinate” or “complicit” masculinity rather than a radical alternative ([1995] 2005, 79).

Although nerd culture has been stereotypically associated with men, male dominance is not a given in all of its constituent communities. Science-fiction and media fandoms, for example, have long had a significant female membership, and many people with whom I spoke believed female participation in some other aspects of nerd culture were increasing. Sexism remains a problem in nerd culture, and yet the culture has also provided a refuge from what Connell has called “emphasized femininity”—that is, the particular version of femininity “that is given most cultural and ideological support at present,” which includes “the display of sociability rather than technical competence, fragility in mating scenes, compliance with men’s desires for titillation and ego-stroking in office relationships, [and] acceptance of marriage and childcare as a response to labour-market discrimination against women” (1987, 187)—for at least some female nerds. For example, one SF&F fan comments:

Fannish males were a pleasant shock. I had all but given up hope that any man would accept me as an intellectual equal. But most male fans did. It was no longer necessary to “play dumb” or hide my knowledge. That fact alone made fandom seem very progressive in America in the ’50s. (J. Coulson 1994, 7)

More recently, Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2006) and Bucholtz (1999) have shown how some teenage girls draw on geek identity to negotiate the constraints of femininity within high-school peer cultures. Participating in fandom is neither an individual nor collective solution to difficult social problems, but, in coming to value alternative norms, practitioners can develop new possibilities for identity and relationship.

Both sets of goods I have described are important parts of participation in nerd culture. But achieving them demands certain virtues from participants, as well. Goods of reception,
imagination, and play, for example, require (among others) attentiveness, empathy, and respect for the craft of creative workers, while those related to its alternative social organization involve (among others) the virtues of fairness, generosity, and integrity. This is not to suggest that every nerd—or even the average nerd—is a moral paragon, as Jenkins admits:

Fans react against ... unsatisfying situations, trying to establish a “weekend-only world” more open to creativity and accepting of differences, more concerned with human welfare than with economic advance. Fandom, too, falls short of those ideals; the fan community is sometimes rife with feuds and personality conflicts. Here, too, one finds those who are self-interested and uncharitable, those who are greedy and rude, yet unlike mundane reality, fandom remains a space where a commitment to more democratic values may be renewed and fostered.

That is, shared commitments provide standards for action that can be brought to bear within the community. In this way, MacIntyre suggests, practices are schools of the virtues as much as sources of particular goods for, in fully elaborated practices, goods and virtues develop in tandem. However, there is more to a practice than goods and virtues, as Beadle and Moore (2006, 335) explain: “the establishment of internal goods is a necessary but insufficient condition for the identification of a practice—the neglected conditions being around the role of the practice in the narrative of an individual’s life, the tradition of the community to which individuals belong and the interconnected role of institutions.”

Communities and Traditions

Because internal goods cannot be realized outside the practice in which they are embedded, the novice must undergo an “apprenticeship” before he or she can effectively pursue those goods for him- or herself. Thus, practices are never individual projects, even when practitioners work alone. They are by definition social and are rooted in communities and traditions. MacIntyre ([1981] 2007, 194) writes, “To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have
preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point.” Communities both maintain and develop the standards of excellence applicable to a given practice, and they induct new practitioners. Identifying a practice is a merely academic exercise if it has no practitioners.

Keat (2000) argues that the “community requirement” is excessively influenced by an anti-modernist attachment to traditional communities (see chap. 6, §5). Although MacIntyre believes practices were more central to life before the rise of the liberal state, this historical claim is independent of the general theory. When discussing specific practices (e.g., painting and cricket), the community constituted by the practice (i.e., the community of painters or the cricketing community, not Turner’s next-door neighbours or Dr. Grace’s patients) is the “relevant community” (MacIntyre [1981] (2007), 191). That is to say, we are talking about “communities of practice” rather than community per se (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). According to Wenger (73), such communities are defined by mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire rather than (necessarily) the affective unity of will that Tönnies attributed to Gemeinschaften.

David Gauntlett (2011, 2) argues that “acts of creativity usually involve, at some point, a social dimension and connect us with other people.” The same can probably be said of any deeply felt interest, even if it is only ever expressed in semiotically or enunciatively productive ways (Fiske 1992). For example, the form of participation that Ito et al. (2010, 16) call "geeking out" comprises “interest-driven practices” through which “kids find relationships that center on their interests, hobbies, and career aspirations.” Similarly, comics fans “should be defined ... by the community that they form and in which they are conscious of participating” (Gabilliet 2010, 256), and Jenkins ([1988] 2006, 41) writes that “one becomes a [television] ‘fan’ not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and
thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a ‘community’ of other fans
who share common interests.” In *Textual Poachers*, a science-fiction fan recounts her own
experience of this process:

I met one girl who liked some of the TV shows I liked.... But I was otherwise a
bookworm, no friends, working in the school library. Then my friend and I met
some other girls a grade ahead of us but ga-ga over *ST*. From the beginning, we
met each Friday night at one of the two homes that had a color TV to watch *Star
Trek* together. (Caruthers-Montgomery quoted in Jenkins 1992, 52)

The narrative trope of an isolated kid who discovers a fan community where others share
his or her tastes, interests, and passions bears some resemblance both to conversion
testimonies and coming-out stories. Eventually, these small pockets of activity may discover
supportive spaces in which they can articulate their own “interest-driven” social practices.
This can lead people beyond existing age- and place-based peer groups, and this process is
increasingly facilitated by “online sites [that] provide opportunities for youth to connect
with interest-based groups that might not be represented in their local communities” (Ito et
al. 2010, 16).

But fan cultures are not only about peer groups. They are also populated with their own
“organic intellectuals” who produce self-reflexive knowledge that constitutes the fandom as
a tradition. For example, Jenkins (1992, 260) notes that “the largest class of songs
performed at the “filksing” he describes were about “fan culture itself, with songs
commemorating or commiserating about previous cons, fanzine publications, costume
competitions, and the problems of maintaining ties to a mobile community.” Given geeks’
propensity to quasi-scholarly modes of expression (see below, pp. 100, 152), the “lore” of
fandom is often treated as fact, which may then be collected into a self-referential body of
knowledge (and eventually used by academic researchers who arrive late to the party).
Whether or not it ultimately proves true, its circulation rhetorically constructs a community
and traditions that people may then orient their conduct towards.
Institutions

Communities are necessary for the achievement of internal goods, but they do not stand alone. Practices and their communities must also be supported by institutions:

Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions. Institutions are characteristically and necessarily concerned with what I have called external goods. They are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards. Nor could they do otherwise if they are to sustain not only themselves, but also the practices of which they are bearers. (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 194)

As we see here, external goods are not all bad. Practices require them in order to reproduce themselves, and institutions play a crucial role in their distribution. Moreover, institutions mediate between practitioners and “meta-institutions,” such as the market and the state, that dominate the economy of external goods. The problem turns out to be, not external goods as such, but rather a confusion of means and ends. As Knight (2008a, 44) puts it, “A teleological ordering of social relations would subordinate institutions to practices....” Institutions must collect and circulate external goods in ways that provide support and incentives for practitioners, accord with applicable standards of excellence, and are consistent with the shared pursuit of internal goods which give rise to them in the first place.

The question of institutionalization is decisive, and fandom's history is measured in the creation of clubs (Busby 1994), conventions (Luttrell 1994; Whitmore and Notkin 1994), and amateur publications (Wertham 1973; H. Warner Jr. 1994; Bosky 1994). As we'll see

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17 Elsewhere, MacIntyre (1988) calls them “goods of effectiveness” (as distinct from the “goods of excellence”).

18 The question of the institutionalization of a practice is thus also a question of public policy.

19 See also the general historical essays in Sanders (1994), which treat the history of US science-fiction fandom as well as several international “variations and echoes” in terms of all of these institutions.
in the next chapter, these groups exist in a symbiotic (though not entirely untroubled) relationship with whole industries that are run to a greater and lesser extent by people engaged with the practice. Thus, comic-book stores, game shops, distributors, and companies that actually produce texts are all involved in sustaining the subculture. The world that they compose supports the community of nerds and enables the pursuit and enjoyment of their internal goods.

Nerd culture is also increasingly served by virtual institutions. Jenkins notes that fans quickly appropriated computer networks such as Usenet in order to make forums for communication about their nerdy interests. Indeed, television fans combined the technological affordances of VCRs (e.g., the abilities to re-watch and pause TV shows) with their increased capacity for communication to create a new kind of close-viewing practice that was not previously possible (Jenkins [1995] 2006). Fans have continued to fashion forums, communities, and resources on the internet. They have also developed online tools for raising money to fund their practices (or at least defray costs). These include, for example, producing small batches of merchandise related to webcomics series, the auction-based online advertising broker Project Wonderful <projectwonderful.com>, and crowdsourcing platforms like Kickstarter <kickstarter.com>. None of these is a particular innovation in and of itself, but each embeds conventional means of collecting and circulating economic resources within the community’s moral economy (Jenkins [1988] 2006).

Identity

So we can indeed identify specific, internal goods of nerd culture and a range of institutions that cultivate and support the achievement of those goods within a community-bound tradition. But practices also entail an extension of “human conceptions of the ends and goods involved” (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 188), or as Beadle and Moore (2006, 335) write
with respect to the debate over whether teaching and other professions meet the criteria, "The project of elevating professions to the status of practices turns on the specificity of the kind of life in which practitioners engage...." This might be recast as a question of one’s identity as a practitioner.

The communities that we tend to describe with the label subculture understand themselves—or are represented as—somehow distinct or set apart from their (or our) understanding of mainstream culture. Michael Warner captures the continuum of identification and differentiation in his discussion of publics, subpublics, and counterpublics:

There are as many shades of difference among publics as there are in modes of address, style, and spaces of circulation. Many might be thought of as subpublics, or specialized publics, focused on particular interests, professions, or locales. ... Yet nothing in the mode of address or in the projected horizon of this subculture requires its participants to cease for a moment to think of themselves as members of the general public as well; indeed, they might well consider themselves its most representative members.

Counterpublics, by contrast, “mark themselves off unmistakably from any general or dominant public. Their members are understood to be not merely a subset of the public, but constituted through a conflictual relation to the dominant public.” (M. Warner 2002, 84–85)

Those who take aboard the fan/mundane distinction—exemplified in Jenkins’s (1992, chap. 8) readings of filk songs like "Escape from Mundania" and "Science Wonks, Wimps, and Nerds"—apparently consider fandom a counterpublic sphere in opposition to the “bankrupt values and lack of imagination” of mainstream society (262). But whether counter- or merely subpublics, it is clear that nerd cultures provide a way for at least some of their participants to narrate and perform a distinctive form of life:

“Fandom Is A Way of Life,” abbreviated FIAWOL, has been a fannish slogan for decades; originally it was a half-humorous acknowledgement that, unlike other fandoms, science fiction fandom involved more than reading magazines and writing letters to the editor. ... While it’s not unusual for followers of other activities and hobbies to maintain their interest for years, and it’s not unheard of
for them to correspond with one another, or attend an annual convention, science fiction fandom is unique in the quantity and variety of activities in which its devotees engage. (R. Coulson 1994, 11)

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To summarize the MacIntyrean schema, internal goods contribute to human flourishing and to the development of virtuous character but can only be acquired through practices. Practices and communities are mutually constitutive, and the commodious adaptation of one to the other requires the continued support of institutions. Institutions help sustain practices over time so that they and their distinctive goods remain available to new entrants to the community, but they can also become sources of vulnerability if they pursue external goods at the expense of internal ones. Full participation in a practice and enjoyment of the goods internal to it generate attachments, obligations, and a sense of identity qua practitioner.

Although I first approached nerd culture as a subculture, I have come to view it as a set of subcultural practices. MacIntyre’s schema, supplemented by the idea of consummative practices, provides a method for the analysis of actually existing social phenomena that restores the “institutional, industrial, material, social, spatial and temporal dimensions and relations” ignored by the “discourse of style” in theories of subculture (Stahl 2003, 27). And while it recognizes the importance of identity, the celebration of identity is not an end in itself. The schema invites us to consider the relationship between practice and identity in more complex ways. Like the CCCS model, it has normative commitments; however, they are based on observable features immanent to a practice rather than conjecture about invisible structures. MacIntyre’s project is critical and oriented towards emancipation, but he suggests that creating, sustaining, and defending communities where practices—and their practitioners—can flourish, is the proper end of politics:
If we look at the larger city-states of the past in the periods of their maximal flourishing, or at, say, the Jesuit and Guarani reducciones in eighteenth century Paraguay, or at those modern forms of association that have for some significant period of time sustained participatory achievement—forms of association as different as Donegal farming cooperatives, the state of Kerala in Southern India, the municipality of Bologna under Communist rule—we find excellent examples of how local market relationships can be put to use to serve local common goods, both through market exchanges within the local society and through the right, even if difficult, kind of market relationships with the larger economy. The politics of such local societies is in key part a matter of promoting the right kind of market relationships and protecting the community against the wrong kind. (MacIntyre 2008, 268)

Given his criticisms of the practice-inimical structures of modern liberal capitalism, MacIntyre might well be skeptical of the practices discussed in this dissertation. Compared with the examples cited immediately above, they perhaps seem somewhat impoverished. But nerds’ efforts to realize the practical—and therefore morally significant—character of their activities point towards the potential significance of subcultural practices. What remains to be done is an empirical analysis that can expose the opportunities and challenges that these communities face today.

Field and Scene

MacIntyre’s theory of practices provides a useful way to think about the activities of nerds and geeks that avoids some of the limitations of (post-)subculture theory and gets us beyond the dead-ends of the active-audience paradigm. However, despite its evident potential for empirical application (Coe and Beadle 2008), it tells us little about the social organization or institutionalization of practices in contemporary society. We have criteria for judging if a set of actors and activities counts as a practice, but we do not yet have a complete theory of “media-oriented” cultural practices (Couldry 2004). To complement the schema, then, I want to develop two additional concepts in order to provide a necessary level of empirical adequacy to the theory—without, I hope, overly constraining its
applicability to other cases. I am suggesting that practices generate (abstract and trans-local) fields that are instantiated as (concrete and localized) scenes.

Imagined Communities of Practice: Subcultural Fields

*Field* already made a quiet entrance when Schatzki (2001) described practice theory’s focus on the “field of practices.” I use it here in the sense developed by Bourdieu. A field is a snapshot of the relations between all the agents who are involved in, affected by, or have a stake in its outcomes. Bourdieu defines it “as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions”:

> In highly differentiated societies, the social cosmos is made up of a number of such relatively autonomous social microcosms, i.e., spaces of objective relations that are the site of a logic and a necessity that are *specific and irreducible* to those that regulate other fields. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 97)

The term simultaneously references the playing field of a game or sport, a military battlefield, and a field of forces (e.g., a magnetic or gravitational field). It suggests that any individual can only be understood in relation to the state of the field that gives his or her strategic actions their meaning.

Bourdieu is also an important practice theorist, but he gradually abandoned *practice* in favour of *field* over the course of his career, and thus obscured the relationship between these two key concepts (Warde 2004). As Warde argues, despite some contrary indications from Bourdieu, fields and practices cannot be viewed as isomorphic: They are concerned with different levels of analysis, and each captures phenomena that are invisible to the other. Therefore, fields cannot be reduced to corresponding practices. A field is made up of *actors* while a practice is a complex, co-ordinated, and socially established *activity* of a certain type. However, sufficiently complex and durable practices—and, especially, articulated sets of practices—will tend to generate fields of interacting agents and institutions.
Field is an analytically powerful concept. But, as Bourdieu would remind us,\textsuperscript{20} it is a theoretical construction distinct from the situated, practical character of everyday life. The perspective from which we can see the relations composing a field is a view from nowhere in particular. Thus, insofar as practitioners orient themselves to more or less shared conceptions of the practice and its traditions, a subcultural field like punk or goth or whatever, represents—with apologies to Benedict Anderson (1983)—an imagined community of practice. Bury (2003; 2005), Hodkinson (2002), and Stahl (2003) all develop the relationship between the local and the imagined or trans-local in different ways. Hodkinson, for example, notes that participants in the trans-local goth subculture “indicated strong identifications with strangers perceived to share their subcultural affiliation in countries across the globe,” despite the fact that most of these strangers would likely remain just that (2002, 68).\textsuperscript{21} It is members’ awareness of a shared, or mutually oriented-to, field that allows the idea of a subculture or group to cohere from its constituent practices and practitioners, however heterogenous and geographically or temporally dispersed they may be. Thus, insofar as members orient to them, we may still speak of practices as constituting subcultural groups, even if we use the term under advisement.

\textsuperscript{20} See, e.g., the "critique of theoretical reason" in Logic of Practice (Bourdieu 1990).

\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, when Hodkinson (69) asked interviewees hypothetically to choose between "spending time with goths from a foreign country or non-goths from closer to home. They unanimously selected the former ...."
It’s a Small World After All: Subcultural Scenes

Try to describe steampunk—22—or any other subculture—in the abstract, apart from any specific people in any specific place, and one can only interpret steampunk style or its representations in texts and artefacts. But a steampunk scene can be easily described in sociological and ethnographic detail. It contains a fluid but finite population, including a limited number of subcultural celebrities; specific venues, spaces, and institutions; and a particular history in relation to local circumstances.

I borrow the term scene from popular-music studies to describe the localized arena in which practices, communities, and institutions interact. Indeed, according to Anahid Kassabian, scene is among the few theoretical concepts distinctive to popular-music studies (quoted in Hesmondhalgh 2005, 27). The term is widely used in ordinary language to describe diverse spaces of cultural activity, but its currency in this academic field may be traced to a series of essays by Will Straw (1991; 2002; 2004).23

For Straw, scene represents a departure point from an older conception of musical community. Although it is only vaguely defined in popular use, denoting objects ranging from “highly local clusters of activity” to globalized taste cultures, the term “persists within cultural analysis for a number of reasons”:

One of these is the term’s efficiency as a default label for cultural unities whose precise boundaries are invisible and elastic. “Scene” is usefully flexible and anti-essentializing, requiring of those who use it no more than that they observe a hazy coherence between sets of practices or affinities.... At the same time, “scene” seems able to evoke both the cozy intimacy of community and the fluid

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22 A variation on the cyberpunk genre of science fiction, steampunk tropes include steam-powered or clockwork versions of modern (or futuristic) technologies in anachronistic quasi-Victorian settings. As a subcultural scene, steampunk is distinctive for its emphasis on costuming and the creation of prop artefacts. See Onion (2008) for an introduction.

23 Shank’s (1994) history of the music scene in Austin, TX, is another important source. Cf. Hesmondhalgh (2005) for a critical assessment of both. An earlier antecedent is Irwin, who used the term to refer to “newer expressive and leisure social worlds” (1977, 23; original emphasis).
cosmopolitanism of urban life. To the former, it adds a sense of dynamism; to the latter, a recognition of the inner circles and weighty histories which give each seemingly fluid surface a secret order. (2002, 248)

A scene is a fluid and changeable cultural space characterized by “the building of musical alliances and the drawing of musical boundaries” (1991, 373). More recently, Straw has expanded his definition of scenes beyond musical practices to embrace “particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them” but which may be distinguished by location, genre, or “the loosely defined social activity around which they take shape” (2004, 412). Scenes are a visible world in which practices can be observed and studied.

For the purposes of this enquiry, I shall use scene to mean a more or less geographically bounded cultural space defined by a set of interacting cultural practices and their articulated communities and institutions. Its institutional configuration and history—along with the agents who compose its constitutive communities—influence its character as a particular, local expression of the practice(s) with which it is concerned. Although it is a principally local phenomenon, a scene is connected in many ways to other instantiations of the same field located elsewhere as well as to neighbouring scenes. From the point of view of the scene containing them, practical communities or particular groups of agents might be seen as “niches,” or more specialized components of the scene’s practice-set.

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So here at last is a working definition of nerd culture: It’s best approached—not as a subculture, style, genre, or identity position, but as a set of practices that produce a field that we can observe in particular scenes. The consummative practices of nerd culture include all the activities conventionally associated with nerds and routinely brought together within nerd-culture scenes, such as reading or collecting comics and graphic novels, playing various kinds of games (CCGs, RPGs, German-style board games, certain
genres of digital game, etc.), particular kinds of fan activity (attending conventions, writing fan fiction or making fan art, cosplaying, publishing critical writing online or in fanzines, etc.) for specific “fannish” genres (science fiction, fantasy, supernatural horror and cult film, etc.), and collecting memorabilia related to any of the above. I’m using practices in the substantive, MacIntyrean sense: they have distinctive internal goods; constitute communities (if only “imagined” ones) and more or less self-conscious traditions; rely on a range of durable institutions devoted to them; and make available a set of roles and identities through which practitioners can create distinctive accounts of their identity.

However, at the empirical level, this definition is agnostic regarding identification. If someone interacts in any structurally specifiable way with any of the activities or institutions composing the scene, he or she is part of the field of nerd culture, regardless of whether others would be likely to categorize him or her as a nerd. Membership in nerd culture is a matter of practice, not ontology, and so sophisticated interpretations of what it means to be a nerd or what the rise of geek culture represents for our society or culture in general are beside the point. Put simply, nerdiness is as nerdiness does.

**CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I have argued that nerd culture can be defined as a set of consummative practices and that this provides a more coherent account than those based on interpretations of the meaning of nerdiness. Combined with the concepts of field and scene, a focus on practice provides a basis for empirical research and analysis.

In addition to providing an analytical method, the passage from subculture to subcultural practices suggests that the various activities associated with nerd culture are much more significant than they may at first appear. It is not that these practices are so important in themselves but the fact that they can be undertaken as practices in more or less the
MacIntyrean sense. Practices are, moreover, a moral economy and school of the virtues. In the field of practice and their local scenes, practitioners confront a web of relationships—of people who depend on them or on whom they depend or both. MacIntyre, sounding something like a communitarian Abraham Maslow, argues that we must create social and political structures that can acknowledge and dignify the inalienable vulnerability and dependence of our common human condition:

But, when these first needs have been met, what those in need then most need is to be admitted or readmitted to some recognized position within some network of communal relationships in which they are acknowledged as a participating member of a deliberative community, a position that affords them both empowering respect from others and self-respect. (1999, 127)

Communities created through and around specific socio-cultural practices, which offer to their members roles, duties, and standards of action as well as recognition for a range of skills and talents that may not be valued in wider society, are a locus of such communal relationships. But practices exist in the real world and are always going to be imperfectly realized. The point of empirical analysis, then, is to make plain—to practitioners themselves as much as outside observers—the unfulfilled potential that even the most trivial-seeming practices hold and to point the way to their self-realization.

The second part of this dissertation will describe the field of nerd culture and its component practices by means of a study of one local scene. Through my conversations with retailers, group organizers, and “rank and file” participants in nerdy communities of practice, I shall draw out the opportunities and constraints at work in the scene and the rewards and frustrations it offers to its members. Much of what I have to say will be unremarkable to those with first-hand experience of nerd culture. Academic understanding is contiguous with members’ everyday knowledge of the world, but it re-presents that understanding in a rigorous, careful way so that it can be approached fresh:
Like so much other knowledge of how society works, people really knew it all along, but would rather not have to think about the implications and corollaries. The sociologist’s job is to say such things out loud and make everyone think about them seriously. (Becker 1986, 128)

In what follows, I will try to represent the nerd-culture scene as I saw it in one Canadian city in the late 2000s and early 2010s. This empirical case speaks to some problems in the study of media, consumption, and leisure and in cultural studies, more generally. By carefully examining my observations and interview material and connecting it to social and cultural theory, I shall say “out loud” what is already immanent to the practices being studied and prompt us all to think seriously about what it means for achieving the good life in a society like ours.
Part II.

The Nerd-Culture Scene
3. World-building: Institutions and Intermediaries in Nerd Culture

In his classic book, *Art Worlds*, Howard Becker (1982) draws attention to the constellation of social actors involved in producing any work of art—whether it belongs to “high,” “popular,” or “folk” culture. As Becker defines them, “Art worlds consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art” (34). They include not only the “creative” producers of artworks but also technicians and artisans, suppliers of materials, and support staff, as well as distributors, critics, and ordinary audience members. Talking about an art *world*—rather than, say, a *system*—implies a level of meaningfulness for its inhabitants. The metaphor also resonates with the idea of “world-building” that is commonly deployed as an aesthetic standard by nerds and geeks. Here, it means imaginatively filling in the details of narrative settings, whether done by professional cultural producers (e.g., a fantasy author) or individuals, such as the dungeon- or gamemaster of an RPG group or ordinary fans discussing their pet theories about the backstory of a sci-fi TV series. Good world-building is a significant part of the appeal of nerd culture’s most favoured texts (see below, p. 173).

But at least some nerds are also involved in another kind of world-building. Nerd cultures are ambiguously located in the hierarchy of cultural activities and forms: they belong to commercial mass culture, yet they have only niche appeal, their publics are relatively small, and traditional stigmas and stereotypes surrounding nerds and geeks further complicate

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their efforts to influence the production of their culture. And unlike high culture, few publicly funded cultural institutions and virtually no cultural policy initiatives directly support their practices. In this atmosphere of relative neglect, nerds and geeks have had to create institutions in order to secure the reproduction of fan cultures. In the city where I conducted fieldwork, a number of organizations, groups, and clubs plan and mount events for their members and the general public. These events range from small, relatively informal game nights to periodic screenings of cult-classic films or children’s cartoons to multi-day conventions. Their partners or sponsors in many of these ventures are specialty retail stores, which not only host and develop their own events but are themselves meeting places for local participants. Although such activities may seem banal, particularly when compared with accounts of creative work in the cultural industries or the transformative capacities of active audiences, they are of the utmost importance for the practices I am studying. These retailers and volunteers build the world that the rest of us nerds play in.

PRACTICAL INSTITUTIONS AS (SUB)CULTURAL INTERMEDIARIES

Because my reconstruction of subculture theory relies on Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of practices, it also includes his conception of institutions. As we have already seen, institutions cut two ways. On the one hand, they are indispensable for the reproduction of practices: “no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions.” When institutions function properly, they distribute necessary external goods in ways that reinforce the pursuit of internal goods. On the other hand, institutions are also a potential

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3 Public libraries are the notable exception. Most have substantial holdings of SF&F and other “genre” literature, and many have begun to collect comics and graphic novels in a more or less committed way.
source of instability for practices when external goods replace internal ones as ends in themselves:

institutions and practices characteristically form a single causal order in which the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution.

If he is correct, then practices—and their communities of practitioners—stand or fall on the proper ordering of their institutions. It follows that the structure of a subcultural scene, at least as I have defined it, cannot be grasped apart from an understanding of the institutions that support it. (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 194)

Because of their role distributing external goods, another way that we might understand practical institutions is as a kind of “cultural intermediary.” Pierre Bourdieu (1984) introduced this term to describe a new and ascendant occupational category *cum* class fraction in his classic study of French lifestyles. A component of the “new petite bourgeoisie,” this group “comes into its own in all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services” (359). More recently, the term has been appropriated by cultural-studies scholars interested in the contribution particular professions and occupations make to the “culturalization” of economic activity. As Keith Negus (2002, 504) suggests, the attention that the concept draws to the mediation of economic processes helps reclaim for cultural studies an area that was foolishly surrendered in the academic division of labour:

It also suggests a shift from, or counterbalance to, an emphasis on economic constraints and determinations (from the economic shaping of culture), associated with versions of political economy, towards a concern with how culture shapes the

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economic. Or, more precisely and in less causal terms, it challenges us to think about the reciprocal interrelationship of what are often thought of as discrete “cultural” and “economic” practices.

Cultural intermediaries work between the “moments” of production and consumption, and are concerned with circulation—of not only commodities but also discourses about their meaning—and so examining their work is particularly apt in the context of the “circulatory turn” in cultural analysis (Straw 2010). However, the exact relationship between producers, intermediaries, and consumers in any given field cannot be presumed, and the recent scholarship focusing on complex and rationalized organizations such as advertising agencies or music conglomerates may not do justice to the “small worlds” associated with relatively marginal forms and genres. In such fields, both production and mediation are embedded in fan cultures with distinctive traditions and standards. In any case, occupational categories are a construction, and as Bourdieu would remind us, the social world can always be constructed differently (1985, 724–25). So rather than proceeding from the division of labour in a particular organization or industrial sector, I want to disaggregate the category of cultural intermediaries and return these agents to the subcultural field where they actually perform their mediating work.

This requires some understanding of the context in which they labour. Before examining the intermediaries’ accounts of what they do, I'll discuss the forms of “subcultural capital” (Thornton 1996) that are valued within the field and a set of infrastructural resources that are necessary for its reproduction. I spent time talking to group organizers and retailers and observing them in action because of the structuring significance of these capitals and resources. The spaces that they create and the events they facilitate are an obvious social setting for observing nerd culture in action: they’re the places where knowledge and collections are acquired; they are the markets, venues, and networks I discuss below. They are sites where nerd culture is visible and publicly accessible. I tried to include a variety of
groups and represent a range of retail markets, but not every site I approached agreed to participate. The sample presented here is somewhat biased towards games and comics, leaving some obvious blind spots in its coverage (some are accounted for in chapter 4; others will require further research to confirm the applicability of my findings). Organizations have been given the code "ORG" and numbered one through four, and stores have been coded "STR" and numbered one through five. Research participants associated with each site are numbered in the order I met them. Interviews with primary informants typically lasted for an hour to an hour and a half. Whenever possible, I conducted at least two sessions of passive- or participant-observation, with one before the interview and one afterwards.

Subcultural Capital

For Bourdieu, a field is defined by the distribution of certain socially valuable traits, skills, and resources, which he refers to collectively as capital. Thus, the analysis of a field such as nerd culture should begin with an analysis of the capital valued within it. Two of the three fundamental kinds of capital (Bourdieu 1986), economic and social capital, are important but function in more or less the same way as they do in the general economy of practices; cultural capital, however, takes field-specific forms and demands particular attention. John Fiske (1992), among others, has drawn critical attention to Bourdieu's assumption of a single hierarchy of "legitimate" cultural forms and tastes. However, it would be a mistake to reduce cultural capital as such to the forms it took amongst the grande bourgeoisie and intellectuals of 1960s France. We ought instead to let the agents in a given field define what they value. Brown's (1997) discussion of comic-book fandom, for example, follows Fiske

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5 See Table 1 (p. 11) and Appendix A under “Phase 1: Organizations and Retail Stores” (p. 279).
and identifies two main forms of specific cultural capital, knowledge and collections, and both of these subcultural capitals are valued in a range of nerd cultures.

Knowledge

Given the familiar nerd stereotypes, knowledge's value is perhaps unsurprising. As Brown (1997, 23) writes, "To amass cultural capital within the comic community, the fan must build an extensive knowledge of the industry." Interactions with other participants provide opportunities to acquire knowledge and for others to recognize one's knowledgeability. This is an embodied form of subcultural capital, which I witnessed being displayed in several different ways, including trivia, good taste, and various kinds of intertextual referencing.

Trivia

The most obvious forms of valued knowledge are facts and trivia related to nerdy interests. Indeed, for some interviewees, these defined nerdiness—STR2-p1 described his conception of the nerd stereotype as someone who "knows the most useless trivia out there." The frequency with which ORG1 events featured trivia contests speaks for itself, and STR2-p1 and STR4-p1 both pointed to the detailed knowledge of individual cards among CCG players. The latter used this "wonderful mental tool" to justify the games' expense:

STR4-p1: One question that I hope that you do ask is ... um, how I feel about people spending that kind of money.

BMW: How do you feel about people spending that kind of money?

STR4-p1: (laughs) Well, I'm glad you asked. I feel really good about it, actually[...]. It's been a very positive way for me to express myself, to be creative, right? and to participate in a community and be competitive and have people to talk to about stuff. And the most really important thing that I find is for people to have something to play with in their head, you know? that really has some depth. Like, I bet you could go up to this gentleman here (gestures to a customer)) and you could say, "Okay, well, I'm looking for a deck that does blah." And I bet out of the back of his head, he'll have a hundred cards just start flipping into his mind, you know, saying, "Oh, this is a good card, this is a good card, this is a good card." He'll go through his collection and start pulling out this and this and this and this. All that information is in your head. All that information stays
there, and you have access to it, and you use it all the time. It’s a really wonderful mental tool.

Whereas knowing actors or plot points from TV series and understanding the minutiae of game mechanics occupy this role in media fandom and gaming cultures, respectively, knowing about creators and “continuity” (i.e., the diegetic histories of fictional characters and worlds) are important within comic-book fandom. STR5-p1 noted that contemporary comics have become more focused on story, and described their aesthetic qualities with a similar rhetoric of intellectual “depth”: “I mean, if you read the comics nowadays, the ones that sell the best, they’re not written for morons. You have to have a good sense of literature in many cases, of mythology in many cases, and you have to keep ((laughs)) very complicated storylines straight in your head.” Interviewees tended to interpret their practices’ value instrumentally, in terms of knowledge acquired.

Taste

The category of knowledge also embraces one of the main uses of cultural capital described by Bourdieu: that is, enabling agents to improvise formally “correct” aesthetic judgements. Although taste is often regarded as an idiosyncrasy for which no rational account can be given, tastes are not equally distributed in the social space—this is, after all, the lesson of Distinction. This is not to say that nerds are cultural dopes, but rather that full participation in a practice presupposes the internalization of shared orientations or frameworks that constrain aesthetic reason in particular ways. It is in this sense that I have referred to consummative practices as “practices of criticism and connoisseurship,” and the operation of situated aesthetics may be seen in the discussions and debates that are everyday aspects of nerds’ social interaction.

For example, although STR3-p1 said that he and his staff try not to judge their customers’ tastes, the exchange of aesthetic judgements is a common feature of talk in the comic-
bookstore. During one conversation I observed, customers were discussing the work of the legendary comic artist Jack Kirby, and the course of the conversation eventually turned to one of his collaborators, inker Vincent Colletta. All of the participants in the circle expressed some disdain for Colletta, and when one of them said that he “doesn’t mind him all that much,” STR3-p1 exclaimed that that was the nicest thing he had ever heard someone say about Colletta. Sometimes the judgements are somewhat blunter, as when one of the staff commented loudly and sarcastically while sorting the week’s shipment, “That Batman–vampire thing doesn’t look retarded at all!” Taste is not fundamentally a private matter but is measured against canons that circulate publicly within practical communities.

This bears some resemblance to Thornton’s (1996) discussion of “hipness” as subcultural capital amongst British ravers. For these clubbers, being on the cutting edge of “authentic” youth culture defined an alternative status hierarchy: “Just as cultural capital is personified in ‘good’ manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being ‘in the know’, using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles” (1996, 11–12). While nerds certainly valued up-to-date knowledge and taste, the competitive “alternativeness” that Thornton depicts—the constant search for the latest and most fashionable tastes—does not appear to be dominant. Rather, nerd culture presents its own logics of valuation.

For example, although an “arational” rhetoric of escapism or naïve pleasure is by no means absent, intellectualism and abstraction appeared to be more valued dispositions. STR4-p1 was particularly adept at such sophisticated reasoning. In one conversation with a customer about a possible loophole in the new edition of the miniatures game Warmachine, he began to justify his argument by an appeal to realism, which led the customer to cry out, “Don’t bring reality in!” Nevertheless, debates over the quality of texts, including games, often draw complexly on a mixture of realism and formally logical extrapolations from
fantasy. STR4-p1 was later arguing with another customer over the correct pronunciation of “Khador,” one of the *Warmachine* “factions” (differently themed sets of miniatures). The customer insisted that his preferred pronunciation ("KAY-dor") was attested to by official game materials, but STR4-p1 argued that the game books are implicitly written from the point-of-view of one of the other factions, and so the pronunciation guide is deliberately in error. Moreover, said STR4-p1, Khador is (loosely) based on Soviet-era Russia and “there’s no ‘ay’ sound in the Cyrillic language that they use.” This particular mode of appropriation and appreciation is a marker of distinction.

*Intertextuality*

Demonstrating mastery of subculturally canonical texts is another way participants display the subcultural capital of knowledge. Mark Allen Peterson (2005, 130) argues that intertextuality is not a property of texts but a performance by their audiences:

> People are never *only* audiences constructing readings of texts, they also seize upon, remember, replicate, and transform elements from the media they consume. They quote dialogue, emulate styles, and whistle tunes they learned from television, radio, or the movies. Some of this intertextual borrowing may be random, idiosyncratic, and personal, but the bulk of such intertextual play is socially patterned. Knowledge of particular kinds of media texts and an ability to display this knowledge competently is a form of cultural capital valued highly in many social fields.

Nerd culture is clearly one such field. I observed three major ways of demonstrating such mastery during my fieldwork: referencing, MSTing, and wearing geeky t-shirts.

First, making and recognizing media references is a ubiquitous feature of social interaction within nerd cultures. It would be difficult to assess whether nerds and geeks engage in such performances of intertextuality more than “laypeople” do, but they occupy a central place in nerds’ everyday discursive practices, and I frequently observed participants rewarding successful (i.e., recognizable and appropriate to the situation) performances with expressions of approval. Drawing on media in this way relies on a particular kind of
spectatorship that seems to hold texts at arm’s length in order to use them as symbolic resources. It is superficially similar to the phenomenon of the “savvy” postmodern spectator described by Goldman and Papson (1996) as well as to the critical viewing practices promoted by certain models of media literacy education. But whereas the former is supposed to result from alienation and jadedness due to overexposure to promotional communication and the latter is intended to produce skepticism towards claims made by media, nerds profess a deep affection for many of the texts that they reference. This ironic and yet simultaneously affectionate or nostalgic relationship to media may be a way of reconciling nerds’ disposition towards intellectualism with their embrace of some of mass culture’s lower genres.

Media referencing is also one way that in-group/out-group boundaries are maintained. The ability to participate in the performance of intertextuality distinguishes those possessing this subcultural capital from those who do not. For example, during participant-observation at STR2, I played a Polish strategy game called *Neuroshima Hex* with a group of store regulars. In it, players take turns laying down tiles that have particular abilities, but the tiles’ interactions are resolved only at random intervals. I was on a team with M. and G., both of whom I had met the week before, and we were all playing this game for the first time. As G. lay down a tile that could push away adjacent enemy tiles, he looked up at the group and said, “You know what this reminds me of? ‘I am the pusher robot.’” I immediately gave a counter-sign: “Shoving is the answer.” We both laughed, confirming that in the late 1990s we both read the comedy website *Something Awful* when it ran a series of pranks conducted over the instant messaging platform ICQ, including one about robots that wished either to push or to shove someone’s grandmother down a flight of stairs. G. and I quoted the prank to one another for a few moments more, taking us out of the game but forging a momentary bond. It was as if we were now familiar with one another because we were both
familiar with the same text. While relationships among attendees in “ethereal” cultural spaces (Kinkade and Katovich 2009) may or may not become intimate friendships, the exchange of references supplies a script of reciprocal interactions that contributes to an atmosphere of sociability and camaraderie within nerd-cultural spaces, so long as one is able to catch the reference.

Second, I use the term MSTing to describe the shouting of humorous comments (often involving intertextual references) during presentations or film screenings. It refers to the TV series Mystery Science Theater 3000, also known as MST3K, which paired old B movies with acerbic, mocking comments from a peanut gallery comprising a human janitor and two robots stranded on a space station. Given that MSTing frequently evokes other texts, it resembles the forms of referencing described immediately above. However, it seems quite different due to its publicity, interrupting or overriding the presentation taking place, and the competitiveness that it often generates. MSTing also somewhat resembles heckling, but I did not observe the same sense of antagonism towards the presenter as one would expect from hecklers. Participants engaged in MSTing seem to be contributing—or, at least, to see themselves as contributing—to the experience of reception rather than undermining it.

I observed MSTing most commonly at events hosted by organizations with explicit medafandom components, such as ORG1 and ORG2. At the former’s Star Trek Con, for example, one audience member MSTed throughout the day’s interstitial programming (i.e., components other than film screenings). I first noticed him during an event billed as a “Klingon rap battle,” when a shout of “Starfleet represent!” came from one of the rows behind me. This voice soon became very familiar, though I was only able to identify him when a trivia contest was announced, and he ran forward to participate, shouting, as if to prove his bona fides, “I wasted my life!” A heavy-set white man, he introduced himself to the audience as “A Stereotype” rather than giving his name and won the contest easily. His
demeanor then, and during the Star Trek–themed poetry slam, during which he presented “excerpts” from what he called a “blank verse cycle,” seemed gleeful and reminded me of an attention-seeking class clown.

This behaviour was even more generalized among the members of ORG2. Organized around what ORG2-p1 called “Western-style anime fandom” (versus a more “solemn” approach that he said is common among fans in Japan), ORG2 members take their media consumption very seriously but also seem to maintain a distance from texts. At the first weekly screening I attended, the audience was mocking the quality of the animation and voice acting within moments of the show beginning, and a reference in the episode to the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center immediately elicited ironic calls of “too soon!” and “never forget!” from the audience. This form of audience interaction extended to the club’s own business meetings as well, which consequently felt rather anarchic. They were frequently interrupted by humorous media references, which often occasioned a chain of other shouted comments, leaving the club’s officers (or, at least, those few who were not themselves caught up in the diversion) at times helpless to keep the membership to the agenda and the task at hand.

In both groups, but especially in the case of ORG2, I had a strong sense of a competitive undercurrent to MSTing, although it was more agonistic than antagonistic, with each successful comment spurring others on to make funnier ones. And one could fail to MST competently. At the same ORG2 screening mentioned above, for example, a woman sat by herself in the row in front of me, working on what appeared to be Japanese language exercises. She would periodically lift her head and make a comment, loud enough that it was clearly not intended as sotto voce but not quite loudly or assertively enough to enter into the stream of comments among the dominant wiseacres. In this case and others I observed, failed contributions were not acknowledged or commented upon. A successful example of
MSTing would evoke laughter and follow-up comments, showing that the contribution had been recognized and received as intended. Where referencing, as discussed above, entails a reciprocity between participants, MSTing calls attention to itself and makes a claim for recognition by a larger group.

Third, many nerds identify themselves by wearing nerdy t-shirts. Although a lack of style is another defining stereotype about nerds and geeks, a cottage industry has sprung up producing apparel for nerdy consumers. Tocci (2009, 348) identifies the emergence of this market as a sign of nerd culture’s recuperation; in this context, “the most outwardly apparent way to communicate which side of the line one stands on between ‘nerdy freak’ and ‘geek chic’ may be through fashion.” The trend’s paradigmatic example is the screen-printed black t-shirt. Thus, as a style, the geek “uniform” is not significantly different from styles worn by, among others, heavy metal fans and less outré goths. It is the explicit semiotic content of the t-shirts’ graphics, rather than the more subtle, syntactic play of fashion, that is of chief importance.

By encoding media references on them, nerds are able to use t-shirts as tokens of belonging: “Generally, the most common approach … to signifying ‘insider’ membership in this ‘outsider’ culture is to offer a gag or reference that will be understandable to in-group members and meaningless, purposely obtuse, or even insulting to nonmembers” (Tocci 2009, 353). This can be quite literal, as in the case of SF&F Con attendees that wore shirts—what one member called his “club colours”—showing their affiliation with the international Star Wars costuming club, the 501st Legion. It is usually less specific, if not any more subtle: During participant-observation at STR5, one of the clerks was helping a customer to find a book he wanted. When the customer checked out, the clerk (who was wearing a Cookie Monster shirt) asked him where he got his Mario shirt, and they spent a few minutes talking about t-shirt websites. The moment of recognition allowed by wearing one’s heart on one’s
sleeve (or chest) transformed a purely economic transaction into a more communalized one by disguising the stranger-relationality that formal market relations demand (M. Warner 2002, 57).

Comedian Patton Oswalt (2010) speculates in a *Wired* editorial that easy access to older media content and to encyclopedic information facilitated by the Internet (a phenomenon he calls “ETEWAF,” or “Everything That Ever Was—Available Forever”) is geek culture’s death knell. According to Oswalt’s account, this culture resulted from intellectual and imaginative engagements with media, and he describes his own nerdy youth in terms of learning and organizing knowledge:

> I was too young to drive or hold a job. I was never going to play sports, and girls were an uncrackable code. So, yeah—I had time to collect every *Star Wars* action figure, learn the Three Laws of Robotics, memorize Roy Batty’s speech from the end of *Blade Runner*, and classify each monster’s abilities and weaknesses in TSR Hobbies’ *Monster Manual*. (¶4)

Crucially, the intensity of engagement is increased by the absence of the text itself, leading to the symbolic productivity often associated with fan cultures. But ETEWAF significantly alters the availability of subculturally valuable knowledge and the scope of their circulation. To put it in economic terms, there is a glut of knowledge on the market, leading to a devaluation of this form of subcultural capital. Oswalt believes this will lessen intensity of engagement, make it impossible to discriminate between true participants and poseurs (e.g., “gym douches” wearing Boba Fett t-shirts [¶9]), and encourage more derivative artistic production on the part of fans. While his fears are presumably exaggerated for comic effect, Oswalt is correct to anticipate significant transformations in the economy of practices defined by the circulation of nerdy trivia, tastes, and intertextuality.
Collections

Collecting is a significant component activity of many nerdy practices, and collections objectify cultural capital. Among comics fans, a “cultural economy ... is based on the ability to acquire canonical texts, as determined by either plot or creator significance. By possessing these comics, the reader substantiates his or her participation in fandom” (Brown 1997, 26). I found ample evidence of collecting during my research: all comic-book retailers started as collectors, and STR5-p1 has collected not only comics but also autographs, movie posters, and first editions of pulp novels; STR2-p1 boasted a collection of over 500 board games and 15,000 comics; ORG1’s Saturday Morning Cartoon events developed out of private screenings ORG1-p1 held with material from his collection of VHS tapes; STR2-p2 and STR2-p3 affirmed that they had spent thousands of dollars on collectable miniatures; and comic-book fans were observed seeking to complete runs of series or acquire rarer variant covers. As ORG4-p1 put it, “where does geek culture congregate and what does it congregate over? It congestes in stores and places of business, and it congestes over collections and collectibles and status that’s driven by possessions and material goods.”

For example, while part of the pleasure of playing miniatures games is the process of assembling and painting an army of figurines, it appears from a conversation observed at STR4’s weekly Warmachine game day that few players complete this task for all of their miniatures. When one player set up his army, someone at a neighbouring table commented that this was the first fully painted Warmachine army he had ever seen. The ensuing conversation among the gathered players identified one other person known to them who had finished painting all of his models. In contrast to the many players who field unpainted or only primed miniatures, a completely painted collection is distinguishing. It is important to note that this is not a collectible miniatures game: the producer does not impose scarcity
on the market, and so what is valued in these collections is not merely their capacity to stand in for economic capital but the objectified cultural capital represented by the process of selecting, assembling, and painting the models.

There are three main kinds of collector, distinguished by their disposition towards the act of collecting itself: I call them completists, hobbyists, and speculators. In each, collecting becomes more autonomous from the original cultural practice of consumption than in the previous form. Completists seek to acquire complete sets of goods that others might otherwise purchase more haphazardly but it is having them that’s important, while hobbyists re-interpret their focal practice as mainly about collecting and the thrill of the hunt for elusive objects, and speculators collect principally with an eye to return on investment. Although completists and hobbyists may be interested in the economic value of their collections, this concern remains relatively embedded in the practice of aesthetic appreciation, while speculators operate outside of practices’ internal norms of taste, primarily pursuing external goods. In my research, evidence of speculation was only apparent within the comic-book community, while completist and hobbyist collecting were more widely dispersed throughout the nerd cultures studied.

All three types of collector are opposed by an orientation towards use-value, a point made perhaps most clearly by Walter Benjamin. Although “great collectors distinguish themselves mostly by the originality of their choice of subject matter” (1978, 250), I am concerned here with more everyday sorts of collecting. These collectors are most likely

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6 This may be attributed to both the scarcity of early comic books and the “speculator boom” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, during which the rising value of classic comics at auction and gimmicky techniques on the part of publishers fuelled “a speculator frenzy” that drove “avid consumers to purchase multiple copies of the same comic book” (Beaty 2010, 204). Although the boom (and its eventual bust) is now widely discussed as a misstep, it established a template for understanding collecting as an investment that is still culturally available to participants.
dealing in mass-produced commodities: “Fundamentally a very odd fact—that collector’s items as such were produced industrially” (1999, 206). That is to say, while one might once have primarily associated collecting with aristocratic art patrons or the Wunderkammern from which descend our modern museums, the surfeit of material objects produced by industrial societies have profoundly democratized collecting. As Benjamin puts it, the collector “makes his concern the transfiguration of things. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them” (9). Once the insistent need to be instrumentally useful has been removed, the commodity may be re-enchanted as part of the collection. However, in recognizing an object’s collectability, collectors open the door to its re-fetishization. The mass-produced collector’s item—particularly if it is relatively old or rare or both—seems to command the auratic quality that attached itself to artworks (1968). This reproduces the collectable as a commodity, potentially reactivating its exchange-value. Hence, collectors are always speculators in potentia, rescuing objects from the curse of usefulness but delivering them to another master, the market.

The opposition of use-value and exchange-value is relatively repressed within gaming practices, as participants will still play with the goods that they have collected. There seems to be little to no fear of depreciation among players of miniatures games, including collectable miniatures games, and although there is a market in CCG cards enabled to varying degrees by different game stores, the most evidence I saw of concern to preserve cards’ condition was a conversation at STR4’s Legend of the Five Rings night about different strategies for shuffling cards without warping them.

In the comic-book sub-field, however, this opposition is quite evident due to a split between “readers” and “collectors” within the participant base. While collecting—especially that of completists—is not necessarily incompatible with identifying as a reader, comic-
book retailers note that “people who collect them tend to be a little bit pickier about condition”:

The few comics that come out nowadays that will be worth anything are gonna have to be (laughs) in really nice shape for that to ever happen. And some people, even though they know their comics aren’t gonna be particularly worth anything, are just picky and like them to be in nice shape, and that’s merely a personal choice. So, I mean, yeah, you notice which guys have to have every issue and which ones are faithful about coming in for them and how they take care of those comics. And the readers are more casual about it. And, again, as far the old ones go, you know which people like the old ones because you’re showing them the old comics. Not too many people buy the old comics just to read them, although I’d be shocked if most people didn’t read them. (STR5-p1)

In response to collectors’ “pickiness,” STR3-p1 keeps his store’s stock of graphic novels and trade paperbacks in plastic sleeves in order to maintain their condition. Although these books are very unlikely to appreciate in value, “there are people who are collectors and who are very particular, and if there is even the slightest ding, you know, bent corner, crease, then it’s going to hurt the potential for the book to sell.” Nonetheless, he recognizes that this makes it more difficult for customers to browse, an activity fundamental to shopping for comics, especially among those more interested in entertainment than investments.

Interviewees report that the distinction between readers and collectors has become more polarized. STR3-p1 and STR5-p1 both perceive most of their customers as primarily readers, and this is reflected in contemporary comics’ emphasis on story and continuity. At the same time, collecting and reading have become increasingly differentiated due to the widespread availability of re-prints of old comics—meaning that readers need not become collectors in order to access these “classics”—and to the rise of the Certified Guaranty Company (CGC), a service that evaluates the condition of comic books, assigning them a numerical grade, and then “slabs” them, sealing them in a protective case from which they

7 By way of contrast, STR5-p1 suggested that for his generation of fans and collectors, the artwork was considered paramount.
cannot be removed without invalidating the grade. CGC comics represent the triumph of exchange-value over use-value among collectors; however, as STR5-p1 argues, it is still possible to acquire a “beater,” or reading copy, of even quite valuable comics, should one still desire to read the stories.

Although the acquisition of this specific cultural capital presupposes economic capital, a collection’s “quality” is overdetermined by knowledge and taste. Indeed, while a certain amount of disposable income is needed to participate in many activities, I did not see any evidence that economic capital as such operated as an axis of distinction. Moreover, participants seemed to distinguish between collecting as an end in itself (whether as a completist or hobbyist collector) and as a form of financial speculation. It was still common during my research for participants in comic-book fandom to blame speculators for the ruinous decline in the comic-book industry following the 1990s boom, and several people I talked to dismissed the beliefs they once held that their comic collections would be financially valuable as mistaken or even foolish.

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As Bourdieu’s metaphor helps us to see, cultural capital may be “cashed in” to better one’s position within the field. Expert knowledge and good collections allow participants to claim status among their fellow geeks. This status most often took the form of conversational precedence: that is, the ability to have others, often strangers, listen to your opinions. However, attempts to draw on reserves of cultural capital also make participants vulnerable to those more knowledgeable than they are.

I observed two examples of this during my time at *Anime* Con. Directly behind me in the registration line was a man who had dressed up as a character of his own creation derived from the *manga* and *anime* franchise, *Naruto*. He talked almost constantly while we were in
line, though his comments were not always directed to anyone in particular, and he identified himself as a “real” fan, commenting that one “can tell who doesn’t belong here because they aren’t wearing a costume or anything.” But his own expertise was in fact somewhat limited, which became clear when he did not recognize that the woman standing behind him was portraying a major character from his beloved Naruto. Later that day during a well-attended panel, an audience member interrupted the presenter to offer the correction that PAX, a gaming convention that he had just mentioned, had moved to the east coast of the US; the presenter immediately retorted that there were now two PAX conventions, one in Seattle and one in Boston. In both cases, status claims implied by attempted displays of knowledge resulted in claimants losing face, although I can’t speculate as to the longer term effects upon their reputations among their peers. More often, the display of subcultural capitals is an unremarkable feature of routine interaction in the spaces I studied, forming part of the texture of the nerd-culture scene.

*Three Infrastructural Resources*

The symbolic capitals I have discussed thus far are resources individuals make use of in a variety of ways to position themselves within the field of nerd culture. However, there is another class of resources that are principally drawn on for the purpose of reproducing the subcultural field and enabling the pursuit of its constituent practices. One way to talk about institutions’ roles in the nerd-culture scene, then, is in terms of subcultural infrastructures, a term Hodkinson (2002, 114–19) introduces in his study of British goths: In addition to pursuing their own ends, they provide, to greater or lesser degrees, an economic and

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8 I myself was not wearing a costume, though it was not clear that the comment was intended to single me out in particular.
organizational base for subcultural activities. Following from this, I shall refer to this second class as infrastructural resources.

I have identified three infrastructural resources that cultural intermediaries provide to practitioners. This is probably not an exhaustive list but typifies my observations of the intermediaries in this study. Stores and groups organize *markets for commodities*, act as *venues for interaction*, and connect participants to *networks for communication*. In each case, the provision of infrastructural resources helps account for intermediaries’ importance to the local scene. They are vital for the cultivation and maintenance of practices, and for this reason are also, at least potentially, sources of instability.

**Commodities and Markets**

Participation in nerd culture, like many leisure activities, presupposes access to at least some material or cultural commodities. Russell Keat (2000, 144) uses the term “equipment-goods” to describe commodities that are desirable, not for the satisfactions they themselves provide, but for the way that they enable the pursuit of goods internal to some practice. He names “seeds and tools for gardening, furnishings for home-making, electronic keyboards for playing music, [and] boots and binoculars for bird watching” as examples of equipment-goods (144). I want to suggest that many cultural goods could be considered equipment-goods to the extent that the pleasures they offer are desirable in the context of a practice of connoisseurship and criticism, which in its turn could not exist without the texts in question.

In our society, the production and distribution of these goods are principally orchestrated via markets. These markets not only supply practitioners with needed equipment-goods but also provide for the economic viability of intermediaries. After all, even the most committed individuals can only volunteer so much of their time and personal financial resources to an
endeavour. However, intermediaries are not the only actors in these markets. They are affected by the economic strategies of both cultural producers and consumers, and so their position can be rendered precarious or even untenable from either “above” or “below.”

Producers

Cultural producers’ interests do not necessarily accord with those of participants or retailers. Local institutions are enrolled by producers in order to reach subcultural audiences, but they have little power relative to producers and trans-local intermediaries, which tend to download risk, albeit in different ways in different sectors.

Comic-book publishing is oligopolistically organized, and distribution is a virtual monopoly held by Diamond Comics Distributors. Unlike books and magazines, unsold comic books cannot ordinarily be returned to publishers, and very few contemporary comics appreciate in value, meaning poorly anticipating demand entails significant costs for retailers. As Charles Hatfield (2005, 23) puts it, “unsold comics not only fail to earn back their initial cost but also consume physical space and person-hours when they pass into inventory.” This renders the process of ordering new comics a fraught exercise in anticipating customer demand. The problem is exacerbated by contemporary trends, such as the ever-proliferating spin-off miniseries and one-shot specials that have accompanied recent “event” storylines from both major publishers. While these “infinite events” (STR3-p1) are popular, readers also expressed frustration and confusion at the number of comics they had to buy to keep up with the story. In a similar vein, both STR3-p1 and STR4-p2 note that readers’ average age has increased while mainstream comics publishers have tended to ignore younger audiences in favour of more lucrative adult readers and collectors who are already enrolled in the practices of comic-book fandom. In these various ways, the comic-book industry appears to be trading long-term stability for short-term gains that disproportionately accrue to major publishers and Diamond.
The game industries appear less concentrated than the comic-book industry (although Hasbro subsidiary Wizards of the Coast is a major player in RPG and CCG markets), but profit-maximization imperatives are still potentially destabilizing. Collectible games, for example, require players to continue purchasing cards or miniatures in order to remain competitive, and most successful board games have several expansions, too. Non-collectable games with large product lines also present challenges to retailers, who must decide how much shelf space to devote to a given game (versus competing games and other game types), given that many have dedicated fan bases that will not shop at a store that does not “support” their game.

In the audiovisual media, relations between cultural producers and fan communities have changed enormously due to technological and organizational transformations within media companies. As a case study, Eileen Meehan (2000) discusses the uneasy relationship between Paramount and fans of its Star Trek franchise. One aspect of the new approach to media production is to cultivate “fans who will purchase any item connected to the title” (83). "When other Paramount ventures fail, the Star Trek line subsidizes those losses,” but, however reliable, Trekkers are ultimately a small market, and so the studio routinely seeks to sell Star Trek to consumers outside the hardcore fan community:

As long as unreliable mundanes must be wooed and fans can be ignored, Trekkers will not be the primary market for Star Trek. To guarantee fan revenues, Paramount attends conventions, engages in dialogues, and offers sops to Trekkers—even as it targets materials for nonfans. This attend-and-ignore policy often frustrates fans. But as long as Trekkers routinely buy the product line, they can be taken for granted. (86–87)

This analysis significantly alters the now commonplace narrative of fans’ newfound importance to Hollywood. For example, a USA Today article reports studios’ struggles to understand and please highly devoted fans:
To be sure, fanboys⁹ (and, to a lesser degree, fangirls) are changing the way Hollywood does business. Studios are hiring marketers just to monitor movie fan sites. If a screenplay is leaked onto the Internet—once an offense that could land the culprit in jail—studios now find themselves asking fans what they think of the stolen goods. And if fanboys still don’t like the script, it gets reworked. There’s good reason to court—and fear—the elusive demographic. While their full numbers remain unclear, Internet and comic devotees can add $25 million to $50 million to a movie’s box office take, according to some estimates. (Bowles 2007)

However, fanboys alone do not a blockbuster make, as the relative failure of anticipated cult classics such as Snakes on a Plane and Scott Pilgrim vs. the World attest. “Buzz” amongst internet fan groups and on the convention circuit is not necessarily a good predictor of the tastes of the general audience, and so significant tensions remain in the relationship between producers and fan communities.

The most obvious example of this tension that I observed was ORG1’s Saturday Morning Cartoons screenings, which usually comprised episodes of animated television shows, vintage commercials and public service announcements, and a feature film. Attendees were encouraged to wear pajamas, and the concession stand sold sugary breakfast cereal. They have been ORG1’s most popular events, but the group struggled to license series that members were requesting. According to ORG1-p1, "to license a twenty-minute cartoon is usually the same price as licensing a full length movie"; moreover, they had difficulty identifying and making contact with the rights holders of the most frequently requested cartoons. Discussing problems with licensing at a staff meeting, ORG1-p6 said that, while media companies know that nerds’ tastes sometimes become popular, they do not really care about these niche audiences unless they can be exploited. Because ORG1’s activities did

⁹ Voracious and opinionated media consumers, especially those active on gossip and review websites such as Harry Knowles’s Ain’t It Cool News. The term is believed to have originated within comic-book fandom and has also become common in the “tech world” (McCracken 2010), suggesting long-term interrelations between the communities composing nerd culture. In both of the latter contexts, like Mr. Fox’s use of the label in chap. 1, it is decidedly less complimentary than in the film and television industries.
not directly lead to building buzz around new Hollywood productions, there was no real incentive for producers to cultivate this fan community. By the end of the research period, the group had redefined their events as “private exhibitions,” thereby (in their understanding) excluding them from requirements to acquire screening rights.¹⁰

All this is to say that producers’ economic interests introduce vulnerability into subcultural practices insofar as those practices are reliant on them for their equipment-goods. Although local intermediaries have done much to stabilize the field by consolidating consummative practices into a visible market, they remain vulnerable to the effects of decisions made by large, corporate producers that may or may not include them in their calculations of enlightened self-interest.

Consumers

Under conditions of marketized provision, consumers themselves also represent a source of instability. The successful reproduction of subcultural practices requires both affective commitment and material support on the part of participants, but markets can undermine commitment in at least two ways.

First, marketization positions participants as consumers rather than practitioners. Among my interviewees, ORG4-p1 was most concerned that consumption was displacing genuine social interaction among participants:

So, I noticed that a lot of-of the conversations that “geeks” have with one another are over product releases. And if you go to, like, for example RPGnet or storygames.com, or any role-playing game fan sites or forums, you’ll notice there’s a huge amount of people talking about when is something being released, you know, who’s doing the art, what product format is it going to come in. It’s a really product-driven culture, which strikes me as absurd because

¹⁰ ORG2’s weekly screenings were also defined as “private” exhibitions in order to shield them from licensing requirements, especially given that most videos were acquired through the grey-market system of “fansubbers” (see Lee 2011).
the focus of the activity is generating our own media and yet the culture rallies around consuming media.

Several retailers also acknowledged potentially detrimental influence of excessive commercialization. For example, STR2-p1 frankly admitted his profit-motive but distinguished himself from another retailer who is “all about money.” Many interviewed cultural intermediaries made reference to a point where pursuit of revenue violates norms of authenticity and—in MacIntyre’s terms—external goods trump internal ones. The previously mentioned comic-book speculation boom of the 1980s and 1990s is a widely cited example of this phenomenon, but few named contemporary examples of just where this point lies.

Second, commodified participation leads participants to maximize utility in ways that may undermine the viability of institutions. Interviewees described local nerds as particularly cheap, argumentative, and flaky. Stores struggle with customers who purchase very little and haggle over prices for what they do buy, while group organizers fret over attendance. “Customers are,” according to STR4-p1, “fucking dicks.” He attributed this to high commercial rents, which inflate prices, and a bad economy, which constrains disposable income. For his part, ORG3-p1 thought the haggling mentality arose from early comic-bookstores’ use of new comics as loss leaders, although he also noted that local sports teams and arts organizations face similar struggles with cheap and noncommittal audiences. I frequently observed participants “gleaning” entertainment (e.g., reading comics in the store, using demonstration copies of games without purchase, or “pirating” copyrighted video). Haggling and gleaning maximize consumer utility without necessarily accounting for impacts on local institutions or cultural producers.

In conclusion, cultural intermediaries such as retailers and group organizers connect producers and consumers within a market that maintains nerd-cultural practices. Markets
are also moral economies that “embody norms and sentiments regarding the responsibilities and rights of individuals and institutions with respect to others” (Sayer 2000, 79). However, dynamics generated by the expropriation of value from this economy can lead both producers and consumers to act in ways that have unintended negative consequences. If the economic foundations of subcultural practice are eroded so that creators, publishers, or retailers are no longer able to make a living, participants’ ability to access needed equipment-goods will obviously suffer.

Interaction and Venues

Physical space is a basic infrastructure for most cultural practices. Not only do activities often extend in space, but interaction among participants is necessary for the reproduction of practices. Put another way, retail stores and organizations’ events facilitate access to and enjoyment of practices by bringing participants into contact with one another. These spaces thus constitute “interlocks,” whereby “cultural information and behavior options are diffused, resulting in the construction of a common universe of discourse throughout the social network in which they are spread” (Fine and Kleinman 1979, 8). Moreover, as public events and spaces—anyone who wishes may walk into a comic or game shop and all of the events hosted by studied organizations are open to the public, subject to modest admission fees—they also represent an interface between nerd culture and the “mainstream.”

However, suitable venues at affordable rates are scarce in the city. ORG3, which has rented the same hall for twenty years, and ORG2, which, as a university club, has free access to space for most events, were relatively fortunate in this regard. Nevertheless, the availability of venues was the primary constraint on most organizations’ activities, limiting the scale, frequency, and accessibility of their events.
In this context, businesses—especially, retail stores—become particularly important venues for subcultural activities. As ORG4-p1 put it, “Basically, if we talk about geek culture, which is a thing that I think genuinely does exist, where does geek culture congregate[...?] It congregates in stores and places of business[....]” Specialty retail stores serving the nerd market are not merely links in a commodity chain between producer and consumer but are themselves cultural spaces. Stores with significant involvement in gaming maintained a series of periodical events that provided customers opportunities to play games socially outside of their immediate circle of intimates. In some cases, organizations co-sponsored these events, as with ORG4’s drop-in RPG sessions at area game stores. Interviewees discussed in-store events in terms of “supporting” different products that they sell. By providing space and time to the partisans of a particular game they not only bring potential customers into their store but also help consolidate individual players who might otherwise have no way of meeting one another into a community of players. For example, I spoke to two *Dungeons & Dragons Miniatures* players at STR2 about their use of the store’s space for their gaming activities:

**BMW:** Do you play this much outside of a store setting like this?

**STR2-p3:** I play it online, probably once or twice a week. And then here, we play once a month.

**STR2-p2:** Yeah.

**BMW:** Then, this space is fairly important for sort of keeping it going?

**STR2-p3:** Mm-hmm.

**STR2-p2:** If we didn’t have this space, the game would have probably died.

**STR2-p3:** Yeah.

**STR2-p2:** ((laughs))

**BMW:** OK. And did you guys meet each other through ... here?

**STR2-p3:** We met through the game.

**STR2-p2:** We actually met through this game, yeah. I moved to the city a year and a half ago, so I found the local group that was still playing. The game was quite popular at the time. And that’s when I met STR2-p3.

So, although STR2-p2 is able to use an online version to keep up with his hobby, the monthly tournaments held at STR2 are the primary opportunity he has to play the game as
it was designed—that is, using the figurines that he has spent time and money collecting—and to be present with others who share his interest. The space and time game stores make available to interested participants involve retailers in their customers’ lives in a way that goes beyond market transactions. As STR4-p1 said, “These aren’t just customers, these aren’t just gamers, these aren’t just people that you spend some time with. These are people that you share a passion with.”

The comic shops studied did not tend to have events of this type; rather, the experience of shopping for comics was itself understood as a social activity involving interaction with other customers and store staff. In STR5-p1’s words, “Definitely, it’s a social activity. The conversation that they have with other customers and um and ourselves is, yeah, that’s a big part of it.” Similarly, STR3-p1 contrasted the more solitary nature of actually reading comic books with the sociability that is expressed in the store:

You know, as long as they’re going to buy a couple of comic books, I don’t mind if they want to hang out and chat. And I think it’s actually really important that some of the ... certain types of people actually get that opportunity to share their ... you know, their love of the medium or even just, like, to get that social interaction because it seems like a lot of them probably don’t get a lot of social interaction otherwise. Or, you know, say high school kids that are a little shy. They might not enjoy going to school, and they might not have someone at school that they can talk to about it, but when they go to the comic store, they know that they’re in an environment where they’re with people that will understand and share their interests. Yeah, there’s definitely some interesting conversations ((laughs)) that take place in here. Some of them even go over my head.

Like STR4-p1 above, this comic-shop owner used a discourse of commonality—or “consubstantiality” (K. Burke 1969, 21)—to describe the interaction among members of his store’s clientele. Doubtless, this rhetoric conceals a potential for interpersonal conflict within these communities, but it expresses the ideal image of community through shared cultural practices that shapes their provision of space for interaction.
For example, at the time of the interview, ORG3-p1 had recently been approached by a company that stages comic-book conventions in several cities in the US and Canada. This company wished to purchase the rights to ORG3’s name, which matches the formula it has used to brand conventions in other cities. As part of this deal, ORG3-p1 would have been hired to run the new show for them. While considering the offer, he informally polled some of his frequent exhibitors:

And the reality is it would hurt a lot of them because Conventions, Inc. is in it totally for the money. They sell 10x10 booth spaces instead of tables for the dealers, and that’s usually $300 to [...] $800 for a booth, which is insane, so unless you’re a big company or something you’re not going to get a space. For the dealer tables, they’re probably in the $100 to $300 range, so, again, it’s gonna price most of these guys out. One of the creators said, “Look, you can do whatever you want, but if you do that it’s gonna fuck up the community.”

Participants within the community—in this case, a cultural producer who relied on ORG3 to provide a space where he or she can interact with other exhibiting producers as well as with fans—often explicitly recognize the utility provided by those cultural intermediaries who act as venues for interaction.

For their part, retailers all expressed support for social uses of their stores but also recognized real or potential conflicts between enabling participation and pursuing revenue. They believed developing communities has long-term benefits even if it does not result in immediate sales, but this was largely a matter of intuition rather than informed strategy:

The point ... again, because there’s no direct ... it’s hard to connect directly, how much money did we make because we had game nights and what have you. We don’t even think of it that way. It’s fortunate that we don’t have to think of it that way because we’re doing well enough that we don’t have to go, “Oh, is it worth it to keep those tables at the back blah blah blah.” And we have the luxury of just feeling that the feeling we have about Friday night being good for business is right. On the other hand, I think that that’s correct. I think that it would be dumb to get rid of the tables to put more stock in. But I don’t have numbers to back that up because it’s very hard to do. (STR1-p2)
However, given low margins, high rents, small customer bases, and the fact that these activities are generally minor contributors to revenue, there are conditions under which retailers would reduce or discontinue support in favour of, for example, stocking additional inventory. Insofar as a practice requires the internalization and incorporation of norms, classificatory schemes, and forms of knowledge, then the loss of opportunities for interaction between participants would severely disrupt the practice’s ability to be reproduced.

Communication and Networks

Communication involves exchanging not only information and gossip but also opinion, aesthetic sensibilities, and cognitive and somatic competences necessary for full participation in subcultural practices. Communicative networks help knit together a scene and, by circulating information between related scenes, help practitioners maintain a sense of their membership in the larger field. In many cases, trans-local communicative networks, such as amateur press associations (APAs), fanzines, niche magazines, and conventions, antedate the local institutions and have developed an independent role in the field. Studied groups and stores function less as networks than they do as markets and venues; nevertheless, local institutions are important sites for communication. Some of these networks are mediated. For example, a number of small circulation magazines for niche audiences such as toy collectors and Whovians were available for purchase at STR5. Other communication is interpersonal, and stores and group events provide occasions for participants to communicate their experiences—whether direct or second-hand—of developments in other scenes.

Today, web sites, forums, and blogs have supplemented or replaced older networks. The effects of these new networks are still unclear. E-commerce and digital distribution
(whether authorized or “piratical”) enabled by computer-mediated communication have the potential profoundly to disrupt the business models on which some local institutions are based, and on-line sources of information and opinion reduce the aura of authority and expertise vested in store employees and group organizers. More fundamentally, increased and increasingly immediate access to trans-local networks may divorce identification with the nerd subculture from participation in the local scene.

Be that as it may, many local groups and stores are themselves making use of new media, in addition to more established forms of promotion, to communicate with their members or patrons. Most organizations had their own websites and a Facebook page, which they used to advertise events, supplementing posters and word of mouth. Groups and stores alike made use of message boards and mailing lists, allowing for asynchronous interaction outside of the physical venues of nerd culture, and game stores’ web sites frequently have a calendar of events and tournaments as well as an e-commerce storefront. Hodkinson (2006) has noted that the relationship between online and offline venues can be quite complex, and intermediaries’ uses of social media and computer-mediated communication warrants further research that was outside the scope of this study.

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By organizing markets, providing venues and spaces of interaction, and linking participants with communicative networks, intermediaries contribute to the maintenance of a social and cultural milieu, giving substance to the fuzzier qualities of subcultural identity and shaping the scene’s localized character. Although all intermediaries act out of their own investments and commitments to some practice or other, they are also constrained by the need to reproduce themselves. The agents and institutions I have focused on are not only well endowed with (sub)cultural and social capital but they are also involved with the
circulation of infrastructural resources. So, although they are by no means the only intermediaries with a role in shaping the field, they make particularly strong contributions to its instantiation as a scene.

**Mapping Nerd Culture**

Thus far, in discussing the constitution of the nerd-culture scene, I have drawn on evidence collected in a number of subcultural sites, but I have discussed them as if my ventures into the field were entirely discrete. But the very concept of a scene points to the ways that cultural activity “mobilizes local energies and moves these energies in multiple directions—onwards, to later reiterations of itself; outwards, to more formal sorts of social or entrepreneurial activity; upwards, to the broader coalescing of cultural energies within which collective identities takes shape” (Straw 2004, 412). The nine research sites were connected with one another and with other local and trans-local actors by relationships of patronage, cross-promotion, and sponsorship, suggesting that the scene is in fact highly interconnected at the level of its cultural intermediaries. Even the most monomaniacal devotee of some sub-sub-genre of nerd culture is regularly exposed to nerdy practices and communities outside of his or her immediate interest. Thus, the nerd-culture scene is not a simple aggregate of all the activities, institutions, and participants that could be categorized as nerdy but rather a milieu that is constituted by them.

Figure 3.1 represents the local nerd-culture scene’s interrelations visually. I produced this diagram using the graph editor, yEd. Nodes and connectors were entered manually based on mentions of people, organizations, events, and venues in my interview transcripts and fieldnotes. For example, if I saw a poster in a comic-bookstore for a fan convention, I created a new node for the convention and connected it to the existing node representing the store. I used yEd’s layout and clustering algorithms to organize the network into the
sub-fields displayed here. The size of a node represents its centrality within the network, measured by the number of links to other nodes: the more connected a node is, the bigger it is displayed. Some manual adjustments were made for the sake of clarity.

The relationships mentioned by interviewees and directly observed during fieldwork are presumably only a small fraction of the ties that bind the scene together (especially with respect to participant mobility between events and stores), and so the figure is necessarily incomplete. Nonetheless, it helps substantiate the intuition that consumption embedded in practices can never be entirely private and dispersed. As can be seen from the figure, observed relationships among participants and institutions divide the field into four major clusters or sub-fields:

• the first cluster (upper right) is dominated by ORG1, ORG1-p1, and SF&F Con, and so this might be considered the field of media fandom, although ORG4, STR2, and nodes associated with video games also appear in this region of the graph;

• the second (lower right) comprises STR2, STR4 and the many games that both stores support, and this cluster as a whole is drawn closer to the first by ORG4-p1’s inclusion and the numerous games-industry members who sponsor ORG1 events;

• the third (lower left) mainly deals with anime fandom—although ORG2 also embraces gaming activities, these appear to be sufficiently independent of the wider gaming communities within the scene; and

• the fourth and final cluster (upper left) was constructed by combining two smaller clusters that both dealt primarily with comic books but separated ORG3 and its conventions from the retail stores STR3 and STR5.

One way of understanding the scene, then, is as a nexus of niches. I shall discuss at more length below how this nexus is configured by cultural intermediaries. For now, the important point is that the simple transactions needed to acquire or access objects and activities implicate consumers in a complex and fluid network of relationships. Some of these are known or potentially knowable by participants; others are relatively hidden but no less influential. The inevitability of these relationships gives force to the sense of nerd culture as a scene.
Figure 3.1. Intermediaries, institutions, venues, and events
However, a nexus is a space of convergence or overlap and not necessarily one of harmony. Interviewees frequently referred to perceptions of rivalry between groups within the nerd-culture scene. In STR4-p1’s words, “Like, nerds can be like valley girls sometimes.” Participants were observed invoking such rivalries, but their own practices are entangled with and in some cases dependent upon one another for their continued viability. No group or store encompassed all nerdy practices, but neither could any of them survive on the basis of a single niche. At least some participants recognized the interdependence of geek cultures, as when a STR4 patron—a Warmachine player—interrupted my interview with the store’s manager to make a derogatory comment about players of the popular CCG, Yu-Gi-Oh!, but immediately acknowledged that these customers contribute to the store’s continued solvency. I also observed similar dismissive comments being made by board gamers against Magic: The Gathering, by Magic players against Pokémon, by a player of historically themed games against fantasy games, and by players of table-top games against MMORPGs.11

Although participants may select particular texts or groups as objects of scorn, it is difficult in practice for anyone to effectively exclude others from the scene. However, there are grounds for concern where such scapegoating overlays existing disparities within nerd culture, such as those of gender, age, or socio-economic status/class.12 A salient illustration is the widespread claim that female fans of Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight Saga “ruined” the

11 Despite the centrality of aesthetic judgements in comic-book fandom, these kinds of pointed comments were observed much less frequently among comic-book fans beyond the more or less conventional self-identification as being a “DC guy” or a “Marvel guy.” It may be that interaction required of players of the same kind of game promotes a greater sense of confidence that those around one share one’s tastes and also makes “rival” groups more obvious.

12 Interviewees were also asked about race/ethnicity. Many seemed reluctant to talk about this, and most argued that their customer base was broadly representative of their perception of the city’s ethnic diversity as a whole. The one disparity that a few interviewees admitted was a perceived under-representation of the South Asian community amongst nerds and geeks.
2009 San Diego Comic-Con (e.g., Bryan 2009; Ohanesian 2009), and this despite the widely acknowledged need to make nerd culture more accessible to women participants.¹³ That is to say, while nerd culture and its institutions are sometimes described as a kind of “sanctuary” from the status competition and dominant value hierarchies of mainstream culture, the nerd-culture scene is itself a field in which agents are differentially situated.

My argument to this point has shown that the spaces and institutions of nerd culture can be understood as a subcultural scene. It is in many ways unexceptional. As we have seen, it is prone to rivalry, conflict, and self-interest like any other social setting, and it is a source of meaningful interaction like other social worlds. But looking at it more closely helps us to see more clearly the ways that cultural practices of all sorts generate such scenes. I now want to examine the role that institutions and intermediaries play in maintaining and shaping the scene on an on-going basis.

THE ALPHA NERDS

Most nerdy practices can be pursued in private—whether by one’s self or in the company of a small group of friends. But the nerd-culture scene thrives when participants are able to share their tastes and hobbies with others. Indeed, given the niche appeal and persistent stigmatization of nerd culture, forms of public play and interaction may be the only opportunities some nerds have to participate in their chosen practices. However, as we have seen, these opportunities are only available because of cultural intermediaries’ efforts.

¹³ I observed Twilight being derided by ORG2 members, customers at STR5, and several phase 2 interviewees. But Twilight also had a few defenders, who usually conceded the inferiority of the novels and films but recuperated them by appealing to Meyer’s obvious success at tapping into the desires of her target audience. For a broader view of Twilight “anti-fandom,” see Sheffield and Merlo (2010).
For example, in the following interview extract, STR4-p1 discusses a group of customers who help sustain the store’s community of gamers:

Saturdays, I have off, but I spend a lot of Saturdays in the store, running demos, playing games, and just promoting the community. One of the reasons why I think this store has been as successful as it has been [...] is because I put a lot of my time and energy into being there, playing games, and promoting the games so that people have somebody to play against, somebody who’s what [M., the store’s owner,] calls the “alpha gamer.” I don’t like that [term] because it, you know, lords over people. I just think it’s somebody who’s very passionate about something. And in every community of gamers you need to have at least one. You know, a really healthy community will have lots of them. People that are going to be at the store to play even if nobody else is there and as soon as somebody shows up looking for a game, they’ll have somebody to play with. For instance, that guy, [E.], he comes in here all the time, and he just hangs around and waits for a game. That’s the kind of thing that encourages people and makes them feel really confident. When they want to spend money on a game, they know they’ll have somebody to play it with.

These so-called alpha gamers are particularly enthusiastic about their hobbies and give of their time to facilitate others’ enjoyment of them. It is interesting to note that STR4-p1 identifies himself—the store manager—with these volunteers, and, although he emphasizes the affective dimensions of subcultural commitment, the immaterial labour of paid staff and customers alike is instrumentally useful for individual consumers, gaming communities, and the store. Such entanglements of the economic with the cultural, of labour with leisure, and of consumption with community are typical of subcultures that have generated their own institutions.

The previous sections attempted to describe the structure of the nerd-culture scene from the point of view of subcultural institutions. I now want to focus on some of the characteristics and activities of the retailers and organizers I studied. Although my sample is quite small, some important features of their work within the scene are apparent. I shall discuss their career paths, their role as gatekeepers in the scene, and various dispositions that they held towards the relationship between the subculture and the mainstream.
In his seminal essay, “Subcultural Conflict and Working-class Community,” Phil Cohen ([1972] 2005, 91) describes subcultural participation as a merely imaginary solution to structural contradictions that have only viable two exit strategies (i.e., either assimilation to work and family life or criminal deviance): “Although there is a certain amount of subcultural mobility..., there are no career prospects!” Yet, despite their associations with fleeting adolescent rebellion and the sphere of leisure, some subcultures have in fact developed relatively durable institutions that offer a range of “careers” to long-time participants.

We may speak of subcultural careers in two distinct but related senses. They are, in the first instance, individuals’ biographical trajectory in a subculture. Like all practices, those that compose nerd culture require a certain degree of apprenticeship. Full participation requires that one become aware of a practice, seek it out, master schemes used to evaluate both objects and other participants, and acquire basic cognitive and somatic competencies. This is well captured in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of situated learning, which suggests learners move through a sequence of identity positions and roles, beginning with what they call “legitimate peripheral participation” and leading towards full participation within a community of practice. In nerd cultures, early career stages often take place during adolescence. Some practitioners eventually reduce or cease their participation for a variety of reasons, 14 but many continue well into adulthood. For a small group, increasing participation leads to professional or voluntary work in the scene. Second, then, subcultural careers are occupational opportunities furnished by a particular subculture. The longest-

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14 The assumption of adult responsibilities, especially those of marriage or parenthood, were frequently cited by interviewees. See chap. 4, under “A Sad Garden,” p. 245.
standing such positions are those of cultural producers (e.g., for example, comic-book creators, game designers, or SF&F authors), but over time subcultures may develop a variety of ancillary positions, many of which perform mediating functions, such as retailers, distributors, convention organizers, and members of a journalistic or critical specialty press.

These two senses of career in some ways reflect the way Stebbins uses it to describe practitioners’ trajectories through the professional–amateur–public systems he considers characteristic of serious leisure: “a career is the typical course, or passage, of certain types of amateur–professional practitioners that carries them into, and through, a leisure role and possibly into, and through, a work role.” These careers are individualized and contingent, but scenes make certain roles available and certain courses through them more likely than others. Thus, “the idea of a career” not only “acts as a major bridge between amateur and professional activity” but also has “the capacity to link individual amateurs or professionals (or other workers) with the culture and social structure within which the work and leisure activities are pursued.” (Stebbins 1992, 68)

While participation in a leisure activity does not always lead to paid employment or even significant volunteer work, occupational engagement presupposes some form of career, however short, in the biographical sense. In music scenes, for example, “spectators become fans, fans become musicians, musicians are always already fans” (Shank 1994, 131). In the nerd-culture scene, interviewees cited detailed knowledge of products as characteristic of successful retailers, and such knowledge is originally acquired through membership in relevant hobby communities or fandoms. In the case of non-profit organizations and clubs, the connection is even more integral, as organizers’ unpaid labour is a direct expression of fan activity and has no significant financial incentives. Although systematic research on the
trajectories of nerd culture’s intermediaries remains to be done, some typical features of their careers are already apparent from my interviews.

While many intermediaries operate on a for-profit basis (at however small a scale), all of them I spoke with discussed their affective ties to the subculture, which generally originate during childhood or adolescence. Sometimes a family member or close friend was credited with introducing the participant to their hobby. For example, STR2-p1 cited his older brother as a major influence on his choice of leisure activities, and STR4-p2 said that his mother encouraged his love of comic books as a way of getting him to read.

Retailers typically described opening their store as the apogee of their subcultural engagement. Several reported “always” wanting to be specialty retailers (STR1-p2 and STR3-p1), while for others opening stores represented a way to make a living at their hobby when schooling or other work became unappealing (STR2-p1, STR4-p3, and STR5-p1). It is also common, however, for the time constraints involved in running a store to limit retailers’ active participation in their hobbies—STR2-p1, STR3-p1, STR4-p3, and STR5-p1 all struggled with “falling behind” on developments in their respective fields. The trajectories of organizers of non-profit groups are less predictable. ORG1-p1 and ORG3-p1 created organizations to fill perceived gaps in the local nerd-culture scene while others, like ORG2-p1 and ORG4-p1, joined existing organizations, eventually taking on leadership roles. Interestingly, the former pair expressed the value of amateurism most strongly, while the latter pair was more invested in the value of professionalism. 15

Insofar as they are “always already fans,” subcultural intermediaries both participate in and act upon the scene. Put another way, their work is embedded in the practices of subcultural communities. When successfully accomplishing an activity or practice depends

15 See below, p. 144.
upon dispositions, skills, or resources that were originally acquired by participation in another practice, then it is “embedded” in that other practice. The embeddedness of practices provides a way to connect intermediaries’ experiences as participants with the routine activities they perform as part of their occupational careers by way of a notion of “practical consciousness” (Giddens 1984, 4), or what Bourdieu referred to as a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 128–29).

**Gatekeeping and the Reproduction of Subcultural Practices**

One dimension of this practical process of definition and boundary maintenance is gatekeeping, a concept with a long history in communication studies. Pamela Shoemaker defines gatekeeping, a metaphor introduced by Kurt Lewin, as “the process by which the billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day.” Control of information is not limited to selection but also includes “withholding, transmission, shaping, display, repetition, and timing of information as it goes from sender to receiver.” (Shoemaker 1991, 1) Nonetheless, the image principally connotes holding back information—the gatekeeper as Gandalf in the mines of Moria, proclaiming to undesirable messages, “You shall not pass!” But, while communication scholars have tended to focus on this kind of “editorial gatekeeping” (Barzilai-Nahon 2008, 442), Lewin viewed gatekeeping as a generic feature of social life (Shoemaker 1991, 9).

Gatekeeping, like Foucault’s conception of power, is not simply repressive but also productive. Cultural intermediaries enable practices, but they enable them in particular ways. For example, there is no necessary reason why comic books, CCGs, and sports cards are frequently sold in the same stores. It might be argued that the common denominator is
collecting, but neither numismatics nor philately is regarded as part of nerd culture.\textsuperscript{16}

Rather, these products and their consumers seem to “fit” together within the field because they have been brought together by nerd culture’s intermediaries. These agents’ work activities are informed by and expressive of existing interests and passions: Knowledge, experience, and in some cases material goods acquired through participation in leisure (e.g., retailers’ own collections) are leveraged as resources. My research suggests three significant forms of gatekeeping practised by cultural intermediaries.

Curation

Ultimately, what gatekeepers filter out may be less significant than the things they admit and the particular configurations into which they admit them. In this sense, gatekeeping resembles a process of curation. Curating denotes the selection of content available to participants—products in a store, vendors and exhibitors at a convention, or events and activities supported by a store or organization, and so on. However, a potential contradiction between personal taste (“quality”) and beliefs about the tastes of others (“demand”) lies at the heart of the curation process. In the following extract, for example, STR3-p1 talks about the role his own tastes play when selecting products for the store:

\begin{quote}
I think everything definitely has a bit of my taste’s influence in it. Like I said, I want to be surrounded by things that I like. I won’t say that everything in the store is something that I like, but definitely if it’s something that I believe in, I will invest heavier in it in hopes that other people will have similar taste. Mostly, that would probably be reflected in the toys more so than the comic books because ... the comics, I want to order what will sell regardless of whether I believe in it or whether I like it, but when it comes to things like action figures and statues and things like that, I definitely think my taste is reflected more in that department.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} Although some might find them nerdy in a more general sense.
Having begun their own careers as fans, intermediaries’ conceptualizations of their audiences and customers—of what they like and dislike, and what they will or won’t buy—are based on their own experiences of nerd culture. Definitions of the field are normalized and often remain tacit until members or customers fail to respond in anticipated ways, bringing the quality–demand tension to the fore.

That is to say, curators do not always succeed in providing what practitioners seek. Intermediaries’ tastes may not match participants’ sufficiently. Retailers frequently described ordering inventory based on their own taste that then fails to sell:

Obviously, I’m trying to bring in what people want, and I have to remember that just because I think that something is good doesn’t mean that other people will, and vice versa[ ...] I’ve brought in things that I thought would do well lots of times that people didn’t find that interesting. (STR1-p2)

There’s certain things that at first I didn’t expect to sell as well as they did and vice versa. It’s a constant learning process. I’m always learning. Every week[...] something will surprise me where I’ll sell out of something that I didn’t expect to or, vice versa, I won’t sell any of something that I did. (STR3-p1)

STR2-p1 also mentioned that he finds selling children’s games challenging since he cannot rely on his own tastes to evaluate whether kids will have fun. These problems are not limited to retailers; group organizers also struggle with tensions between quality and demand when developing events. For example, I attended an ORG1 staff meeting where a great deal of time was devoted to trying to understand why a screening they organized was not as popular as they had hoped it would be.

Difficulties involved in anticipating participants’ tastes and curating accordingly are clearly a source of stress for many intermediaries. STR4-p3 put it in particularly forceful terms: “Ordering still to this day is the worst process in the world. [...] It’s like playing the lottery every time you do it, and from day one it’s been difficult.” One significant exception was STR5-p1, the most experienced and professionalized retailer included in the study. By this point in his career, he accepts that some mistakes are inevitable:
You’re gonna get fooled sometimes because it’s an especially good issue or [...] because it’s an especially bad cover and you don’t sell as many. That’s gonna happen; you don’t worry too much about that. But you can guess pretty accurately how many you’re gonna sell. When a new book comes out [...] you don’t really know how well it’s gonna sell until you’ve ordered a few. And when it’s selling really well, you’re upset because you know you’re not going to have enough of the next issue, and when it’s selling really poorly, of course, you’re upset because you know you’re gonna be ((laughs)) stuck with a bunch.

He de-emphasized the role of taste in ordering: “I just try and find similars—you know, if they’re doing a new Legion\textsuperscript{17} series, how well did the last Legion series do? who’s doing it?—and base it off that.” However, the choice of meaningfully “similar” comparisons relies on shared frames of reference, and so even this seemingly objective process is embedded in shared experiences of participation.

Second, curation is constrained by intermediaries’ limited agency within the trans-local nerd subculture and associated cultural industries. Local intermediaries have little influence upon the production and distribution of cultural commodities. Stores can only stock products that are available to them, and ORG1, for example, had difficulties obtaining exhibition rights for cartoons and films that its membership requested. When curating proves inadequate, more active interventions may be required: Intermediaries may attempt to influence participants’ tastes or diversify beyond their core practices.

Education

One possible response to gaps between intermediaries’ and consumers’ tastes, which often appear as a misalignment of supply and demand, is for cultural intermediaries to attempt to “educate” their patrons. Participants were frequently observed interacting with store staff and key group organizers as if they were authoritative sources of information and opinion.

\textsuperscript{17} DC Comics’ Legion of Super-Heroes. At the time of this interview, the series had just been re-launched. It was re-launched again in September, 2011 as part of DC’s “New 52” initiative.
Even so, influencing tastes is a difficult proposition, especially given the aforementioned time constraints on retailers’ own participation, which means they are frequently asked for opinions about products they themselves have not read or tried.

Nevertheless, stores such as STR2 and STR4 have had some success influencing buying habits as customers have come to trust the staff’s judgement. This became apparent when the players at STR2’s board-game night could not agree on which game to play next: STR2-p1 had offered to teach us to play a game called Wasabi; one attendee, M., had brought his own game; and two others wanted to play Small World. M. didn’t want to play Small World but no one seemed very keen on his game, and so he resolved the impasse by suggesting that we try Wasabi, remarking that it’s a good idea to take up STR2-p1’s offers, as he often picks fun games one might never try on one’s own. Trust in an intermediary’s taste was also an explicit theme when STR4-p2 discussed the range of comics they sell:

> At least at this store, we’ve built a specific niche of comic-book readers, the ones who are sort of similar, that have similar tastes to us. For the most part, at least. And so we know what we can sort of recommend to them, and they trust us enough to at least try it out for a little bit[...]

In the context of a well-developed retailer–customer relationship, it is possible to shift consumption patterns: “It becomes a thing of where ... there’s a delicate balance. Some retailers can do it. I don’t know how many actually try it, but there are ways you can sort of wean customers.” At the first meeting of the semester, many members introduced themselves with reference to the aspects of nerd culture that they liked (e.g., “I’m into anime and I play Magic”), and several said they originally joined to pursue one specific interest and gradually learned to appreciate others supported by the club. As ORG2-p1 said in interview, “I find now in the club pretty much everybody is open to everything or was a fan of everything to begin with. I don’t think it’s really hard to convince gaming people to go to weeklies [i.e., their regular screenings] or anime people to go to gaming night.” This is
partially due to the club’s “interdisciplinary” character and partially due to an intentionally educative stance taken by ORG2-p1, among others. However, tastes often prove resistant or unpredictable. Sometimes, there simply may not be enough people with a particular set of tastes to ensure the survival of a store or organization.

Diversification

Another common way of dealing with unpredictable or irregular demand among core participants is to broaden the product categories or types of events offered. Some intermediaries may seek new customers who do not identify as practitioners—as when ORG4-p1 experimented with holding gaming activities in cafés, a site he associates with social interaction and an “artsy, creative” clientele—but it is more common to attempt to consolidate existing niches within nerd culture.

Institutions whose particularistic commitments are less clearly specified have more freedom to diversify. For example, although gaming and anime were the focus of the vast majority of the club’s activity, ORG2’s president resisted pigeonholing the group:

> The club is definitely more successful when you promote it in a vague way rather than specifically as an anime club or a gaming club. That’s when we’ve done the worst, when it’s been tied down to being one or the other. And, yeah, I want to try and not only promote those activities to the community at large but sort of open people up to different types of things within that category.

Similarly, the range of different games allows some play in ORG4’s focus. While most activities are primarily for RPG players, the group’s president said, “We intentionally have a bit of a vague classification of what we mean by games because we want to be open and holistic and kind of a networking portal, rather than yet another small niche.” This is not to say that only such loosely defined institutions can bridge multiple communities: STR5, nominally a comic-bookstore, is perhaps the most diversified site studied, embracing comic readers and collectors more comprehensively than other stores and selling magazines,
manga, anime DVDs, action figures and toys, statues, t-shirts, posters, RPG books, board games, picture postcards, celebrity photographs and film stills, movie and television scripts, and miscellaneous merchandise such as buttons and magnets. Robust conceptions of “genre” and “popular culture” provide the explicit justification for this diversity.

In some cases, the communities consolidated together are relatively contingent, such as the blend of various gaming activities, anime fandom, and, increasingly, viral videos and Internet “memes” supported by ORG2 or the sometimes idiosyncratic mix of texts screened by ORG1. In others, the combination of niches complement one another, as when stores such as STR2 and STR4 sell both board games (higher profit margin, less frequently purchased, more casual consumers) and CCGs (low profit margin, consumed frequently, mostly regular customers). Expanding their offerings does, however, place obligations on intermediaries to become knowledgeable concerning new practices with which they may have less direct experience.

In the work of gatekeeping, local cultural intermediaries make their most significant contributions to the instantiation of the nerd-culture scene. Their decisions concerning what products to stock, what events to host, what recommendations to make, what combination of communities to court, et cetera have a variety of intended and unintended effects on the composition of the scene. Curation, education, and diversification, all of which rely upon tacit knowledge and practical reason derived from participation, shape the matrix within which cultural capital and material goods circulate.

18 A catchphrase or joke circulating on the internet. Often absurdist and highly self-referential, they are strongly associated with the forums on 4chan.org.
Dispositions

What appears in lay and media discourse as the mainstreaming of nerd culture might be better understood as a revaluation of its specific capitals. Capital is convertible, not only between forms but also between fields, and when the “exchange rate” of field-specific capitals change, making them more valuable in a greater range of social and cultural contexts, it follows that more people will “invest” in them. In the case of nerd culture, longer-term effects are not yet clear, but the cultural intermediaries I studied are precariously positioned: on the one hand, they stand to benefit from a larger base of participants and customers to stabilize their businesses and groups; on the other hand, it may prove difficult to satisfy older and newer participants at the same time.

Having observed two women hesitantly wade through a gaggle of CCG players to reach a shelf of jigsaw puzzles, I asked STR2’s owner about the relationship between the core community of gamers and more casual customers. Although he believed the spectacle of in-store gaming events drew curious passersby into the shop, the rowdiness of the gamers—including occasional off-colour comments and personal-hygiene issues—sometimes interfered with business. Pressed to define the relative importance of these two publics, he struggled to choose between them:

Unfortunately, they both come first, which is a contradiction. So, in other words, customers come first because I need to make money in order to sell things. However the tournament comes first because I create an event for them to come in here and play, so I will have the tables for them, I will do those pairings, I will do all of that, too. [...] So, I know it’s a contradiction, but I do my best to do both.

This contradiction encapsulates the dilemma facing cultural intermediaries in relatively marginal cultural fields: Should they focus on the needs and desires of established and known audiences and consumers, or risk alienating them by seeking new ones? In this section, I want to explore two pairs of dispositions towards the fraught relationship
between nerd culture and the mainstream: (a) amateurism and professionalism and (b) introversion and extroversion.

Amateurism and Professionalism
In speaking of “amateurs” and “professionals,” I do not mean intermediaries’ occupational status (i.e., paid worker or volunteer); rather, I refer to two contrasting ethical dispositions. Amateurs talk about their motivations principally in terms of intrinsic, immaterial satisfactions. For example, STR5-p1 believes that his employees are over qualified for their jobs as comic-bookstore clerks, but, like many other intermediaries, chose their occupation because of their love of comics (or games or media texts or whatever) and accept the related opportunity costs. Indeed, a number of people made employment inquiries during participant-observation in STR5, and one of these prospective employees said working in a comic store was his “dream job.”

In ordinary use, “amateurish” implies inferior quality. This is not necessarily the case here, although altruistic love of a practice is sometimes used by organizers and participants to rationalize amateurish execution:

I do find that a couple of people might show up and complain about a certain level of professionalism with our ticket handling or whatever, but, really, we’re not hiring people. It’s just a group of friends who are doing this. So I don’t mind pissing a couple of strangers off as long as all my friends have a good time.

(ORG1-p1)

The two senses of amateurism collude so that claims of authenticity, grounded in altruistic love of the practice, justify keeping costs low and volunteer labour to a minimum. For example, ORG3-p1 made a distinction between conventions that have “heart” and those that are merely “corporate.” In contrast to corporate conventions, his shows were kept small, which simplified administration and allowed him to charge low rates. He also offered free admission for children and provided free exhibition space for local creators, arguing that
these policies are good for the local comics community and for comic-book culture as a whole. However, groups dominated by an ethic of amateurism also displayed a tendency towards cliquishness, as in the above quote where ORG1-p1 privileges his friends’ enjoyment over that of “strangers.”

There is much to value in this approach to facilitating subcultural practices, but however appealing amateurism and its enthusiast rhetoric may be, the everyday demands of running a store or group exert pressures towards an ethic of professionalism:

> Well, I guess a lot of people think it’s sort of a … quaint little business that people sit around and talk about comics all day. And, certainly, we talk about comics a lot around here and, certainly, comic stores are little businesses[...], but it’s a huge amount of work[...]. With so many titles coming out, to do the job properly is very labour-intensive. (STR5-p1)

Those I am calling professionals tended to de-emphasize the field’s specificity, appealing to more generic frames of reference, such as “small-business owner,” to describe their work. Professionals also made use of strategic planning to address vexing problems: ORG4’s president led an “appreciative inquiry” to develop a mission statement in hopes of reducing volunteer burnout, and ORG2 and STR5 both ensured that women had visible roles as officers and staff, respectively, in order to combat the perception of their practices as essentially masculine. Encouraging a long view, professionalization offers intermediaries more stability, but in re-framing subcultural institutions as generic organizations, it may also undermine their practices’ specific goods.

**Introversion and Extroversion**

While the previous pair of values described interviewees’ views of their own motivations, these keywords describe their strategic orientation to the mainstream. “Introverts” are indifferent or hostile to mainstream attention in favour of cultivating the existing community of practice. Explicitly rejecting the pursuit of more mainstream audiences,
ORG1-p1 best exemplified this orientation. Although he desired to share his interests with others—as evidenced by his involvement in founding both ORG1 and ORG4—he discussed this in terms of making “the weird, cool stuff that we do more viable,” rather than pursuing a broader audience. While one might expect retailers to welcome any expansion of their market, some, such as STR3-p1, shared the introvert orientation: Despite claiming that “comics are for everybody,” he did not believe advertising was a worthwhile investment “because people that are into comic books tend to seek them out. You know, it’s not something you really need to tell people about.” Introverts see subcultural activities as principally oriented towards pre-existing, stable, and relatively inextensible audiences. For these intermediaries, recruiting participants is a black box, and they have a limited role, if any, to play.

“Extroverts,” by contrast, embrace mainstream interest and may be willing to modify practices to do make them more attractive to those outside the subculture. For example, referring to more introverted retailers, STR4-p1 said, “I think it’s true that the hobby community is one where the hobbyists look for the stores and the stores can just sit there and wait […] but I still think it’s bullshit to sit on your laurels and just hope that that works for you.” From the extroverts’ point of view, the growth and development of their practices have been constrained by an exclusive focus on already initiated participants. If introverts are sectarians, extroverts are nerd culture’s evangelists. For example, ORG4-p1, who is also an independent game designer, was very critical of aspects of geek culture which, he believed, limit the appeal of RPGs:

I think if you market towards social awkwardness, you get the appearance of social awkwardness. To give a counter-example, [I published a game] and when I was making the product, I was like, “I’m going to make a gorgeous-looking product that when I tell sexy, intelligent women about it, they’ll really want to see it, and when I show it to them, they’ll really want to play it.” And so that was the goal, and when you create that goal, you see that result in the demographic.
Like, the people who I end up playing [it] with most often are sexy, intelligent women. It strikes me as strange that we don’t say, “Role-playing games: These are things that sexy, creative people do because they don’t like sitting around like couch potatoes.” Instead, we market them as, “This is stuff for couch potatoes.”

Similarly, STR2-p1 expressed concerned that players at his weekly board game night were unrepresentative of the “real” players of board games, mainstream consumers like families, schools, and church groups. Efforts to “re-brand” a practice (and thereby change the composition of the community) will obviously meet with varying degrees of success, but they will certainly exacerbate tensions between those participants who prefer the status quo and those who seek new audiences, whether out of economic self-interest or a genuine desire to share the hobbies and interests that they love with others.

These values and strategies chart a range of orientations to the relationship between nerd culture and the space of lifestyles in which it is situated. While all intermediaries have an interest in the reproduction of the practices they support and of nerd culture more generally, their conceptions of what will secure these interests vary. Extroverted professionals will produce very different spaces and events from those run by introverted amateurs. In this, we may find an echo of the struggles over the relative autonomy or heteronomy of the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1983, 319–26). Like those making up the literary field whose genesis Bourdieu analyzed, all agents in the field of nerd culture are involved in activities that push its borders one way or the other. Some of these efforts are explicit, strategic, and accessible to discursive consciousness but many of them are only implicated in practice.

19 Another example of negotiating the application of membership categories. See chap. 1.
CONCLUSION

Throughout my research, I have been deeply impressed by the vitality of nerd culture and the depth of enthusiasm and commitment displayed by participants at every level. One way to define a cultural scene is as an “overproductive signifying community” (Shank 1994, 122), and nerd culture certainly fits the bill. While much of its “effervescence” can be attributed to the activities of ordinary participants, we must also acknowledge those who work, whether for pay or not, to support these practices: To borrow a phrase from Obi-Wan Kenobi, the labour of cultural intermediaries surrounds, penetrates, and binds nerd culture together.

But beyond giving credit where credit is due, I have tried to develop an ethnographically informed account of how the work of these subcultural intermediaries is not only shaped by the context in which they are situated but also reproduces the scene so that its practices remain available to participants. Despite the fact that many of them do indeed work for pay, intermediaries are not simply economic agents, and their mediating labour may seem less like work and more like a calling. In a way, most of the intermediaries I studied have prepared for this role since childhood. Years of experience as participants prior to taking up their occupational roles have generated a frame of reference that they share with customers and group members, allowing them to make judgements of quality and to anticipate demand (albeit imperfectly). This feel for the game also shapes responses to changes in the field, such as the entrance of new participants at a time of mainstreaming or the translation of practices to digital environments. Bourdieusian field theory would predict that differently located agents, who thus have incompatible interests, will respond to these challenges differently. However, it would be a mistake to treat this in economically reductionist terms, for the lesson drawn from subcultural intermediaries is that personal,
affective identification with the field and love for its practices are part of what doing such work is all about.

On this view, then, mediation is not located “between” production and consumption; rather, production and mediation are both embedded in a culture without which they would be unintelligible. Scenes are loci of meaningful and meaning-making practices, and they require cultivation and support by cultural intermediaries, including organizing markets for the subculture’s equipment-goods, providing settings within which new participants acquire subcultural capital, and connecting participants to communicative networks. By the same token, the embedded character of cultural intermediaries’ experience and judgement means that they are also likely to reproduce the failings, blind spots, and prejudices that are also part of participants’ common-sense views of their activities. Nonetheless, when cultural intermediaries do their job well, they articulate communities into a cultural space where individuals can develop the goods internal to their practices and the human powers and excellences that they entail. In the next chapter, I turn to individual, “ordinary” participants in geeky cultural practices and examine the ways that they make use of the resources provided by the nerd-culture scene in order to construct their own experience of nerd culture.
4. Nerd Life: Participating in the Nerd-Culture Scene

The scene is set, and if this were merely a study of a particular corner of the cultural industries, I could perhaps stop having described the work of nerd culture’s institutions and intermediaries. However, I have argued for the priority of participants’ consummative practices, not only as objects of analysis in their own right but also as a necessary component of any adequate understanding of nerd culture as a subcultural field. As relational systems and assemblages of organizations, the field and scene have emergent properties, but it is from individual acts and habits, articulated together into cultural practices and interpreted by members, that they are recursively produced. Without accounting for real people and their real, everyday activities, our picture of nerd culture is missing a great deal. The scene is set; it’s time to bring out the players.

After completing my research with the group organizers and specialty retailers, I contacted them again to ask their help in locating typical and atypical participants in their activities. They opened up their address books to provide referrals or let me post flyers in their store. From the people who responded to my calls for participants, I recruited a group of six people who were willing to sit down with me and talk about their life. I’ll call them Barry, Diana, Mr. Fox, Shiera, Solo, and Wedge.¹ We met them already in chapter 1 when considering how people use words like nerd and geek. They were involved in a range of nerd-cultural practices, some of which I’d been able to cover in the earlier phase of fieldwork and some of which—like the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) or MMORPGs—were new to the study. Three were men (Barry, Mr. Fox, and Wedge) and three

¹ See Table 2 (p. 13) and Appendix A under “Phase 2: Subcultural Participants” (p. 296) for more information on the participants.
were women (Diana, Shiera, and Solo). Solo and Mr. Fox were single twentysomethings,
Diana and Wedge were both new parents in their mid-thirties, and Barry was a bachelor in
his early fifties. Shiera was close in age to the second cohort (three years older than Diana
and four older than Wedge); however, her three children were teenagers and so she was in
a quite different life stage than the thirtysomethings. It should be noted that none of them
had a “regular” / “nine to five” job: Barry was a self-employed consultant; Diana was a
small-business owner taking time off for maternity leave; Mr. Fox worked as a freelance
writer and half-time at an indie video-game developer; Shiera was on long-term disability;
Solo was a university student; and, although Wedge had a full-time job as a software project
manager, he worked from home two days a week and had a relatively high level of control
over his hours. This is probably an artefact of a certain selection bias in the recruitment
process, since people with more time or flexibility would be more likely to respond to the
call given the series of interview appointments that it entailed, but I don’t believe it is a
major factor distorting their understandings of nerd culture.

In this chapter, I want to show how these six people (and others like them) make their
way through the subcultural scene that I have described and use the resources it furnishes
to shape their own experiences of nerd culture and geek communities. Although I used the
same interview guide each time, the number of interviews per participant varied between
four and seven due to scheduling, number of nerdy activities, and conversational style.
These were generally an hour to an hour and a half in length, though some were
substantially longer. In every case but one (Mr. Fox), this also included a “home visit” where
we spoke about the organization of their collections in situ. I attempted to include a
participant-/passive-observation component in this phase as well, but due to scheduling
constraints this was only possible in some of the cases.
Over the course of the interviews, I felt as though I got to know them quite well—I hope I am not presuming too much to say that we became friends. I always looked forward to our “chats”—despite the knowledge that I would have to transcribe everything we talked about afterwards. I saw something of myself and my own experiences in each of them, for better or worse, but they all provided new, interesting perspectives on the issues that we discussed. Our conversations ranged from their childhood experiences to the present day and covered religious and political opinions, their own definitions and models of nerd culture, specific nerdy practices and interests, relationships with friends, and perceptions of change, *inter alia*. Due to this diversity, this chapter has proven the most difficult to write. Nevertheless, I have identified some themes from my transcripts and fieldnotes that seem to me of significance in explaining what it’s like to participate in nerd culture today.

**HABITS OF THE HEAD: A SUBCULTURAL HABITUS?**

With a sketch in hand of the field of nerd culture, it is perhaps worth considering the question of a corresponding nerdy habitus. *Habitus* (pl. *habitūs*) is one of the key concepts in Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical vocabulary. Along with *practice, field* and *capital*, it does a great deal of the explanatory heavy lifting in, for example, his accounts of the class-based and class-shaped nature of consumption choices (Bourdieu 1984). Indeed, it is arguably the keystone of his sociological project, which Loïc Wacquant describes as a “genetic structuralism” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 5). This perspective emphasizes the way social structure and individual acts grow out of the seeds of praxis. *Habitus*, then, is proffered as the missing link between structure and agency.

*Habitus* is a product of socialization. It is a set of mental and physical habits generated by the practical needs of one’s “conditions of existence,” especially those pertaining during childhood (Bourdieu 1984, 177). These dispositions regulate our perceptions of the
situations we encounter as well as the responses that we improvise to them. A habitus’s schemata are structured by our experience: “This means that inevitably inscribed within the dispositions of the habitus is the whole structure of the system of conditions, as it presents itself in the experience of a life-condition occupying a particular position within that structure” (172). Hence, Bourdieu says, “habitus is not only a structuring structure […] but also a structured structure”:

The habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions; it is a general, transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application—beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt—of the necessity inherent in the learning conditions. That is why an agent’s whole set of practices (or those of a whole set of agents produced by similar conditions) are both systematic, inasmuch as they are the product of the application of identical (or interchangeable) schemes, and systematically distinct from the practices constituting another lifestyle. (170)

As Swartz (2002, 62S) notes, Bourdieu’s “sociology of habit” emphasizes the meaningful (contra behaviourists), practical and reflexive (contra rational-choice theorists), and improvisational and generative (contra believers in law-like norms) character of social action. Indeed, Bourdieu’s argument is perhaps more similar to those of evolutionary psychologists than mainstream sociologists. Like the sociobiologists, Bourdieu draws attention to subjects’ fitness for their environment, except that the “environment of evolutionary adaptedness” for each individual or class is their immediate social and material conditions and not some imaginative reconstruction of the Pleistocene savannah.

What gives the habitus its real explanatory power, however, is that its dispositions don’t stay where they are generated. It is a “[system] of generative schemes applicable, by simple transfer, to the most varied areas of practice” (Bourdieu 1984, 170); people draw on the same repertoire of habits when responding to problems across different fields and as their material conditions change over time. When dispositions are transposed, they may prove adaptive or maladaptive to these new conditions, but the habitus nonetheless shines
through them all as the unifying principle behind the various acts of perceiving, classifying, and judging that we make in everyday life:

The habitus continually generates practical metaphors, that is to say, transfers ... or, more precisely, systematic transpositions required by the particular conditions in which the habitus is “put into practice”.... The practices of the same agent, and, more generally, the practices of all agents of the same class, owe the stylistic affinity which makes each of them a metaphor of any of the others to the fact that they are the products of transfers of the same schemes of action from one field to another. (173)

Identifying a specifically subcultural habitus is an ambitious goal. Participation in any subcultural scene or set of cultural practices seemingly pales in comparison to the structural determinants that Bourdieu suggests shape habitus: what is style or music, after all, compared to class trajectory and childhood material conditions? And yet, in examining the data I generated during my fieldwork and interviews, I began to recognize dispositions and attitudes that were widely shared among the interviewees. They may not constitute a habitus per se, but they may well be artefacts of habits and competences that are cultivated by nerd-culture practices. At the very least, they represent a distinctive, habitual way of interpreting their experience.

The April Fool’s Day 2012 edition of The Incomparable (Snell 2012), a pop-culture podcast featuring a rotating panel of tech-industry writers and hosted by Macworld editorial director Jason Snell, temporarily adopted a game show format. The panelists, divided into competing teams of “old(ish)” and “young(ish)” men, were subjected to trivia questions, bluffed one another with fake definitions like a sci-fi Balderdash, concocted plots incorporating a random assortment of movie and TV characters, tried to guess the responses of the panelists on a “parallel-universe” version of the show, debated resolutions, role-played as George Lucas to “fix” classic movies, produced illogical statements to stump “Star Trek android Jason,” and were forced to “defend the indefensible” (in each case, a statement tailored to the individual panelist’s known pet peeves in geekdom). That is to say,
this friendly competition amongst tech enthusiasts and SF fans required not only knowledge but also playfulness, wit, and the ability to jump through intellectual hoops, improvising arguments one may not believe in and developing elaborate, counterfactual scenarios. These are the kinds of distinctively nerdy dispositions that I want to explore in relation to interviewees’ views of schooling and education, their translation of various kinds of participation and pleasure into a vocabulary of “learning,” and the aesthetic standards that they deploy.

_The Ear’oles’ Tale: Schooling and Education_

In _Learning to Labour_ Paul Willis (1977) sets out to explain how it is that working-class boys remain working-class despite the best intentions of their teachers and guidance counsellors. He argues that the “lads” he studied “partially penetrate” the ideologies surrounding their conditions and chances of success. This insight, combined with the “cultural pattern” of working-class (masculine) identity, leads them to reject education as a life strategy—to act out, talk back, play hooky, avoid doing work, and so on. Their attitudes in the classroom and on the street prepare them—and make them eager—for life on the shop floor.

One thing always bothered me about this answer—or, rather, about this approach to the question. In a society where, we are told, social mobility is guaranteed through the provision of educational opportunities, it comes as no surprise that students who blow off school in favour of “having a laff” should thereby “[commit] themselves to a future of generalised labour” (Willis 1977, 100); I always wondered about the so-called “ear’oles,” working-class students who “invested something of their own identities in the formal aims of education and support of the school institution” and, consequently, were held in
contempt by the lads (13). Ear’oles, too, often ended up in working-class jobs, if slightly better ones (110–11, 148), but Willis has little to say about their situation. Like Willis, many of us focus on “problem students” and educational “crises”; this has perhaps distracted us from understanding the distinct experiences and perspectives of those who, whatever their class background, stay in school and get good grades. It is unacceptable simply to label them as mere dupes of the meritocratic ideology, for they themselves actively construct the meaning of education, in the classroom and in everyday life.

As mentioned in chapter 1, nerds are strongly associated with the peer cultures produced within the education system. Moreover, the intellectualism evidenced at every level of this study and the fact that people’s school years are also when they appear most likely to embark upon subcultural careers both suggest that nerds’ relationships with formal schooling warrants further examination. And so I asked several questions about school. Most interviewees had done post-secondary education, and two had graduate degrees—in fact, Barry was a professor of chemistry at a major Canadian university before becoming a consultant. However, attitudes concerning “education,” broadly conceived, prove even more important than the foregoing would suggest.

Interviewees almost unanimously rejected the “hierarchical” view of peer groups (Milner 2004), which they tended to associate with Hollywood movies and TV shows or with schools that are “elsewhere,” in different sorts of neighbourhoods, big cities or in the United

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3 According to the 2006 Canadian census, roughly 39% of Canadians have attained a high-school (or equivalent) diploma or less, while approximately 23% of Canadians hold a university degree at the bachelor’s level or higher (Statistics Canada 2008). Higher levels of educational attainment in my sample may suggest a greater degree of participation in postsecondary education amongst nerd-culture participants or simply random chance, but there is also probably a degree of selection bias involved, with those who understand and value academic research being more likely to respond and more willing to give of their time to building up human knowledge with no tangible rewards.
States. Some of the conventional labels for cliques and crowds—for example, *preppies, jocks,* and *nerds*—did enter their vocabulary; however, their significance as social boundaries within the school culture was usually downplayed. Extracurricular activities were also relatively insignificant. Interviewees participated in them to varying degrees, but they did not define their accounts of school. Indeed, many struggled to remember their extracurricular activities at all. Thus, it appears—at least retrospectively—that they did not construct school as a primarily social experience; rather, they viewed it as a site for acquiring knowledge.

When asked about their academic performance, most interviewees portrayed themselves as bright, hard-working students. In general, they liked school and had good experiences there (at least with respect to academics). They all described supportive and encouraging home situations. Some parents specifically valued formal academic achievement:

> My older sister and my younger sister and I are all intellectually precocious. We were expected to get good marks. We weren’t rewarded for it. We weren’t punished for getting bad ones. Basically, it was kind of a “we don’t care” neglect going on (laughs) from my mom. My dad was thrilled whenever he was involved, whenever we got a great report, he was, “I’m so proud of you guys, that’s awesome, that’s terrific.” He always supported the precocity. [...] Yeah, he rewarded us for that ... not in material ways, but in emotional ways definitely. (Shiera)

> I know when I was younger, when I had problems with spelling or fractions—damn those fractions!—the flash cards came out and I had to do flash cards. They always made sure I got my homework done, and if I brought home a B, there would be questions. It would be, “What’s wrong? You can do better.” So, yeah, I’d say they were more involved in that when my grades didn’t—like, as long as I got As, but if I didn’t get As, it was like, “What’s going on?” (Diana)

Others parents were less wedded to formal measures of success but nonetheless encouraged their children to pursue their interests and do well at whatever they set their mind to:

> Yeah, I don’t think that they put on any pressure at all. I think a lot of that came from probably my dad’s experience. He’s quite smart and went to university,
but was never ... never ashamed that he left university to go to a trade. And, because he worked as a plumber, that was always highly valued, as well. There was never a ... never a negative connotation to not going to school or at least, learning was always a positive thing but it didn’t have to be a school-based learning or anything like that. And as long as you did things that you enjoyed, there was no real pressure to, like, make money or you had to do well in order to advance yourself or anything like that. (Wedge)

They basically said, “You can choose what you want to do, just succeed. Don’t half-ass things.” Which is something my father actually said to me. Weird advice to give a sixteen-year-old. (Mr. Fox)

Solo was the one major exception to all this, describing herself as a “lazy” student. Today, as an undergraduate, she feels habituated to the education system, saying, “I think I’m used to school, and there’s ... pieces that I like, but [...] I’ve never been overly engaged in it.” Nevertheless, when asked what these “pieces” were, she affirmed a romantic view of education:

I like learning. I like knowing things. I like knowing that, in three months from now, I will know more than I know now. [...] Especially the last couple of years, just knowing more about the world and sort of getting a bigger perspective on what other people, you know like re-occurring things about our society and stuff like that? I like that sort of thing. That’s part of why I’m a history major.

This comment seems to me typical of the way my interviewees talked about what they valued about education—and also about their nerd-cultural practices. That is to say, there is a lay theory of education embedded in interviewees’ reminiscences about their school days, one that is widely shared amongst my interviewees and, through its transposition into the field of nerd culture, continues to inform their participation.

At the risk of vastly over simplifying debates amongst philosophers of education, we could describe this lay theory as a kind of romantic scholasticism. At its core, it embraces the intrinsic rewards of learning, as though there were nothing more pleasurable than splashing about in the vast ocean of human knowledge:

I learn stuff. I mean, now that we’re talking about myself as a scholar, I like finding out about new stuff. I like ... telling other people about stuff. (Barry)
Well, and that’s what—everybody’s like, “What are you going to do with that?” And I was like, knowledge for the sake of knowledge, right? (Diana)

Yeah, for sure, because those people are generally intellectual, they’re generally interested in delving into stuff for the sake of learning it. Like, hackers are just … hacking things because they like doing it. It’s not for any specific … purpose, right? (Wedge)

As curious, self-motivated learners, they represent the ideal subjects of Rousseauian—Progressive pedagogy. However, they reject the Progressive preference for the concrete over the rational and for “active” over “passive” learning (Egan 2002, 18, 19). Although their theory—particularly, its self-consciously autotelic posture—bears striking similarities to traditional, liberal-arts approaches, they by no means limit it to the disciplines most commonly associated with that educational philosophy. As I discussed in chapter 1, breadth of interest is a widely accepted good in itself—as Barry expressed particularly well on several occasions:

My interests are very broad. Holy smokes. And, again with my membership in the SCA, it extends into the humanities as well.

Well, I tried to be interested in everything. I figured if I was there I might as well get something out of it.

[Of his university days:] Yeah, not a lot of going out. Um. Mostly stuff having to do with the studies. Yeah. There’s a lot of papers to write—well, you know this stuff. Um. Mind you, the papers, I’d go all out on those. Practically books they were, some of them. Even on subjects that were kind of electives.

Even without the inducements of assignments and report cards, people like Barry and my other interviewees would be interested in the world around them and act on that interest by seeking new knowledge. Their beliefs about education are especially clear in

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4 One possible exception is Wedge, who described his favourite course—one on robotics he took at university—as being about “hands-on” learning, rather than having to write hated essays. However, he also mentioned exploring his interests in history and literature outside of the classroom setting, so it is doubtful he would reject all “book learning” as passive and useless.
descriptions of their favourite teachers. For example, Diana discussed how her undergraduate professors spurred her on to undertake graduate studies:

So, yeah, I had always intended to do a PhD, just because I loved it so much. I loved the learning. When you have really great teachers, you know, it’s just so fabulous[... As an undergraduate,] I had really great teachers who were really supportive and helpful and were really like, “What about this?” or, “Have you thought about this?” (Diana)

The “great” instructors were not those who explained things particularly clearly and certainly not those who gave easy assignments and exams; rather, they treated her as a scholar and encouraged her to think more—and more seriously—about her coursework. However, the teachers that seem most fondly remembered were those who recognized when intellectually precocious students were being constrained by the curriculum and who made accommodations so they could pursue their interests unfettered by their peers’ pace or formal requirements. I collected several accounts that fit this description:

[That] drove me crazy in elementary school. We studied the Egyptians, and we spent three weeks on the Egyptians. I’m like, “This is a culture with thousands of years of history, and we’re looking at mummies. I want to know about how they trained their chariot horses, I want to know how they farmed in the desert, I want to know about how you make papyrus—I don’t care about mummies! I care about every other aspect! I want to know what pigments they used on the paints that they put on the carvings that people didn’t even know were painted”—it was a recent discovery. So, it drove me mad that we had to move on. And my teacher, I had a great teacher in grade 6, she was like, “Great! We’re going to move on to something else, you can stay on this. You’re going to keep writing reports on whatever interests you.” And that was great, that self-directed, that kind of encouraged that aspect of myself. (Shiera)

MR. FOX: My elementary school teacher! She taught me to read because I learned how to read late ... She introduced me to actual, good children’s literature. And she’s like, “This is what you’re missing.” And I went, “Well, shit, I have to get on that.”

BMW: What sorts of things did she show you?
MR. FOX: Have you read the book The Giver?
BMW: Yeah, yeah.
MR. FOX: That. That kind of hit me like a punch in the gut. And I was like, “Wow. They write things like this for children?” She’s like, “Yeah. It’s pretty cool, right?” And I went, “Yes, it is. I want more of this.” Kind of set me on the road I’m going down right now.
Yeah, exactly, like ... I can remember in public school I had a great teacher for English, and so he’d give essay assignments and basically we came up with—and I hated them. I hate just writing an essay on something that I don’t care about. And he would let me write, like, creative writing, like write sci-fi stories or that sort of thing instead of—because he saw the benefit of um writing and you’re still doing all of the grammatical studies and that sort of stuff, but it doesn’t necessarily need to be focused on something that the teacher assigns. (Wedge)

Thus, somewhat ironically, the ”best” teachers were those who enabled their students’ self-directed learning—that is to say, who got out of the way. Most interviewees also discussed programs of self-teaching they undertook after completing their schooling. For example, Wedge described himself as an atheist suspicious of organized religion but interested in Buddhism and Taoism, which he learned about mostly from reading on his own. And Shiera audited some university courses in history and linguistics after high school, which she felt allowed her to pursue her interests just as well as students taking a degree program—perhaps better:

So, because of the areas that I ended up researching, I was just interested in, and I would read further—and further than most people who take courses in it would go. Because when you’re self-directing your own research, you can go as deep as you want.

To summarize, interviewees generally believe in the value of learning, understanding, solving intellectual problems, and “playing” with ideas—full stop. Schools, as institutions, ought to facilitate their education (they certainly shouldn’t hold them back), but they are only way-stations in a more general course of life-long learning and self-development. This is a far cry from our stereotypes of sullen teenagers who must be cajoled or coerced into learning what adults have determined they will need to know.

Psychological research on children and adolescents’ beliefs about education can provide some vocabulary for describing the lay theory emerging from these comments. Goal orientation theory suggests that there are at least two distinct and stable motivations on the part of students; these are referred to as ”mastery” and ”performance” orientations. The
former is oriented towards "developing competence"; the latter, towards "demonstrating competence" in front of others, regardless of actual understanding. (Kaplan and Maehr 2007, 142–43) In a series of studies, John G. Nicholls and his colleagues (Nicholls, Patashnick, and Nolen 1985; Nicholls et al. 1990; Nicholls 1992) measured students’ self-reported motivations and their beliefs about the purpose of schooling and the determinants of academic success, and the indices they developed enable us to distinguish analytically between different aspects of mastery and performance motivations that, in real life, are often mixed together.

Nicholls, Patashnick, and Nolen (1985) used the terms “Task Orientation” and “Ego and Social Orientation” to differentiate between mastery and performance motivations, respectively, and added “Avoidance of Work,” meaning the motivation to get by with as little effort as possible. In Nicholls et al.’s (1990, 115) study, Task Orientation items grouped into two distinct factors, one comprising statements about hard work and keeping busy (“Task Orientation I”), and the other, statements that emphasize the pleasures of solving problems and figuring things out (“Task Orientation II”). There are four groups of beliefs concerning the purpose of schooling: to enable students to get higher-paying jobs (“Wealth and Status”); to produce responsible citizens (“Commitment to Society”); to provide insight into how the world works (“Understanding the World”); and to provide future opportunities for self-fulfillment (“Achievement Motivation”). The latter three of these were more closely related to one another than the first was to any of them (1985, 685). Finally, they studied beliefs about the determinants of academic success, ranging between “trying hard” and “pleasing the teacher”:

Beliefs that school should foster responsibility, understanding, and achievement motivation ... were linked to beliefs in the efficacy of effort, interest, attempts to understand rather than memorize, and cooperative work. In short, what students think should happen and how they think things do happen were meaningfully related. As anticipated, the conceptions of the aims of education that give learning
a more integral role in the attainment of these aims were more related to beliefs in
the contributions to success of interest, effort, and attempts to understand. (688)

That these various measures are not randomly distributed but held in reliable and coherent
sets is what leads Nicholls (1992, 273–74) to speak of them as theories rather than merely
beliefs, values, or concepts. Drawing on this research, my interviewees’ educational theory
involves the personal goals associated with Task Orientation II and the belief that
understanding is a sufficient purpose for schooling. “Soft” versions of Ego and Social
Orientation, Commitment to Society, and Achievement Motivation are not inconsistent with
their remarks, but are less evident in them.

Many scholars have pointed out that schools do much more than teach reading, writing,
and arithmetic. Although details of the arguments vary, this idea has been powerfully
expressed as the education system’s “hidden curriculum,” the “tacit teaching to students of
norms, values, and dispositions that goes on simply by their living in and coping with the
institutional expectations and routines of schools day in and day out for a number of years”
(Apple 1990, 14). Through the lived experience of schooling, students learn habits and
expectations about life outcomes that ultimately fit the needs of capitalism and the interests
of dominant social groups. In Discipline and Punish, for example, Foucault (1995) names the
school as a core institution where the techniques of disciplinary power—“hierarchical
observation, normalizing judgement and their combination in a procedure that is specific to
it, the examination” (170)—were developed:

The organization of a serial space was one of the great technical mutations of
elementary education. It made it possible to supersede the traditional system (a
pupil working for a few minutes with the master, while the rest of the
heterogeneous group remained idle and unattended). By assigning individual
places it made possible the supervision of each individual and the simultaneous
work of all. It organized a new economy of the time of apprenticeship. It made the
educational space function like a learning machine, but also as a machine for
supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding. (147)
Today’s schools are very different from the eighteenth-century institutions Foucault discusses, and yet the techniques of “supervising, hierarchizing, [and] rewarding” are still part of their DNA, expressed in state-mandated curricula and standardized tests as much as in the physical surveillance and policing of students’ bodies. That is to say, learning to be an object of evaluation, to sit still in one’s place, to perform gradable actions, and so on, is the real lesson taught in every classroom. On this view, the mission of mass education is little more than a smokescreen for its true function as an “Ideological State Apparatus” (Althusser [1970] 1971, 137): The school exists to fit students to their social roles, and on this basis—as Willis’s lads well knew—Ego Orientation and Avoidance of Work are perfectly reasonable responses. But the hidden curriculum is not the only one, nor is it the “truth” of the education system in any straightforward way. Moreover, the interpretations of education offered on the surface are resources that may be appropriated by students to guide their own life projects, whatever may be intended by school administrators, teachers, or parents.

My interviewees’ romantic scholasticism embraces many of the education system’s legitimating ideologies but rejects its “disciplinary” functions. Indeed, the actions that so endeared particular teachers to them were, unsurprisingly, those that excepted them from the observation and judgement to which most of their peers were subject. Shiera, for example, was given permission to remove herself from the classroom (and the watchful eye of her teacher) as well as to study whatever she found interesting at her own pace, and Wedge’s licence to write sci-fi stories instead of essays meant that his work was incomparable with that of his peers. And, despite generally favourable views of education, formal schooling came in for criticism when heteronomous, social-sorting functions (e.g., the need to evaluate student performance, which these generally high-achieving students
DIANA: I loved school. Yeah, I did.
BMW: All the way through?
DIANA: Uh, right up to my master’s. I mean, I came into my master’s really excited and really gung-ho. [...] It was a Women’s Studies grad program, but they didn’t have any courses. It was like, take an undergrad course and write a longer paper. Well, that’s not grad work. I’m dealing with students—which is fine, there’s nothing wrong, but I’m at a different place in my education than they are and the level of discussion is just—you know, I wasn’t taking first-year courses but I could take second- and third-year courses, and I was like, “The conversation’s we’re having are not—I had those! Three years ago! Like, I want to be having more!” So, I found that really disillusioning and disheartening.

WEDGE: I think they were more hands off, but like I can’t really remember a time when my dad or mom would sit down and help me with math, but I have a feeling that that may have been more me. I tended to not do homework. I can remember even from an early age, once I understood something I never really saw the value in doing homework.
BMW: Like, in doing a page of repetitive exercises.
WEDGE: Exactly. In spite of, or especially when teachers would force you to do homework, I would tend not to do it. I would always do projects and those sorts of things, but I think maybe because I wasn’t at home, sitting there doing my homework on the kitchen table, I probably never had that interaction with my parents for that reason.

It’s a study contrasts because at the same time as living with a librarian at Cross-Town U, I was doing this self-directed research and knowing that this paper has never been written, this research has never been done, it’s not out there. It should be. This should be part of the historical record as far as the academic study of Irish history goes, but it’s not there. Why isn’t it there? Because we’re not freed to do the research into the areas that we are fascinated with, we’re bound by the methods and methodologies of academia. Unfortunately, in some cases. Because I think what you learn when you go to university is you learn, first, how to write for the professors, for the style. And then the next thing you learn is how to research, again for the style. It doesn’t really encourage free thought, and it doesn’t really encourage that kind of life-long self-directed learning. I think it’s the exception to the rule who pursues it beyond getting the piece of paper and says, “This is something that I’m passionate about and will be all my life, and I’m just going to go wherever it goes.” (Shiera)

This set of beliefs about education and learning strikes me as the single feature that most unites my interviewees. And it is unsurprising that this scholastic disposition—the valorization of intellectualism, precision, and both depth and breadth of expertise, all for
their own sake—would be brought to bear upon their enthusiasms and hobbies. As Barry put it when recollecting the first fan club meeting he attended, “I thought it was kind of a capsule of what fandom was about … they have their opinions and they kind of play with them.” Nerd culture serves as another intellectual playground for the scholastic disposition, but one that has no formally mandated curriculum or set exams, where people may follow their interests as they choose, free from the school’s functional role in society.

*The Invisible College: Participation as Learning*

In chapter 3, I discussed knowledge and trivia as a form of cultural capital particularly valued in the field of nerd culture. I experienced this first-hand when, again and again, interviews and conversations would be sidetracked by some tangential discussion, correcting an error or providing supplemental trivia. It was always important to my interviewees to be precise in matters of fact:

[When asked his age:] I was born on the eleventh of March, 1958. So, every day my age changes, but if you have that number you can always figure it out. (Barry)

MR. FOX: And to actually pose as a comic-book fan? You need to be a comic-book fan because people will be like, “Who was the main character of *Amazing Fantasy* 15—er, 17?” And you don’t know, do you? Exactly. You’d get outed fairly quickly. But Spider-Man. That’s when he was introduced.

BMW: I think it is 15, isn’t it?

MR. FOX: 17.

And when multiple people were involved, this could quite quickly take on a quasi-competitive dynamic, with everyone seemingly eager to demonstrate that they could contribute an interesting bit of trivia. Nor was I immune to this mania; when the opportunity arose, I gave as well as I got. But beyond swapping interesting facts and scoring

Ahem: The first appearance of Spider-Man was, in point of fact, *Amazing Fantasy* 15, which was the last issue of the series. The character next appeared the following year in *Amazing Spider-Man* 1. (Daniels 1991, 94–95, 97)
points by being proven right, the scholastic disposition can be seen in interviewees’
tendency to intellectualize their leisure activities. That is, they not only prided themselves
on their knowledge about the things they love but also framed participation itself in terms
of knowledge.

For example, my informants seemed to believe that reasonable discussion and appeals to
verifiable facts could overcome most problems or disagreements. In Barry’s view, even
irreconcilable differences could be recuperated as a learning experience or a teachable
moment:

Oh: I suppose I got some negative comments on some of the things that I did
one year in a science-fiction convention committee that … um that I overheard
that wasn’t very pleasant. But I guess I learned from that, too.

In the SCA—again, I’ll use that as the first example because it’s the first one that
comes to mind—there’s the people who show up at their first SCA event
dressed as a vampire or a bunny-fur barbarian … And the attitude of the SCA is,
“Okay, we’ll give them the opportunity to learn how it really was.” It’s a
teaching experience.

One consequence of this faith in triumphant reason is a suspicion of emotion, which could
be detected in many accounts I collected. Recall Mr. Fox distancing himself from the “bad
nerds” he called fanboys, calling them “fanatics” because “you can’t argue with [them]. You
can’t beat crazy with smart.” When someone feels something so strongly that they cannot be
persuaded by arguments, then we have reached the lunatic fringe. But even otherwise
reasonable people can let their emotions get the better of them:

Especially if-if let’s say things get emotional, then the original point can be
completely lost. So, if possible, I try and … if there was a particular point to start
with and that point has been not resolved but kind of forgotten, I try—and I
have something to contribute to that—I figure that’s a way that I can contribute.

In this quote, Barry sees a role for himself keeping the group (in this particular case, on a
mailing list) focused on the topic, lest they be led astray by controversy or offence. Tangents
offering interesting, if irrelevant, facts are judged by different standards than those spurred
on by someone’s emotional reactions. Of course, as paragons of objectivity, interviewees did
not except themselves from the critical gaze. When reflecting on their own actions, they too
tried to isolate emotional reactions and instead think clearly about how they ought to act:

And uh, yeah, that I do try to be objectively impartial as well because maybe the
other person is right after all, which I will not say ... outright. (Barry)

I need to be able to trust their opinion when I say, “Am I way off base?” and
they’ll say, ((laughs)) “Yes you are. You are reacting emotionally to something
that needs to be, you know, not emotional, so get your head out of your ass.”
And I need that, too. (Shiera)

But in talking of nerdy rationalism, I don’t mean to imply that they’re a bunch of Spocks and
Datas, repressing or even lacking emotion. Rather, “reason” is a normative ideal and
rhetorical frame for various modes of participation and forms of pleasure available through
their cultural practices.

Although most of my informants appealed to this frame, it is perhaps already plain that
Shiera and Barry did so most frequently and explicitly. For example, they discussed their
participation on fandom-related mailing lists in very similar terms:

I will try and reply to things that I think I can contribute to. I’ve got a few books
at home, and I know how to use the Internet. So, especially if I can say
something that will contribute as a matter of fact to help the discussion, and
instead of like just adding to the shouting, if that’s going on. (Barry)

Whenever there’s discussion on them, they land in my inbox. I read. I only reply
to: ... ... specific ... questions that someone may have asked regarding something
historical that happened that has to do with something I’m interested in. If
somebody says, “Hey, that battle that happened in 1580, what was that called?
The one in Ireland—?” “The Battle of Wicklow. I know all about that. Here you
go. Here’s the research, here’s the thing.” But I don’t send it to the list. I send it
to that person. I don’t talk on the list at all. I don’t want people to necessarily
know I’m reading what they’re saying. And I’m not a political animal anymore; I
don’t want to be involved. When people start going blah and blargh and rrr, I
don’t want to know. Just ... keep me out of it.

Barry is seeking conversation and discussion relevant to his interests while Shiera mostly
just wants to be informed of upcoming events, but for both of them participation involves
making a contribution, which is, by default, a contribution of knowledge, expertise, and the
resources that they access. However, this is about much more than just providing the odd bit of trivia. Their understanding of themselves as people engaged in collecting and re-distributing knowledge is central to how they go about their daily lives and provides categories for evaluating their experiences.

At one point in an interview, Shiera and I were joking about our stores of trivia and sesquipedalian vocabularies, and she said, “I’m the best *Trivial Pursuit* partner you’ll ever have. I read too much.” Her reading contributes to building up this base of knowledge. That she finds it pleasurable as well as useful suggests a blurring between leisure and edification. Indeed, as I reviewed transcripts of our conversations, *research* emerged as a significant keyword. On the one hand, doing research is a metonymy for a more significant process of deepening engagement:

> Every couple of weeks I’ll get the urge to do a little bit of research into historically accurate stuff, into the Irish history, and maybe do a bit of writing on that and do a little digging.

> [As a court bard in the SCA,] I ended up doing research into different, the way that court reports were written for different eras and different cultures.

> [On *Marvel Comics’ Thor:*] When I was a teenager, I loved Thor. It was awesome. And then I got more into the research and went, “There are so many really good Thor stories out there, why did they have to create their own mythos for him?”

That is, something Shiera is willing to research is something she deems worthy of her time, to the point that tucking in to do the research is itself an expression of care. This also seems like a legitimation strategy, as *research* carries positive connotations of seriousness and utility. Importantly, however, doing research is also (in her accounts) a substantively enjoyable, diverting, and engrossing activity. Although it has an instrumental, work-related function (e.g., doing background research related to a story she is writing), it is distinct from work:

> Sometimes, I’ll go researching while I’m working on something. Like, I need to know how does an airship dock and how do you get from the ground to the
airship, and I need to find that out and I’ll do some research. And often go over here because there’s a cool picture over here and oh, over there. So, like, the research is why I’m supposed to be online, but I’m over here and over there. I get the answer to my question and I go—now I have to go back to work. ((laughs))

On the other hand, research acts as evidence that someone takes the object of their attention seriously:

[On the website Oh Internet:] They research memes. They research and give historical precedence to trolls and the personalities and the types that you’re going to encounter on the internet. Fascinating overview, sociologically, but at the same time, it touches, it can lead you into different directions and different areas of research.

[About SCA fighters’ self-identification:] They tend not to use the word fencer. They don’t like the word fencer. They refer to themselves as um … duelist or rapierist. And a couple of them, you know, some of them have done the research into what their period term would be.

[On the local SCA bard community:] There isn’t … a bardic practice, there isn’t an open house, there isn’t—there’s a couple of people who do the same old same old same old and have for twenty-five years. There’s nobody doing current involvement, research, getting people into it.

[On trying to work out a game mechanic in Star Wars Galaxies:] We have community standards that aren’t necessarily talked about but are assumed. Like the woman who wasn’t doing the research the same way we were.

Again, we see the ideal of research being used to prove that a topic, whether internet memes or the bardic arts, is a legitimate object of connoisseurship, but here it reflects back on to these other “researchers,” as well. To say that someone has “done the research” is, thus, not only to say that they are prepared (i.e., “they’ve done their homework”) but also that they are “one of us” in their dedication to learning and to the empirical truths that many fans believe are the foundation of their leisure activities.

Barry, who was particularly devoted to the idea of science, also embodied these attitudes particularly well. For example, he described his novel-in-progress as “diamond hard science-fiction,” meaning that “all the science in it will be real, or at least plausible, fitting current, well, laws.” He maintains subscriptions to mailing lists, newsletters, and magazines.
related to science. And even in his Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) persona as “Dr. Mercurius, an alchemist of the year 1300,” he is primarily interested in exploring and showcasing the science and technology of the Middle Ages. Speaking of one of his SCA projects he said, “I thought that was pretty neat. I really like it when something works the way it’s supposed to. That’s a real thrill with science.” Given that he works as a consulting chemist, synthesizing and testing compounds in his basement apartment, this “professional” interest in science is hardly surprising, yet it also informs his perceptions of leisure and pleasure. For example, he draws a clear distinction within the category of television shows between “passive entertainment” and shows that engage their audience—and engage them intellectually—and this is what, in his view, stimulates fan activity:

I think there are many activities that are quite passive, which you … kind of, well, you’re talking about television. Many programs, just sit in front of the television and you laugh at the jokes and so on, and you don’t think about it afterwards. It’s not engaging. But compare that to a program, for instance, like Star Trek. The original Star Trek. That is something that really gets the nerve cells going, and had resulted in a huge fan activity and fan production of Star Trek stuff.

This is, further, only a particular case of his more general attitude towards science-fiction fandom. SF&F, he argues, is an intellectual gymnasium, keeping his imagination and general knowledge “in shape” so that they can eventually be put to more immediately practical ends; at one point, he even referred to reading SF&F as a form of “studying”:

Well, it’s a bit like … weightlifting … Weightlifting is a pretty useless activity, but it develops muscles that you can use for other things. And I’ve used science-fiction as kind of weightlifting for the imagination. ( ) and then you can apply your imagination to other, maybe more practical things. But also it’s recreational as well. If you—I guess, pretty much anything you get into, you start getting into it you know … and … it touches on so many things? and you learn so much from it, at least from the good stuff. (It’s) educational. And it applies stuff that you … might have learned in … elsewhere and don’t seem to get much use for in real life.

That’s something that you realize more and more when you’re studying any historical period. It’s something that I guess the best literature has as well, the
human condition. Even when you’re studying the inhuman condition in science-fiction.

Many would interpret this transformation of pleasurable reading into education as a rather bloodless form of “participation.” Common-sense distinctions between pleasure or emotion, on the one hand, and reason, on the other, might suggest that thinking this much is evidence that one is not having any fun. Yet, it would be exceedingly difficult to maintain such a claim in the face of a group of nerds making puns, quoting the Simpsons, or debating the finer points of comic-book canon, any of which could be described as both fun and intellectual.

When Barry animatedly depicts a scenario in his role-playing game, then discusses the application of the system's rules to a particular situation with the players, drawing on his knowledge of historical and scientific fact to inform the ruling, one cannot doubt that he in enjoying himself by intellectually engaging with the game.

This intellectualized framing of participation also has consequences for the ways they view subcultural institutions. For example, fans have studied whole fields of popular culture that were, for a long time, almost entirely neglected by academics. Fanzines, clubs, and conventions have been important venues for exchanging the results of this research, just as scholarly journals, learned societies, and conferences are for traditional intellectuals. Barry, who has worked as a researcher and professor, drew particular attention to this dimension of fannish institutions:

There are ... there’re panels, entire panels that are given at science-fiction conventions as to what is the difference between science-fiction and fantasy.

I suppose that there’s also the effects that the stories are trying to produce. Horror ... uh thrilling adventure ... romance, there is such a thing as science-fiction romance ... ah overall, though, it kind of infuses all of these with a kind of a sense of wonder, (that’s what it’s) called. Again, there are panels on “sense of wonder,” panels on everything at science-fiction conventions.

Yeah, and also there are people that are literally scholars, okay? So they might be interested in conventions but actual conferences on stuff. So members of the
Mythopoeic Society—I subscribe to their journal, *Mythlore*, which is a refereed journal about Tolkien, Lewis, and Inklings, okay?

But it was most evident among the medieval re-creationists of the Society for Creative Anachronism, which Shiera described as “a venue unlike any other for the sharing of information, the sharing of knowledge, the learning of new things, and the understanding of people.” Wedge, a former SCA member, still held the Society in high esteem, explaining that only a small proportion “aren’t very, very smart, like aren’t really into history or that sort of thing. And very driven, very … very creative, as well. Like, in tonnes of different areas like fashion, writing, et cetera, et cetera.” Among their many activities, the SCAdians hold workshops on the history and crafts of the Middle Ages. They’ve even gone so far as to organize “universities” as guarantors of the facilitators’ expertise. As a result of this “very solid scholarly foundation,” Barry claims that “people will go to long-time members of the SCA to find out more about um about the real Middle Ages. Some of them are actual … professorial positions as well as their hobby, it goes that far.” From Barry, this is high praise indeed.

*De Gustibus Disputandum Est: Aesthetic Standards*

Despite the popular wisdom that there’s no accounting for taste, research on consumption and everyday experience both testify that people are perfectly willing to dispute aesthetics. Statements about taste are more than arbitrary personal preference—they always evoke lay theories and criteria and are correlated with social position and background. The scholastic disposition I am trying to track also plays a role in the aesthetic judgements participants

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6 Despite her generally positive view of the SCA and its members, Shiera was suspicious of much of the “scholarship” that circulated within the Society, dismissing it as “hearsay” and “tertiary or worse in terms of documentation.” In doing so, she constructs herself as a judge with access to better knowledge, but the accuracy of either version of the historical record does not diminish the cultural importance of the *idea* of facticity for both true believers and critics.
render. According to Bourdieu (1984, 360), the “new petite bourgeoisie” of 1960s France showed a distinctive attitude towards low culture:

Their ambivalent relationship with the educational system, inducing a sense of complicity with every form of symbolic defiance, inclines them to welcome all the forms of culture which are, provisionally at least, on the (lower) boundaries of legitimate culture—jazz, cinema, strip cartoons,7 science fiction...—as a challenge to legitimate culture; but they often bring into these regions disdained by the educational establishment an erudite, even “academic” disposition which is inspired by a clear intention of rehabilitation, the cultural equivalent of the restoration strategies which define their occupational project.

The comparison is not quite on all fours, as this rebelliousness is not a significant feature of my interviewees’ accounts of their taste and consummative practices, but insofar as they are invested in the intellectual enterprise of education for its own sake rather than its capacity to qualify them for particular (and particularly remunerative) occupations, it is not inapt. Similarly, Douglas Holt ([1998] 2000) has noted that consumers possessing low levels of cultural capital (“LCCs”) tend to evaluate cultural texts in terms of correspondence to their lived experience and consumption goods in terms of pragmatic criteria or simply personal preference. Those with high levels of cultural capital (“HCCs”), by contrast, enthusiastically improvise sophisticated analyses that borrow the language of professional critics:

Applying a highly nuanced, often idiosyncratic approach to understand, evaluate, and appreciate consumption objects, connoisseurs accentuate aspects of the consumption object that are ignored by other consumers. ... This stylistic practice necessitates the development of finely grained vocabularies to tease out ever more detailed nuances within a category, the expression of opinionated and often eclectic evaluations of alternatives, and the ability to engage in passionate appreciation of consumption objects meeting one’s calculus of “quality” within a category. All HCCs have at least one category for which they have developed the

7 Although North American readers probably picture newspaper comic strips, what Richard Nice translates as “strip cartoons” is presumably bandes dessinées, the generic French term for comics. Despite the name, the hardcover “album,” introduced for Hergé’s Aventures de Tintin, is the standard publishing format for French and Belgian comics (Screech 2005, 50).
requisite knowledge and interest of a connoisseur and many have several such categories. (241)

Whether they would be considered LCCs or HCCs in a society-wide ranking,\(^8\) the nerds and geeks I interviewed had clearly internalized an ethic and aesthetic of connoisseurship that approximates, to greater and lesser degrees, “academic” principles of criticism. Like Bourdieu’s new petite bourgeoisie, they apply these attitudes to unconsecrated forms of popular culture, perhaps believing that treating them in a sufficiently scholarly manner will legitimate them. But, as Shiera forcefully suggests, producing criticism about the objects of their connoisseurship is also a good internal to consummative practices:

That’s one the things I love about our fandoms is that we can go see a movie and see two different movies! And then talk about it afterwards! And that’s the fun for me of seeing a movie, is not the movie itself, it’s talking about it afterwards, it’s hashing it out—thinking about it dispassionately or emotionally or however … you want to, but critiquing it, even though we didn’t have anything to do with the making of it and our opinions are our opinions and worth whatever they’re worth, which isn’t much.

These acts of criticism draw on a vocabulary of evaluative categories, a shared universe of aesthetic possibles. When asked to articulate what they like and dislike about cultural texts or to give examples of some ways they might talk about them with friends, interviewees frequently mentioned interesting premises or ideas, the immersiveness of fictional worlds, and the technical proficiency with which a work was executed. Each of these criteria can be understood as an expression of rationalism, and they were often articulated in those terms. For example, the premise of a narrative (whether in comic-book, prose, or audiovisual form) was usually referred to as an “idea”:

\(^8\) Given their educational attainments, I suspect they would fare reasonably well, but they come from a variety of social origins and their investments in mass and popular culture would tend to undermine claims for high levels of general cultural capital according to conventional measures.
DIANA: I didn’t actually like it, but it was an interesting concept, and the idea of steampunk zombies was kind of cool. It’s like two great ideas that go great together.

BMW: “You got your steampunk in my zombies!”

DIANA: Yeah, exactly. So, say with that, I would recommend that just because ... it wasn’t great, but it was an interesting idea, you know, and whether she in the end did it well? I think doesn’t matter because the idea was neat.

As the idea is fleshed out into a narrative, it becomes important that the story follow rules that produce an experience of verisimilitude, however fanciful. Several interviewees objected, in particular, to cases where sloppy depictions of scientific fact (“I hate it when I see the science is wrong, glaringly wrong in a movie or a book and the creators don’t even care,” Barry). They stretch credulity to the breaking point, pulling them out of their immediate experience of the narrative:

I watched all three Aliens movies, and that was enough for me. That was enough of having the shit scared out of me by a giant exoskeleton, which by the way is physically impossible—it’s bad science. And that’s one of the reasons I’m reading natural history essays ((laughs)) is because there’s stuff in the worlds that we write about or that we read that we go, “Oh, that’s so creepy! Giant bugs!” Yeah, you know what, can’t exist. Can’t happen. Impossible to ... on our world ... they would be crushed under their own weight of that exoskeleton. It can’t exist at that size. Oh, good to know. So, are we writing about other worlds where it is possible, in which case what has to happen with gravity and if that’s affecting just—you have to look at the whole picture, the whole ecology of a lower gravity ... with higher, you know, whatever oxygenation levels to allow them to grow to that size. (Shiera)

To borrow the tagline from Richard Donner’s Superman, “you’ll believe a man can fly,” but not if his cape doesn’t flap correctly while he’s doing it. Finally, interviewees often raised the technical proficiency with which the object in question was executed as an important basis for their judgements:

DIANA: Um ... sometimes the special effects, like if it’s just poorly shot? You know, poorly done.

BMW: Are good effects something that attract you? Or is just when they are done really badly that you notice?

DIANA: I notice both. Good effects don’t make a movie, but bad effects can ruin a movie.
I’d start off with writing. I’d be like, “This has solid writing, really creative or authoritative about what the comic was about.” That kind of thing. (Mr. Fox)

In cases where all of three features are not present—presumably, the majority—we can see how they are weighed against one another to make a final judgement about the ultimate quality of a given work. For example, Diana described how she still derived enjoyment from books she considered to be poorly executed but had a good premise:

The friend that I was talking about earlier, she’ll often pass on books that aren’t great. Like, the writing might not be great or the characters might not be great, but the idea that the author’s trying to play with is a good idea, is one that she really liked, so that, you know, if it’s a good idea or it has a really good—I want to say “hook,” but even if it doesn’t work, even if the idea is, I don’t like the way that they’ve done it, but if it’s like, “Oh, this! If they’d just done this,” or you know, “This is a great idea but they did it wrong.” Something that you can wrap your head around, that doesn’t just go in one ear and out the other, but it’s like, it makes you think.

As she explains it, these criteria are in service of a larger goal: namely, that entertainment should provide an opportunity for thinking, whether about the text itself, in relation to a generic tradition, or using it to reflect on the world or the human condition. Setting the manifest content of their aesthetic standards aside, there are also two features of the way that they hand down judgements that merit further attention.

Creativity and Creator Orientation
In that last quote from Diana, she describes a novel saying, “This is a great idea but they did it wrong.” I find this a very telling statement, in that it not only expresses a subjective opinion that the book isn’t (all that) good but also suggests that she has at least an inkling of how it could be made better. The pleasure that she derives from reading a book like that, then, is the pleasure of re-writing it, at least in her imagination.

Many participants displayed a similar “creator orientation” in their cultural consumption. That is, despite popular portrayals of fans as voracious—and even pathological (Jenson 1992)—consumers, the nerds and geeks I talked to often worked out their aesthetic
opinions by imaginatively taking on the role of the creator and using this viewpoint to separate laudable, tolerable, and execrable works. In complimenting the novels of Gene Wolfe, for example, it was not enough for Barry to say that he liked them. Instead, he called Wolfe “a writer’s writer” and “a favourite of many other science-fiction authors.” Herbert Gans ([1974] 1999) argues that the creators and users of every kind of art have distinct orientations to culture. However, he reserved creator-oriented consumption for the audiences of high culture:

High culture is creator-oriented and its aesthetics and its principles of criticism are based on this orientation…. The popular arts are, on the whole, user-oriented and exist to satisfy audience values and wishes. (76)

In contrast to this generalization, participants in nerd culture distinguish themselves by applying typically “high-culture” dispositions to popular culture such as SF&F novels or board games. As a public, they adopt a creator orientation and principles of criticism that follow from it.

Although it grows out of the criteria discussed above—most especially, desires for consistent and immersive narrative worlds and for technical competence—this is not merely a judgement about a work’s aesthetic worth but relies on imagining cultural production as an attainable role and existing producers as quasi-peers. The close articulation of cultural industries with their fandoms in nerd culture is partly responsible for this attitude. It is easy to imagine yourself in the position of the cultural producer when so many of them were once fans “just like” you:

I think one of the things about the creativity feeding off itself is, in your literary fiction circles, you’re read by a much smaller audience, the criteria is very different and very rigorous, it’s scholastic criteria, but um a good story is a good story. [...] When you’ve got a broad audience but you have no way to connect with them other than through the fandom, that means that ... a fan has a personal connection that they’ve seen, heard read at an event and-and ... it equates, it-it levels the field. They go, “I could be that. He’s just a fan who wrote stories, I could be ...” So, it-it—I think the fact that science fiction and fantasy are marketed through face-to-face with the author also encourages
the wannabes in the field, in the-in the genre. [...] I don’t think there’s a parallel in any other genre of fiction. There’s starting to be now because of the success of marketing to your-to your fanbase directly. So, there are now romance conventions and there are now ... um historical fiction conventions and-and-and that sort of thing but it’s—I think fantasy and science fiction started it. (Shiera)

Spaces of fandom are often also spaces occupied by creators, and in these relatively marginal fields of cultural production there is much less perceived social distance between them and “us.” And as Shiera notes, publishers, studios, and increasingly entrepreneurial cultural workers’ economic imperative to cultivate audiences has produced more opportunities for these subcultural quasi-celebrities to engage their publics, whether face-to-face at a convention appearance or on Facebook or Twitter. This not only helps audience members to conceptualize a future vocation as cultural producers but also enriches present consumption practices:

BARRY: I was glad to have met some of the ... some of the authors that I enjoyed[....] Face-to-face encounters with some of these authors are sort of special experiences.

BMW: What does that mean to you? What does that feel like to meet someone whose work you admire?

BARRY: It tells me that these are real people who wrote this thing, and it’s kind of inspiring ... to an aspiring author that this can be done, okay. Um. It just kind of adds a dimension to uh to what is ... basically, initially, a two-dimensional experience—flat, flat ink on flat paper or flat pixels on a flat screen. Maybe more 3D now with the glasses, but I think you know what I mean. And uh it kind of grounds it in real life as well. It’s uh—science fiction and fantasy is an outgrowth of the whole human experience [and] there have been various [...] works that have moved me in various ways um ... that I think have shaped my life[....]

When I asked further about connections between nerd culture and their creative practices, most informants affirmed a belief that nerds and geeks are generally creative people. Diana, Mr. Fox, and Wedge argued that the creativity evident amongst nerds derives from their individualism. Somewhat ironically, they appropriated the negative view of other mass-culture audiences, viewing “geekdom” as an iconoclastic culture in which individuals can express their authentic selves in whatever form is most meaningful to them:
I think that... geekdom can be very creative[...]. I think the whole point of
geekdom is to be what you are, is to allow you to explore, is to allow you to be
... you know? in a way that other parts of society don’t allow you to be? So, I
think that it fosters creativity and it encourages creative people, you know?
Particularly things like D&D and, you know, like, even like superhero and comic
books, like it just—like, I remember Steve telling me about the people re-
envisioning, well, video games. Where they’re creating, like, the video game is
out and people are hacking it and making new levels. And, you know, Steve was
all excited about it. And I was like, “Well, duh, that’s what fandom is. What have
I been studying? What do you think my whole master’s thesis was on?” Was,
you know, hacking, just with popular culture, but I think it encourages that idea
of... something’s put out there, but that’s not the final product. It can be
worked with. (Diana)

I have no idea what the relationship is, but there are a bunch of creative people
who happen to be nerds. Uh I think it’s uh... a freedom to express yourself.
You’re not, you know, you’re not—your friends look at you and they’re like, and
you say, “Oh, I have this idea for a thing,” another one goes, “Oh, let’s hear
about that because I have an idea I’d like to share as well.” There’s an...
openness within nerd culture or you know within nerd groups of friends where
you’re allowed to just go off on ridiculous tangents about creative stuff, and
your friends are like, “That sounds cool. That sounds awesome.” It’s a
reinforcement of the individual, as opposed in most... cultures where... that
isn’t really a thing that exists. Like uh you have two lawyers? and one of them
wants to talk about GI Joe, that is not a conversation that is going anywhere... be
cause the one guy is just like, “I’m thirty-seven. What the hell are you talking
about, man?” You know. Things like that. Whereas, in nerd culture, there’s that...
... uh there’s still that childishness, I guess. It’s openness to creativity. (Mr. Fox)

I think that’s probably a very hhh similar base line for kind of everyone in geek
culture is... um it’s a way to express their individuality, even though it’s... sort
of... if you look at it as a whole, it’s a lot of people doing the same thing, but in
that, there’s a lot of individuality, of comics you like or games you like or that
sort of thing. [...] I think uh... like, probably... a l-lot of my friends who are
artists or: very heavily influenced by art or that sort of thing, they were all like
that. Very into geek culture and... i-if you look at it, at least from my point of
view, the people who are producing that are the same way. Those were the
people producing... cartoons and um... they’re artists, they’re very creative
people and uh or you look at video games or that sort of thing. People go into
video games, the same sort of thing, you get these very creative people, which
you have to be in order to come up with these stories or these images or
these—all that-all that media that comes out. There’s so much... difference.
(Wedge)

In addition to this widely held lay theory that individual genius is the wellspring of
creativity and innovation, interviewees also frequently spoke of creative aspirations and
projects as developing more prosaically and organically out of routine acts of consumption
and criticism. Once they have begun to view the world through the eyes of a cultural
producer, they do not stop at making aesthetic pronouncements from that point of view. It
is quite easy, as Barry says, to move from imaginatively inhabiting cultural texts to writing
one’s own: “If you’re a fan of science-fiction, you might start by reading everything that’s
ever been written, and then you proceed to writing your fan-fiction or, you know, your own
stuff.” For example, Wedge and Mr. Fox both discussed filling in the backstories of their RPG
characters in order to enrich their gaming experiences, but creativity originating in
consumption need not end there. First, the habits and competencies developed by
consuming one form or medium in a creator-oriented way can be transferred to other forms
and media. For example, as a prose and video-game writer, Mr. Fox feels like he has some
additional insight and appreciation of the writing of webcomics:

MR. FOX: Basically, if it’s good writing and passable art, I’ll read it ... Or, if it’s good art and
passable writing. I lean more towards better writing. I’m a writer myself.
BMW: Yeah, it seems like you have an interest in the craft, as well, in the technical
level of how writers are accomplishing
MR. FOX: Yes. That’s what’s more important to me. That’s what I do ... That’s one thing I
actually don’t like about being a writer is, everyone thinks they can write, too.
And, no, no you can’t. I’m sorry. I practise. And I practise and work at writing
every day.

Second, a great deal of this creative energy is invested around (i.e., in other kinds of creative
output or in social interaction and conversation) rather than in the texts or media that
originally inspire it:

SOLO: I mean, when I was young, like a kid kid, I use to make models, like Hogwarts
models.
BMW: Like out of clay or what?
SOLO: Yeah. And games, like board games? I made a couple board games that were
Harry Potter board games. You had to, like, collect house points and stuff.

I used to read a lot of ... I used to read a lot of fan-fic. And I used to ... do a lot of
... I used to have parties? Like Buffy parties where, like, everybody had to play a
specific role, or it was sort of like tag, except everybody was vampires and one
person was the Slayer. Or, we’d have ... You know, it probably could have almost
been cosplay—I mean, no, it wasn’t ... because we weren’t that serious about it.
It would just be like, we’re gonna have—it would be somebody’s birthday party,
this is like Grade 6 or 7, and then one person was designated to be the Slayer
and one person was designated to be the Watcher, and then everybody else
was a vampire, and it was mostly dressing up, playing hide and seek, or
something? Maybe a little immature for twelve-year-olds, but ... yeah. (Solo)

Nowadays ... we don’t really do anything. We just sort of talk about it, like the
good ol’ days. But I do think, and it is starting to feed back, people are starting to ...
realize with the accessibility of media-making tools that they’re not
constrained to ... by what’s out there, they can make their own. They go, “That
Star Wars sucked. I could make a better movie. In fact, I will. Using my Star Wars
figurines. And I will turn it into a fifteen-minute show. A fifteen-minute Robot
Chicken, you know.” ((laughs)) (Shiera)

Although a tradition of cultural criticism has judged consumption negatively in light of
binary oppositions between passivity and activity or triviality and seriousness, it has
generally made exceptions for the creator-oriented consumption of high-culture publics: A
comic by Jack Kirby, Joe Kubert, or Gil Kane is suitable only for the culturally illiterate, but
Roy Lichtenstein’s copies of their drawings are Art.9 We give these publics the benefit of the
doubt, presuming that they are engaging with culture at a deeper, more thoughtful level
than consumers of popular culture. And yet audience studies, including my own interviews,
routinely show that at least some audience members are deeply engaged by the most
“banal” or “trivial” of entertainment. Indeed, the connoisseurship and criticism that are part
of consummative practices take those audience members well beyond mere engrossment in
a narrative. My informants interpret their consumption of SF&F literature, games, comics,

9 David Barsalou maintains a gallery attempting to identify Lichtenstein’s comic-book originals
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/deconstructing-roy-lichtenstein/>. On the one hand, criticism of
Lichtenstein by comics fans for not—at the very least—crediting his source material is one point of
cleavage between the scholar’s “citational” ethic and attitudes associated with fine art. On the
other, arguments against un-credited swipes and appropriating imagery from other artists show
that fans are oriented to the creators of commercial art and their economic realities, and they need
not mimic precisely the attitudes of high-art audiences.
and film and television as an opportunity for sophisticated aesthetic appreciation—and even as a kind of creativity:

I think ... science fiction and fantasy are ... genres of imagination. They’re genres of breaking the rules of real life, and so ... the stories aren’t about people who are um ... they might be ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, but that requires them to be creative in some way or another. It’s inspiring to read how someone can come up with an unusual solution to a hard problem. (Shiera)

It is notable that the majority of my interviewees were not just active, creative audience members but actually aspiring professionals. Barry was working on a science-fiction novel and had submitted some short stories to fiction magazines, Shiera had multiple writing and blogging projects on the go, and Solo wanted to work in the media and cultural industries after completing her university degree program. (And, as mentioned above, Mr. Fox already works as a freelance writer as well as writing video games.) So they not only tried to imagine how works might have been created differently but frequently projected themselves into the relevant creative industries, as well:

Felicia Day, I’m a huge fan of hers. I followed The Guild from the first episode on. I stumbled across it and adore it. [...] I would love to meet her. I think she’d be a really fascinating person to work with. (Shiera)

BARRY: When she [J. K. Rowling] goes around, she gets a lot of questions about—besides the books—about how she wrote them and yeah. There’s always people interested in getting into the field who have questions about the secrets. BMW: “Where do you get your ideas? How do I get an agent?”

BARRY: (laughs) I’ve learned enough not to ask that first question. But that second sort of question, yeah, that’s quite relevant.

The scholastic disposition is here translated into terms of avocation or professionalism. Even if they never “break into” the ranks of professional creators, this orientation to craft and technique legitimates their consumption choices and provides a personally meaningful way of appropriating culture. However, this posture can at times function as a source of distinction from “recreational” writers (Barry) and “wannabes” (Shiera), from those who “are definitely not artists” (Solo), and from “naïve” or “entitled” fans and gamers (Mr. Fox)—
that is, from others who, by comparison, don’t take their cultural participation seriously.

Furthermore, the creator orientation provides a foundation for making ethical claims about how audiences and fans ought to act. In these comments, interviewees use potential or imagined impact on the creator as the basis of their judgements about, for example, obligations to support creators, the ethics of downloading and of fan fiction, and even unacceptable, groupie-like fan behaviour:

Well, it’s stealing. I mean, if someone downloaded a story I wrote off the internet or a game I made and played it for free, I’d be like, “That’s kind of a dick move! I worked really hard on that.” Or, at least, as hard as someone who does my job for a living works. I deserve, you know, recompense for that! (Mr. Fox)

BARRY: So, what I like to do with series is I like to … because you know especially with fantasy and stuff you have like a volume that comes out every year—

BMW: If you’re lucky.

BARRY: If you’re lucky. So you read that and it leaves you hanging? and the next installment isn’t due for a year, so a long time ago I decided I’ll wait till the series is over ((laughs)) and then read them all together. Now, you can’t—if everybody did that, the author would not be able to survive and the business would not be able to survive. ((laughs)) Other people are keeping it in business, but um … You still need people like me that even after the series is finished are still buying the books.

BMW: Did you ever get into fan-fic?

SOLO: Not really. I never wrote any. I used to read it a lot when I was like just discovering the internet, the wonderful things on the internet. But then it was mostly Buffy fan-fiction. It wasn’t Harry Potter. I always felt a little bit, like, pissed off at the people that decided that they could take somebody else’s character and make it do whatever they wanted. That’s not fair. Like, I don’t know why it bothered me more with Harry Potter more than with anybody else. I guess maybe because I felt like TV shows had more writers anyways; this was like hers.

Like, the girls that went to—ugh, there were these two girls that went to England? for the premiere. Not to watch the movie, just to get signed by J.K. Rowling, and they got autographed and then they tattooed them. They got it tattooed to them. And I was like, “What is that?” What does that do to you as an author? Like, I would be like, “So … what are you going to do with this? No.” Oy. (Solo)

Although they interpret them differently, these consumers’ orientation towards creativity has normative implications for their practices. Most obviously, identifying with creators
affects those moments when fans interact with them, whether directly or through economic relationships. However, just because certain situations (and interview questions) call forth creator-oriented responses, we ought not to view this as the only orientation shaping their consumption choices. Not all participants are necessarily as attuned to the creative labour behind their consumption objects, nor should it be imagined that consumers oriented to the idea of creativity necessarily regard actually existing creators over the fruits of their labour. Solo, for example, semi-facetiously quipped that some of her friends are comic-book fans only because “they’re easier to read than books,” and she herself, like many fans of “mainstream” comics, identified with and followed characters more enthusiastically than writers or artists. Although their aesthetic discourses are shot through with references to creativity and creators, consumers’ identification with cultural producers is partial because their view of the field of cultural production is only ever a partial one.

Quality as a Quality

When called upon to adjudicate differences between niches and groups within nerd culture, interviewees often demurred in favour of a pluralistic ethic of “different strokes for different folks.” But when they were asked instead to render a judgement on some particular cultural text—or did so spontaneously—they were more likely to speak as though its quality (or lack thereof) were a positive fact, plainly available to any unbiased

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10 C.f. Stevens and Bell’s (2012) study of comics fans’ beliefs about intellectual property. Selection bias accounts for the number of pro-downloading comments in the sample but not for the greater variety of pro-downloading arguments. They identify six frames in favour of downloading and two opposed. I would argue that two of these are creator-oriented (one pro and one con), four are user-oriented (all pro), and two fall outside this framework, drawing on moral or legal arguments.

11 This was a significant contrast from observed comments about other niches and sub-groups within nerd culture, as reported in chap. 3, under “Mapping Nerd Culture,” p. 127.
observer. This second feature of their aesthetic discourse is by no means unique to nerd
culture, as I. A. Richards, for example, noted in his 1924 *Principles of Literary Criticism*:

> The belief that there is such a quality or attribute, namely Beauty, which attaches
to the things which we rightly call beautiful, is probably inevitable for all reflective
persons at a certain stage of their mental development.

> Even among those who have escaped from this delusion and are well aware that
we continually talk as though things possess qualities, when what we ought to say
is that they cause effects in us of one kind or another, the fallacy of “projecting” the
effect and making it a quality of its cause tends to recur. (Quoted in Fish 1980, 52–
53)

A. J. Ayer (1952, 113) would point to this as another instance of mistaking concepts that
“express certain feelings and evoke a certain response” for factually meaningful ones:

> It follows ... that there is no sense in attributing objective validity to aesthetic
judgements, and no possibility of arguing about questions of value in aesthetics,
but only about questions of fact. A scientific treatment of aesthetics would show us
what in general were the causes of aesthetic feeling, why various societies
produced and admired the works of art they did, why taste varies as it does within
a given society, and so forth. And these are ordinary psychological or sociological
questions.

Bourdieu (1984) has taken up this sociological project of documenting the projection and
repression of subjective aesthetic judgements. The “aesthetic disposition,” which he defines
as “a generalized capacity to neutralize ordinary urgencies and to bracket off practical ends”
in favour of aesthetic experience (54), is distinct from the intellectualism I am trying to
isolate—nerds seem less concerned with the “stylization of life” (55; after Weber) than with
its rationalization—but the latter draws on the same ideology of “natural taste” Bourdieu
described.

Ironically, treating emotional responses as if they were empirical qualities obscures the
actual operation of reason as a faculty of judgement. It erases individuals’ role in producing
evaluations and the collective work of canon formation. Indeed, it lends nerdy rationalism
an air of *post-hoc* rationalization, much like the supposedly pure, disinterested judgement of
the “aristocracy of culture” when held up to Bourdieu’s social critique. The naturalization of
their aesthetic choices is apparent, first, in the way that simple, un-nuanced terms like “good” and “bad” were often informants’ first recourse when describing texts:

The word good comes to mind. Very general ... very useful word. ((laughs)) I-I guess I would use—well, what would attract me would be things like uh ... strong plots, few loopholes, few holes ... which can really offend me. (Barry)

I would say it’s bad. Just to start off, to start off with. “I don’t think it’s very good because ... it’s written like Twilight, or the art looks ... unrefined or juvenile.” Things like that. (Mr. Fox)

As interviewees expanded their descriptions, there could be no doubt that they applied in the first and the final instance, not to their own aesthetic responses but to the object:

I would probably just say it was really, really bad. Or, I really didn’t like it or I thought it was really poorly delivered or ... that sort of stuff. I’ve been known to be like, “That character would never do that.” And my friends are like, “How do you know what that character would do?” I’m like, “He just never would do that.” (Solo)

Phenomenologically and epistemologically, of course, this is perfectly valid—aesthetic responses are functions of one’s experience or perception of the object, which simply is what it is. But one should think that reason’s role would be to question these perceptual “givens,” rather than to mask them in the language of objectivity. Occasionally, interviewees would qualify their claims as arbitrary or individual judgements:

I don’t go to [video game news and review website] IGN cause IGN sucks balls. That’s just a personal opinion of course ... don’t mean it literally ... (Mr. Fox)

SOLO: Collins is new but awesome.
BMW: Yeah, The Hunger Games.
SOLO: I think everybody should read them. They’re fucking amazing. Or, I thought they were pretty good.

However, a slippery slope leads from these judgements to statements of absolute, ontological substance: There is a fine line between “it seems to me” and “it is.” For example, Barry said he likes works that are “complete” stories. This is obviously a subjective preference—the mass audience for Hollywood films has a healthy appetite for sequels, prequels and re-imaginings, and SF&F literature thrives on epics by installment—but he
frames his classification of films into “complete” or “incomplete” works as if it were a falsifiable (or even verified) claim:

Well, take the first Terminator movie. [...] That was a complete film in itself. It stands on its own. The sequels actually didn’t add to the first one. They even kind of removed some of its ... power, so ... on the other hand—well, okay. Also, take the Star Wars movie, the first one that appeared ... chronologically. Okay? So-called episode four[...] That stood (very) well all by itself. The sequels, at least the first couple of sequels, they added to it and they did fill out the universe a bit more, so that’s a good thing. Um. It’s when the sequels are not worthy of the original. Maybe I’d better stop here as far as Star Wars goes.

These descriptions are all formulated as simple statements of fact. Declarative sentences in the indicative mood (like these) describe reality rather than offering hypothetical or arguable claims. Yet there certainly was a level of civility in the way Barry raised and explained his judgements.

By contrast, Mr. Fox and Solo were the most frequent and confident producers of claims to aesthetic correctness, which in their hands often (though not always; see above) became challenges to their interlocutor. Although more systematic research is required to verify this, it seems reasonable that the two youngest of the six interviewees, who both came of age during the height of the “geek chic” / “triumph of the nerds” discourse, would be much more at ease making bold statements of taste than someone like Barry, who has perhaps more thoroughly internalized the experience of encountering indifference or incomprehension when discussing his tastes with others. They happily contradicted my judgements and those of their friends and acquaintances, asserting theirs as superior descriptions and choices. If ever aesthetic judgements have masked the will to power, they certainly were in extracts like these:

BMW: I’m more of a DC guy.
MR. FOX: Oh, blasphemer! Enjoy your reboot of everything. Yeah, that’s going to be stupid as hell.

It’d be like, “Oh, it has sluggish controls. Driving cars feels like ... you know, you’re throwing a wheelbarrow down the street. It’s terrible.” Things like that,
or, “The story is hackneyed and clichéd”—every Final Fantasy! Yeah, I said that. They are. They are hackneyed, clichéd, and terrible. “Hey, you’re a spiky-haired guy with a weird sword! You’re our protagonist. You probably have amnesia!” Fuck, I hate that. (Mr. Fox)

I have a friend who’s sort of—he’s not super into comics; he’s kind of into comics because his older brother was, and he’s borrowed things from me before—and it was that Justice League of America run where Green Lantern and Green Arrow leave, and they’re like, “Batman’s dead and we’re gonna go take care of business,” and they leave? And I remember reading the first issue of that and I was like, “This is fucking amazing. It is so good.” And then he read it and was like, “Yeah, that is exactly how you want Green Lantern and Green Arrow to behave.” And I’m like, “I know!” So that was how that conversation went, so there it was very character-focused. But it was just really satisfying because … to see characters be true to themselves, maybe? is nice, is really nice. It’s refreshing. (Solo)

Well, that’s my problem with Game of Thrones, was that I think the dialogue’s shit. Like, and I’ve only seen two episodes. I know the whole plot because I just ask people because, yeah, as much as I want to know the plot—that’s fine—but watching it, like I’ll watch it now, and I won’t really care that I know the plot, but I really hope the dialogue picks up. One of my friends was like, ((goofy voice)) “Game of Thrones is like The Wire for fantasy.” And I was like, “That’s bullshit. That’s not even—like, are you? No. Just sit in the corner.” ((laughs)) (Solo)

These comments are obviously hyperbolic. But in exaggerating for rhetorical force, they also quite definitively stake their claim for the basis of aesthetic judgement. It is no longer the case that an educated sensibility and appropriate attention can elevate any object of study; now, quality resides in the object itself, and all it takes is for you to open your eyes, listen to reason, and admit that they’re right.

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What is a nerd? As we saw in part I, the question is more complex than it first seems. Any attempt to define nerd culture—including my own—is necessarily involved in the social world it is claiming to describe objectively. For this reason, I have tried my best to side-step internal debates about the essence of geekiness. And yet in this section I have isolated a set of dispositions and attitudes from my interview transcripts that seem distinctive of nerd culture.
Far from making an ontological claim, I want to suggest that this “habitus” is initially given by their experiences of the education system. My interviewees were students who generally accommodated themselves to the demands of formal schooling, came to think of themselves as gifted or intellectually precocious, and adopted a theory of education that stresses the autotelic value of learning. But these attitudes are cultivated and nurtured by their consummative practices, in much the way Bourdieu (1984, 28) describes here:

Such competence is not necessarily acquired by means of the “scholastic” labours in which some “cinephiles” or “jazz-freaks” indulge (e.g., transcribing film credits onto catalogue cards). Most often it results from the unintentional learning made possible by a disposition acquired through domestic or scholastic inculcation of legitimate culture. This transposable disposition, armed with a set of perceptual and evaluative schemes that are available for general application, inclines its owner towards other cultural experiences and enables him to perceive, classify and memorize them differently. Where some only see “a Western starring Burt Lancaster,” others discover “an early John Sturges” or “the latest Sam Peckinpah.” In identifying what is worthy of being seen and the right way to see it, they are aided by their whole social group (which guides and reminds them with its “Have you seen...?” and “You must see ...”) and by the whole corporation of critics mandated by the group to produce legitimate classifications and discourse necessarily accompanying any artistic enjoyment worthy of the name.

The community of practice itself stands in for the “corporation of critics” that produce “legitimate classifications and discourse,” initiating new practitioners into more or less sophisticated forms of connoisseurship and criticism, which require the ability to make fine-grained distinctions. Thus, attitudes “acquired through domestic or scholastic inculcation” are given a new arena. The imaginative consumption they engage in is subsequently expressed in academic styles and vocabularies, leading participants to understand their participation in intellectualized ways. Their scholastic disposition, by privileging particular categories and responses, thus makes available some ways of being and discourages others.

This is undoubtedly not the only way of being a nerd, but it is a widely shared and well-articulated interpretation of what it means to participate in nerd culture. Its categories are seemingly second nature to my interviewees, who drew on them habitually and reflexively.
when explaining their opinions and activities. As a frame for their experiences and judgements, this disposition is a ubiquitous feature of nerdy discourse; once recognized, it can be detected in virtually every aspect of their accounts of nerd life.

**LEISURE CAREERS**

In chapter 3, I introduced the idea of a subcultural career to describe cultural intermediaries’ paths through the field of nerd culture. This idea applies just as much to those participants who never seek paid employment or positions of leadership in subcultural institutions as it does to the professional geeks. In everyday speech, a career is simply a path from one position or role (usually occupational) to another. However, we should remember that, like trajectory—or path, for that matter—career, too, is a “ballistic” metaphor of sorts, with archaic meanings such as a race course or the full-speed gallop of a horse (OED). As a verb, it still means to move swiftly—often on the verge of uncontrollability.

Recall, too, that a sense of movement is inscribed in the concept of a field. John Levi Martin, for example, suggests that a field can be considered “a set of organized vectors” (2011, 271). That is to say, a social system may be conceptualized as a field if it has “field effects” that can be described in terms of position and movement. On this view, agents enter a field, which is already in a particular state of play, with a trajectory determined by their previous life experience and the capital they have thus far accumulated. They certainly make choices, but what they are able to accomplish (or even to aim for) is a product of the capital they possess and dynamic relations internal to the field.

So let’s begin our consideration of leisure careers in nerd culture by examining how my informants first got involved in their nerdy practices. After that, I shall discuss their deepening engagements and the ultimate durability or decline of their fandoms. This is not
a fully field-theoretic account, as my study involved qualitative rather than quantitative methods; however, in understanding how individuals conceptualize their paths through the field, both retrospectively and prospectively, we can better understand the possibilities participation offers, as well its potential costs.

**Year One: Recruitment Accounts**

**BMW:** Okay, so having had this interest in superheroes, Grade 12 you get into comics. Can you tell me a bit about what that was like, what that process was?

**SOLO:** I met a boy who was a fan from when he was a little kid, so ... It probably started a little bit earlier. Like, I was interested in it, and then I met him and he was really interested in it. [...] Yeah, I don’t know, I met a boy and we bonded over this mutual sort of nerd connection (perhaps), and then he got ... It was like, because I was new at it and he’d stopped for a while, and then I was really interested and it like brought him back into it. [...] So, that’s probably when I started buying graphic novels. Er, and I started off buying trades because I was like, “I don’t need to buy individual issues. I find that kind of ridiculous. I just want to know the story; I don’t need to make money later.” And then I started going to comic cons because of ORG3-p1, who was my teacher, so that connection was there. And there it’s mostly trades—er, it’s mostly floppies, so I bought some ... sets.

**BMW:** Sort of bundles that the dealers put together?

**SOLO:** And then, for some reason, I just went on this crazy—I think I read *Identity Crisis* in a hardcover, I had a hardcover of *Identity Crisis*, like the DC ... And then I got, I went on this mission to find 52 in back issues, so I got all the 52s, and then that led into needing to have, like, *Final Crisis*, and then that led into needing to have *Blackest Night*.

When talking with interviewees about specific practices they have pursued, I asked how they first became involved or what their earliest memories of the practice in question are.

Solo’s explanation of how she got into comics is in many ways typical of the “recruitment accounts” I collected. Asking people for *post hoc* accounts is always a tricky business.

Interviewees frequently fell back on conventions like “I was always interested in that” or, to

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12 Bourdieu’s approach calls for the field to be constructed statistically and has a particular affinity for the techniques of Geometric Data Analysis (see Le Roux and Rouanet 2010). However, Beaty (2007), for example, has productively drawn on his work on the field of cultural production to inform an interview study.
quote Diana, “I can’t remember ever not reading science fiction and fantasy.” Locating the source of nerdy interests is made even more difficult by the fact that themes and imagery derived from science fiction, fantasy, and superheroes absolutely saturate children’s media culture, and so the precise moment when isolated acts of consumption are integrated into a consummative practice, when a viewer or reader becomes a fan, is hard to pin down. More recently acquired interests and activities depend on tastes and dispositions formed in earlier practices, and so in most cases ultimately recede into the mists of personal history. Searching for a variable or causal mechanism that can predict participation in nerd culture is a mug’s game. However, two common features of these accounts—both of which can be seen in Solo’s narrative of becoming a comic-book fan—can help us understand how people are initiated into the practices of nerd culture.

These Are the People in Your Nerd-bourhood: Significant Others
First, no matter when they started the practice in question—in childhood, as a teenager, in university, or six months ago—recruitment accounts are dominated by other people. When interviewees explain how they got involved in a cultural practice, they tell stories that feature significant others as their main characters. Although the real origins of Solo’s comics fandom precede the seemingly chance encounter with “a boy” (“It probably started a little bit earlier. Like, I was interested in it, and then I met him and he was really interested in it.”), her story begins with a person and a “mutual sort of nerd connection”: It doesn’t get any simpler than boy meets girl, and Solo’s involvement in comic-book fandom is narrated as though it follows from this relationship. Indeed, we see that it works in both directions,
as Solo is the “other practitioner” for this boy, and encouraging her interest in comics draws him back into the hobby.

I collected many accounts that followed this pattern. Friends, friends of friends, siblings, and parents feature prominently in them. Often, these people are simply eager to share their tastes with others; sometimes, they have more pragmatic motives, as with Solo and STR4-p2’s mothers, who created a *Harry Potter* and comic book fan, respectively, out of their concern to find material their children would be willing to read. Diana’s versions—and especially her stories of her father’s role in her interest in science fiction—are particularly notable:

**BMW:** Can you remember your … what’s the earliest memory you have of engaging with the science-fiction and fantasy genres?

**DIANA:** ((laughs)) My dad loved *Dune* … just loved it and pushed it on me and pushed it on me and pushed it on me and forced me to read it. And I hated every page. *Dune* and *The Hobbit*, every … like, he sat down and read it to me. So, I don’t know how old I would be, but the age when you’d still be reading to your kid at night, he sat down, and I hated every single page of *The Hobbit* and the same with *Dune*, every single page of *Dune*. That’s my first, earliest interaction. You’d think that would turn me off, but it didn’t.

Like I said, my dad was a fan, so he … he never again was so blatant about reading a book, but he was directing me. He was like, “Here, try this, try this. Why don’t you try this? This is a good author.” You know, that kind of thing.

Movies, yes, because my dad was a science-fiction fan, so I remember lining up for … *Return of the Jedi*—yeah, that’s the third one—yeah, I remember lining up for that with my dad. Like, we were the first people in line when it came out.

These stories stick out because Diana returned to them when asked about particularly meaningful or significant experiences having to do with her science-fiction fandom: “Just all through, reading science fiction with my dad, you know, that was important. That’s important to me.” Thus, despite her initial resistance to the SF&F fare proffered by her father (and belying her claim, above, to not remember a time before she read SF&F), the shared practice of reading science-fiction novels enriched their relationship in subjectively significant ways.
Indeed, this way of accounting for the genesis of leisure interests is so common and habitual that Barry twice inserts hypothetical others into his story of joining his first science-fiction fan club as a teenager, having happened upon a poster in a library:

I’m trying to remember if I knew somebody? in it or ... probably it was a poster in a library. I hung around libraries a lot, and I know that they were publicizing there. So::: and that was a society that was specifically devoted to science fiction and fantasy ... Before that, it was ... a really solitary activity, I mean, reading comics—okay, yeah, comics you talk about, trade them with your friends and talk about them ... a little bit ... yeah but uh ... as far as science-fiction or fandom culture I guess that was my first exposure to fandom culture, and a science-fiction society is ... fandom culture, capital “c.”

But whereas Diana’s case shows how the introduction of nerd-cultural practices like SF fandom or gaming can be used to strengthen and enrich existing relationships with significant others, Barry used the field of nerd culture as a means to seek out and establish relationships. He reported using this strategic use of nerdy practices to join communities and social networks again, such as his decision to look into the SCA when he moved to the city, and that the majority of his social interactions within nerd culture were facilitated by groups and organizations such as the SCA, a Tolkien fan society, and so on.

The tendency to “socialize” their recruitment is notable for two reasons. One, despite prevailing cultural norms privileging the performance of individualism and authenticity, interviewees do not hesitate to name others as the source of something that is treated as an important part of their own identity. To borrow a phrase from Bloom (1973), we might say that they show no “anxiety of influence” whatsoever. Two, there is an obvious affinity between this way of talking about their recruitment to nerd-cultural practices and their

14 With respect to conversational performance of subcultural authenticity, see Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995) and Locke (2011). For a more general overview, see Lindholm (2008) or Potter (2010).
more general understanding that shared tastes lay the foundation for shared experiences and, thus, a kind of community.

Theories of consumption, including theories of postmodern/post-subcultural identities, often seem to elevate the individual and his or her pleasures and projects to the position of both prime mover and final cause. Whether framed positively or negatively, these scholars tend to focus on hedonistic consumption—the cheerleaders point to the subjective experiences of agency produced by the thrill of shopping (e.g., Fiske 1989; Twitchell [1999] 2000) while the critics lament the trivial nature of these acts, which are anathema to the cerebral and ascetic dispositions that they, as members of the dominated fraction of the dominant class, hold (Bourdieu 1984). However, as Daniel Miller (1998) has noted, the majority of consumption is not hedonistic but oriented to provisioning our and our loved ones’ basic needs; in most cases, then, consumption is also a channel through which we express care for and confirm our relationships with the people who matter most to us. The accounts I collected suggest that cultural practices are similarly Janus-faced: Certainly, they are oriented to individual rewards and pleasures, but they are also always oriented to significant others. That they are “other directed” does not seem to in any way reduce their felt authenticity or integrity.

Games Were Played: Passive Voices

The second feature of recruitment accounts is that they are typically narrated in a “passive voice.” I don’t mean this quite literally, in terms of grammatically passive constructions; rather, interviewees present themselves as passive objects, acted upon by processes they can’t necessarily describe or explain, with the result that they ended up where they ended up, doing what they do. We saw this above when Solo said that “for some reason” she fell into reading and buying, first, the DC Comics cross-over event Identity Crisis and then its
successors 52, Final Crisis, and Blackest Night. She twice describes the chain of events with the construction, “that led into needing to have x.” Her local comic shop closed shortly thereafter, curtailing her participation, but it’s quite easy to see how this chain could continue indefinitely, drawing her deeper and deeper into comic-book culture: After Blackest Night she would have “needed” Brightest Day and then Flashpoint, which would have led into September 2011’s line-wide relaunch, the so-called New 52. As she recounts the events, at least, they were entirely out of her control.

To put it another way, these accounts—like passive sentences—seem to lack an active subject. Instead, impersonal processes work themselves out through their lives. Take, for example, these extracts in which Mr. Fox discusses how he became a comics fan, Barry talks about joining the SCA, and Diana explains how she got back into RPGs after a decades-long absence from the hobby:

**BMW:** What is your earliest memory of comics?

**MR. FOX:** Yes. I was … shit … seven, eight? and in the hospital with a broken leg … Um, yeah, bought a couple issues of Spider-Man in the hospital gift shop. Needed something to do to kill the time. […] I read them for a couple months after that, and then dropped out for a couple years. And then I ended up in the hospital again at fourteen.

**BMW:** Okay. I’m sensing a theme here …

**MR. FOX:** Yeah, yeah, boredom combined with immobility combined with they’re in the shop right there. Anyway, the point is, I was in the hospital. This time, I was in for longer? so I ended up collecting a few issues and then just kept going.

Around 2005, I checked them out, and I think turned up at the chatelaine’s place. In those days, the chatelaine had an orientation session in her house[....] And then right away went to a camping event. (Barry)

A friend of mine was looking to make more friends. She was like, “I don’t have enough friends. Like, I don’t do enough stuff. I like” I don’t know she was like, “I like Dungeons & Dragons.” So, I guess she went to a convention, like a D&D gaming con kind of thing with the intent of finding some people to play with kind of thing. So, she met ORG1-p1 and mentioned to us that she was doing this,

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15 For more on declining participation, see below, p. 195.
and [Steve] was like, “I used to play D&D!” And I was like, “Well, I played D&D” ((laughs)) you know? And [Steve] painted minis and was quite involved when he was young, so he was like, “I wouldn’t mind getting back into that.” And I was like, “Okay, sounds like fun. Sounds like something to do.” So, we ... [my friend] was like, “Well, ORG1-p1 is starting up this girl group, why don’t you join it?” So, we just kind of started from there. Yeah, started playing there and just kind of went on from there. (Diana)

In these quotations, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the conditions or situation in which their interest was sparked, but their own active agency is given a limited role, if any. The most generous reading of the accounts might suggest that the situation had qualities (or “affordances,” in the field-theoretic vocabulary [Martin 2011, 246]) that called out for a response from them. In the first part of Mr. Fox’s story, that comics were bought is explained as a function of a “need,” despite no pre-existing history of comics reading, and then in the second part, it seems like random chance that he “ended up” collecting comics “and then just kept going.” This last phrase echoes Diana’s wording: “Yeah, started playing there and just kind of went on from there.” Like Barry’s account, Diana skips from the initial point of contact to full-fledged participation. As narrated here, there is no reflection or point of decision; in these particular examples, the speakers do not even mention liking the things they identify as launching their leisure careers. Rather, they are simply part of an unfolding chain of events. Stories of how they got started are constructed as accounts of external processes initiated by other people, but there is no sense of alienation present in them. That their recruitment was not under their control is not treated as a problematic or even a remarkable feature of the narratives fitting this pattern.

These two features don’t quite add up. If the recruitment process is a means of establishing or enriching relationships with significant others, then it cannot truly be an impersonal process. And yet these ways of narrating their careers as practitioners appear cheek-by-jowl in the accounts I collected. Because they distance the true subjects from their actions, both could be understood as another way for speakers to normalize themselves and
minimize opportunities for negative inferences to be made about them. But, in weaving narratives that involve people who are important to them and processes that extend through time, they are also expressing an intuitive, *a priori* understanding that engaging with nerd culture involved them in something bigger and more complex than individual preferences and tastes.

*If You Love it So Much, Why Don’t You Marry It?: Engagement*

I want to evoke two different ways we use the word *engaged*. On the one hand, it describes active participation in something—as Barry says, some TV shows are “quite passive” while others, like *Star Trek*, are “engaging.” On the other hand, it implies commitment, as in an appointment (e.g., “a dinner engagement”) or, at another level, a wedding engagement. In leisure careers, these two senses often go hand in hand. As with the concept of “serious leisure” discussed in chapter 2, this is as much about quality—for example, emotional investment—as sheer quantity, whether measured in terms of time or financial resources devoted to the practice. Which sense of engagement comes first is rather like sorting out the problem of the chicken and the egg, and the paradox only strengthens the sense that depth of commitment and richness of participation are intimately woven together in my informants’ accounts.

Given their life circumstances and the differing demands and temporalities of the practices themselves, interviewees described a wide range of levels of engagement. At one extreme, Barry spent several hours a day consuming SF&F literature and media or working on his novel, travelled to SCA events most weekends in the summertime, and towards the end of the data collection period began GMing a weekly RPG session; Diana read SF&F and watched movies for an estimated eight to ten hours a week, played in a weekly D&D campaign, and logged into *World of Warcraft* nearly every spare minute that her infant
daughter was sleeping; Wedge played in two weekly RPG campaigns and a monthly
miniatures game that requires a fair amount of maintenance between playing sessions; and
Shiera joked that she “lived” at the computer, playing Star Wars Galaxies and helping
administer a “professional” community in that MMORPG, which involved monitoring
problems and liaising with developers to address them, for many hours every day. At the
other, a number of practices were more or less dormant, reduced to, for example, a taste for
comic books (Solo) or miniatures games (Mr. Fox) that was now only rarely indulged.
However, even where active engagement had waned, interviewees frequently professed a
sense of identity and affiliation with the dormant activity.

Once initiated into practice, a practitioner’s identity qua practitioner exerts a determining
influence—in Williams’s ([1980] 2001, 153) sense of “setting limits” and “exerting
pressures”—on his or her next steps. This is not an instance of constraint so much as of
particular positions or roles making some “moves” seem more obvious and natural than
others. A field is a “space of possibles,” after all (Bourdieu 1996, 168). Wedge provides a
good example of how a series of engagements with different practices and groups can be
smoothed out retrospectively into a relatively straightforward, linear narrative.

I played my first role-playing game in ... some time around 1982 or ’81, I think.
[...] It was my dad’s best friend who introduced me. He came over and had his
D&D books and wanted to show my dad, and so then he ran a game for my dad,
my mom, my sister, and me, and then he gave me all his books when he left.

BMW: Could you talk a bit more about umm some early memories associated—like, do
you remember how you started getting involved with those genres of
entertainment?

WEDGE: Um. Well, I ... um:: I’m just trying to think um I know ... probably a lot of it came
from ... um playing D&D, I would guess, just ... because I got interested in that
sort of thing, it’s hard to tell ... like ((laughs)) how early on I was watching what
shows and that kind of thing. ‘Cause I can remember that time period when I
grew up ... there was a fair number of like fantasy:: movies and like ...
Dragonslayer and uh Beast Master[...]

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Umm… well I think really, really it was… I’m sure it was D&D, really. When I started playing D&D, I don’t—that was pretty early on—so I don’t think I would have been reading Lord of the Rings or The Hobbit or something like that before that, but I think by playing D&D then I started looking for that kind of stuff.

We have a Celtic festival in my hometown, so somebody who was a member of the SCA in Toronto had come out, who was from our hometown, and he had like fights with kids with like foam swords, so that’s how we got interested in it. So, I was already interested in the fighting, but I was always interested in that historical period through role-playing.

Such narratives are sometimes portrayed as a matter of random chance, but there is a strong tendency in the accounts to erase contingency and instead present them as basically inevitable. As Wedge thinks back to his initiation into each practice, the causal chain regresses back to playing D&D. As with the recruitment accounts discussed above or the (lack of) recruiting strategies among “introvert” cultural intermediaries (chap. 3), people I spoke with often portrayed career paths as natural or organic developments from their initial interest or encounter with the practice rather than a series of decisions or actions. Because they experienced it—or at least recollect it—as a more or less unproblematic process of getting from there to here, they recast it as a generic psychological process:

Well, I think it’s natural in any human activity that um you start by consuming… in education, you start by being a student, and then eventually uh you… get the um the desire to start giving back and to actually… teaching the stuff or going into it yourself. If you’re a fan of science-fiction, you might start by reading everything that’s ever been written. And then you proceed to writing your fan-fiction or, you know, your own stuff. So, I think there’s nothing special about… fandom in that. It would be the same with everything else. (Barry)

It… just kinda… kept going. Uh. You know, gradual increase in interest, same as with… games and comics. You start out with, you know, watching regular stuff and you’re like, “I have an interest in this that I’m going to pursue,” so you just naturally get more into it. (Mr. Fox)

As in Wedge’s case, deepening engagement with one practice often leads people into some level of involvement with others, whether they are understood as directly related or are simply part of the milieu they find themselves in. For example, Barry often recalled the science-fiction fandom of his youth, which he described as being quite interdisciplinary at
the time (the 1970s). The main fan club in his area embraced not only SF&F literature but also other nerdy pursuits, and their annual convention was a “general convention,” meaning that it “included all of that stuff, comics, movies, games.” Since then, however, there has been a proliferation of more specialized clubs in that scene: “the Doctor Who Society, the Star Trek group that I mentioned, and the comic collectors, and so on, a whole galaxy of different aspects with common roots but their own interests and their own vocabulary and everything.” Sometimes these combinations can be quite idiosyncratic, as in the case of the small-town comic-book and hobby shop Mr. Fox describes:

MR. FOX: I bought my first rocket there.
BMW: At the comic shop?
MR. FOX: You know the little model rockets? Man, those are fun.
BMW: I don’t think I’ve ever seen a comic shop that sold model rockets before.
MR. FOX: Well, it was a comic/hobby shop. They did everything.
BMW: Yeah, I know there are a lot that have—there’s like a universe of options, and every comic shop seems to sort of pull things from there, and I just haven’t particularly seen model rockets at one myself before. So it’s interesting.
MR. FOX: They also had a slot car track. [...] It was actually a really terrible comic shop.

Individuals’ personal trajectories can also be unexpected. Whereas I started reading webcomics because they were another outlet for my enjoyment of comic books and graphic novels, Mr. Fox—who, recall, is also a print comics fan—started out by reading Penny Arcade, one of the pioneers of the “gamer webcomic” genre, because he was interested in video games. As explained in chapter 3, nerd culture’s institutions and infrastructures often maintain relationships with one another—or with third parties that they mutually support or promote—making these sorts of connections readily available, if not explicitly promoted and encouraged. Talking to individual participants about their paths through the nerd-culture scene underscores this point, as they frequently move between or simultaneously engage with groups who have no formal relationship.

Looking to individuals’ career paths also makes available connections to practices outside the realm of leisure. Barry and Wedge clearly saw their working lives as a chemist and
software developer / project manager as, broadly, of a piece with their nerdy interests. In these cases, there was some blurring of work and private-sphere identities. But the nerdy, scholastic disposition can also penetrate the working day in more subtle ways. When I talked with Diana and her partner Steve about creativity, they not only mentioned the storytelling component of D&D but also discussed the creative problem-solving she used in her business in terms very similar to how Wedge talked about coding:

I feel I’m a very creative person, even though I’m not—I don’t necessarily identify as maybe an artist or something like that, but uh in my opinion I find I find programming very creative. I find it triggers the same sort of things as when I do an art piece or something because ... you’re looking at the same sort of centres in your brain, I’m sure, where you’re trying to think up new things because you don’t know how it was done before. Whereas maybe a lot of the stuff you’re doing is built on something you see someone else do, but a lot of stuff I do, it’s inventing a new way of doing a thing, which is really creative in my opinion. And I think that’s where I’ve kind of taken my creative outlet is that way. (Wedge)

DIANA: I don’t know. ((To Steve;)) Would you consider me creative?
STEVE: I would say that your first reaction is to say no, you’re not, but you’re wrong.
DIANA: Yeah, that’s what I’m thinking. My first reaction is to say no, but then no, but then I am.
BMW: So creative and humble?
STEVE: What it is is that she doesn’t recognize that the things that she does are, the things that she takes a hand at she’s very creative with. She doesn’t think of those as attributes or skills, that’s just how you do it? But when you compare it, like she doesn’t have very many benchmarks to compare to, so that’s just the way you are in the world. But it’s even things like cooking—you know, you’re creative and explorative and thinking about how you can tweak things and change them. It’s a process for you. It’s not just following a set of instructions, it’s incorporating them, “How do I mix it? Oh, I remember I did something like that over here.” Your business, with developing new flavours and things, it’s all very creative.

Despite hopes that SF would be a means of popular scientific education, historians of science-fiction fandom have pointed out that more serious fans have pursued careers as authors than as scientists and engineers. So the prospective paths into cultural production that Barry, Shiera, and Solo described for themselves are also worth noting here. Video-game writer Mr. Fox was the only interviewee who had already created career
opportunities out of his leisure practices, and his was also one of the very few examples of a story about engagement featuring an intentional decision—even if one precipitated by a sudden "epiphany" in the middle of the night:

Let’s see uh ... when I was young? I was into games. Then I got more into stories ... I became a more avid reader and I was like, “Wait a minute! There has to be a way these two things can combine.” Then I was like, “Wait. Why did I not think of video game writing when I was like twelve?” So, when that ... epiphany struck, and I was like, “Durp! I gotta look into that.” So ... I looked into that, and like, yeah, there’s game schools and everything. I was like, “Oh, so I’m going to go to one of those.” So, that’s basically how it happened. Yeah. It was ... two in the morning, I couldn’t sleep, so I was in bed ... I was ... I was sitting there, looking up at my roof, and I went, “This is going to be my life plan. Tomorrow morning, I’m gonna wake up, I’m gonna look for the best video game school [in the City ...] I’m gonna go to that school, I’m gonna graduate, and then I’m going to go to Ubisoft and write *Prince of Persia* games.” About half of that plan came true. (Mr. Fox)

As I have tried to stress, participants in nerd culture have their own—often quite sophisticated— theories and models of how it works and of their place in it. Although the details vary, they, like Aristotle—or Goldilocks, for that matter—generally described a continuum of engagement, with the norm (in both descriptive and prescriptive senses) lying somewhere between two extremes. As we saw in chapter 1, so-called hardcore fans often served as rhetorical scapegoats for all of the negative inferences associated with the categories *nerd, geek, fan, gamer*, and so on. They thus have an ambivalent role: They threaten attempts to portray nerd culture and its practices as basically normal, but their existence—even simply as an “unfortunate stereotype” with an “unfortunate basis in reality” (Mr. Fox)—also makes it easier for individuals to pull off “being ordinary” (Sacks 1984). But even within the category of fanatical fans, distinctions are made. They may all be viewed as a little weird, but while some are marginalized for their objectionable habits and prickly personalities, others are tolerated for their authentic, unself-conscious engagement with the objects of their fandom:
Who am I to tell you that you’re too something? If you get enjoyment out of it, then you know, run with it. It doesn’t mean I won’t laugh at you, but, you know, at the same time […] part of me … I look at the people that go to conventions, the (kind) where everybody’s [i.e., non-participants viewing from the outside] laughing, “Oh, look at them dressed up in Star Trek,” and part of me is like, it’s kind of cool, you know? It’s kind of cool that you’re so involved with your passion and you can wear it right out like that. It’s kind of neat, you know? I kind of admire that. (Diana)

At the other extreme lie “casual” participants, a category which in fact hides a wide range of commitment levels. In some cases, casual fandom or participation seemingly embraces everyone who can do the job of being ordinary—that is, who is not hardcore:

If you play games? you’re a gamer. Just like if you read any kind of book, you’re a reader. If you drink any kinda coffee, you’re a coffee drinker kinda thing. (Mr. Fox)

In other cases, however, casual participation—in Shiera’s vocabulary, being a “dabbler”—is valued less because it is a less involved or even less authentic kind of participation. Still other practices are depicted as entirely lacking a “casual” level due to the knowledge, expertise, or time commitment that is the cost of admission (e.g., games like Dungeons & Dragons or Warhammer versus following a television series). It is perhaps becoming clear that regular, unremarkable participation is a moving target. Each of these commitment levels can be mobilized tactically in order to police symbolic boundaries between “good” and “bad” nerds.

Choose Your Own Adventure: Durability or Decline?

One of Robert Frost’s most famous poems begins, “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.” Crossroads are a powerful symbol of choice. As people move through the field of nerd culture, they are frequently confronted with a choice between diverging paths: Do I stick with this or give it up? Having recruited participants, rather than ex-participants, in nerd culture, there was a risk of bias towards accounts of continuing, durable involvement,
rather than declining participation. Yet my informants talked much more explicitly—and often quite poignantly—of friends who had retired (as it were) from their leisure careers, of groups that had fallen apart, and of practices they themselves had left behind. Some of the reasons why participation might decline or stop altogether will be discussed in the next section. For now, I want to look at how participants interpreted these paths and what’s at stake in choosing between them.

Getting Away from It All: Decline

Whether emotional or material, there are real limits to participation. No one can fully engage with everything; there are only so many hours in a day. People will draw the line in different places, but they eventually have to make decisions about how to bear the commitments they have shouldered. This is true of most aspects of life, but the costs of walking away from leisure activities are relatively low. It’s an easy choice. This experience is common enough that SF fans have coined a word just to describe it: *to gafiate*, meaning “to give up on fandom and return to mundane activities” (Sanders and Brown 1994, 267):

*There’s an expression called gafiation. It means “getting away from it all.” And that can be when somebody is just, well, it could be money or time or job or whatever, or it could just be that they’re starting to get sick and tired of the whole thing, or starting to get into feuds with some individuals. They don’t want to go to these events anymore because there’s that person there that they don’t want to see ever. It can even be an ex or something. (Barry)*

This definition already suggests two distinct causes: first, the accidents and contingencies of everyday life and, second, changing attitudes towards the substance of participation. His experiences bear this out (as do my own of having to gafiate to finish writing this dissertation). As a self-employed bachelor, Barry was less bound by external commitments and so he was one of the last men standing in a number of different groups over the years:

*I used to have a gaming group gaming here[...] That was a couple years ago that that disbanded. Yeah, yeah, people moving, people going to hospital, you know, anyway. Nothing’s forever.*
My last regular game seems to have shut down. Actually, I just got an email from the GM saying that she has to withdraw from fannish activities for a while because she’s on medication[....] But that ... they were great games, but ... there were many days when I as the only player showing up, you know?

However, he also found it difficult to stay interested and committed when others’ participation flagged. As a result, he had mostly abandoned these other groups, throwing himself into his novel, the SCA, and, towards the end of the fieldwork period, a new RPG campaign. Although he was clearly excited about these on-going activities, the tone of regret in his accounts of dying or declining organizations is palpable:

I was disappointed, though not surprised, that all the other Tolkien-related projects and ambitions of this group—the role-playing game, the Hobbit readings, the LARP, the newsletter, membership in the Tolkien Society—now seem to have fallen by the wayside, so that now all that’s left is a few friends meeting once a month over dinner and chatting about whatever comes to mind, entertaining enough though that might be, and that the “new” people who were coming a few months ago looking for Tolkien stuff, now seem to be no longer.

Independent variables

According to Robert Coulson (1994, 11), there has been a long-standing, though somewhat tongue-in-cheek, debate between two rival camps of SF fans: FIAWOL (Fandom Is A Way Of Life) versus FIJAGH (Fandom Is Just A Goddamned Hobby). Neither of these positions quite captures the ways that participation in the consummative practices of fandom relies on a whole host of external circumstances. That is to say, FIADV—Fandom Is A Dependent Variable.

Thus, people often pull out of practices because their circumstances have changed. For example, by the end of the data collection period, Diana had gone from playing World of Warcraft every spare moment to not having played at all for some time:

BMW: Um. So, yeah, how do you feel about firing up WoW?
DIANA: Sure. Like I said, I haven’t played in a while.
BMW: Is this bad? I mean, am I going to cause you to relapse or something?
DIANA: No. Unfortunately, I’m in a spot where I’m kind of stuck. I don’t really have anything to do.

STEVE: It’s been what, two months since we played?

DIANA: It’s been since my mum, since my parents were here[....] I got out of the habit, you know? because it’s such a new one.

BMW: Do you see yourself coming back to it? Do you miss it? Or are all my notes about Warcraft just—

DIANA: ((laughs)) Just throw them away! Um yes and no. I mean, I could see myself easily going back into it … I have much less time now because Donna was a lot younger so she was sleeping more so I had much more time, but now she’s not sleeping as much so I can’t. ((laughs)) You know, the baby doesn’t really like it when you don’t pay attention to her.

Here, two different changes conspired to reduce her ability and desire to play. First, she got stuck in the game; feeling helpless or directionless, she was temporarily unable to achieve the game’s pleasures and goods, and she lost interest. Second, her daughter no longer slept as much, significantly reducing Diana’s window of opportunity to play. In one sense, it is easy to say that the latter is much more important, although if the game was still experienced as rewarding then Diana might have been able to make some time to play in two months. But, in her own words, she “got out of the habit.”

Other times, circumstances are much less personal and, thus, also less manageable. At different times, Solo and Mr. Fox had both had their regular comic shops close on them. At the end of her account of being recruited into comics fandom and becoming a regular reader of more and more series, Solo’s career abruptly ends when her comic-bookstore of choice closed:

And like that’s probably when I collected most of my floppy stuff and actually had a subscription, and it was like Buffy Season 8 and Batman and Robin and Green Arrow and Green Lantern ... and Star Wars Legacy ... and I feel like other ones, too. Gotham City Sirens, maybe? Ender’s Game, maybe? But then the comic store went out of business, and the void has yet to be filled.

There are, of course, other shops where she could take her custom, but their locations are less convenient and she just doesn’t like them as much as her old store. Nowadays, she occasionally stops in a mass-market bookstore to buy a trade paperback collection of
comics, but is no longer engaged with the culture of comic-bookstore regulars. In contrast,

Mr. Fox had no options when the comic/hobby shop in his hometown closed:

BMW: I guess, you grew up in a pretty small town, you said, how were you accessing comics at that point?
MR. FOX: Well, comics are monthly, so whichever trip into town at the end of the month, I’d swing by the comic shop.
BMW: Okay, so there was a specialty comic shop in the regional hub nearby.
MR. FOX: Yes[...]. It was actually a really terrible comic shop. It was just the only one in town.
BMW: Okay. Beggars can’t be choosers, right?
MR. FOX: Yeah, and then it went out of business and beggars couldn’t choose anything.
BMW: Okay. When was that?
MR. FOX: Late ’90s, I guess.
BMW: So, you were still living there for a while after that. What happened to your comic—
MR. FOX: Stop reading them. If you can’t them, you can’t get them, so you stop reading.

Like comic-bookstores, gaming groups seem particularly fragile. Barry had had one break up shortly before I started interviewing him, and both Diana and Mr. Fox’s regular groups ran into difficulties during the fieldwork period. Diana didn’t open up about the issues that precipitated its dissolution, though she had previously mentioned personality conflicts among the players. Mr. Fox explained that his game master had simply moved away: “Well, the GM left. So. He was the guy who told all the stories and had everything sorted out, so … it’s kinda gone.” The logistical problems of co-ordinating schedules in order to have regular sessions prove difficult to solve permanently:

[T]he big problem these days is getting everybody together. Huge problem these days! I don’t know if it’s we’re all getting older or something like that because I guess when we’re all students at the same place, okay, because often it’s a student situation, they all kind of hang out together, but then people got their own things going in different parts of the city, and it becomes a rarer pastime so those who are interested find themselves farther away in the first place from each other. (Barry)

Subcultural studies have reminded us that teenagers often have more truly disposable income and free time than adults. That Barry, age 53, still harkens back to his student days underscores the significance of this period of relative affluence and freedom for leisure
practices of all sorts. Once adult responsibilities enter the picture, the threat of gafiation is always nearby. In smaller, more informal settings, even one member leaving can severely disrupt a group.

But declining participation is not only a problem for self-organizing groups of friends. Fan Fellowship and Con-vivium, two local groups that met for dinner, drinks and fannish discussion, had a reasonable amount of institutional momentum, but their low-commitment structure made them vulnerable to the vagaries of members’ interest levels. Despite their relatively lengthy histories, Barry reported that attendance had fallen, they were now being held less regularly, and he himself had not attended Fan Fellowship dinners for several months. These might be contrasted with the SCA, which Barry repeatedly held up as an example of a healthy, well-organized group that was in it for the long haul. But despite his sanguine views of the bonds of fealty and affection that held the group together, Shiera was concerned that the rise of a rival society of medieval re-creationists that had fewer bureaucratic requirements—and, therefore, seemingly more “fun”—heralded decline for the local SCA. Even the best organized institutions may be undermined by external factors that overwhelm them.

The willing suspension of disagreement

In other cases, people feel forced out of fan communities and active practice, or at least it looks that way to those who stay inside them, interpreting their erstwhile consociates’ motivations. Barry and Shiera, who both had long associations with organized fandom, mentioned personal conflicts or “feuds” that push people out or otherwise precipitate their gafiation. These were never discussed at length, but they were raised again and again.

Shiera noted wistfully that she couldn’t attend SF&F Con, which she viewed as the main fan event in the area, because of her ex’s involvement in its organization. And, although she
said SCAers don’t hold grudges, she was also very wary of being drawn into the Society’s internal politics—which, like all feudal societies, have an inescapably personal dimension:

Um it-it was a: ...... it’s a time that I look back on now, and I still want to go to events for the people, but I want to make sure I don’t get involved in the politics. And it’s very difficult to do when you’re as intimately familiar with as many different things as I am. Because I have done a lot. But the moment I volunteer to co-autocrat an event, I’ve gotten involved in the politics, and I’m going to have to deal with that. I’m not going to do that. I refuse.

Although Barry said he had mostly managed to avoid feuds and grudges in his time in fandom, the problem seemed to weigh quite heavily on his mind:

Yeah. I mean, there are ... oh, I suppose also, you’ve heard of fannish politics? which I haven’t experienced a whole lot lately, but that can be a really ... energy sucking experience. I mean, people have left the whole science-fiction field just because of what they’ve experienced of politics. Not even participating, but just observing. It can be very discouraging.

I do know that people can get into fan feuds so that they won’t go to events because somebody else is there. I: have not been in any of those things, tho:ugh I don’t know ... um ... it might be a factor these days for Anadûnê. Um. ( ) But I know with some people, it can poison their entire lives.

Some clubs and just groups of people involved in fandom, they can detonate, okay? Self-destruct with people not talking to people anymore about who knows what. [...] But that’s possibly true of any activity where people are not linked together for economic reasons or whatever, just from common interests.

He is undeniably correct that conflict is endemic to human relationships, and perhaps that it is more common when self-interest does not force people to grin and bear it. But it also seems that the experience of his religiously based conservatism putting him at odds with the left-liberal, libertarian, atheist/skeptic, and neo-pagan types that are often outspoken members of fan communities colours his account. As he put it, “Any trouble that I’ve been in has had more to do with people’s own lives apart from their fannish activities. Or my life apart from my fannish activities.” So, although he tries to restrict conversations to harmless topics of fannish interest, he did admit having gotten into arguments or offended people on occasion:
BARRY: Let me think about some specific instances for a minute and I might be able to answer you better ... Well, I’m talking with somebody about something and they suggest, well, maybe I should consider moving out of Canada if I hold these opinions. And right away I think, “Well, look, I have as much right to be in this country as anybody else. It’s a free county and so on.” So, that sort of thing is stepping beyond the pale, and then when I task them with it and say, “Look, this is like the first step towards ethnic cleansing,” ((laughs)) which is maybe a little bit—

BMW: That’s a slightly provocative way of putting it.

BARRY: A slightly provocative way of looking at it, but in fact I believe to be an accurate way because when you’re starting to suggest to people that they don’t belong in a country, you’re on your way to pushing them out.

There was one road trip where I got one of the ladies offended, and it was pretty awkward for the rest of the trip. Sometimes, you just say the wrong thing, people take it the wrong way, and you can’t really fix it right away. But anyway I think she’s ... uh ... she’s gotten over it.

Moreover, his arch-rationalist disposition leads him to neglect the personal, rather than solely propositional, dimensions of such disagreements. (When I asked him to describe people he liked or disliked and felt were similar or dissimilar to himself, he had uncharacteristic difficulty answering the questions and tried to shift the discussion of personal qualities to formal psychology.) Whether or not Barry resolved them as successfully as he hopes, these sorts of encounters can easily rob the pleasure from participating in communities of practice. Certainly, it becomes difficult to maintain the myth of enlightened nerds versus the mundane world when conflict—fundamental, intractable, and undeniably emotional conflict—re-enters the picture.

The Secret Masters of Fandom: Durability

In the course of one of our conversations, Barry introduced me to another piece of fan slang, one for which Sanders and brown’s glossary had not prepared me:

Actually organizing fan activities can be classified as ... you know, instead of reading? Instead of watching a movie? You’re organizing an activity. So, you might be running a convention or running a club about something. It might even be a third dimension. It might be a club about science-fiction movies. All these possible combinations. [...] Whether you just read the things and never talk to
anybody about them to the other extreme of being ... oh, what’s it called again? A god of fandom? A Secret Master of Fandom. SMOF[...], which has ... had been used in different senses. It’s used in a positive sense as somebody who actually contributes to fandom in a big way, editing fan magazines or um amateur press, organizing conventions and stuff. Or, you know, just messing with people. Destructive politics, you know.

The title of SMOF might be used ironically to refer to someone who considers themselves “kind of a big deal,” to mark someone who manipulates people and engages in “destructive politics,” or as a sincere expression of admiration for someone who has dedicated a great deal of their time and energy to facilitating others’ enjoyment. As Barry says, organizing fandom can become a distinct “medium” of fan activity. Shiera noted that some conventions have gone so far as to name an official “Fan Guest of Honour” along with the fêted cultural producers, someone who is famous within fandom simply for being a fan.

The liberal individual is typically portrayed as a bearer of rights and a maker of choices. She is a “free agent” who makes contracts and ends them, calculating the costs and benefits of the universe of choices that she can pick from. But, as Michael Sandel (1984, 87) reminds us, there is one choice unavailable to the liberal individual: the choice not to choose, “the possibility of membership in any community bound by moral ties antecedent to choice.” No community built around consummative practices fits that bill. Nonetheless, communitarians rightly point out that “sticking it out” over the long term offers possibilities that can’t be realized by the mobile, unencumbered and uncommitted self—one can’t simply choose to become a SMOF (in its positive sense) one day, for a life spent working at the consummative practices of nerd culture, developing the skills and competences involved, and enjoying their internal goods is the prerequisite.

Yet, the meaningfulness of durable fandom is a kind of present absence in my interview data. It did not generate the kind of detailed, explicit discussion as accounts of gafiation and disintegrating groups did. The ancients said, “Call no man happy until he is dead,” and
perhaps my informants simply had more difficulty projecting forward than they did looking back. Some people spoke of long-term relationships they had made or witnessed within nerd culture, but these sometimes seemed more the exception than the rule, and as Shiera explained, it takes work to hold them together:

I have a friend who’s a crossword cruciverbalist, he’s a crossword maker. And he does a weekly game. He’s in his late 20s now, and they’ve maintained it all the way through from high school. Those are some hardcore geeks. ((laughs)) [...] But the thing is he writes—I think part of keeping that community together is maintaining the interest across the board. So, he writes a write-up, almost an episode of what they gamed through. And it’s brilliant stuff, it’s great stuff, very fun, fun to read.

The rewards of participation that they mentioned were, more often than not, momentary and fleeting: a fun conversation or game session, being recognized for your skill and effort, or being exposed to an interesting or moving story in prose, film, or visual art. But every life is composed of moments; it is the function of a practice to articulate them together so that we can narrate our identity teleologically—that is, to make sense of how we came to be who we are today. Together, they are more than the sum of their small parts. They are a resource of self-hood, but only if we can come to perceive and experience them as such. That is to say that the rewards of enduring participation are not an automatic function of putting your time in; rather, they involve constructing one’s self as part of a practical community that can give meaning to those experiences. In the next section, I'll try to understand better how the diverse and differentiated clusters of activity in the nerd-culture scene might be—indeed, how they are—made into communities.
MAKING COMMUNITIES FROM MASS CULTURE

When asked to estimate the proportion of their friends who were also participants in some aspect of nerd culture, informants’ responses ranged from 60 or 70 per cent (Diana) to virtually 100 per cent (Mr. Fox and Wedge). Not only are virtually all of Shiera’s regular social interactions with people she considers as belonging to “the geek clique,” but due to her mobility issues they are also mostly conducted virtually:

There’s people from both communities that I connect with on Facebook. That’s actually one of the things that I really like about Facebook. I’ve got my writing groups, I’ve got my SCA groups, and I’ve got my SWG groups, and then I’ve got family and friends.

Other than that, my social interactions are very limited because I am housebound. I use Ventrillo and the in-game voice chat to talk to the people that I game with. One of my guild members hosts … the guild. […] She hosts the chat on her Ventrillo server, and there’s maybe—I mean, at the most we have twenty-five people on, but usually it’s five.

In thinking back to their school days, several interviewees identified as “loners,” or they built their peer groups around specific clubs or shared activities, such as drama or music programs. As adults, many of them continued to meet people and develop friendships through more or less formal groups and organizations in nerd culture, which guarantee certain commonalities and also provide a framework of regular contact:

Well, I guess with some of these people there were um … there were already reasons for friendship because we were already at the same job or the same … and the rest of them, it was mostly because we were interested in going to the same events. Gee … I guess I got to know some people through um playing role-playing games. You might put up or notice an ad in the game store, or might know somebody who knows somebody and then we all get together. (Barry)

Barry was the exception, reporting a major split between “Knights of Columbus and church friends” and “science fiction and fantasy friends.” As Grand Knight of his local chapter of the Knights of Columbus, he said he had to know all of the members, pushing this group into quantitative dominance, but he counted more people that he “shares recreational interests with” in fan circles, as “everybody else in Knights of Columbus wants to talk about fishing or hockey.”
Since I moved here as an adult? the people I met here uh I met because of my interests in these things. Like uh most of my friends I know from game school. They were classmates or in other classes. (Mr. Fox)

Usually, there's an event. Usually, there's an event to focus it, or a practice or um ... I mean, in in the case of internet friendships, you're so spread out that it takes an event for everyone to coalesce. In the case of random SCA friends, we're all so busy—I've noted this. When you've got a hobby that takes up that much of your time, you don't have time to go, “Hey! Let's get together for coffee!” unless it's, “Hey, let's go to dance practice and let's go for coffee afterwards.” That's how the get-togethers happen. It's usually in the aftermath of an event that's already—or a practice that's already scheduled or happening. (Shiera)

Alternatively, as we saw when discussing recruitment accounts, they might be introduced to new people through a social network in the local nerd-culture scene:

Um, pretty much all my geek friends I've met through playing D&D or through knowing ORG1-p1. So. You almost have to have ORG1-p1 as a separate [category]—like, I play D&D and do World of Warcraft, I read science fiction, and I know ORG1-p1. (Diana)

Like, probably my best friend here, I've known for twenty years, and ... he's into gaming and that kind of stuff, so I've met a lot of people through him[....] (Wedge)

Solo provides an interesting case, as she seemingly identified more strongly with nerd culture in the abstract than with any particular practice, fandom, or group. She and her best friends from high school were drawn together by a shared fandom:

Well, I was putting up a Buffy poster in my locker, and two girls walked by and were like, “Oh, you like Buffy, too?” And that started my entire circle of friends that continues to this day. So, that's pretty significant.

Although she remains close with these girls, they have grown apart somewhat in the intervening years: “I got into comic books and others got into art and others got into science, and you know that sort of stuff changed, too.” The majority of her current peer group, by contrast, is a group of “gamey nerdy boys,” whom she met after one of them struck up a conversation about her Star Wars shirt. But she explained that “they're not the same kind of geek as me.” Despite not considering herself a gamer as such (they play RPGs
and video games; she plays neither), Solo nonetheless pointed to a shared sense of nerdiness as the foundation or glue that brought the group together:

I mean, they’ve known each other since high school. They’ve known each other since elementary school. And the only reason I’ve really managed to integrate into them so deep is because I have similar likes. Because I can talk nerd with them. ((laughs))

Hanging out, talking, and a lot of the talking is where a lot of the nerdy stuff comes up. So, a lot of it is like, we’re not doing anything, but we’re like sitting and actively being nerds together. Like just being nerds together.

There is a strong sense in the way Solo frames her interactions with friends—and even strangers—that they share a common discursive repertoire drawn from their mutual orientations to the field of nerd culture, even when they don’t necessarily participate in the same groups and practices within it:

But then it’s like other people that I’ve sort of met recently … are sort of similar. It’s like we have fun together, and then as they find out, like, that I know the difference between Marvel and DC, they’re like, “Oh!” And then all of the sudden we’re rampaging through a nerdy conversation. And they’re like, they like it that they can be a little geeky with me because I don’t really care.

At the least, this repertoire facilitated small talk, and sometimes the shared sense of belonging and familiarity that it generates provides the basis for more significant and durable relationships.

An Aggregate by Any Other Name

A social circle or group of friends, however close and consubstantial it is perceived to be, is not necessarily a community. If we want to understand how and why some of these relationships and not others are experienced as communalized, it may be useful to begin by probing under what circumstances and conditions people called something a community. The word was indeed widely used by my interviewees, thanks as much to its vagueness and ubiquity as to its universally positive connotation (Williams 1977):
I would use *fan community or fandom*. And that's about the most general term that I can think of that applies to that sort of thing. Everything else I can think of is kind of subsets of that. (Barry)

One of the things that makes MMOs work is community, and SWG has a very vocal, very intelligent—I have a very intelligent community that I’m a part of. So, I’m very involved with them, both emotionally and intellectually. (Shiera)

I think there are certainly geek communities. [...] Like, you have the gaming community, which I probably have the most connection with, and that’s separated into a bunch of them, but I think most of those people would probably know each other or have met or seen each other, that sort of thing. And then you’ll have ... um there's a fairly large like sci-fi community, I think. Like, SF&F Con’s been going on for what thirty years now? or something like that? And so there’s a tonne of writers and um that kind of ... uh group here. [...] And then uh ... I just saw the other day there was a ... local nerd meet-up something, and—then there’s the Reddit ... Reddit kind of meet-ups going on, which I think would probably classify as a geek or a nerd meet-up. And then you’ve got like the Hackspace crowd, which would probably fit in there a little bit. Yeah, so there’s ... I think there's a lot of different communities. I don’t necessarily know them that well. Unless it tends to be more of a focus that I’m interested in. (Wedge)

However, they also qualified its application. Some practices were viewed as having a community and others weren’t (“I mean, I’d say fans. It’s like, you know, ‘Pokémon fans.’ I wouldn’t say ‘the Pokémon community’ ’cause that sounds weird,” Mr. Fox), some groups or organizations counted as communities and others didn’t (“I think the SCA as a whole is ... it’s not a community. I think individual branches can form communities. Or fail. To form communities,” Shiera), and there were some ways in which the relationships fostered by nerd culture simply didn’t square with their understandings of what a community is. As much discussion as there was about the *gemeinschaftlich* status of particular groups or practices, there was more uncertainty about whether we can speak of nerd culture in general as a community. Many recognized it as a social object, but hesitated to attribute to it the intimate qualities typically attached to *community*:

*Geekdom* is less a ... less of a word that I’d use. It doesn't seem to me to actually exist in the sense of a community. You know, a lot of people have a personality
trait that they don’t get together. Community is where people get together. (Barry)

I wouldn’t say community, though. I would never use the term nerd community. That makes me think of like an old folks’ home. It’s like, “Oh, at Shady Oaks Community Centre.” That’s an old folks’ home. That’s like this horrible place you put nerds. Ugh. That place would smell like Cheetos.

That is, the proper use of community is arguable enough that extending it to “mere” contemporaries in an open-ended, porous milieu like the nerd-culture scene was sometimes contested. I often had to push my interviewees to explicitly formulate why they held the term to be appropriate (or not) for describing a given cluster of people and practices. But when they were pressed to justify their answers, it became easier to see what criteria they were applying and just what community meant to them.

One of a community’s key characteristics is a sense of sharing. What, precisely, the members share varies between explanations, but there is a strong sense that they share something:

Well, I think … community is like shared—it maybe depends on your—I think there’s community in nerds. (Solo)

Communities may be said to share spaces (“in comic books, I think the community is very central to your shop,” Solo), activities (“You know, like, they’re groups of people that do the same thing, so they can talk about—people that play D&D, that’s a community,” Diana), goals (“My community in [SWG] is … based on that we have shared needs and goals and desires,” Shiera), or experiences (“The point about adversity and surviving adversity as being the one of the: um ingredients in a successful uh community is that um … they have a shared experience,” Shiera). But, at the very least, the focal practice around which it is

17 In classical social theory, this “organic solidarity” of functions is actually a property of Gesellschaften, or civil societies, and not communities. That my informants consider it a criterion of community raises questions about their experiences and understandings of modern society that I cannot explore here for reasons of space.
organized is presumably shared (even if they take very different roles in relation to it) by everyone who would self-identify as part of the community. As mentioned in chapter 1, interviewees generally agreed that similarity of tastes and interests was a foundation upon which meaningful relationships are built, precisely because they demarcate a boundary between groups, even if that boundary is only symbolic or rhetorically achieved. However, shared interests alone are insufficient to make a community. Indeed, it is precisely the one-dimensionality of many such aggregates that leads critics to dismiss them as mere “lifestyle enclaves” (Bellah et al. 1986, 72–73) or “cloakroom communities” (Bauman 2000, 199).

Clearly, we want a community to be more than a niche market or audience segment. When comparing some different organizations with which he’s been involved, Barry rates two sci-fi supper clubs as more like communities than the SCA because they are more “general”:

BARRY: Organizations like Fan Fellowship or ... what’s the other weekly dining thing that’s been going on for longer? Con-vivium. Those are kind of formal communities because they get together on a regular basis. The individuals are fairly diverse and have diverse interests, but they do still get together and there’s some back and forth on different subjects.

BMW: What makes an organization like that different from some of the other fannish organizations?

BARRY: I guess you could compare that to the SCA. The SCA is much more organized, scheduled, more different kinds of things happening ... I suppose, more reliable in some sense. If something is announced it usually happens. Uh ... and more active. You know, people doing more stuff and putting more of themselves in an activity.

BMW: So, why is that you think of Fan Fellowship and Con-vivium when I asked about a local fan community?

BARRY: Because they’re more general.

BMW: More general?

BARRY: I think if you’re talking about a ... the concept community, the general comes first. You know, like a family may be extended but everybody’s still related to each other there, rather than people on the other side—well, neighbours or whatever. Anyway, Fan Fellowship and Con-vivium and the conventions like SF&F Con are set up specifically to bring people from different backgrounds together. They’re meeting places. They’re the town halls, the marketplaces.
Two important dimensions of Barry's notion of the priority of the general are important to understanding what these communities share and how they diverge from traditional communities.

First, privileging more general groups also seemingly means emphasizing people and relationships over the activities that they do when together. A group becomes a community when sociability amongst members overruns the original reason for its constitution:

> And we went um from there to establishing a chapter of Fan Force, which was a ... fan community ... specifically oriented towards actually meeting other fans in person and opening up what was thought to be quite insular and make it social.

(Shiera)

Although Barry doesn’t draw attention to it explicitly, there is also an implicit contrast here between the local, more informally organized groups and the SCA, which is a (not-for-profit) corporation with a board of directors providing oversight to nineteen “kingdoms” and their smaller units (principalities, baronies, shires, and the like) around the world. When Barry describes Fan Fellowship and Con-vivium, he mentions that they gather regularly, are made up of diverse members, and serve as meeting places; when describing the SCA, he basically says they keep the trains running on time (or whatever the period equivalent would be). So Fan Fellowship and Con-vivium are not only more “general” than the SCA, they also appear more intimate or personal than that large, bureaucratically organized society. But under the right conditions, communities can be carved out of such large entities. For example, while Shiera held that SCA members as a whole shouldn’t be considered a community, she believed that “individual branches can form communities. [...] In that other barony’s case, that is a successful community. That is a group of people who, once you are in, you’re in.” It is regular, even if only fleeting, contact and interaction with a knowable population of participants that seems decisive, seeing the same faces and getting to know people over time and at or in a range of different events and spaces:
BMW: Are there ways that ... it's, like the idea of community just doesn't map onto, like, what it's like to be a gamer in the city or a comic fan in the city?

MR. FOX: No, those are actually ... like fairly big communities. You can meet a lot of people who share those interests and hang out with them and have pretty cool discussions. It's nice. It's rather Bohemian, actually.

But I mean, I think there is a comic community in the city. Like, that's evident from ORG3 Con and stuff like that, where everybody sort of knows everybody and all the shops know each other. (Solo)

And events ... like, maybe movie openings, maybe that sort of thing, you might run into the same people. (Solo)

Second, a community is general because it takes all kinds. There is an ambivalence introduced here, since traditional communities are often understood as relatively homogenous (at the extreme, bound by blood and kinship). Nevertheless, Barry suggests that the less narrowly focused a group's interests and activities, the more like a community it is. He relates this to the givenness of traditional communities, where you may have little in common with other members besides the fact of your membership. That is, in the same way that you don't choose your family or your fellow small-town citoyens, you don't have a say in who will show up and be counted as part of your community. Of course, not every gathering of geeks quite meets this standard of porous boundaries, but this is another instance where a breach makes the rule plain:

SOLO: But I think it's also very like close—like, it's friendship-based? It's very friendship heavy where it's hard to say if that's community or not because you're not ... like, it's more private? It's less public? Maybe?

BMW: So, you're saying—

SOLO: Like, it's more of a private community.

BMW: —nerd culture is more based on friendships and so is more likely to be closed off in the private sphere—

SOLO: Mmhm.

BMW: —whereas something you'd more easily describe as community—

SOLO: Is public.

BMW: —is public.

SOLO: Like, where you're coming into contact, where you're networking and making friends, but also sort of like business associates and that sort of stuff within community.
Contra Bauman (2002, 172), who has claimed that “the community of the communitarian gospel is either an ethnic community or a community imagined after the pattern of an ethnic one,” my informants asserted that a group must be inclusive and “joinable” in order to merit the term. As much as we all like being around people that we like, if an individual or “faction” is creating barriers to entry or turning some participants against others, then that group or community has devolved into mere cliquishness, which is anathema to the meritocratic ethic that reigns in (or at least is the public face of) the nerd-culture scene.

Although the groups described as communities were often durable (“Some of them very strong, very old communities. You have people in the SCA who have been there since the ’60s, okay?” Barry), one major way that the communities of nerd culture differ from traditional ones—at least, as they are imagined in hindsight—is that the former are relatively light on duties and obligations. By the same token, what one can expect from these groups is much more limited. When I asked whether this aspect of community life fits with their experiences of nerd culture, I received some unusually short, straightforward answers:

I guess that’s something that I do value because I miss it in some of the communities that I’m a part of right now, some of the fannish communities. (Barry)

No, not really. (Mr. Fox)

That is almost completely lacking. (Shiera)

Most participants denied any major, specific obligations to their nerdy groups and consociates, beyond basic ethical duties that they would argue are due to any other person and beyond those that are voluntarily taken up:

I guess it’s the same as with everything else. There are opportunities to make promises, and once you’ve made them, you ought to keep them. I guess that’s true of a lot of life as well. And I guess there’s certain general ethical things, you know, you ... you don’t mess with people, you don’t steal from them, you don’t tell lies to them. That’s true everywhere. (Barry)
Well, the only commitment I can think of is, if you had a saver account, going to pick your stuff up because I could imagine that would be really annoying to that person building your stack if you never show up. [...] Or if you’re, if you’re in a position where you’re producing anything, then you obviously do your work. But I don’t know if to the community itself. If you’re part of a group, maybe showing up? and being consistent about your performance and that sort of stuff, but I don’t definitely have any commitments to any nerd community. (Solo)

However, Mr. Fox recognized that in certain instances the consubstantiality of fandom could motivate others to act altruistically in a way that they wouldn’t for “just anyone”:

**BMW:** So, that’s one of the things that I’m trying to get at. Ways that the concept or idea of community fits or doesn’t fit on what you see.

**MR. FOX:** Uh it doesn’t really fit. Unless it’s like an extreme case. Like uh … for an … like, I guess, a hypothetical, if someone is a big comic fan and is well known in the community, and their house burned down, chances are the comic-book—if that’s like gets a message … fans would send them stuff. They’d be like, “Well, I’ve got a few extra comics kicking around.” They’ll help him rebuild his collection, things like that. Same thing in the gaming community.

And Solo at times alluded to a kind of obligation immanent to fandom. She talked, for example, of feeling bound to watch TV series she followed: “It used to be, ugh! When it [Buffy the Vampire Slayer] was on TV, it was brutal. I would put off anything to be in front of the TV Thursday night. Everything else, it just would not … I could not miss it.” And when, during a participant-observation session at her apartment, we talked about movies, she said that she felt as though she “should” see the Green Lantern film then in theatres (though she claimed to be “resisting” because the trailers suggested that its characterization of Green Lantern Hal Jordan didn’t jibe with her own understanding of the character). Admittedly, this is not the stuff of categorical imperatives and moral codes. Rather, it seems a nagging awareness that, if all it takes to be counted a member of a community of practice is to participate, then one ought to keep participating.

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18 A recent example is that of Mike Meyer, a mentally disabled man whose collection of Superman comics and memorabilia was stolen. After the story spread, fans began sending him replacements. When the original collection was recovered by police, he turned the donations over to a children’s hospital. (Palmer 2011)
**Imagining Communities**

Benedict Anderson (1983) taught us that nations are “imagined communities.” They compensate for a fundamental problem of scale—that is, the boundaries of a state comprises too many people for us to feel emotionally attached to—by projecting a sense of community onto the symbols and trappings of nationhood. But all communities, asserts Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 169; emphasis in original), “are postulated”: They are “projects rather than realities, something that comes after, not before the individual choice.” Without denying the (sociologically explicable) psychological appeal of communitarian thinking, it seems plainly contradictory to him to say that we must choose to create—or, more often, defend—that which is claimed to precede individual choice.

But “being in community” is not a matter of essences or even of geography. Instead, I’m suggesting that community is a social performance and that various community-making practices are integrated into the everyday activities of nerd culture’s practitioners. These practices are the means by which we perceive and experience our social context as “communal” rather than “societal” (Weber 2004, 343–44). Solo, for example, noted that people who engage in the same activities may draw different interpretations from them, leading only some to claim they belong to “the community”:

> Or, is it like you’re part of the community because you’ve defined it as a community, and you’ve found other people who also define it as a community, and you’re talking to those people and therefore you are a community because you all established this. But then there’s all these other people that do exactly the same things with themselves most of the time that could fit into that but they just don’t know these people and don’t know that these people are calling it a community. ((laughs)) “What!?" ((laughs))

Community-making, in its many guises, cultivates and authenticates membership. It is a meta-discourse around a focal practice, allowing us to imagine what we do as part of a shared tradition and a web of relationships. And it’s a set of habits that develops alongside it, which serves to sustain that tradition and extend and repair, as necessary, those
relationships. In my interviews, the project of communualization appeared in three main contexts.

First, given the definitions above that associated community with persistent or organized groups, it is unsurprising that community-making often took place through relatively formal organizations and institutions in the subcultural scene. On the one hand, groups could enact policies or facilitate events that helped to produce a sense of community. These might involve approaches to recruiting new participants into the group or, in a more “cosmopolitan” mode, into the practice in general:

I think they [gaming conventions] really foster ... um a good network of people and draw new ... my main goal at like throwing cons and helping out with like ORG4 and that sort of thing is really to draw new gamers in, give them a place to sort of meet together or connect with other gamers or play new games. That sort of thing. I think ... fostering that sense of community is really ... useful to draw new people in. (Wedge)

We talk about how to keep a game that is seven years old going, how to keep people coming in and interested, and community support for new players and returning players. We talk a bit about ... what we’ve learned from what we do. (Shiera)

On the other hand, individuals qua members could act in ways that supported the on-going reproduction of the community. Some people are good “citizens” and orient their conduct towards building and maintaining groups, often by pitching in towards shared activities:

They’ve added to the community, they’ve fed back ... uh actually, it’s funny that I hadn’t even thought about that, but obligation is a key factor in community-building, and if you if you are giving back to your community—the thing is, it’s a little f:—um ... I guess I’m defining “giving back” in a very broad sense. Because people can give back even if they have nothing to contribute as far as ... know-how goes. They have their enthusiasm, they have their sudden discovery of “Oh my god, this is so cool! Oh my god, I love this thing!” And it just builds that, it helps the whole community stay positive, stay proactive, stay focused and get ... more ... you know, fun out of the game. (Shiera)

And I think it’s actually—there was a lot of website building and fan club building [for Buffy] and ... and, yeah, that sort of stuff? but there wasn’t a whole lot of activities. (Solo)
In other parts of science-fiction fandom, you have people who go to science-fiction conventions. That’s part of their hobby. They spend, like, every weekend it seems at a different convention. And helping to organize conventions, too, or some aspects of them. Like, organizing ... what’s it called? the con suite. Okay? Think of the couple who I mentioned to you. That’s what they used to do, organize con suites at the different conventions. Just a place where people drop in and chat, a bit of refreshment. (Barry)

In these ways, and many others, individuals imagine and conduct themselves as members of communities. It is undoubtedly a project, but one that is very real. Group-oriented community-making might also include distinctive ways of supporting new practitioners as they develop skills and learn to appreciate their internal goods. To take the SCA as an example again, Barry asserted that its culture emphasized interpersonal bonds and loyalties:

Yeah, and there’s some very formal relations between, within the SCA. Fealty and stuff, that’s a big thing in that organization.

With the SCA, the SCA is kind of a special case because as an organization it has a commitment to the ideals of chivalry. Now, that’s a formal commitment. I’m not saying that the other fannish organizations don’t have those ideals, but they’re not necessarily stated.

Obviously, this is partly an element of “the game” of playing at medieval lords and ladies, but it does appear to shape the ways that the group forms its practitioners, which is a way of making community. As Shiera describes the Society’s day-to-day and behind-the-scenes functioning, this fantasy of chivalry and fealty is expressed, organizationally, in an apprenticeship model that not only transmits expertise across membership cohorts but also guides people into roles where they can be useful to the group. Of course, not every member will go to such lengths, as Wedge notes:

19 Shiera was, however, somewhat critical of this model in practice, charging it with stifling innovation and, by quickly channelling capable new recruits into demanding service roles, leading to burnout among the membership.
I think that really depends on the person. Uh. Some people will be far more committed to ... solving problems within a community or that sort of thing.

Second, there were forms of community-making available to—and perhaps even incumbent upon—individuals qua individuals (i.e., outside of roles provided by formal groups and organizations) and for the sake of other individuals. Stripping away some of its quasi-mystical postmodern excesses, Maffesoli's (1996, 73; all italics in original) *Time of the Tribes* makes the important point that “experiencing the other is the basis of community.”

Against the tidy functionalisms to which social explanation is sometimes prone, it should be remembered that some groups' raison d'être is simply to be: “Thus, I believe that the being-together is a basic given. Before any other determination or qualification, there is this vital spontaneity that guarantees a culture its own puissance and solidarity” (81). On this view, the events and policies of a group or organization is only a container for the vital social activity of individuals. They establish the terrain upon which communalized experiences and, moreover, an “ethical connection” (18), are created: “it is by force of circumstance; because of proximity...; because there is a sharing of the same territory (real or symbolic) that the communal idea and its ethical corollary are born” (16). It might be quite pedestrian, as in these examples of preferential treatment or special care taken towards other members:

I think any ... any group that shares a similar interest on an on-going basis, like that meet with any regularity, becomes a community. Um. I think they ... um ... People tend to ... get an attachment to that community and that uh ... They’ll help others out. They’ll share things. They’ll give those people:: first crack at, like ... if you’re selling something, you-you’ll tend to bring that to your community first or give them a break or that sort of thing. (Wedge)

But there were a couple of SCA cars that stopped by to see if we’re doing okay. It’s kind of a tradition in the Society, if you recognize somebody’s vehicle or the stickers they have or the equipment that’s lashed on as being with the SCA, and they’re pulled over, you stop to inquire how they’re doing. Sometimes, you know, if there had been some vehicle with a trailer that was only half-full that was on the way to the city, we could have transferred the stuff, but, you
know ... that’s too bad for the people that had their stuff on the trailer, but everybody ought to have their stuff back by the next weekend. (Barry)

But they can also be deeply meaningful. Shiera’s accounts of her MMORPG-based relationships illustrate this point beautifully:

But, I mean, what do we talk about? Mostly, it’s game stuff, but also there’s some personal stuff. Friends have ... One of the things about community building and maintaining is that when a crisis happens, you need to be there for them, you need to be a friend. You know, we’ve been through deaths in the family, we’ve been through cancer diagnoses, as a group. The guild that I’m the leader of right now—I don’t know how that happened, but um—we formed in 2005, so we’ve known each other a good long while. And while we’ve had new people come in, they’re people who fit that same help/share/bear kind of dynamic.

I have a very intelligent community that I’m a part of. So, I’m very involved with them, both emotionally and intellectually. There’s a lot there for me. They also make me laugh, and first thing in the morning, sometimes, I really need that because I’m in a lot of pain. So, that have my morning coffee and sit there, and there’s a post from a guy in Australia who’s a hilarious writer, and he’s making stuff that—it’s funny! So, it’s enlightening to read. Just lightens the whole mood.

This might be—and often is—framed in terms of investing in personal support networks. There certainly is a transactional dimension to, for example, Shiera’s comments about helping, sharing, and bearing one another’s emotional burdens. To say that “there’s a lot there for me” in a given group is, at one level, to make a statement of cost and benefit. But it could also be said that the ethical imperative to be for one another is precisely the referent of the frequently invoked but nebulous signifier, “a sense of community.”

Third and finally, many participants discussed the role of new media and communication technologies in extending their community-making practices. The internet was mentioned as an important facet of contemporary fan communities, and participating in communities was one of the main uses discussed for networked communication technologies:

It’s hard to say these days what is ... more common because ... internet is not a traditional way of getting together, but it is becoming a traditional way—you know, a common—way of getting together. And it’s happening both within and
outside the fan community. It could be that the fan community is taking a lead
in that because there was a lot of this stuff going on over the electronic media
when there was just, you know, the university. A lot of these people were in
college and stuff. And even when there was a BBS—do you remember that? [...] I
didn’t use that much myself, but there were fans, a lot of the correspondence
(happened that way). (Barry)

There is a quotidian dimension to this mutually reinforcing relationship between computer-
mediated communication and community, as well as one that is quite profound.

On the one hand, digital communication tools and platforms let groups and individuals
organize cheaply and efficiently. As Barry alluded to, electronic mailing lists, Usenet and
Internet Relay Chat, message boards and forums, blogs, and social networking sites have
again and again re-mediated the fan practices of correspondence that previously took place
through the mails and in mimeographed or photocopied fanzines and APAs. These
communication channels not only disseminate information but can also be communalized
themselves, as the Christian Fandom mailing list was for Barry:

Christian Fandom, I should say, is a list and an organization—or, you know, a
loose association—of people who are both Christians and fans of science fiction
and sometimes might need a little support for one or the other. People who are
Christians sometimes feel a bit dumped on by science-fiction fans that happen
to think that means only atheists can be fans. And vice versa. Fans who their
church friends might look a little askance of.

Meanwhile, websites like Wikipedia, ad-supported wikis hosted by Wikia (e.g., the
specialized Star Wars and Star Trek references, Wookieepedia <starwars.wikia.com> and
Memory Alpha <memory-alpha.org>), and TV Tropes <tvtropes.org> have become
significant repositories of knowledge and trivia, in addition to “institutional” memory about
the communities’ history and traditions. But digital resources can also ease the
organizational work of running events. For example, the meetings of Anadûnê, the Tolkien
fan club Barry occasionally attended, were co-ordinated through the web app Meetup
<meetup.com>, which aims “to revitalize local community and help people around the
world self-organize” by making “it easy for anyone to organize a local group or find one of

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the thousands already meeting up face-to-face” (Anon. 2012). And Shiera remarked that a very labour-intensive administrative project she implemented while still heavily involved in the SCA—and which she viewed as an important instrument of community-making within the Kingdom—could, today, be accomplished quite easily by building a wiki that decentralized the collection and maintenance of information. In these cases, new technologies are being enrolled into long-standing, practically constituted tasks required by these communities.

On the other hand, the ability to form online communities was perceived as a driving force in the reformation of nerd culture over the past two or three decades. I’m refraining from calling them “virtual communities” because, despite persistent fears that computer-mediated communication is turning its users into digital anchorites, cultivating a seething underbelly of misanthropic sociopaths, or regressing us into texting simpletons, the communities organized through or around the internet (whether supplemented with face-to-face interaction or not) do not seem to be viewed as necessarily any less meaningful or authentic. Indeed, Shiera ranks her “guildies” and fellow beastmasters in Star Wars Galaxies as having much more communalized relationships than she experienced in the SCA, which is of course primarily oriented to interacting “in real life”:

It’s a different kind of group. Um::: I think that one of the things I find interesting about the Star Wars Galaxies, the beastmastery community is that we—most of us have never met. But we are closer to what we do and ... the fun we found than people who have got together in person. The SCA, being that it’s in-person ... sort of gives you the feeling that there should be more of a sense of “we belong together,” and yet it’s so much more personal and so much more ... um political and ... so that—I don’t think they have done that[...]

Digital resources and communication channels also create opportunities for people to weave their nerdy interests and engagements into the texture of their everyday life, particularly for those whose working day is spent in front of a computer. News and review
websites, blogs, podcasts, listserv messages, and forums were all ways of receiving information or communicating about nerd culture:

With the internet, you get knowledge a lot faster, you know. So, you have this this nerd hive brain kind of thing that—before the internet, where did you get this knowledge from? You know? You had to go to a bookstore, you had to go to a, you know, geek social place to find out, you know, where now you can stay at home. I can get much more information than I ever would have had being on the fringes of the community than ... I can be almost as informed as somebody in the heart of the community if I want to be. (Diana)

It seems that fandom is no longer a “weekend-only world” (Jenkins 1992, 277); nerd culture is now a constant presence wherever and whenever they have access to the web. But Barry, for one, feared that new modes of interaction, which encouraged extensive, diverse but ultimately only periodic and glancing contact, don’t foster the boots-on-the-ground commitments that fan communities need in order to thrive in the long run:

There’s a lot less face-to-face interaction, I guess, in terms of clubs and conventions, [...] Now, it’s more casual, loose ... you don’t know the people you’re talking to, or at least you’ve never met them. I mean, that can be a good thing. You’re talking to people who are farther away, in other cultures and stuff. But then you might not get to know them, further aspects. [...] When you’re in a club, to keep the club going, people have to commit to showing up on a certain day of the week at a certain time of day. If you just have an internet interest group, people can sign up, sign in and out, whenever they want. Both can work. But the second one doesn’t require ... the specific, more specific commitments.

I suspect neither argument will prove universally generalizable. Tensions between “broadcasting” and “narrowcasting,” promiscuousness and selectivity, and periodicity and pervasiveness will be fundamental features of community-making practices for the foreseeable future.

But the advent of online communities has already re-shaped how people imagine the communities of nerd culture. Wedge, for example, explained the internet’s role in compensating for nerds’ introverted personalities and connecting interested but isolated individuals into an online community of practice:
I think humans are social animals that kind of require that interaction and uh so when people don’t get it in their personal life, when they’re interacting face-to-face with people, then … they’ll tend to: go online and—and because sort of the … geeky pursuits … tend to draw people that are not necessarily as socially … um uh extroverted or forward um … they’ll tend to congregate online. I think uh … I think that’s part of it as well as they’re technologically—they tend to use technology, so they’re … they maybe, like I did, started out BBSes when they’re on computers, and then that kind of grew into larger uh communities and that sort of stuff.

And I think … yeah, I think … um … I think the internet is a big … is like probably the biggest thing, is that you can always find somebody who likes to do what you want to do. So if I like … I like painting miniatures, and there’s nobody in my small town that likes painting miniatures, I can go online and find videos of somebody painting miniatures, and so then … I’ll do that because I like doing that. So then people tend to do things they like to do because they’re no longer ostracized from—they may still be ostracized but they’re not … ostracized from everywhere. They have that connection and they can talk to somebody about it … and enjoy it, and then that fosters that … growth in everything, basically.

The internet is not only a means for circulating information but for real communication, which is always (at least potentially) communalizing. It offers sites where people can express their interests to and with one another and, in that interaction, form a kind of community. And, importantly, this fan activity leaves traces, cookie crumbs that can be followed. This creates visible, searchable paths into nerd culture for anyone who cares to look, and the commitment of time and effort is much lower than in the days of sending away for dittoed zines. As a result, the consummative practices of nerd culture are more accessible than perhaps ever before. It’s not for nothing that Boing Boing co-editor David Pescovitz has suggested “Find the others” as a motto for the internet and formerly emblazoned it on the blog’s homepage (Walker 2010).

20 This quotation from Timothy Leary suggests an attempt to construct affinities with the ’60s counterculture.
"Imagining communities" sounds wonderfully utopian. I think I've already shown that it involves real (if often pleasurable) work. But neither is it simply a matter of rolling up one's sleeves and participating. However desirable the rewards of nerd culture’s communities may be, life does not always accommodate our desires. People also act under a set of constraints that limit or otherwise distort their ability to participate as they would like. In some cases, there are adequate “workarounds”; in others, no straightforward solutions present themselves. When I asked them about the things that kept them from doing what they wanted, interviewees talked about three major limitations: money, time, and “real-life” commitments.21

The Price of Admission

I have already drawn attention to the way nerd-cultural practices usually rely on at least some commodities, or “equipment-goods” (Keat 2000), which are acquired through markets. The marketization of these practices is not only an abstract or philosophical problem; it imposes fundamental constraints on how and how much people can participate in these practices and the communities that have been built around them. It should come as no surprise that the financial cost of participating in nerd culture was one of the most commonly cited constraints.

A number of the practices and hobbies I discussed with my interviewees could quite easily be done on the cheap. However, costs generally rise with greater participation and, particularly, with greater emotional investment in the signs of legitimate commitment:

21 Other constraints mentioned more sporadically include limited access, barriers related to cliques and interpersonal conflict, and constraints related to mobility, distance, and travel (including Mr. Fox and Shiera, who had mobility-related disabilities).
BMW: Do you consider science-fiction fandom, is it in general an expensive hobby?
BARRY: It doesn’t have to be, no ... On the other hand, if you are buying all the DVDs, you know, of all the shows, it would probably add up pretty fast. Books—new books are pretty expensive these days, as well. [...] I mean, if one were a millionaire and didn’t have to worry about ... any of this stuff and spend 24 hours a day travelling to conventions around the world. So there will always be some kind of limitation ... and it’s actually best to make it a limitation or things can get out of control.

It depends on what—if you’re a casual gamer, no, it’s not an expensive hobby because most apps are free or ninety-nine cents, and it is actually killing the game market—goddamn cheap games; I hate that. But, yes, it’s fairly expensive. I mean, games run from ... forty to seventy bones or more if you’re getting’ the ... you know la-de-dah special edition ... so, yes, it’s expensive. (Mr. Fox)

SHIERA: People devote a lot of time and an awful lot of money to ... their focus. [...] Attending an [SCA] event is not a cheap thing. It’s cheap entertainment compared to modern entertainment standards. [...] By modern standards, it’s very cheap entertainment. But people put a lot of their ...

BMW: I guess if the specific fee to attend something isn’t very high, but the cost in terms of the amount of time it takes to prepare yourself and uh—

SHIERA: If you’re gonna be camping, you can do it the cheap, mundane way and hide away in a corner with your little dome tent and your little Coleman stove, or you can ... go all out, buy the pavilion or build it yourself, or uh you know build the stove, build the—you know, learn all those things. There’s an awful lot of investment into even just the camping in the SCA. [...] You’ll see it if you go to one of those camping events—they don’t camp light. They buy the big van so they can go to the big event with the big pavilion ((laughs)) which takes nine people to set up? and only two people sleep in it.

Status within the scene is not based on crude “pecuniary strength,” as Veblen ([1899] 1948) might say, but there are forms of authentic participation and kinds of subcultural capital that are more easily attained if one is willing and able to devote financial resources to it. And there is apparently no upper limit (within reason) to how much money could be devoted to the equipment-goods and accessories, particularly if travel can be counted among the possible expenditures. Comic books and miniatures gaming, by contrast, were described as particularly expensive practices:

BMW: How much money do you regularly spend on comics and comics-related things?
MR. FOX: [...] Seventy bucks a month, I guess. If it’s like a bad month, yeah, seventy. A bad month meaning there’s lots of good things coming out.
BMW: Yes. Good for your hobby, bad for your wallet. [...] Would you consider reading, collecting comics and expensive hobby?

MR. FOX: Oh, yeah.

Mostly because I can’t afford it. It was getting to be almost a hundred or a hundred fifty bucks a month, and it was just a little bit too much. So, I’m a little bit removed from the world of comics at the moment. (Solo)

Like, Warhammer is crazy expensive. (Mr. Fox)

It should be noted, however, that these costs are not necessarily out of line with those of similar levels of involvement in the other practices noted above. How “expensive” something is is a situated judgement based on financial circumstances, perceived value for money, and (I think in these cases, in particular) a sense that the financial outlay is somehow compulsory. Following comics means following a series month by month—possibly following a particularly beloved character across however many series the publishers decide to feature it in—and Warhammer isn’t Warhammer without the miniatures produced by Games Workshop, at whatever price the market will bear.

Diana, for one, made a clear distinction between geeky expenses that were small enough that they didn’t really “count” and those that that had to appear as a line in the household budget. However much they might add up to as a category, the former were perceived as merely discretionary spending, or “coffee money”:

BMW: How much money is involved in regularly, in participating in World of Warcraft?
DIANA: ((sighs)) More than I want. Um. Because we have the two accounts, I think it’s thirty bucks a month, which, again, isn’t ... isn’t that much and doesn’t, doesn’t stretch our budget. But we did have to re-budget, we had to re-do our budget to get thirty bucks a month. I’m not going to say we had to take it out of our budget ((laughs)) but we had to take it out of our food budget.

BMW: And ... uh:: I guess when you say that it’s more than you want, like, does that reflect that adding that second account? Is there less value for money for you?
DIANA: Yeah, it was, you know. And it’s also, like, as we said with like movies and TV and books, they’re free. You know, like, we can buy books, but you don’t have to buy books, you can get them from the library. They’re free. And the same with D&D. Once you bought the books or we have one subscription, because we’re able to have one subscription to Wizards of the Coast, it feels—you can do a lot with that one subscription, so it feels like it’s free. But with this, it just—
I don’t know why, it just doesn’t feel like it’s free, you know? And certainly having to- to have the two accounts, like if we had the one account, eh, fifteen bucks. That’s coffee money. You don’t really think about it. But when it goes up to thirty, for some reason, that’s not—that starts, as I said, that had to be a line item.

BMW: That’s like, you know, good coffee money.

DIANA: That’s good coffee money. (((laughs))) That had to be a line item on the budget, whereas fifteen bucks didn’t. You know, fifteen bucks was, oh, that’s just disposable, discretionary spending kind of thing, whereas—and I don’t know why. Like, what’s the difference between fifteen and thirty? Like, it’s not that much. But for some reason that seems to be crossing a line. And it’s like … it also feel like and we didn’t need to do that, you know? We were perfectly fine on the one account until we wanted to play together, and then suddenly it’s each of us has fifteen bucks.

She had earlier described herself as middle class, arguing that a middle-class upbringing stayed with you and informed your “way of being in the world,” no matter your current standard of living. That any category of spending can be regarded as below the threshold of budgeting is a good example of this. In contrast to the four informants who considered themselves, broadly, “middle class,” Mr. Fox and Shiera grew up in circumstances they described as poor. When I asked the others if they could ever felt like money kept them from participating, I usually received vague affirmations that they could have spent more or done more things. Mr. Fox’s and Shiera’s answers felt more immediate, though this could be due to my own knowledge of their circumstances:

Uh, when I was poor … as a child. That inhibited my buying of video games immensely … Uh when I was poor and a student. (Mr. Fox)

I don’t spend much money because I don’t have much money to spend. If I had of a discretionary income, I would spend more on geeky things. Um. I see … books, I’d probably buy a lot more books if I had more money. (((laughs))) I go to the library once a week. I usually take out five to seven books from the library every week. I read voraciously. (Shiera)

Although Mr. Fox said he now enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle, Shiera still dealt with economic constraint. She is unable to work and lives on a fixed income from disability benefits. Without much disposable income, being able to participate is, she says, “a question
of budgeting. If you budget, you can go. It’s just a question of knowing how much to budget.”

Like Diana, she plays an MMORPG and likes to play it with family members, and she has developed a complicated system of account rotation in order to manage the costs of good in-game citizenship:

Oh, I alternate which accounts are active. [...] I have four accounts. Only one is up all the time. Uh if I’m short on funds in a month, I’ll let the other ones fade[...] If an account is coming due that I don’t want to have re-upped, I’ll just move the money out of the account. That account will go dormant, then I’ll put the money back in for the account that I need it to be there for. I generally try to have at least two accounts running. [...] But if my middle son has expressed that he wants to play, that account will be up. If my older son has expressed that he wants to play, I’ll up his account. If my younger son wants to play, then I re-up his account. [...] But the other thing I can do, and I do ... i::s um ... instead of paying month by month, I have at least one account on every three months. That saves me a couple of dollars. If I schedule it right, and I know the boys are gonna be playing more consistently—like, I’m waiting for my brother to finish fixing my second computer. Once my second computer’s fixed, my youngest is gonna be playing pretty much constantly, so ... ‘cause we’ll both be able to play at the same time, we’ll be able to play together. That’s kind of why I do it um. In that case, I’ll have more than one account on the three-month-at-a-time. Then, we’ll just cycle through, so January it’ll be first account, February’ll be second account, March’ll be the third account, and then in April, it’ll be the first account again. [...] Because of the way citizenship works, I re-up each account at least every three months. So, there’s always two accounts up. It just depends which month it is which two accounts.

There are a number of ways to avoid costs—to “glean”—associated with participation in many nerdy practices. For SF fans, the most commonly mentioned way of reducing costs was using the public library. Buying used copies, whether from local used bookstores or searching online for deals, was another very common tactic. Although some interviewees (e.g., Solo and Wedge) expressed a preference for buying books over using the library, everyone also mentioned trading—both borrowing and lending—books as well as movies and games with their friends. Shiera was part of an elaborate ring of book-trading amongst her circle of friends, and since Wedge and his friends usually played with one another anyway, they kept tabs on what board games they owned to avoid duplication. Swapping is
a way not only to share costs but also to recommend and learn of new things. Networks of friends and acquaintances also featured as a resource for co-ordinating rides to events for Barry and Shiera, neither of whom owned a car. Downloading movies and television shows was a somewhat more controversial activity: some interviewees were opposed to such “piracy,” due to its impact on cultural industries and their workers; others had no such ethical quandaries and embraced downloading as a way of reducing costs. Finally, as Barry quipped, the most effective way to reduce costs is “simply staying away from the really expensive aspects of fandom.” Since “expensiveness” is a subjective evaluation, we cannot be sure how much this will impoverish individual experience, but as long as the equipment-goods of nerd culture are produced in a capitalist economy, there is only so much that these kinds of ad hoc strategies can accomplish.

Time Enough at Last

Many strategies for avoiding financial costs of participation involve paying more in the coinage of one’s time. But those lacking financial resources are not necessarily any richer in time, and using these tactics leaves one perpetually behind new developments in the field. Camping out on the library hold list, scouring used bookstores for a second-hand copy, and waiting for a friend to finish and pass it along all involve a different rhythm of circulation than the first-run economy. This creates a complicated temporality in nerd culture, with many participants lagging behind others—and, therefore, vulnerable to the threat of spoilers. Moreover, because the time someone devotes to a practice is taken as one of the principal indicators of engagement and commitment, struggling with these constraints is a fundamental feature of their experience of nerd culture:

And then you have the::: casual gamer who just likes to come out for a ... a game every once in a whi:::i.e. The:::y'll play a game when it's offered but not necessarily uh ... organize games or um go out of their way to play games ... and they may be ... more interested in the social aspect or just hanging out, which ...
I think maybe I am kind of a casual gamer? but I would play more games if I ... I kind of had the time because I really do ... enjoy ... doing it? (Wedge)

As I noted earlier, the problem of co-ordinating different people’s (more or less) busy schedules is an important component of the time constraints faced by my informants:

Time. Yeah. Just being able to find the time to do it, being able to find a night that works for everybody. (Diana)

MR. FOX: I have guys—I talk to my friends online about games and play together, that kinda thing. Throw down some ... Left4Dead or ... (Company of Heroes), that kinda stuff.

BMW: About how often does that happen?

MR. FOX: Two weeks or so, I guess? Depends when we have enough time to actually ... play. I mean ... for Left4Dead, you need four people. You need roughly four people for an hour and a half for one campaign, and rounding up four adults ... uh who all have full-time jobs, it’s not the easiest thing. It’s why our D&D campaign is kinda waffling.

For participants who involve themselves in several different parts of the scene, time constraints often involve scheduling conflicts or poor co-ordination of events. This is possible even within one community, as Barry noted when two SCA events fell on the same weekend:

BARRY: It’s too bad that they were going on at the same time. I don’t know how that happened. Normally, nearby events, they try to have them on different dates so that everybody can go to each of them.

BMW: I guess the calendar-the calendar seems pretty full this summer. I don’t know if that’s unusual.

BARRY: Well, it’s um—they’ve actually pared it down?

But it’s particularly true when someone is involved in regions of the scene that don’t habitually think of themselves as in “competition” for quite the same population of attendees.

Time constraints are, compared with financial costs, relatively intractable. The one bright side has been the growth in time-shifting technologies that permit greater control over media consumption. Rather than having to fit one’s schedule to those of the networks—especially if they are so foolish as to pit one fan-favourite show against another on the
broadcast schedule—programs can be viewed when it is convenient to the viewer. Barry still made use of the grandfather of time-shifters, the VCR, to record shows off the air, and Solo spoke in glowing terms of “TV–DVD,” by which she meant collections of TV series on home video:

That was nuts. I have a lot of TV–DVD. Well, that’s not that much there. But TV–DVD was huge. I mean, I had Buffy on VHS as soon as it came out on VHS. Like, I wanted it to be able to watch it at my own pleasure. I didn’t want ads; I hate ads … Yeah. That’s probably the biggest thing I’ve noticed.

But downloading audiovisual content also appeared as a tactical response to time pressures. For Solo and her friends, it was now the preferred method of time-shifting TV shows, but she not only viewed it as a way of customizing the schedule and avoiding ads but also as a superior, more immersive way of watching television:

SOLO: I watch TV in blocks, like I don’t watch it on TV anymore, it’s different. And I go into what I call “TV comas,” where just two weeks, I just watch one show for two weeks, and my brain is just melted by the end of it, but I just can’t stop. And there’s a lot—yeah, it just becomes so much content, though. Like, right now, it’s Mad Men, but … three weeks ago, it was The Wire, and that was rough.

BMW: So, you jumped through all of The Wire?
SOLO: Yeah, all five seasons in, like, three weeks.
BMW: I don’t know if that’s healthy.
SOLO: It’s complicated. ((laughs)) Like, “I’m sorry if I say the n-word; I’ve been in Baltimore for the last three weeks.” ((laughs))

Wedge reported a similar dynamic with e-books, which he had recently started reading in odd moments on a new smartphone, and anticipated doing more reading as a result. But there are some practices that can’t be time-shifted, particularly those that require the mutual co-presence of others, such as gaming. In these cases, the “workaround” may be little more than a compensatory mechanism for being unable to play:

Well, you certainly have uh like even for me because I don’t have time to play a lot, I’ll read stuff online or … participate in … forum discussions or … um … that sort of thing or: um … hmm. (Wedge)
A Sad Garden

Balancing leisure pursuits with the demands of “so-called real life” (Barry) is a constraint that every participant faces. To a certain extent, this is a function of time and money as well, but it also involves managing responsibilities that come from our necessary entanglements with other people, such as spouses, children, and friends. That is to say, it’s all fun and games until someone loses their job, ruins their marriage, or otherwise fails to make good one on their commitments.

We’ve already seen the rhetorical power of appeals to “real life” in distinguishing normal from over-involved (“bad”) participants. Moreover, fannish references to mundanes and GAFIA further speak to the significance of the symbolic opposition between real life and fantasy, which only re-expresses those between work/responsibility and leisure or constraint and freedom:

\[ \text{Gafiation} \] is such a good word. Yes, and it is understood in the SCA and in fandom in general that real life comes first. That you need to ... that you might have to pull out, and people shouldn’t resent you for it and you shouldn’t feel bad about it yourself beyond the fact that you know you’re missing out on some of the fun. (Barry)

Whereas mundanes might use the expression “getting away from it all” to describe a much-needed vacation from their responsibilities, fanspeak inverts its valence. As Sanders and brown (267) explain its origins, GAFIA was “originally used to mean turning away from the mundane world to join fandom,” but fandom has since become the “point of reference.” This suggests a complicated, ambivalent attitude to the relationship between these “extracurricular” cultural practices and everyday responsibilities. On the one hand, people recognize that real life is a source of rich, fulfilling experiences. On the other hand, it is the realm of necessity and can be experienced as a constraint on what “really” matters most to someone; indeed, it can completely prevent people from doing the things they find most enjoyable.
Given the ideological alignment of “free time” with freedom, its opposition to real life and responsibility is basic, and it appears in every case in this set of interviews. However, for the moment, I want to concentrate on Diana and Wedge. They are, roughly speaking, the same age and both have a spouse and young child. What distinguishes them is that Diana and her partner, Steve, are (in her words) a “geek family,” while Wedge's partner shares few of his nerdy interests. This point of comparison allows me to explore the ways that family life and adult responsibilities can limit participation.

Diana and her partner Steve met while in university, and they later moved to the city when Diana pursued graduate studies. Today, she runs a small business and he works as a software developer. When I talked with them about their library of SF&F novels, there was some lively back and forth about their different taste in books, but precisely the kind that is only possible when people agree on the broad contours of a canon and some shared landmarks in the field. They started playing D&D together seven years ago or so when invited by a friend who was starting up a group, and Steve now serves as their Dungeon Master. He is actually involved in a wider variety of nerdy practices than Diana—at one point, she said he is “more of a geek” than she is—but this doesn’t involve any necessary conflict, since nerd culture is a space where they equally feel at home:

    Every once in a while we’ll hold a painting party because Steve paints miniatures and a couple of our friends paint miniatures. So I’ll be there, but I don’t paint miniatures, you know but I’ll be there, probably playing World of Warcraft actually, but in the same room, so, you know, part of conversation. I can be part of the conversation, that kind of idea.

The recent arrival of their first child has (to understate things) introduced some new pressures into their life:

    BMW: Are there any other factors that limit or constrain your ability to participate as much as you might like to?
    DIANA: Baby. Baby. “Stupid baby, ((laughs)) taking me away from World of Warcraft.”
    [...] So, yes, obviously the baby really, well, my whole life I guess limits what I
can do, but other than that—sometimes Steve, ((laughs)) he’s like, “You have to get off the computer so we can, I don’t know, be social together.” It’s like, “Yeah, yeah, Steve.”

BMW: “Get your laptop.”
DIANA: ((laughs)) Exactly! “Grab the laptop, we’ll play together!”

But this has meant an evolution of her engagement with nerd culture, not its decline. For example, it was only after having Donna that they were introduced to *World of Warcraft* by a friend, who gave them a trial subscription. Skeptical at first, she found the game well suited to her maternity-leave schedule, since it rewards time invested but doesn’t necessarily require long sessions. However, parental responsibilities has introduced new dilemmas when it comes to co-ordinating activities with other community members:

I feel much more connected to [a friend who is also a parent] because we have that. You know, because he’s like, “I can only game one night a week because I have these other responsibilities,” where so many of our friends are childless and are like, “I don’t know why! We should be able to game all the time!”

Wedge would probably recognize this dilemma, too. He moved to the city a few years ago to be closer to his wife’s family. His job has him commuting quite far, but he has arranged to work from home twice a week. Although his wife will play and enjoy some board games and they have some shared sections of their bookshelf, Wedge says they have quite different tastes in, for example, movies and television shows, but it is in the realm of tabletop gaming where the tension between fun and family is most keenly felt: ”I’d probably … watch more movies and TV if my wife liked watching that kind of stuff, same as I’d probably play more games and stuff if my wife did those sorts of things.” In addition to playing board games socially, he’s a member of two regular RPG campaigns (though he admits one of them often devolves to just hanging out with friends), plays in a miniatures league, and has been involved in running ORG4. Wedge sounded almost sheepish whenever he admitted to conflict between these priorities—and note that, where Diana would talk about “the baby,” he almost always mentions his wife, rather than their daughter, as the decisive factor:
In my marriage, the lack of ... the lack of being able to game with my wife certainly divides our time [...] because generally I like to get out and game once a week or something like that, and I would love for her to be able to be involved because it would mean we'd get together a little bit more often with other people and interact that way.

Um most people would play two [Blood Bowl games on the monthly game days], but I::, in general, I will probably play one because I'll normally—I like to spread mine out. I like to play ... I'll play a game some time during the week, and then play one game on a game day so that—I find sometimes getting in and playing the same game for ... like, six or eight hours, and it also ... it's a little bit hard for my wife, just because then I'm gone all day. And that's once a month, so ... so it makes it a little hard, whereas if I'm just gone in the morning, come back, we have the afternoon to spend. And getting outside. ((laughs)) Saturdays tend to be real nice and bright out, but uh if I'm spending it inside all day, it ...

I like conventions. I think if I had—if I had more time ... or didn't have a wife ((laughs)) or something like that, I would go to conventions more often.

That is to say, his nerdy interests must compete with family for his attention, while, for Diana and Steve, gaming or going to see the latest sci-fi blockbuster is family time.²² I need to underscore that, although Wedge occasionally expressed the wish that his wife liked playing games more, he seemed perfectly happy. He mentioned, for example, that they shared other interests like hiking and going dancing (which also validated his claims to be a “well-rounded” participant). But, anecdotally, his situation is more common in the field than Diana and Steve's, a fact Diana herself noted:

Most of our geek friends, their wives aren’t, so we don’t see them because we, we game and we ... you know, we do ... even when you’re doing the stuff that isn’t directly gaming like miniature painting or Friday night fun night, they just don’t come because they have, they do different things, you know?

Indeed, jokes about “wives and girlfriends” that would have been tired in 1950s sitcoms are still current features of conversation in comic shops and at game days. There were numerous accounts of “guys” who have to sell off their comic-book collections or stop

²² Although they note that hiring a babysitter has inflated the costs of an evening at the cinema, making it prohibitively expensive for all but those films they judge as requiring the “big screen” in order fully to appreciate the spectacle.
playing games because they've married and of “bored girlfriends” being dragged along to conventions. For example, when I was interviewing STR4-p1, we started talking about age differences and life stages among gamers and comic fans. He cracked a joke, which led to a riff between him and two customers who were hanging around at the time:

STR4-p1: Nerds start when they’re kids, and they end when they die.
BMW: Okay. Um—
STR4-p1: Or when they get married.
CUST3: Yeah.
CUST1: And have to sell their collections because their wife doesn’t like looking at the miniatures.
CUST3: No, that’s true.
CUST1: ((shrill voice)) “You spent how much money on these!?"
STR4-p1: So, like, the marriage age is the time that you start having ... Like, you have a little garden of nerds. They start [as] little children, and then women come in and they kill lots of them. And some of them keep growing into big nerds, but many of them are taken away and re-planted in the married-with-kids garden.
CUST1: It’s a sad garden.
STR4-p1: It’s a ((laughs)) fucking sad garden.
CUST1: Full of wilted flowers.
STR4-p1: Full of wilted flowers that are stomped on by little children who don’t care.

This transforms the banal, pragmatic problem of managing commitments and priorities into an entirely different sort of beast. Along with the assumption that the default geek is male (even interviewees who seemed otherwise quite aware of the issue of gendered participation fell into this habit), the idea that women “spoil the fun” is perhaps the most basic and pervasive form of sexism I have encountered in nerd culture. But the women of this discourse are not actually existing women, only stand-ins for the responsibilities of adulthood.

*Mainstreaming and Change*

BMW: Right. So, because of that, I’d like to ask some questions about the changes in nerd culture and changes in the perception of nerd culture—
MR. FOX: Fire away.
BMW: —that maybe you’ve observed during your time.
MR. FOX: Yes. It became cool.
BMW: Pardon?
MR. FOX: It became cool.
BMW: Really?
MR. FOX: Yeah. Or, at least, accepted. And that ... that might just be my coming from a small town where ... nerd culture was me. And then going to the city where I could safely say, “I’m a game design student,” and have people say, “Aw, that’s awesome, man,” instead of, “Huh. Why you doin’ that?”

I recently followed a link to a video hosted by the webcomic cum game-culture portal Penny Arcade, and was surprised to find an ad for a line of organic children’s snack foods running before it. I wondered what those who cling to the stereotype of nerds and geeks as adolescents (or failed adults "living in their parents’ basement") would make of this—or of the accounts of managing the responsibilities of marriage and adulthood, mentioned above. As noted in chapter 1, there is a widely held belief that nerd culture, or at least its place in the general economy of lifestyles, is changing. This would seem to substantiate at least some of those claims.

The question of mainstreaming has been central to subcultures research since the CCCS days, and its particular view of the process has migrated into common-sense understandings, as well. "We all know" that marginalized groups generate novel, radical critiques of the mainstream that are expressed in some distinctive style, but that this style is gradually appropriated by outsiders—first as a mark of nonconformity and later as simply the latest fashion; as a result, the original critique is incorporated into the mainstream and diluted to nothingness. But this simple, familiar narrative needs to be re-evaluated in the case of nerd culture. Here, the issue of mainstreaming is much more ambivalent.

To start, there is the question of whether nerd culture is really “marginalized” in any meaningful way. Many of my informants raised the commercial success of cultural commodities that they associated with nerd culture as evidence of its newfound status. However, Solo argued vigorously that these properties have always been mass-market, commercial behemoths:
I was definitely indoctrinated into the—when the prequels came out, I was 10. I was, like, the target demographic, and it worked. I mean, most of the fandom stuff, and even most of my nerdy stuff, I would argue it’s more of a—especially the *Star Wars* connection? I mean, we were targeted and it worked. So, it’s not really counterculture at all. Like, people see me in a *Star Wars* hoodie, and they’re like, “Wow! That’s really nerdy!” And I’m like, “Are you kidding me? *Star Wars* is the most mass-merchandised entertainment item there is.”

I see it in a lot of, a lot of—you know, outcast culture ... but where people are throwing themselves into the periphery by denying the fact that there’s a mainstream for it. Like, anybody who holds onto their “I’m a loner because I like comic books” is an idiot because comic books are incredibly cool right now, and you can be as cool as you want to be simply throwing those names around and being, you know, being a nerd is actually really, yeah, it’s pretty hip right now. (laughs) So, holding onto that sort of stuff is just, like, just doing it to yourself, and I have no sympathy. (laughs) No sympathy!

She certainly has a valid point that the nerdy cultural texts may have niche appeal, but those are niches of the *mass* media. However, *Star Wars* being a mass-audience phenomenon and financial success does not mean that the audience practices that led some of its viewers to nerd culture were as widely distributed. I doubt that the average cinema-goer, for example, followed the Expanded Universe spin-off novels and participated in fan-fiction circles the way Shiera did—or collected *Star Wars* LEGO sets the way that Solo does, for that matter.

And I should not be as quick as she was to discount the subjective experiences of marginalization—and subsequent recuperation—that some of my informants described:

**MR. FOX:** Uh ... mostly it’s different because ... I don’t feel weird about it anymore. I don’t get the sense of people judging me for my hobbies. It’s no longer a step above being a dope fiend. […]

**BMW:** How much did that sense of, I guess, stigma um—

**MR. FOX:** How much did that affect me?

**BMW:** Yeah.

**MR. FOX:** Quite a bit when I was back home. People thought I was ... the strangest of guys because I liked to read comics and play games and such. They didn’t understand how a guy who’s 19, 20 could be interested in these things because it's all ... kids’ stuff.

As they say, the only constant is change, but interviewees of course produced different interpretations of its costs and benefits to nerd culture. A major component of
mainstreaming is, as I alluded to above, changing demographics. Informants almost universally affirmed that nerd culture's participant base was now more diverse than it was when they began. Although Diana, for example, still lamented the lack of media representations of women geeks, she said that things had improved for women in real life: “I don’t get the stares being a woman walking into a game shop[...] That’s not as unusual as it once was.” And Solo traced the creation of new paths from the gendered children’s culture of tween girls into nerd culture:

Kevin Smith has this wonderful quote where he’s standing in the back of the theatre when they were doing a trailer screening of Twilight when Jacob takes his shirt off? And he was like, “And the room just went wet,” that’s his quote, and he’s like, “You know, I don’t really understand all these people hating on Twilight. What they don’t understand is that what they’re building is an army of twelve-, thirteen-, fourteen-year-old girls that are going to grow up wanting, like they’re going to grow up being a part of all this.” And that’s what Buffy did, too, it opened—it was the shoe for the foot in the door for a lot of nerdy culture.

Although gender was raised most frequently, it was not the only axis along which informants registered change. Mr. Fox described increasing gender and ethnic diversity, and associated a rising average age among video gamers with increased “sophistication.” But for Barry aging was a threat to the sustainability of some communities. He feared that the new entrants to the field were largely ending up in newer communities of practice, while more “traditional” fandoms, such as SF literature, were looking significantly greyer than when he started out. Solo registered a similar tension between comic-book and media fans at the San Diego Comic-Con, which she attended in 2011:

Whereas the younger fans, like..., were more into media, more into cartoons and television, less into comics. Like, it’s weird because it’s Comic-Con, so you feel like you’re okay if you’re a nerd, but you’re still a nerd if you’re into comics. (((laughs)))

These last comments begin to suggest some downsides to the mainstreaming process. When a culture that acts as a sanctuary for the “uncool” is dubbed the latest thing, it’s bound to have significant impacts on members’ self-identity. Insofar as this shared experience of
alienation from the majority of mass culture was a key component (along with mutual orientations to shared social practices) of the communal sensibility, it may also result in a loss of group identity:

When I mentioned my mom calling herself a gamer and self-identifying as a gamer because she plays a Facebook game ... I’m like, “Mom, you weren’t a gamer when you played Monopoly. Why are you a gamer because you play Frontierville?” [...] When you dilute a culture to that extent that uh ... everyone particle in that, you know, that even vaguely touches the sides of the yogurt tub have now declared themselves yogurt. It’s not yogurt! But it’s declared itself yogurt and therefore it is—self-identification has a drawback. Um ... and it’s not the drawback of stigma. It’s the drawback—uh the drawback of the dilution of the term until it loses all meaning. Music geek. How would you be a music—how are you a music geek? When I was growing up, you could be a band geek, but if you listen to ... Led Zeppelin and Van Halen, you weren’t a geek! Now people who listen to Led Zeppelin and Van Halen self-identify as geeks, hard-rock or early rock geeks. They don’t even specify; they’re just music geeks. I’m like, “Okay, if I play you, you know, Beethoven—” “No, no, I’m not that kind of music geek.” “What kind of music geek are you, then?” (Shiera)

And yet there is no consensus about the ultimate impacts of the mainstreaming of nerd culture. Perhaps it is no more than a fad: the mass audience will grow tired of superheroes, the spectacle of cosplayers will wear off, and nerd culture will return to being a sleepy, poorly understood corner of our media culture. But perhaps not—perhaps SF&F and games and graphic literature will be integral parts of the media sector for the foreseeable future and fannish expertise will become a widely traded form of cultural capital. What would it mean to be a nerd then? Barry and Dianna offered two different pictures of a “post-fandom” world:

If everybody became a fan? No, I don't think we’re losing anything, unless it’s displacing interests which are equally valid and important. I mean, I don’t want our society to lose things. Most things. ((laughs)) None of us can do everything, and if something grows, something else must diminish in our lives. I would think. On the other hand, different aspects of our lives can enrich each other and can communicate to each other, so there might be enough overlap and ... anyway. (Barry)

It loses its community. Um. Because, and that’s not necessarily a bad thing, because before it was just a little tiny group of people who are geeks and they
all interact, but it can be very insular. Um. So, now that there’s more people in
it, it’s a much more vibrant? Much more going on kind of thing. But at the same
time, it loses its community so it can be stretched and pulled and changed in
ways that it wouldn’t necessarily have wanted to be. (Diana)

For Barry, any constraints are individual problems of management; nerd culture can expand
to embrace anyone who should like to join us. For Diana, however, expansion also meant
the weakening of community ties, which could signal either a fannish renaissance as old
gatekeepers and barriers are removed from the field or an end to the community’s
autonomy. Yet she also expressed hope that geeky dedication would preserve the
consummative practices of nerd culture through it all—that is to say, the nerds you shall
always have with you:

I think there will always be the core geeks, you know, core nerds in their *Star
Trek* uniforms ((laughs)) that when it stops being popular and it stops being you
know the in, hip thing and goes back to obscurity, they’re still gonna be there,
you know.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter has provided a picture of nerd culture from the point of view of six people who
participate in one Canadian city’s nerd-culture scene. Or, more precisely, it has provided an
interpretation of those points of view. I don’t want to claim that this is the definitive account
of the meaning of being a nerd today, but I think that exploring my informants’
experiences—and the categories that they use to make sense of them—can provide some
depth that has been mostly absent from mass-media representations and the academic
commentaries on those representations. For one thing, the complexity of these accounts
discounts any simplistic claims about the resistive character of fandom or the legitimation
of the nerd in our network/information/knowledge society. Nerds sometimes experience
their practices as stigmatized by mundane society, and sometimes they view them as the
epitome of where we are all heading.
But if there is a single lesson to be drawn from this account of nerd culture, it is that social practices oriented to cultural forms can provide the basis for lasting forms of social organization, for meaningful experiences, and for a distinctive form of life, if only they are taken “seriously” by their practitioners. Bauman is certainly correct that community is a project, but it is not a project that can be accomplished separately. It is a collective, social accomplishment—how could it be otherwise? One person can play games, watch sci-fi movies, or read comics. One person can even do a lot of organizational work and stage an event. But only a group can, by their mutual orientation to a shared practice and the cultural forms that it generates, make a community.
Conclusion: Internalizing Community

In December 2011, Susana Polo, a writer for the female-oriented geek culture blog, The Mary Sue, posted two clips from an upcoming episode of the NBC sitcom, Community. One was an animated sequence that parodied the style and clichés of shonen (i.e., “boys”) anime. The other featured the borderline-autistic film student, Abed (Danny Pudi), dressed up as Batman and doing his best Christian Bale impression. At the time, Community (then partway through its third season) was about to be put on hiatus by the network, leading many to speculate about its future, while another nerd-centric comedy, CBS’s Big Bang Theory, was emerging as one of the most popular shows on television. This led Polo to compare the two:

Is Community the anti–Big Bang Theory? Where instead of presenting geek stereotypes as crazy people who have trouble functioning in normal society, they present normal society as full of crazy people with geeky interests all trying to function together? You know, like actual society? (¶7)

The comparison is, obviously, about much more than two TV series. Rather, she is staging a debate between two ways of imagining nerd culture and its relationship to the mainstream.

At one level, this debate is about the relevance of the old nerd stereotype—and all the variations discussed in chapter 1—in a post-Revenge world. For example, the nerds of Big Bang Theory are young men ensconced in the world of science and basically defined by their (stereo)typically geeky interests; Community’s Spanish study group is an ethnically diverse group of men and women in different life stages and circumstances. But I’ve argued that these images and labels can only be understood as part of a social process of drawing symbolic boundaries, both around the field of nerd culture and between its participants. So, at another level, it is about nerd culture’s status as a distinct field and about what counts as “authentic” membership. Big Bang Theory seemingly represents nerds as a breed apart but one that is so inwardly focused that it produces comically impoverished people, while
Community shows them coming out of the game store and into the streets (as it were), their distinction from the ordinary person dissolving even as they challenge the definition of ordinariness. This tension has appeared under different guises in this dissertation: in distinctions between believers in “geek exceptionalism” and those who tried to normalize away any potential inferences about them, between “introverted” and “extroverted” intermediaries, and between those who see danger and those who see opportunity in the mainstreaming of nerd culture. These debates are just as much about their community’s future as its present.

But there is another dimension here that must be considered: Both of these “trajectories” are being offered by Hollywood studios and major television networks. That is, they are both money-making ventures hoping to find a sufficiently large viewership (whether among nerds, mundanes, or some mix of both) to entice advertisers. The Mary Sue isn’t exactly an amateur project, either; it’s a business, part of the Abrams Media Network, which co-ordinates ad sales across seven websites. So all three are in the business of buying and selling, but none is exactly a product—and, as the saying goes, if you aren’t paying for the product, then you are the product. In the world of Marxist communication studies, Dallas Smythe (1977; [1981] 2000) formulated this same insight through the concept of the audience commodity. More recently, Web 2.0 technologies/discourses and the related paradigm of user-generated content has revived interest Smythe’s concept (cf. Hesmondhalgh 2010). Eileen Meehan (2000; see above, chap. 3) showed how this idea applied to fan communities in her analysis of the relationship between Paramount and Star Trek fans. But I want to frame it a little differently because extracting value from nerd culture has involved more than just organizing audiences.

What distinguishes a fandom from an aggregate of individual viewers (however committed they might be) is that many, if not all, of its members are self-conscious of their
participation in a shared cultural milieu. Whether SF&F fans, comic-book collectors, gamers, or cosplayers, they are oriented to a field produced by their shared practices. To put it another way, we might say that a fan community is an audience für sich. But this is by no means guaranteed. If being a nerd is something one does, as entailed by the notion of subcultural practices I have used in my analysis, then it is also something one can stop doing, and community proves a fragile thing indeed.

In the first—or is it the final?—instance, we have the problem of the economic base of these practices and the organizational constraints it introduces. This was clearest in my discussion of the nerd-culture scene’s cultural intermediaries (chap. 3). Some of these spaces were more deeply entangled with the cultural industries, acting as markets for equipment-goods or organizing opportunities for their use and consumption, but they all had to grapple with what they and their members or customers can afford to do. But the problems of nerd culture’s economic and organizational conditions of possibility also figured significantly in my analysis of the limits and constraints on individual participation (chap. 4). So, while the brute fact that much of nerd culture’s raw materials are produced as cultural commodities does not dictate its content in any straightforward way, that it is part of a larger capitalist economy in which most people rely on wage labour does “set limits” and “exert pressures” (Williams [1980] 2001, 153) on the forms of participation that people engage in. Many of these limits and pressures are relatively benign, but others prevent members from participating as they would otherwise like and, perhaps, from participating altogether.

But the discursive and practical work of community-making is social in even more fundamental ways. For instance, what I have spoken of as “performing” or “imagining” community, in its many, quotidian forms, could also be described as a more or less conflictual process of struggle over the boundaries of the field of nerd culture. Bourdieu
(1983; 1996) argues that every field has an internal tension between those members who seek to preserve existing, internally defined (i.e., “autonomous”) principles of legitimation and those who would introduce new, externally defined (i.e., “heteronomous”) ones. In the field of cultural production, for example, the great divide is between the avant-garde sub-field of restricted production, whose members produce for other cultural producers and are fully invested in their own canons of taste and legitimacy, and the sub-field of general production, which is oriented to the mass audience and where commercial success reigns supreme. The definition of the relevant practices is, like valued forms of capital, both means and ends of the struggle. We need to see everyday processes of classification and evaluation as part of this on-going process, as in my interviewees’ efforts to explain “the” difference between nerd and geek in chapter 1. They are also central to the introverted and extroverted dispositions amongst intermediaries and, of course, to people’s attitudes towards mainstreaming and change, more generally. Bourdieu’s sympathies were obviously with those occupying the field of restricted production (even as he subjected the aesthetic disposition held by the corresponding class fraction up to withering critique in Distinction), but there is no obvious reason to back one horse or the other.

For that, we must return to MacIntyre. His distinction between internal and external goods in some ways matches Bourdieu’s between the autonomous and heteronomous principles. But MacIntyre is much clearer and arguably more nuanced in his understanding of the relationship between the two. Recall his definition of a practice, which gives us good reasons for favouring internal goods over external ones:

By a “practice” I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. ([1981] 2007, 187)
First, they are unique; they’re intrinsically valuable skills and experiences that can be got in no other way. Second, these skills and experiences enrich practitioners’ lives. They cultivate the virtues and allow for the development of a teleological conception of the self as a member of a tradition with a role in a community that entails certain responsibilities and privileges. Third, like most practice theories, MacIntyre’s provides the basis for a shared form of life—that is, an intersubjectively valid but (because it is given by the practice) not merely consensual framework for co-ordinating action and, more significantly, for reasoning and judging together. Fourth and finally, as mentioned in chapter 2, this account accords with the moral intuition that something undertaken for its own sake is more praiseworthy than something done (e.g.) for personal gain.

By now, it should be clear why I think that nerd culture is worth our attention. I hope that you’ve recognized something of your own concerns in the practices I’ve described. Nerd culture is an example of a group (there are undoubtedly others equally deserving of study) that has maintained substantive cultural practices in the midst of a bureaucratic–rational society and carved out a *gemeinschaftlich* sphere of accommodation within *Gesellschaften*. The goods internal to the consummative practices I’ve been examining in this dissertation are genuine goods that are meaningful and important to real people. But is the “sense of community” one such good? It fails the uniqueness test—as we’ve seen the ethical duties and the rewards of fan communities are not considered radically different from those related to membership in any other community. More importantly, as central as community-making is to nerds’ focal practices, I doubt many of them would say they developed their hobbies and leisure activities in order to join a community. It is, rather, that their efforts to secure the knowledge and material goods they need to continue their practices necessarily entangle them with other people in a more or less definite social milieu that is structured (but not wholly determined) by institutions that act as markets,
venues, and networks. The orientations they share with these others give rise to the sense of belonging and fellow-feeling that we call “community.” Its benefits are not insignificant (that much should be clear), but they are produced almost incidentally.

But it isn’t quite an external good, either (at least not yet). If goods external to a practice are “goods of effectiveness”—that is, they extend our capacities to get things done with respect to our practices—then it is hard to see what tasks the subjective feeling of being part of a tradition and community enables; this is not primarily about instrumental communication and co-ordinating action. Although participation in these communities may well generate social capital, the sense of community isn’t itself a form of capital and neither can it be converted directly into wealth or status. To borrow a term from economics, we could think of it as an “externality” of cultural practices. I’m suggesting that, like all scenes, nerd culture is “overproductive” (Shank 1994, 122). The transactions and interactions that nerds and geeks undertake for their own reasons—the everyday hanging out, messing around, and geeking out, to borrow from Ito et al. (2010), in which nerd life consists—produce unintended consequences or side-effects. Foremost among these “spillovers” is the communalization of the social relationships involved. Again, consummative practices are not only about consumption but also a form of immaterial labour—that is, “labour that produces immaterial products, such as information, knowledges, ideas, images, relationships, and affects” (Hardt and Negri 2004, 65).

As externalities of everyday participation in nerd-culture practices, these immaterial/affective products are up for grabs. Indeed, the new-found commercial success and mainstreaming visibility of nerd culture is about “capturing” or “expropriating” them as much as it’s about the inherent appeal of these texts and activities concerned. The producers of Big Bang Theory and Community—and The Mary Sue’s bloggers, for that matter—are not simply organizing and selling access to an audience. They are more fully
externalizing the goods of participation in the practices of nerd culture, seeking to commodify them as sign value that can be attached to their products. Without demeaning the contributions of the screenwriters, actors, directors, and “below the line” craftspeople who have worked on Marvel’s recent *Avengers* film sequence, for example, its tremendous commercial success has only been possible because of the work of generations of comic-book creators and fans who have sustained and enriched these characters, concepts, and settings over the years, “investing” in them and thereby creating valuable intellectual property that can now be marketed to a global audience of moviegoers. The same could be said for any of the last decades’ deluxe big-screen adaptation of fan-favourite texts. The appeal of these films is not only snappy dialogue, thrilling action, or impressive special effects; it is also the way they make available—for a price—rich fantasy worlds that were previously enjoyed only by dedicated fans, the feeling of being part of a community of practice, and the ability to say with Russell Smith (2007; see chap. 1) and countless others, “I have these dweebie interests.” But I don’t want to fall back into a lament for nerd culture’s lost authenticity. As I’ve said, community is always already gone anyway. Instead, we need to see clearly the opportunities and dangers for community-making in the present situation.

As I showed in chapter 1, the revenge of nerds is in a state of perpetual becoming but never seems to be complete. And, despite some of the rosy claims my informants made about the destigmatization of nerd culture, many of the negative stereotypes persist. More people may accept comics, games, SF&F, and so on, as legitimate forms of cultural expression and unremarkable leisure interests, but it is nonetheless still possible to be a “bad nerd” (Kendall 2011, 510–11): a greasy, misanthropic troglodyte who dwells in a parental basement, subsisting on Cheetos and Mountain Dew, and only ventures out under the Yellow Face if absolutely necessary, preferring to troll message boards online and get into flame wars. Of course, no one is this stereotype, and yet it continues to feature in media
and popular discourse as a kind of warning not to be too nerdy. The meaning of nerd and geek is always negotiated in definite social contexts, and who is a “good nerd” or a “bad nerd” depends on who is speaking and about whom.

But if these membership categories are principally about marking consubstantiality and social distance, then we might well ask why nerd and geek have become so widely used, even outside of nerd culture’s core practices: What does a gourmand mean when he describes himself as a “food nerd”? What does a hipster gain by calling herself a “music geek”? Shall we start saying “sports nerd” instead of “hockey fan”? Lots of people like to eat, listen to music, and watch sports, but those claiming the title nerd or geek are trying to distinguish themselves from the mass audience: they care more and devote more of their time to developing expertise about these objects. The proliferating discourses of nerd identity have made these categories available as a way for people to talk about what matters most to them. It is a democratic, even populist, rhetoric for legitimating consummative practices regardless of their status in the conventional hierarchies of culture. Based on my interviews, I would hazard that most nerds and geeks would be happy that these words have become synonymous with caring deeply about something. And yet the specific goods and practices composing nerd culture that I have discussed in this dissertation should not be forgotten as we enter the brave nerd world that has such people in it.

The question, then, is how we might internalize the externalities of nerd culture’s practices, and thus protect the field’s autonomy and the continuity of its practical traditions. Perhaps, in a perfect world, practices could flourish all on their own, but MacIntyre makes it clear that, in this one, practitioners cannot simply do without external goods and the institutions that manage and distribute them. The challenge is to organize our social institutions in such a way that external goods always support the pursuit of internal ones,
rather than undermining or displacing them. That is, we must keep ends and means straight. As Russell Keat (2000) argues, there are better and worse—more and less practice-friendly—markets, a point which can be extended to venues, networks, and communities in general. I have shown, for example, that market relations are embedded in personal and moral relationships and how what seems rational to intermediaries is at least partly a product of their own experiences as participants. When contained by the cultural and ethical norms of the community of practice, this kind of marketization strikes me as relatively benign. Indeed, the selling of nerd culture arguably—and this was the fervent hope of many of my interviewees—reduces some of the traditional barriers to entry, "democratizing" the ability to participate. It's when the habits of *homo œconomicus* take over—as in extreme cases of speculation and gleaning—that there is reason to be concerned.

In this area, cultural policy interventions, particularly at the civic/municipal level, can offer tools and resources to communities like those making up nerd culture. Cultural policy at the federal level is generally oriented to the production and broadcasting of high or upper-middle culture. The publics of the traditional arts—and the general public—might well balk at the prospect of funding or otherwise committing to support comic books, games, and other "low" forms of art and literature. And yet the state ought not to be deciding on the worthiness of any taste culture. While holding onto his high-culture ideals, Herbert Gans ([1974] 1999, 176) admits it's unlikely the mass audience will ever be converted and calls for a new cultural policy of "subcultural programming":

Instead of the present programming system, which provides content cutting across and thus compromising the standards of several taste publics and serving some not at all, subcultural programming would create for every taste public the specific culture which expresses its aesthetic standard.... Subcultural programming would enable audiences to find content best suited to their wants and needs, thus increasing their aesthetic and other satisfactions and the relevance of their culture to their lives. In addition it would considerably increase
cultural diversity, enhancing and enriching American culture as a whole, high and low.

Many would suggest that digital communication and crowdsourcing has deprecated this proposal before it was ever seriously adopted. It’s true that the field of cultural production has developed all sorts of new nooks and crannies, though how many of them provide “good work” for creators is another matter (cf. Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). But my research in nerd culture certainly demonstrates that production is not the only or even main problem so much as creating opportunities for the elaboration of consummative practices. That is to say, while there is indeed room for improvements in terms of diversity and working conditions, existing market institutions are pretty good at making cultural commodities. However, they have fewer incentives to support communities of critics and connoisseurs, especially over the long term as the marginal utility of their consummative labour declines.

Municipal cultural planning units and parks-and-rec departments have been more likely to produce spaces for cultural consumption and are sensitive to a wider range of stakeholders, among which existing nerd-culture organizations might find a place. Local museums, community centres, libraries, and art galleries are all civic cultural institutions that could partner with subcultural institutions to support existing practitioners and make practices available to wider publics without converting them to commodities. The aforementioned Toronto Comic Arts Festival, which is currently held at the Toronto Reference Library, is one exemplar; another is the annual National Gaming Day @ Your Library, which seeks “to reconnect communities through their libraries around the educational, recreational, and social value of all types of games” (American Library Association 2012). At a smaller scale, civic institutions can still do much: for example, community centres could provide venues for groups like those included in this study to host
screenings, game days, and even small-scale conventions; libraries could open up their service-planning and acquisitions processes to input from organized representatives of different taste publics; and schools could connect interested young people with the communities that can “apprentice” them through extracurricular programs. A careful balance needs to be maintained between making these practices accessible and ensuring the viability of the existing institutions that support them. However, the retailers I have spoken with are, to a one, invested and committed to promoting their focal practices: what’s good for gaming is good for game stores, what’s good for comics is good for comic shops, and so on. So this tension can be managed if impacts on a scene’s infrastructural resources are accounted for when developing partnerships and events.

However, even the friendliest policy interventions can only do so much. If nerd culture is to secure its autonomy in the face of changes that would enclose the “common culture” (Williams [1968] 1989) its members have created over generations of fans, then participants must also internalize the orientations and dispositions that provide the basis for community-making practices. This dissertation is meant to help, not by proposing solutions—which would be a curious sort of autonomy—but by putting together a case for a way of thinking about nerd culture. I’ve suggested that we should consider the individual acts of consumption, criticism, and socializing around our favourite things as making up a practice in the strong, MacIntyreen sense. Orienting to these activities as if they were practices of this sort, rather than a kind of casual leisure, is the best way to secure and preserve the real goods that I and many others have found in participation. This means also recognizing our relationship to a community of practice and the roles, obligations, and duties that follow from it. Nerd culture’s practitioners are also practical reasoners. I’ve tried to show places where I think the lay theories that my interviewees offered are insightful and help us all to think through our relationships with media, culture, and communities, as
well as places where I think they distort what’s really going on. They must decide for themselves whether my account is persuasive, for it is up to them to shape the future of nerd culture—but of course the future has always been their stock in trade.
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Appendices
A. PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCH SITES

This appendix contains brief profiles of study participants and research sites. These are intended to act as a reference for the reader and to provide additional, contextual information for the extracts used elsewhere. Participants were given an opportunity to review their profile for factual accuracy, though not all responded.

Phase 1: Organizations and Retail Stores

The first phase of research included four organizations and five retail stores, which have been assigned alpha-numeric code-names. Primary informants, site type, year of founding or establishment, location type, and key activities of all nine sites are summarized more schematically in Table 1 (p. 11).

ORG1: Nerdy Film Society

ORG1 is a registered non-profit society that produces events for local nerds, most of which are built around a screening or series of screenings and augmented with live performances and participatory activities of various types. These events have included Star Trek and Ghostbusters mini-conventions, a festival of films by Japanese animator Hayao Miyazaki, a science documentary, and a popular series of screenings where attendees can watch old cartoons in their pyjamas and buy bowls of sugary breakfast cereals.

The group’s president, ORG1-p1, and two friends originally came together in 2008 to organize an event with horror writer H.P. Lovecraft’s “Cthulhu mythos” as its theme. This event comprised a screening of the 2005 independent film, Call of Cthulhu, a Rock Band video game contest, and a concert by his band, The Lovecrafts. Following the success of the original Cthulhufest, the three organizers decided to form a more permanent group for producing similar events. As ORG1-p1 said in an interview, “I don’t know, I just like getting people together for nerdy stuff. I feel like [sports fans …] have their playoffs and they have their venues[...] so I guess I kind of felt there was this hole that needed to be filled for getting nerds together.”

The original organizers recruited a group of officers, including a treasurer and accountant, a media specialist, and a volunteer co-ordinator. Volunteers were also recruited for help with promotion and running larger events. The group was eventually registered as
a non-profit society. This suggests a level of professionalization that—while pursued in order to reduce the officers’ workload—was not routinely attained. Staff meetings had an informal and chummy tone and were frequently interrupted for unrelated conversation. Furthermore, in interview, ORG1-p1 espoused values of amateurism ("I do find that a couple of people might show up and complain about a certain level of professionalism with our ticket handling or whatever, but, really, we’re not hiring people. It’s just a group of friends who are doing this") and indicated that tasks were delegated on a relatively ad hoc basis ("If a person’s really busy, then they’re not going to be able to do the stuff that needs to get done for that responsibility, so we just kind of hash it out").

Although the group has faced numerous constraints, which are discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, it has been among the most successful groups within the scene for combining audiences from a number of different constituent hobby communities. This is most evident in the sponsorship and cross-promotional agreements that the group has secured with a variety of subcultural businesses and organizations, both locally and outside of the local scene. These include comic book and game stores, conventions, role-playing and video game developers and publishers, a local chapter of an international computer graphics society, and the National Film Board of Canada. Although these partnerships represent the considerable social capital of group organizers, they also suggest that media fandom—most especially for texts that evoke nostalgia—provides a point of articulation for participants in the relatively diverse and independent communities that are associated with nerd culture.

ORG1 uses a variety of means for promoting its events. It is heavily reliant on social media, such as Facebook. A poster service is hired to advertise major events, though ORG1-p1 suggests that their budget for this service is inadequate. Volunteers also distribute flyers to subcultural businesses as well as cafés.

Events were initially all held at a small commercial movie theatre, for which one of the group’s founding members works. However, renting the theatre proved too expensive in the long run for a venue with a much larger capacity than actually needed for most events. More recently, the cartoon screenings have taken place at an artist-run centre focussing on video art. These screenings have also become members-only in an effort to circumvent licensing requirements and provide access to the most popular vintage cartoons, many of which are not currently available commercially.
ORG2: *Anime* and Gaming Club

ORG 2 is a university club primarily focussed on anime (Japanese animation) fandom and gaming activities but with evident support for a variety of nerd-associated interests. During the period of data collection, regular activities included weekly anime screenings, often paired with a “special presentation” that was not necessarily an anime and frequently followed by some kind of social activity (e.g., dinner at a restaurant, bowling, laser tag, or karaoke); weekly gaming nights, including several on-going *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns in addition to more drop-in style gaming (e.g., *Magic: The Gathering*); and cosplay workshops that culminated in photo-shoots of completed costumes. The primary informant, ORG2-p1, was club president during data collection but subsequently resigned the office upon graduation.

Due to the high turnover inherent in university organizations, the club’s history is not entirely clear. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that it began in the mid- or late-1970s as a gaming club:

> You know, I actually, I talked to someone at the student union, and I asked, “Could you please find the earliest documents that you can that would indicate exactly what year the club started.” And he couldn’t because they were so old. The club’s actually been around since the late ’70s. I think it was ’76 or ’77 that it started[...]. It started along with *Dungeons & Dragons*, basically.

At some point in the mid- or late 1980s, the club began to encompass anime fandom, though it is not clear whether members who were also anime fans began to incorporate it into club activities or if there was a separate anime club that eventually merged with ORG2. The emphasis between these two primary components of the club’s “mandate” has shifted over time, and there have been periods when they have composed two solitudes within the group or one has entirely overshadowed the other; however, ORG2-p1 reports that now “pretty much everybody is open to everything or was a fan of everything to begin with.”

As a university club, the ages of participants are relatively delimited. While it is reported that arts majors once dominated, the club’s membership is now primarily drawn from the natural and applied sciences (especially computer science). The social atmosphere is typical of nerd culture. Many members either exhibit a shy and reserved interpersonal style or are effusive and act out in a way reminiscent of a class-clown type. Meetings and events are always punctuated by shouted comments, often making media references.
Demographically speaking, however, ORG2 is noteworthy in one respect. ORG2-p1 estimates that approximately 50 percent of the club’s membership is female. He further reports that when he first joined ORG2, the club had more female than male members. This is attributed to the heavily female make-up of anime and manga fandoms. At early meetings, this was less obvious—indeed, ORG2-p1 made an announcement at the year’s first general meeting to assure newcomers that “there are more girls in the club”—but over time, the gender ratio of attendees tended to even out. Gender balance is also self-consciously incorporated into the club’s promotion and recruitment strategies, as ORG2-p1 is concerned to portray it as a safe space for women fans and “not just composed of a bunch of creepy guys who just kind of sit around in a dark room all day.” Women appear to be active in all the major club activities, and a number of women serve as officers in the club executive. However, they (with one notable exception) tend to be quieter and are thus often overshadowed by louder, attention-seeking male members.

In many ways, ORG2 seems the most pure instantiation of contemporary nerd culture as it is expressed online. Not only do its events and activities mirror the articulation of interests found on nerdy web sites, but the group members’ interactions are funded by references to texts and phenomena that circulate on the Internet (so-called “memes”). For example, members share a particular enthusiasm for the web forum 4chan, and many in-jokes are references to this web site. ORG2-p1 says, “If there’s any alienating aspect to our club maybe it’s the appreciation for Internet memes and Internet humour and keeping up with all the jokes related to that.” In between officially programmed selections at the weekly screenings, members suggest short, humorous videos from YouTube. There is an aura of one-up-manship to the process, and suggestions are often preceded by the question, “Has anyone seen x yet?” This implies that members are connected to similar sources of information, and the reward comes from being the first to have found a particularly funny or interesting video.

It should also be noted that Anime Con, the city’s anime and manga convention, began as an ORG2 event. Indeed, ORG2-p1 suggests that there was a period when the club’s activities were primarily oriented towards mounting the convention. It has since operated as an almost entirely separate entity but, until very recently, it continued to use its connections with ORG2 to book space and audiovisual equipment from the University. The two groups had a falling out over finances, and Anime Con has moved on to other venues. Individual
ORG2 members still attend Anime Con despite the history between the groups, although they also frequently make critical comments about the convention. Other than this there are no apparent organizational links with other groups or agents in the local nerd-culture scene.

ORG3: Local Comic-Con

ORG3 is a bimonthly, vendor-oriented comic convention held in a small community hall on a commercial high street. The building is owned by the city and has an exhibition space of approximately 3,000 sq. ft. Although there is a core of regular dealers, the number of exhibitors varies between conventions. Some are comic-book stores liquidating excess inventory, some are semi-professional dealers, and some are just individuals selling off their collection. Although ORG3-p1 will coach first-time exhibitors and “will happily discourage people from doing the show if [he doesn’t] think they’re going to make any money or if [he doesn’t] think they’ve got product that people are going to want,” he does not strictly curate the convention. Besides comic-book dealers, exhibitors at conventions I attended included a restaurant-review web site, a model-making club, and an individual selling used records, DVDs, and sets of trading cards.

A high-school English teacher, ORG3-p1 has been organizing these conventions since 1989. He makes “a couple hundred bucks a show at the end of the year” from admission and exhibitors’ fees, but he does not charge children for admission and reserves an allotment of free tables for local artists—gestures that he sees as “ultimately good for comics.” He also sells comics at his conventions, focussing on comics and graphic novels that may appeal more to the casual attendee or new comic-book reader rather than to dedicated collectors of superhero comics. As a youth, ORG3-p1 was a member of a comic-book club organized through a community centre. Club members began holding collectors’ swap meets in the early to mid-1980s and eventually attempted to mount a larger convention, which was a financial failure. Under financial pressure, the group of enthusiasts “sort of imploded,” but many of them remained in social contact. During the late 1980s and early ’90s, comic books and trading cards were perceived as investments, and new shows were organized locally to take advantage of the “speculator boom.” ORG3-p1 describes this as a time when “it became all about money and just how can you fuck people over for money,” and he decided—“reluctantly”—to return to organizing conventions in order to provide something that was...
more oriented the needs of comic-book aficionados as well as more accessible to young fans.

ORG3-p1’s business model relies on the conventions’ small scale and high frequency, which reduce overhead costs. In addition to giving local creators an opportunity to promote their work, ORG3-p1 books established comic-book creators as guests to attract attendees. He is proud of the variety and importance of the guests that he has been able to host in the convention’s 20-year history, giving him the opportunity to meet and interact with creators whom he personally admires and to facilitate contact between local creators and established industry figures. Despite occasional pressure from exhibitors and members of the local comics community to expand or diversify the convention, ORG3-p1 has maintained its size and its focus on comic books, resisting, for example, overtures from TV and film actors that now make a living off the convention circuit. Shortly before the interview, he was approached by Conventions, Inc., a company that franchises comic-book conventions across the United States and Canada. It proposed to buy ORG3 and the rights to its name, retaining ORG3-p1 as organizer for at least three years. He is, however, skeptical of Conventions, Inc., its “corporate” approach, and the impact of his decision on the dealers and creators with whom he has a relationship.

ORG3 also hosts an annual convention for independent or alternative comics. The decision to create a differently branded convention for cartoonists working outside mainstream genre comics came after ORG3-p1 had experimented with booking small-press cartoonists for regular conventions and subsequently recognized that he was dealing with two relatively distinct segments within the local comics community:

[A group of alternative cartoonists] were the guests, and, again, it was just me hanging out with my pals, but it sort of became this thing where it’s like, well, the guys who come in to buy superhero comics don’t really know what to make of these guys, and they’re not really getting a lot out of it because of that. I mean, on both ends. So, it’s like, well, why don’t we spin this thing off into something in the summer where it’s just all creators and only a few dealers in the middle, and, basically, I’m gonna tell the dealer “yes” or “no,” and I’m gonna pick whoever’s coming in just because of the product mix and see how that works.

The small-press convention has been running for 10 years with this artist-centric model, and ORG3-p1 has produced two promotional comic books for it.
In a city where many game stores offer playing space and numerous groups organize events and conventions for gamers, ORG4 offers a way of networking local gamers, keeping them informed, and helping them to organize opportunities to play. The group originally began as an electronic mailing list using the free Yahoo! Groups service. ORG1-p1, a previous ORG4 board member, created the list in 1996 as a way of connecting with local gamers when he first moved to the city. The mailing list was initially advertised on notice boards in comic and game shops, which traditionally fulfilled the same role in the gaming community.

According to the group’s president, ORG4-p1, its “mission is to network people who play games in [the city] and area,” and it does this by means of “a web site which offers people the ability to find other gamers [...] and meet up with them, as well as a kind of on-line marketplace allowing stores to post events and allowing us to talk about conventions.” This discussion forum was a later addition to the original mailing list, which still operates. In addition to facilitating communication between gamers, the group hosts events. At its height, these comprised four conventions a year; at the time of data collection conventions were held less regularly, but periodic “on-going drop-in game days” were organized in several local game shops as well as a café. ORG4 members also help run gaming programming at other local conventions. The organization of all these events relies on a loose body of volunteers who step forward to commit to helping with particular projects as they are interested. The group focuses on tabletop role-playing games but also includes other forms of gaming in its events to the extent that volunteers are willing and able to offer them.

One distinctive aspect of ORG4 is the steps that have been taken to institutionalize and professionalize the group. In 2008, it was incorporated as a non-profit society, which obliges officers to hold annual general meetings, file annual reports, and follow various regulations concerning the group’s finances. Additionally, ORG4-p1 facilitated an “appreciative inquiry visioning session” during his presidency:

One thing that I brought up is the need to have a definite vision and mission statement and a plan for how to actually achieve those things beyond just trusting that it would work out, which is how a lot of [...] clubs and organizations, especially hobby-related ones, seem to operate. It seems to be common-sense operations and not a lot of definite planning.
The aim of this initiative was to help ORG4 become more stable and sustainable as staff members and volunteers turn over and “in light of some dwindling attendance” by clarifying the group’s objectives and working at creating a “dedicated structure” that could carry on without “certain key volunteers” and their particular experiences and institutional memory.

Such an attempt to make explicit the group’s mission objectives may also help it deal with what ORG4-p1 sees as a significant change in the gaming scene. ORG4 was created to help individuals find their way in local gaming communities when social media tools were still quite new:

Now the issue is that there’s too many social networking media, and everyone is kind of overrun by them. So, in light of that, our mission and our mandate and how we go about business needs to change and adapt to that[...] Personally, I think that a focus on connecting groups rather than trying to build up our own audience is really important. I think that [there are] a lot of isolated niche groups and that working to support them and interconnect them would be really great.

These comments suggest that ORG4 may be entering a transition period that will force its organizers and members to re-evaluate its place in a diverse scene. Although gamers’ concrete practices—playing games with friends at home, in game stores, and at conventions—seem little changed, these activities may be organized and facilitated in many different ways.

STR1: Game Store

STR1-p2 once managed a comic-book store that, like many comic shops, also sold some games, but eventually decided to go into business for himself: “Yeah, I’m a gamer. I mean, all gamers want to open a game store.” He and his wife opened their game store in 2002. STR1 has quickly become one of the best known game retailers in the area. The store is located on a quiet stretch of a well known commercial high street in a relatively affluent neighbourhood. While it carries a range of traditional games, RPGs, and CCGs, STR1’s primary focus is on German-style board games. A second location in a suburban community was opened in 2006.

STR1-p2 stresses that most Canadians have some exposure to games in childhood, and so he considers “normal” people to be potential gamers. STR1 was intended to be a comfortable environment for casual, walk-in customers who may not be familiar with the various forms of specialty gaming:
Sometimes people can be apprehensive about going into a comic shop or a
game store because they don’t feel like they belong, you know what I mean? [...] So we wanted to make sure that it was a store that was just a store. That was not like a typical game store in which the average person would be afraid of stepping into. And, that’s worked.

This emphasis is evident in the design and organization of the stores premises. Its interior is divided into front and back by a small staircase. The front area is organized around an “island” of games displayed on a Deco-style chest of drawers. The games shelved in this area are mostly the German-style board games that have become increasingly prominent in North American game stores in the last decade; some familiar American-style games are in this area as well, and CCGs are shelved behind the counter.

Downstairs are the remaining components of STR1’s product mix—RPG books, jigsaw puzzles, traditional games (chess, checkers, cribbage, and poker sets), and some board and card games that have a more niche appeal. The back area also features several restaurant-style booths and a bookcase of board games that customers are encouraged to play. This space may be used by customers whenever the store is open, but STR1 does not formally organize events for other kinds of games on a regular basis:

I try to have a good role-playing selection and whatnot. And we carry most of the collectible games, but some of those are more specific. Like, you need to have the games organized and whatnot, and we can’t do all the games. Or, I suppose it’s possible we could, but we don’t. ((laughs))

Others occasionally make use of store space with the management’s blessing (e.g., ORG4 sometimes runs game days here, and a group of teenagers were playing RPGs in a back room during participant-observation), but the weekly board game night is STR1’s only regular event.

These weekly game nights are well attended. They are an opportunity to play a wide variety of board games with a pool of players for free and without any obligation to buy. Groups of players tended to congregate around particular games and then recruit others to fill open seats (cf. STR2, below). Although STR1-p2 does not have any direct evidence of a positive economic benefit from hosting these events, he “think[s] it would be dumb to get rid of the tables to put more stock in,” and STR1-p1 reports that in his estimation the events do result in many sales. STR1-p2 has a group of friends who attend and with whom he often plays. The store is open late and, after the paid staff members go off the clock, he runs things
himself for the rest of the night, attending to customers between his turns. STR1-p1 estimates that 75% of players any given week are regular participants and suggests that it is rare for newcomers not to become regulars (“So, you might not see them for a couple of weeks, but they’ll be back”). Players often greet one another by name, and I found it easier to gain access to games the second week that I attended.

STR2: Game Store

Unlike other retailers interviewed, STR2-p1 did not have particular aspirations to enter the games industry. However, having grown tired of his job as a casino manager and upon visiting a shopping mall in the core of a growing suburban community, he began to consider going into business for himself. It was only upon noticing that the mall lacked “a game store, a place for people to hang out,” that STR2-p1 then tapped into his experiences as a dedicated gamer with a personal collection of over 500 board games and opened STR2 in 2003.

He cites “bringing back social interaction through board games and card games” as STR2’s mission statement. As a small business owner, he stresses the importance of making sound business plans and avoids buying stock on credit (a practice to which he attributes the demise of other local game stores); as a long-time gamer, he prides himself of his encyclopaedic knowledge of his stock and his personable manner with customers.

STR2-p1 boasts that his is the largest board-game store in the province in terms of number of different titles. These comprise the newer and more specialist “German-style” games as well as more familiar games from major North American publishers (e.g., Trivial Pursuit, Yahtzee, and variously branded editions of Monopoly) and a selection of “party” games. STR2, like other game stores studied, provides space to play and open copies of board and non-collectable card games for patrons to try out prior to purchase. In addition, open games may be “rented” by placing a down payment on the game, which is subsequently deducted from the price of a new copy should the customer decide that he or she likes the game well enough to buy it.

Collectable card games (CCGs) also compose a major portion of the store’s business (roughly 30% of revenue). STR2-p1 was initially reluctant to sell collectable games, fearing that he would be pushing “paper crack” and “plastic crack,” but eventually bent to customer demand. Although card games have much lower margins than board games, the frequency
with which they are purchased by a dedicated base of players serves to stabilize the store’s revenue stream: “I refused to sell it, but then I ... Then I caved in because I need to pay my rent, so I figured, ‘All right this kind of helps supplement my income.’”

The store carries smaller selections of role-playing game (RPG) books and miniatures game accessories. It also boasts a large stock of jigsaw puzzles, emphasizing puzzles that are more challenging and appealing to adults than those carried by big-box stores. Sports cards, action figures, and miscellaneous small toys, games, and candies make up the rest of the store’s inventory. All of these contribute an estimated 20% of revenue.

In the above quotations, STR2-p1 identified what was missing at the mall where his store is located as “a place for people to hang out” and emphasized the importance of gaming as a form of social interaction, and STR2 stands out as an exceptionally sociable space. Although quiet during weekdays, the store hosts numerous scheduled events on evenings and weekends. These include CCG tournaments and release events as well as scheduled, drop-in gaming for board games, collectable miniatures games (such as the Dungeons & Dragons Miniatures Game and Axis & Allies Miniatures), and RPGs. CCG-related events dominate the shop’s calendar and are the best attended. STR2-p1 reports that patrons who have met playing together at store events have formed friendships outside the store. During board game nights, he tries to ensure that all players have been introduced to one another by name and often suggests and explains games that the players might not otherwise try.

The store’s full schedule of events may introduce a tension between serving customers who are simply shopping (especially those unfamiliar with the hobby) and serving patrons who are participating in tournaments and game nights:

Unfortunately, they both come first, which is a contradiction. So, in other words, customers come first because I need to make money in order to sell things; however, the tournament comes first because I create an event for them to come in here and play, so I will have tables for them, I will do those pairings, I will do all that, too.

But, excepting when high volume and overcrowding become obstacles to routine business, STR2-p1 believes that boisterous groups of gamers visibly having fun create a spectacle that draws foot traffic into the store. This may be attributable to its shopping-mall location, which is more open and visible to passersby than a standalone storefront. The mall has also presented STR2-p1 with challenges, however, as when it arbitrarily moved the store across
the mall and refused to post notices of its new location. At the time of data collection, STR2-p1 was anticipating being moved by mall management again. It was his hope that this would work to his advantage, allowing him a bigger space to expand his inventory. There were, however, few guarantees:

I want it to be larger. So-so, basically, if I get it, great. If I don’t then … okay … then I’m in trouble because I need to have a larger space. But to be fair, what will suffer if I don’t have larger space, right now, is the tables. Because I need to sell products in order to survive, so, therefore, the tables are actually an extra bonus.

When I returned to STR2 a year later to drop off some recruiting materials for the second phase of the study, I found that the shop had indeed moved across the mall. The new space was larger, allowing STR2-p1 to keep table space for in-store events and expand his inventory. He mentioned that he now shelved games by publisher, rather than trying to group similar games together as he had previously done.

STR3: Comic-Bookstore

In some ways, STR3 appears to fit common stereotypes of comic-book stores: located on a commercial high street, the windows of the narrow storefront are papered with posters depicting superheroes; inside, every inch of available space is filled with comic books, action figures, vinyl toys, art books, and t-shirts; and, although periodically punctuated by animated conversation, the atmosphere in the store is generally quiet. Nevertheless, STR3-p1 does not consider his store a typical comic shop. Indeed, he contrasts it with STR5, which he believes serves more traditional comic-book collectors: “There’s a different vibe in a store like that. They’re definitely more focussed on the hobby itself than they are on just, like, you know, people enjoying what they’re reading and that kind of thing.”

STR3-p1 describes his career as a comic-book retailer as a “natural progression” and a “life-long dream.” After gaining experience working in another comic shop, he opened STR3 in 2002. A comic-book reader and collector, he used his own collection as the store’s starting inventory. New, periodical comic books are ordered on the basis of anticipated demand and subscriptions; on the whole, however, inventory is selected on the basis of two principles, taste and variety. First, STR3-p1’s own taste helps him select products within the range of goods offered by Diamond Comic Distributors:
I think everything definitely has a bit of my taste’s influence in it. Like I said, I want to be surrounded by things that I like[....] I won’t say that everything in the store is something that I like, but definitely if it’s something that I believe in I will invest heavier in the hopes that other people will have similar taste.

Second, STR3-p1 hopes that by maintaining a broad range of products he can ensure that “anybody that walks into the store, there’s going to be something for anybody”:

I guess I would just say that ... as broad a selection of comic book or comic book related merchandise and uh ... I guess not all of the action figures could be considered comic book related but, you know, that genre at least—science-fiction, fantasy. And, yeah, we just try to have as wide a variety as we possibly can.

This suggests not only the diversity of tastes among STR3 patrons but also the slipperiness of the generic designation “comic-book store.” Indeed, the sign above the store describes its wares as “comics, toys, and stuff.” However, unlike many comic shops, STR3 does not participate in the gaming market to any significant degree. The collectable card game *Magic: The Gathering* was initially included in the store’s product range, but STR3-p1 abandoned it as unprofitable without a much more significant investment of time.

Whereas dedicated comic-book readers and collectors seek shops out to pursue their interests, casual customers and passersby are attracted by the more general, “popular culture” merchandise, such as the t-shirts hanging in the window. However, despite efforts to diversify his clientele by investing in action figures and t-shirts, regular purchasers of periodical comic books remain the staple of the business:

Well, I guess Wednesdays, obviously, we see the nerdiest side, if you will. The hardcore comic-book fans[....] Obviously, my bread and butter are the hardcore fans, so I much prefer days when my store is full of people who are more likely to actually buy something than a day when they’re just kind of in here because they’re curious about what’s in here and they just wanted to check it out.

STR3 is located in a rapidly gentrifying neighbourhood and is surrounded by hip cafés and boutiques. It may thus be well placed to benefit from the current mainstreaming of nerd culture—and especially of pop-culture nostalgia—among young, media-savvy urbanites. Nevertheless, STR3 continues to face both the typical challenges of a small business owner and the particular challenges associated with the comic-book industry’s “direct marketing” model.
STR4: Games and Comics

STR4 is a combined game and comic shop. Its name originates with a game store located across town. In late 2007, STR4-p1 was recruited to work in a new STR4 location, having been recommended by the manager of another store where he frequently played games. This second location was in a basement suite below a comic-book shop; according to STR4-p1, the comic shop’s owners wished to enter the gaming market but lacked the capital and so invited STR4’s owner to rent the space below them. The two businesses later moved into a shared space and began to integrate their operations, adopting the STR4 name in a slightly modified form.

The location studied is nestled among a cluster of retail stores and fast-food restaurants between a residential neighbourhood and a light-industrial area. It is accessible by rapid transit. STR4-p1 manages the gaming side of the business as well as the general operations of the store, while STR4-p2 manages the comic books and performs more clerk and cashier roles. STR4-p3, a co-owner of the comic-book side of the business, now works as a manager at the original location, but spends time working at both stores.

Like other game retailers interviewed, STR4-p1’s business model concentrates on providing space for playing games. The store is neatly organized and uncluttered, and additional tables can be set up if needed. STR4-p1’s primary experiences as a gamer are with miniatures games, and this is the genre in which the store is most heavily invested. In addition to the miniatures themselves, building and painting supplies, and rule books for sale, plywood boards and pieces of model terrain are kept in the shop for game days. The store sells and schedules events for several collectable card games (CCGs), including Legend of the Five Rings, which is less widely supported within the scene than other CCGs. STR4 also carries role-playing games (RPGs) and board games, and STR4-p1 plans to expand its range of board games:

We’re actually trying to increase the amount of casual customers that we have. That’s why we’re increasing our … the amount of board games we have because the … Board games are what the casual customer craves because they don’t want to put any commitment into their games. They just want to be able to open up a box and go.

Contribution to revenue is inversely related to the amount of space occupied—for example, CCGs require the least amount of physical space but provide the “bulk” of revenue, while RPGs are relatively unprofitable given the amount of space they occupy. However, STR4-p1
stresses that a game store cannot rationalize its product range, as this will alienate customers who expect stores to carry the products they need to participate in their particular gaming practices.

Comic books take up less physical space in the store. Although the bulk of comics sold are published by either DC or Marvel Comics, the store has cultivated a customer base that shares its staff’s taste, including an openness to some independent titles:

At least at this store, we’ve built a specific niche of comic-book readers, the ones who are sort of similar, that have similar tastes to us. For the most part, at least. And so we know what we can sort of recommend to them, and they trust us enough to at least try it out for a little bit.[...]. (STR4-p2)

The store provides numerous cues to its customers, singling out “picks of the week” and staff recommendations as well as informing of the subscription service and encouraging them to request re-orders of sold-out comics. STR4-p2 reports some successes at shaping customers’ tastes, introducing them to series they might not otherwise have tried.

The relationship between the two sides of the business, and of their respective clienteles, is still developing. All three interviewees acknowledge that there is currently little overlap between these two communities. STR4-p3 describes the composition of these two groups as similar, but “the comic guys are quieter, more reserved” while gamers are much more sociable. According to STR4-p2, “There are some people who dabble in both, but um … Yeah, I haven’t really seen too much overlap. Both sides just sort of tend to stick to their—whatever respective thing they came in for.” STR4-p1 asserts that “all gamers love comics,” but that the trade-offs between a “gaming budget” and a “comic budget” mean that few devote much time or money to buying comics. Similarly, STR4-p2 notes that both collecting comics and playing games are “pretty expensive” hobbies, and so it is difficult for the “good portion” of their customers who “work retail jobs or work for about minimum wage” to engage seriously with both practices. Numerous “gamer” customers were observed browsing the comic-book section, but this appeared to be principally a way of killing time rather than serious shopping.

While STR4-p1 felt uncomfortable estimating the gender distribution of customers—leaving it at “more than 60%” male—he did note that female customers tended to buy RPGs and board games. During participant-observation, most of the girls and women observed in the store were shopping for comic books, though this was likely exaggerated by the Free
Comic Book Day promotion in which STR4 was participating. Unlike some other interviewees, STR4-p1 did not believe there were any significant changes in the proportion of female participants over time. He tries to do what he can to make the store more accessible to girls and women, but notes that there is not much he can do as a store manager to affect how the gaming community welcomes them.

STR5: Comics and Collectibles

STR5 is the longest established business included in this study. It has been located on a major downtown street since 1979. Although this has been at times considered a "roughe area," owner STR5-p1 viewed proximity to a number of nearby movie theatres as an advantage, and the busy street ensures a level of foot traffic past the store as late as 9:00 pm.

STR5-p1 began reading and collecting comic books as a child in the 1960s. Participating in comics fandom as a serious collector involved buying, selling, and trading old comic books and corresponding with other collectors by mail. He mentions reading fanzines, in particular, as a source of information about comics. After high school, he opened a comics shop in a neighbouring municipality, eventually quitting university to devote himself to his business and relocating downtown. Although STR5-p1 had visited early comic stores in California and elsewhere in Canada, the closest "model" for his own business was a store owned by an American friend. STR5-p1 and his friend’s stores share the same name, each owning the trademark in their respective jurisdictions, and they have at times shared the expenses of advertising and printing promotional items.

Physically, STR5 is the biggest store studied, which allows it to maintain a large inventory. New graphic novels and trade paperbacks are organized in two ways. In one section, they are shelved by creator, with high-profile writers being the focus. In the other, the books are organized alphabetically by creators. Some titles appear in both locations. Unlike many other retailers, STR5-p1 does not organize comics by publisher: “Yeah, I don’t like to ghettoize comics[...] I’ve always felt that by doing that a lot of people are going to ignore a lot of books. Because they’ll only pick up—especially in the early days of comics, people would just go for Marvels or just go for DCs.” In addition to new comics and trade paperbacks, STR5 also deals in the collectors’ market to a greater degree than other comic-book stores studied. This includes not only back issues of contemporary series for
completist collectors but also rarer and more valuable vintage comics. STR5-p1 says that these contribute very little to overall revenue, but it is his “favourite part of the business.”

Like many other comics retailers, however, STR5-p1 has diversified his product range beyond comic books. As he says, “You can’t just depend on comics, you’ve got to have a lot of other things.” The store’s current product range includes comics and graphic novels, comic-book collectors’ supplies, magazines, *manga*, *anime* DVDs, action figures and toys, statues, t-shirts, posters, RPG books, board games, picture postcards, celebrity photographs and film stills, movie and television scripts, and miscellaneous merchandise such as buttons and magnets. During the peak of their popularity, sports cards contributed as much as half of the store’s revenue, although this market is now “more or less dead.” Despite all this diversity, STR5-p1 views comics as providing the focus for the product range:

> Well, certainly it’s popular culture with a comics focus. Everything revolves around comics. I mean, the toys that we sell tend to be comic-related, the posters we sell for the large part very ... you know, *genre*. Genre, including all the fantasy video games and movies and things like that.

Besides dedicated comics readers and collectors, the store pulls in a high volume of foot traffic from casual passersby. Casual customers are frequently attracted to the store by the large glass display cases that flank the entrance, featuring a mix of comic books and popular-cultural merchandise.

Given its longevity, size, and relatively large staff (at least three employees were on duty at all times during participant-observation), it is unsurprising that STR5 is among the most professionalized of all the stores and groups studied. STR5-p1 says that his reference group is other businesses in his neighbourhood, not other comic-book stores, and that his challenges were those typical of small businesses. While other interviewed comics retailers found the process of ordering comics particularly fraught, STR5-p1 is more confident: “You’re gonna get fooled sometimes because it’s an especially good issue or fooled sometimes because it’s an especially bad cover and you don’t sell as many. That’s gonna happen, you don’t worry too much about that, but you can usually guess pretty accurately how many you’re gonna sell[...].” Similarly, he approached the problems of diversity within comics fandom in a straightforward manner. Whereas some retailers claimed that there was nothing they could do to affect gender balance among their customers, STR5-p1 has a strategy to encourage diversity:
I remember a conversation I had with a guy in the [...] bar where I used to drink when I was a young man. This would have been at least in the 1980s. And it was at the time when [a local] hotel became a gay hotel. And I remember saying to the bartender, “Well, how does a hotel turn gay?” And he said, “Well, it’s easy. They just hire gay staff.” And it sort of dawned on me. Well, duh. You know, if I want girls to come in the store, I should hire some girls. Or, women[.... B]y exercising common sense and having a mix of gender in the store you sort of take away from that sort of frat club atmosphere that develops when just guys are working together. And so it’s good for the store and it definitely makes it a lot more accessible ... for women.

In conclusion, although STR5-p1 typifies his main successes as “normal business success,” he remains convinced that “nobody could run a comic-book store successfully if they don’t really enjoy comic books.”

**Phase 2: Subcultural Participants**

The six primary participants in the second phase of fieldwork are profiled in this section. All names are pseudonyms: Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own code name; in cases where they expressed no preference, I selected one from among the secret identities of the Justice League of America. They are listed here in alphabetical order. Key information is summarized in Table 2 (p. 13).

Barry

I met Barry after someone forwarded my call for participants to the mailing list of the local Society for Creative Anachronism chapter. He wrote to me saying:

> Possibly I can be of assistance in your study. I’ve been a science-fiction fan since my teens, and am now 53, and a research scientist. I’m still moderately active in fan activities, and have had regular to occasional contact with the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), the Christian Fandom email-list, Anûdunë (the local branch of the Tolkien Society), computer games, SF&F Con, Anime Con, various long-term or weekend Role-Playing activities, a local LARP group, and lots of reading.

I couldn’t resist a resumé like that. Barry was the first person I interviewed for the second phase of the project, and he allowed me to tag along with him for the most number and widest variety of activities. He was probably also the most invested of my interviewees in the idea of fandom or fan culture as I recognized it from the academic literature—he was, for example, the most likely to use words like “fandom” or “fannish” to describe aspects of nerd culture outside of specific media fandoms, seeing all of the former as outgrowths and
elaborations of the latter. We met at a coffee shop near his home regularly for a few months, and I came with him to an SCA event, a local writers’ group, an Anâdunê meetup, and I played in his Arthurian Britain role-playing game.

Physically, Barry is a slight, spry man. He cuts his salt-and-pepper hair himself, dresses simply, and sometimes wears his safety glasses ("with sideshields!") when he is out and about. He has a puckish smirk that makes you want to re-examine whatever he's just said for references and puns—he nods enthusiastically when you catch them. During interviews, he would frequently ask me to let him think, and then turn his body to the side, looking down to the floor or up to the ceiling, carefully considering his response before answering a question. Sometimes, rather than venturing an opinion on some topic, he would call for more systematic research to be done.

As a boy, he was involved in scholarly and scientific pursuits, including a field naturalists’ club for youth and a computer club that gave members access to the local university’s computers. He was raised Roman Catholic and remains observant. He doesn’t like to be labelled “conservative” for his political and religious opinions because it lacks a stable frame of reference, but he concedes most people would describe his positions as socially conservative. He studied chemistry in university, eventually receiving a doctorate in the field. He taught at a major research university before moving to the city to take a job in the private sector. Today, he is an independent consultant.

A bachelor, he lives and works in a crowded basement apartment in a nearby suburb. He has covered every available wall, including the few windows, with bookshelves that are stacked at least two rows deep. It is full of mementoes of his time in fandom, as well as the detritus of his various projects. When he took me around his apartment, he repeatedly explained his habits in terms of systems that he devised. These ranged from making the same meal of rice and split peas day in and day out (he says he worked out the amounts of nutrients he needs, and none of the ingredients spoil so he can shop for groceries as infrequently as possible), making hot cocoa (using vanilla to reduce the bitterness, as the Aztecs did, instead of sugar), and even drinking water ("What I do is I fill a pitcher, and then I let it stand until the chlorine’s gone from it [...] I fill a bottle, and then I take it here and I put it here, and when I thirst, I reach over, drink, and put it back. When that’s empty, I refill it. When that’s empty, I fill it from the—so, that’s the story of water").
Barry discovered organized science-fiction fandom after seeing a flyer for an area fan club in the library. He attended a meeting and remembers “a debate on the merits of Ray Bradbury, and a song broke out—((sings)) ‘Oh, how we hate Ray Bradbury.’ I didn’t especially hate Ray Bradbury, but I thought it was kind of a capsule of what fandom was about ... they have their opinions, and they kind of play with them.” The club and its annual convention were inclusive of multiple aspects of nerd culture:

We started as a club with people in it that were interested in all kinds of different things. It was a way to talk to each other about our different interests and present our different interests to each other ... and I think, actually I think [it] still exists, but a whole lot of other clubs, the Doctor Who Society, the Star Trek group that I mentioned, and the comic collectors, and so on, a whole galaxy of different aspects with common roots but their own interests and their own vocabulary and everything.

The shelves in his apartment (which contain only part of his library; the rest is in storage) attest to his continued interest in SF&F literature, but he admits he has fallen behind: “my tastes in science-fiction literature have not kept up to date, so I really know what’s being written these days ... like, if you look at my collection of stuff, it’s pretty impressive for the ‘70s and the ‘80s and part of the ‘90s, but after that it’s getting sparse.” This is partly attributed to preferring to re-visit favourite authors like J. R. R. Tolkien, G. K. Chesterton, Jack Vance and Gene Wolfe and partly to his preference for buying used books. More recently, his interest in SF has led him to a new avocation as an aspiring writer. He says this grew organically out of his love of storytelling:

I was always telling myself stories, okay? Running ... for my own amusement, stuff in my head, okay? Daydreams. I had a very rich ... internal life as a child. Um. Many of these would not make particularly good or original stories if I were to set them to paper. Some of them might. Um. I guess pretty much I-I waited until I had something that I thought would be worthy, okay, before I decided, hey, this is going to become (a contribution) some day.

His in-progress novel draws on stories and ideas that he’s had in mind for years. He wants it to be “diamond-hard” sci-fi, and so it is another opportunity to draw on his scientific expertise, collection of reference books, and broad general knowledge. He’s begun to attend meetings to give readings of his work to other amateur writers and participated in a workshop at SF&F Con.

Another relatively recent development in his leisure pursuits is his involvement with the Society for Creative Anachronism. He recalls encountering the SCA through a demonstration
they put on while he was in university. He enjoyed himself but never pursued it. But a few years ago, after attending a medieval-themed banquet put on by the Knights of Columbus, he decided to look them up again and get involved. As he explains it, “I was um ... looking for something to do with my spare time. Getting together with people about interesting stuff. The science-fiction ... groups were not very organized. [...] Besides the conventions, which are like once a year, there were not a lot of get-togethers.” While many SCA members are drawn by the martial arts, “Doctor Mercurius” is mostly interested in the arts and sciences competitions and, more specifically, in explaining and recreating the science and technology of the period. He also appreciates the opportunities that SCA events provide for camping and being out of doors. Moreover, he identifies with the chivalric values that the SCA idealizes and seeks (with greater or less success) to embody.

Diana
Diana is in her late 30s. She wears her hair short and has two piercings in her left brow. She describes her ethnic background as “white” and “slightly Ukrainian.” She knows ORG1-p1, who has been a DM for her in past Dungeons & Dragons campaigns. Diana’s answers were often succinct and to-the-point, but she also frequently became excited explaining her points, and we joked around quite a bit during our interviews.

When she first wrote to me to volunteer for the study, Diana said she played Dungeons & Dragons and World of Warcraft, knew a bit about comics, and had previously participated in several TV fandoms. She also described herself as part of a “nerd family.” She and her partner, Steve, met in university and have been together for twenty years. He is also a gamer (and was the DM of their regular campaign). They recently had their first child, and Diana has taken time off from her small business to care for her. She explained that they already involved her in the game—“she likes the dice”—and planned to introduce her to gaming when she is old enough.

Diana is an avid consumer of science-fiction literature and media. She described herself as an “advanced reader, like, right from a really young age,” and said she couldn’t “ever remember not reading it, so [she] must have been reading it forever.” Her father, who was trained as a scientist and worked in administration at a college, was a science fiction fan, too, and she vividly recalled him reading to her as a child. He continued to recommend books and authors to her as she grew up. This developed into a taste for SF&F books, as well
as “media science-fiction, so like TV and movies—Star Trek, Fringe, X-Files, all that kind of stuff.” In contrast to the elaborate cases that fans like Barry and Shiera made, Diana de-emphasized SF’s intellectual uniqueness:

Like, you could say, “Oh, it’s the re-envisioning or the envisioning of what the future could be.” But it’s not because that’s not—I mean, you can tell by golden age, like they got it so wrong, so you know that anything written now is going to be so wrong in the future. So, it’s not re-envisioning. That’s not why I read it. I just, a good writer is a good writer, it doesn’t matter what they’re writing. Sorry.

On the hard–soft continuum, she expressed a preference for “the Connie Willis style of science-fiction, which is the more—which I’m (really liking)—the more feminine base. You know, like, yeah sure we’re on a different planet, but really it’s about relationships, it’s about people kind of thing.”

She and Steve moved to the city twelve years ago so she could pursue a master’s degree in Women’s Studies. Her thesis was on women writers of fan fiction. This background led to several interesting discussions about gender and nerd culture. Although she felt that she received fewer “stares” when going into a game shop now, she noted that media representations of women involved in nerdy practices were still relatively rare:

Well, it’s also as a woman it’s really hard to—I mean nerd figures are men. Nerd and geek and all that, they’re men. It’s really hard to ... In Big Bang Theory now, they’re starting to get women. But for the first season or two there weren’t even any women who were nerds. So, as with most popular culture, I don’t see myself reflected in it, you know?

We also debated whether fandom per se should be considered part of nerd culture since, in her experience and based on her research, media fandoms are spaces with “women’s rules” in contrast to the sites and communities she associates with “nerds” where men’s rules dominate:

And I think, for me, and I think this directly relates to my thesis, what I studied, fandom to me is women’s space. It’s not geek space. It’s a way of women connecting. And it kind of goes back to my women aren’t nerds, you know? You don’t have any nerd women role models, so women aren’t nerds, so women are doing this, so it’s not nerds. You know? That kind of thing, I think, is my thinking. For me, the emphasis is that it’s women’s space, and that’s different from geek space or nerd space[. ...] If you’re in, you know, science-fiction fandom, certainly in the old days, you went by men’s rules or you didn’t do it, right? If women stood up and tried to do differently, they were told they were doing it wrong.
She acknowledged some overlap and that fandom for certain objects or certain modes of fandom (e.g., comic-book fans) were, in her view, more closely aligned with nerd culture. However, her primary associations with nerd or geek had to do with gaming cultures, such as *Dungeons and Dragons* or *World of Warcraft*, which were also her heaviest investments in nerd culture at the time of the interviews.

Diana first played *Dungeons & Dragons* as a child: “D&D, I did when I was in grade six. I had a friend who into D&D, so we played D&D with him.” She doesn’t remember very much about those early campaigns and didn’t play again until fairly recently:

> A friend of mine was looking to make more friends. She was like, “I don’t have enough friends. Like, I don’t do enough stuff. I like—” I don’t know, she was like, “I like *Dungeons & Dragons*.” So, I guess she went to a convention, like a D&D gaming con kind of thing with the intent of finding some people to play with kind of thing. So, she met ORG1-p1 and mentioned to us that she was doing this, and Steve was like, “I used to play D&D!” And I was like, “Well, I played D&D,” ([laughs]) you know? And Steve painted minis and was quite involved when he was young, so he was like, “I wouldn’t mind getting back into that.” And I was like, “Okay, sounds like fun. Sounds like something to do.” So, we ... my friend was like, “Well, ORG1-p1 is starting up this girl group, why don’t you join it?” So, we just kind of started from there. Yeah, started playing there and just kind of went on from there.

As gaming groups often do, this one split, reformed and shuffled its members several times over the years. Eventually, Steve ended up in DM’s chair, and that, combined with their need to watch over Donna, meant they hosted the gaming sessions in their home. When asked to describe role-playing games, Diana emphasized the collective exercise of imagination and the emotional rewards that come from it:

> DIANA: I think I would say that it’s ... it’s collective storytelling. You’re ... playing characters with somebody, with the Dungeon Master, who’s the overall storyteller, and you’re playing within his story. And there’s swords.

> BMW: [...] And is that what you like about it most? The storytelling aspect?

> DIANA: Yeah, I like that. And sometimes, when you’ve had a really bad day, sometimes it’s nice to just ... sit down and—I know you’re just rolling dice, but it’s nice to just hack and slash. You know, to just beat the snot out of something.

Although it lacked, for her, this dimension of collective participation (“I don’t do a lot of really social things with it”), *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) offered a flexible form of leisure that she could engage in while her daughter, Donna, was sleeping. It was also something she could share with Steve, though that required them to maintain two accounts. Diana
mentioned playing other fantasy computer games (e.g., *Might and Magic*) quite heavily when she was younger, but WoW was her first massively multiplayer online role-playing game. During our early interviews, the game was clearly at the top of her mind: She had only started playing in the last few months and was devoting quite a lot of time to it (several hours a day), and it frequently came up when she was looking for an example to illustrate some point about gamers or nerd culture in general. However, by the end of the data collection period, her engagement with WoW had tapered off, as she had reached a point where the game had become less rewarding and Donna required attention for a greater proportion of the day.

Mr. Fox

I first saw Mr. Fox from across a public plaza. I was sitting in the window of the coffee shop where we had agreed to meet, and looked up just as he dramatically threw open a pair of doors and rolled on through in his wheelchair. He had noticed a poster calling for participants in his regular comic shop, STR5, and wrote me to volunteer. In addition to a comic-book fan, he was a gamer, an SF&F reader, and a “movie geek.” His self-presentation in conversation oscillates between the sardonic and the sincere—he might shrug off one question with a wry comment, while others would elicit touching personal stories. He has a hyperbolic style of humour, and we often ended up riffing on one another’s jokes.

Mr. Fox was raised in a small, rural town. His parents ran a farm, and he bussed into a regional hub to attend school. As a result of the lengthy trip to and from school, he never got involved in extracurricular activities. He was something of a loner, though by the end of high school he hung out with a crowd he described as “the nerds.” They played *Magic: The Gathering* together at lunch. One of the school’s math teachers (“the best teacher I ever had”) ran a course in science-fiction appreciation:

MR. FOX: Let’s see, there was … there was review of classic science-fiction movies, things like that … let’s see … uh, oh, and review of classic science-fiction literature. In a couple cases, he’d have us read short stories, but he’d leave out the last page and have us write the end to see what kind of end we would write. Things like that.

BMW: How would you compare the experience of taking that class with your sort of provincially mandated English classes?

MR. FOX: Oh, it was way more fun. And a lot more interesting because we were allowed to read anything, pretty much, as long as it was a certain length, and he had a
library of a bunch of really cool, old science fiction that you couldn’t get in the library.

He also mentioned writing “terrible science-fiction and fantasy stories” and “terrible fan-fiction” in his leisure time. His high school English teacher “inspired [him] to do things properly when writing”: “He instilled the discipline of proper English, as opposed to just words on paper.”

Gaming has been a major part of Mr. Fox’s life. When I asked him about his earliest recollections of playing video games, he told a story of playing a neighbour’s console:

MR. FOX: Uh … TurboGrafx 16. My neighbour had a kid who had one, and I loved it. You’d play uh … it had cards? They were like a cross between a … cartridge and a floppy disk? Splatter House. That game is the devil because it gets … just randomly hard all of the sudden.

BMW: But you say that with a smile on your face.

MR. FOX: Oh yeah because it was ((laughs)) awesome. It’s just like, all right, duck! jump! two-by-four! two-by-four! duck! jump! two-by-four! There’s this one level where there’s these little weird amoebas floating towards ya? but at random? so you couldn’t memorize a pattern, so you were just like ‘hhh.

His family’s income level “inhibited [his] buying of video games immensely,” though he recalls finding an NES in an attic and playing that. Nonetheless, he got deeper into games at the same time as his ambitions as a writer were growing. In a moment of insight, he realized that people must write video games, and perhaps he could make a living at it.

In 2007 Mr. Fox moved to the city to pursue a course in game design. In his home town, he felt that people viewed his hobbies and interests as “weird.” But in game school “everyone’s a goddamn nerd,” and he found the city to be a place where nerd culture--at least with respect to his vocation as a video-game writer--was “not just accepted but encouraged.” After graduating, he began working half-time as a writer and project manager at an independent game developer. Most of his co-workers also went through the same program, and the company is still indie enough that they don’t have an office. Mr. Fox works from home, co-ordinating with his team over the internet. He also picks up freelance writing projects of various kinds to make ends meet.

Another aspect of being immersed in a milieu of gamer geeks at school was that he got involved in other kinds of gaming, too. Some of his friends and classmates were into Warhammer 40,000 (40K), a sci-fi/horror themed miniatures game, and joining them had become part of his “hang-out-with-the-guys weekend routine.” He played with miniatures
that he bought in high school: “Yeah, I bought models because I liked the way they looked and wanted to put them together and paint ‘em.” Around the time the interviews started, the group transitioned to role-playing games:

**MR. FOX:** We started that up ... instead of playing *Warhammer*, we'll play D&D.

**BMW:** Oh, okay, so it’s sort of jumped over from *Warhammer*.

**MR. FOX:** Yeah. Well, it’s a ... it’s a D&D campaign set in the *Warhammer* universe. So. God, that was so dorky to say out loud. ((laughs)) Oh, well.

**BMW:** It is what it is.

**MR. FOX:** Yeah. Whatever. I drove a truck off a building while shooting a gun at another truck last week, so really I’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. I killed the driver, and they crashed and they exploded in an alleyway. And I landed the truck, jumped out ... and walked away just fine, so ... good times. [...] We had the *Lupin III* chase music playing and everything. We even had little models. [...] We even grabbed some of the 40K models? and put ‘em on the table and shook ‘em back and forth like we were actually in a chase scene. Yes. We are huge nerds.

However, by the end of the interview period their GM was moving away and the future of the group’s activities were unclear.

Although he actually preferred to come into the store on Thursdays, when the aisles were less crowded, Mr. Fox was the kind of customer STR5-p1 called the “Wednesday warriors.” That is, he came in every week to pick up his new comics and chat with the staff. He mentioned having good relationships with a few of the longer-serving clerks. One of them was also a writer, and they would sometimes talk about their shared craft (i.e., “writer stuff”). However, Mr. Fox denied being a comic *collector*. He would buy good story arcs or miniseries in trade paperback form, but when he was done reading floppies (as with old video games) he donated them to the library or a children’s hospital, which is particularly fitting since he first started reading comics when hospitalized as a child.

**Shiera**

Like Barry, Shiera responded to a call for participation posted on the local Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) mailing list, on which she lurks but is not an active participant. In addition to being an SF&F (or “speculative fiction,” as she preferred to say) reader and a former SCA member, she identified herself as a fan of the TV series *Doctor Who* and a player of the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *Star Wars Galaxies* (SWG). When we arranged to meet the first time, she said I would recognize her as a “heavy short lady [...] with a cane.” She is a crocheter, often arriving to interviews wearing some of her handiwork, and she takes her coffee with a lot of sugar. Our interviews were quite a bit
longer than average: Shiera had a lot to say and could effortlessly launch into discourses on virtually any topic—perhaps a legacy of her theatrical background.

Shiera was raised in the semi-rural communities surrounding the city. She describes her family as “the lowest rung on the socio-economic ladder” and, more cheekily, as “Po’ white. ((laughs)) I won’t go so far as to say trash because we’re not, but very poor.” As a girl and adolescent, she was an equestrian and a thespian. After high school, she decided to pursue employment rather than post-secondary education, although she audited some university classes and pursued her intellectual interests in Irish history and culture independently. She continued to work with horses and later in retail until her arthritis made her unable to work. She moved back to the city a few years ago. Today, she lives with her youngest son, who was twelve years old at the time of our interviews; her two older sons live in the area and stay with her “every second weekend or so.”

She was raised as an avid reader. In addition to fairy tales, she had fond memories of a series of German books about children who solved mysteries using science that her mother read to them, translating on the fly. Her earliest memory of reading speculative fiction was discovering the novelization of Star Wars in her school library:

I’ve been a Star Wars fan since I was twelve and read the books when I was in middle school um and I didn’t see the movies. Everyone else around me saw the movies. Everyone else had the merchandise. Where we grew up extremely poor, so I never saw the movies in the theatre until I was an adult. What I did do was read the books, and I loved the books. I thought the books were marvelous. It was a really great story, it left a whole bunch of things open, and my-my brain went tickety-tack.

She immediately shared it with a friend and they wrote fan fiction together. In addition to introducing her to the worlds of science fiction and fantasy, Star Wars remained an object of fandom. Friends of hers continue to give her Star Wars collectibles for holidays and special occasions—for example, she has a number of quite expensive statuettes in her home, which were presents from a friend who salvaged them from a closing comic-bookstore. It was also responsible for what was, at the time of the interviews, her major nerdy activity, SWG.

Shiera doesn’t consider herself a gamer because she had never really been interested in video games until friends started recommending that she try out SWG. She resisted at first because out of concern she would become “addicted,” but she got hooked nonetheless:
And then in 2005 ... in January, I had been working out of doors at a horse farm, and I ... came down with pneumonia, and it ... I went from being ... 100% active to being hardly able to breath, so I was flat on my back for six weeks. And my friend, who had gotten the game for Christmas, was like, “Come on over. I'll take care of you, I'll take care of your kids, get them to school and everything like that. I'll look after you. You can play the game while you recover.” That's when I started. And got hooked. And never looked back. ((laughs)) So.

The Star Wars setting was the reason she was drawn to the game. However, she has come to appreciate the kinds of skills it requires and the rewards it offers. Although the game has numerous components and allows players to maintain multiple characters (or “toons”), Shiera’s primary involvement with the game has to do with “beastmastery”—that is, the skill that allows a character to use a trained animal (or “pet”). Some beastmasters are, like Shiera, involved in breeding these pets using various in-game resources, and the community is heavily engaged in working out the combinations of resources that determine how the pets turn out. Co-ordinating this exercise of players’ collective intelligence is a major task, and she has been heavily involved as a leader of the community, which also involves liaising with developers and representatives of Sony Online Entertainment, SWG’s publisher.

Formerly, she was heavily involved in the SCA. As a teenager, her next-door neighbour was a member of the Society and hired Shiera to look after her kids while at SCA events:

So, I’m at this event, I’m wearing thrown-together thrift-store garb, and I’m having a great time. And it became very quickly a big part. And then my family got involved, my mom and my stepfather and my sisters, we all started going to events as a whole group, as a household. As soon as I was old enough to get involved in the combat, I got involved in the combat.

Performing traditional Irish music, however, was her main avocation in the Society, though she eventually became involved in administration, serving as court bard to the King and Queen for a time. She is wary of being drawn back into the politics involved in the Society but speaks fondly of many of her experiences and rattles off people she misses spending time with. She would like to start attending events again, but even local events are difficult for her to travel to.

Because of her mobility issues, her average day revolves around the home. After breakfasting and getting her son ready for school (including co-viewing an episode of Pokémon with him), she typically watches an episode of Doctor Who in re-runs on the Space
Channel, possibly while crocheting. One of her sons encountered the series at a convention and recommended it to her:

He sat in my room with me and we watched an episode. And I went, “Yeah, that’s pretty good. I like that. Chris Eccleston? Yeah, I’m all for that. He’s a good actor.” We move on: The writing was brilliant. It reminded me a lot of Joss Whedon. So, I was like, “Hmm. Okay.” And we started talking about each episode. It was ... Initially, it was just a way for me to connect with my middle son, who’s autistic, so he had difficulty connecting with people. And since he moved with his dad, I’ve missed him. So, it was a family thing, and then it became something that we could share. And it was only just him and I and nobody else in the world, and we could share this wonderful little appreciation of this great show, this great series. When he went home for the next week, I kept watching, so, yeah, it’s his fault, he addicted me to Doctor Who. I’m not complaining because it’s brilliant.

Much of her day revolves around some combination of playing SWG or working on her writing projects (she blogs and is always working on stories and novels), but it’s shot through with digitally mediated communication. Despite being constrained to her home, she is able to make contact (by Ventrillo voice chat, instant messaging, and email) with fellow SWG gamers, SCAers, fan-fic writers, and professional authors. These networks provide a lot of emotional support, in addition to keep her involved in new developments related to her interests.

Solo

Solo is in her early 20s and a student at Cross-Town University. She was recommended to the study by ORG3-p1, who had been her English teacher in high school. She was a comics fan whose comic-book reading habit was dormant, and personally engaged with (although not involved in organized fandom for) media franchises like Star Wars, Harry Potter, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Moreover, she identified strongly with the idea of nerd culture: “I don’t play D&D, First Person Shooters, or WoW[...]. Despite this, I would associate more closely with geek/nerd culture than other ‘cliques’ or social spheres.”

Solo comes from a professional family. Her father is an engineer, and in early childhood the family moved about internationally as he worked on various projects. They settled in the city when she was eight years old. They lived in a traditionally working-class part of the city, but maintained a “high standard of living.” Solo describes herself as “lucky,” as her parents have supported her education and provided for her needs as well as her hobbies.
When we started interviewing, she had just moved into her first apartment downtown, which was decorated with toys, superhero posters, and her collection of Star Wars Lego.

She thinks that she first saw Star Wars on VHS when she was four. It’s the first film she remembers seeing:

I remember watching it and being absolutely terrified when Luke … Empire Strikes Back? when Luke gets his hand cut off, and the poles? and the (tube)? Just absolutely mortified … like, I could not watch that scene after. […] I really like Luke. Luke was the first boy I had a crush on when I was, like, eleven. No, it must have been earlier than eleven. It was the first, like, the first … thing I can … the first moment I can recall looking at a boy and being like, “Hey, he’s really, he’s yeah! all right.”

As her chosen pseudonym suggests, however, she later came to prefer Han Solo. She was ten years old when the prequels started coming out, and she was “indoctrinated.” Star Wars was, according to her, the most mass merchandised media product in history, and she was its target demographic when Anakin Skywalker, Darth Maul, and Jar Jar Binks started appearing on collectible soda-pop cups. In her own words, Solo was “obsessive” by Grade 6. She saw Revenge of the Sith eight times in theatres and says she “cried buckets.”

As a child, the only books that interested her were by Roald Dahl. Her mother, concerned that she wasn’t reading enough, went to a bookstore where a clerk recommended Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone—she thinks largely because the cover blurb compared it to Dahl’s work (which strikes me as a rather inapt comparison, at least after Harry is rescued from the Dursleys’). She devoured it and followed the series. She remembers dressing as Harry Potter for Halloween one year well before the film adaptations and hype began, and no one recognized her costume. When the film Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2 was released, she described experiencing the opening-night line-up as the end of her childhood. Alongside and after the Harry Potter books, she read other fantasy novels. Solo’s media consumption in general has a kind of compulsive quality: She always wants to have a book series (or a TV series) underway, and when it ends she has to find another. She doesn’t like to read science-fiction novels, but prefers SF-themed movies and television to cinematic attempts at the fantasy genre.

Her first exposure to the TV series Buffy the Vampire Slayer came through an interpersonal connection: “my brother had a friend who was really, really into it, so then I started watching it and then I got into it.” At that point, the show was already half-way
through its run, and she had to catch up with VHS “best-of” compilations from each season (she would have to wait for DVD before complete seasons were available on home video). Like the later Star Wars t-shirt described above, a Buffy poster in her school locker was the catalyst for her peer group in high school. She still considers the show a major influence on her life:

I mean, it was really instrumental in a lot of ways, in terms of, like ... like, adolescence, I guess. Like, there’s a lot of things where I think, “Ah! Stupid Buffy, teaching me the wrong lessons!”

I think it limited my ability to ... grow up ((laughs)) because I was so obsessed with this one little facet of pop culture for such a long time. ((laughs))

Like Harry Potter and Star Wars, Buffy is mostly dormant as a fandom (for her) because there aren’t new installments of the story coming out. Yet, at the time of the interviews, she was regularly getting together with a friend to work their way through the series on DVD. She still speaks admiringly of the show’s creator/auteur, Joss Whedon, though her feelings about his post-Buffy projects are all over the map.

Her interest in comics has its roots in a childhood spent with superheroes and was initially nurtured by movies, TV, and video games. She saw Batman Forever very young, and she remembers fighting with her brother over Mighty Morphin’ Power Rangers action figures. But she didn’t actually start reading comics until she was in Grade 12. Between a boyfriend and a friend of her parents’ who were both lapsed fans, she had sources of information who helped her fill in the backstories of the characters she had first encountered in their licensed adaptations. She started attending ORG3 Cons and buying bundles of back issues put together by the local dealers. This led her to start a subscription account at a comic shop. At the peak her reading habit, she spent somewhere in the neighbourhood of $150–200 a month, about which she claims to have felt significant guilt. When her comic-bookstore closed, she got out of the habit. She occasionally drops by a mass-market bookstore and purchases a graphic novel or trade paperback and still has very strong opinions about the DC Comics universe; when I mentioned the New 52 relaunch, she seemed intrigued and started making tentative comments about maybe getting back into comics.
When we arranged to meet at a coffee shop for our first meeting, Wedge told me that he looks “like a gamer and [has] a scruffy beard, shouldn’t be too hard to spot.” What this turned out to mean was that he came wearing cargo shorts and a t-shirt with a Threadless-style graphic screen-printed on it. Wedge is easy-going and quick to laugh. He was connected to the study in two ways: he’s been involved with the local gamers’ society ORG4 and, seemingly like all the local nerds, is friends with ORG1-p1.

Wedge is a software developer and project manager. He plays board games, role-playing games, and a fantasy- and football-themed miniatures game called Blood Bowl. He also mentioned that he had once been an avid comic-book collector, and he was a member of the Society for Creative Anachronism as a teenager. He made sure to point out, however, that he was a well-rounded individual; in addition to his nerdy hobbies, he enjoys hiking, going dancing (although he doesn’t get to as many raves these days as he might like), and is interested in natural building, permaculture and community gardens. At the time of the interviews, Wedge and his wife had lived in the city for two years, but they have been in the area for five years in total, having moved to be closer to her family. Like Solo, he took his code name from his favourite Star Wars character, Wedge Antilles (embarrassingly, I confused him with Biggs Darklighter).

Wedge’s earliest memory associated with nerd culture was throwing up while watching Alien on laserdisc at age six. He describes the media landscape of his youth as particularly accommodating to someone with his tastes:

WEDGE: I can remember that time period when I grew up ... there was a fair number of like fantasy:: movies and like ... Dragonslayer and uh Beast Master and ... um ... not-not-not great—

BMW: The kind of post-Conan fantasy wave?

WEDGE: Yeah, post-Conan exactly, yeah. Like a lot of not necessarily great movies, but really fun and uh that genre really ... that was kind of a period when they were quite prominent?

His father was a plumber and at some point did work for the local video-store owner who paid in kind, giving Wedge free access to the entire catalogue:

I watched a tonne of movies that I can’t even name. I can remember going in there later, like probably when I was ... sixteen? and having trouble finding anything that I hadn’t seen—like of any genre. [...] I watched a tonne of ... just everything, and—but I always would come back to li::ke sci-fi ... fantasy[...]}
The film adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune* got him interested in reading SF books, and he remembers reading his father's copy of *The Lord of the Rings*. Today, SF&F literature and media are still important. His favourite books are George R. R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* novels (now appearing on HBO as *Game of Thrones*). But he says he doesn't get as much time to read as he'd like and that he'd watch more movies if he and his wife shared more similar taste in films.

Another early involvement with nerd culture was learning to play D&D when he was eight years old. A friend of Wedge's father ran a game for the family, including both parents and his sister. In a sense, this is the wellspring of much of his geeky interests:

I know it made a huge impact on me. I can remember—and I have a really bad memory and I've always had a really bad memory, and so I only (have) very, very, like very singular memories of when I was a kid, and this one—like I can remember my character. I played like a barbarian guy with an axe. And I can remember pieces of the adventure. I know we were travelling through a dungeon trying to rescue a princess. And I can remember parts of the map because I still have the map. I still have the original map that my mom drew from that.

After it was over, the friend left a copy of the rule book behind. Wedge then got some of his friends involved, and gaming became a major part of their lives:

Like, after school we would play quite a lot. Probably a reasonable amount of my spending money was spent on that sort of thing, like buying modules or new books or that kind of stuff. I can remember ... um, a local store—because I grew up in a small town, so getting stuff, like newer things, was often, was difficult a lot of the time. But there was a store in town that ended up carrying some of that stuff, but only a small amount, and they would get it in every once in a while, so we would end up getting it then. Or whenever we went on a ... a trip anywhere, to like one of the bigger towns or cities, that would, like our friends would be like, “Oh, can you see if there’s this?” and we would give them money and, like, they would try and get it for us. So, it ended up occupying like a fair amount of our sort of lives, I guess.

In university (he studied computer science), he joined a club that held regular drop-in gaming sessions. He started out playing *Magic: The Gathering*, but eventually drifted into the *Warhammer*/football miniatures game, *Blood Bowl*. Today, he still plays *Blood Bowl*, running a team of Skaven (rat creatures) in the local league. He's also involved in two RPG campaigns, one in the traditional D&D mold (although set in the Asian-themed campaign setting, *Legend of the Five Rings*) and a more free-form game called *Over the Edge*, which he
compares to the William S. Burroughs novel *Naked Lunch*. Wedge says that gaming is “more about the story than necessarily the mechanics,” but he also appreciates the nuance that well-designed game mechanics bring: “I find they, for me, they add a lot to the game, but the story is certainly the focus in a lot of my games or intentions.” This is reflected in the variety of gaming styles represented by *Blood Bowl*, L5R, and *Over the Edge*. 
B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The “default” schedule of topics for interviews from both phases follow below. Questions were customized in advance of interviews based on what I already knew of the group/store or person from our previous interactions and communication (in phase 1, this usually included a session of participant observation on site). However, interviewees were also given latitude and I asked follow-up questions based on their responses, so the final transcripts rarely follow this sequence of topics very closely.

Phase 1 Interview Schedule

- How would you describe your [store/organization] to someone who isn’t familiar with it?
- What can you tell me about the history of the [store/organization]? How did it get started?
- How long have you been operating?
- How were you involved personally in the nerd scene prior to [opening your store / getting involved in the group]? Cue additional leisure activities/interests if necessary.
- What, if any, surprises were there when you started?
- Are there any significant changes or events that you would point to over the history of the store?
- Is there anything you would point to as particular successes? Anything where you’d say, “Yes, we really got that right,” whether a one-off thing or a general achievement for yourself or the [store/organization]?
- Are there any particular challenges or difficulties that you face?
- What would you say that an outsider needs to know to understand this [line of business / kind of organization]? What do you need to know to “get” it?
- When you do something, even a fairly complex thing, over a long time, you start to see patterns and cycles. I wonder if you could tell me a bit about how the average week in your [store/organization] goes down.
  - Month?
  - Season/year?
- Store: What is the range of different products that you sell? Could you describe your major product categories? Organization: Could you tell me some more about the different kinds of events and activities that you run?
- Do you find that these reflect different [customer bases / kinds of members], or just different tastes that individuals have? For example, do you find that [people shop from different parts of the store / you see the same people at different kinds of events]?
- Are there any kinds of groups or types within your [customer base / membership] that you would point to? You know, “There’s a collection of people and all they want is this,” or, “There’s a group of people that do this”?
- Store: How much do you find people hang out in the store?
- Do you think people have a lot of expectations of you or the other [staff members / volunteers]?
• All right. Something I like to do in these interviews is go through a list of stereotypes about the “nerds.” And I’d be interested to know if, based on your experiences, you can confirm or deny them.
  • Gender?
  • Ethnicity?
  • Age?
  • Occupations?
  • Social awkwardness?
• Do you notice a distinction between regular and casual [customers/attendees]? What would you estimate the proportions are?
• It seems to me that with a lot of niche interests, there’s often a tension between serving the existing community of fans and bringing in new [customers/hobbyists]. How do you manage that tension? What kinds of things are you doing to attract new [customers/attendees]? And what, if anything, are you worried about doing that would negatively impact the existing base?
• There’s been a lot of talk in the news, with articles like “Bam! Pow! Comics aren’t for kids anymore!” Comics are becoming more mainstream. Similarly, you regularly see celebrities saying in interviews, “Oh, yeah, when I was in high school I was such a nerd. I was really into comics and games.” So there’s a lot of talk in the press that nerdy hobbies are becoming more mainstream. If that’s true, one would expect that at the level of the local scene, you might see some changes: for example, changes in the [customer/attendee] base or different kinds of demand. Have you seen any indications of changes like that?
• That’s everything that I had planned to ask. Is there anything you feel like I should have asked, you’re surprised I didn’t ask, or anything else you’d like to get on the record?

Phase 2 Interview Schedule

Personal information. I’d like to start by asking you some general questions about yourself. I just want to have a better idea of who you are and your background before we get into some of the more hobby- and interest-related questions.
  • How old are you?
  • Do you have any brothers or sisters? [Are you the eldest child in your family?]?
  • How would you describe your ethnicity or cultural background?

Living situation/family life.
  • How long have you lived in the city?
  • Are you currently in a romantic relationship?
  • Do you currently live alone or with other people?
  • How important to do you think shared hobbies, interests, and tastes are to a successful romantic relationship or to other close, personal relationships? Can you think of any particular examples from your own experience, or maybe experiences that people you know have told you about where shared interests, or their lack, have been significant to relationships?
Work. Even though I’m mostly interested in the way that you use your specifically leisure time, I’d like to ask a few questions to put that in the context of how you spend your time as a whole.

- Are you currently employed for pay?
- Could you describe for me a typical day, from the time you get up until you go to bed? I’m interested in getting a sense of all the things that you do—of the rhythm of your day—on an ordinary or typical day.
- *Cue socializing and cyber-slacking questions if relevant:* Are there people that you interact with socially on a regular or semi-regular basis in the course of your day? Could you describe some of the things you talk about in a typical conversation? Do you ever have opportunity to pursue your leisure interests in amongst these activities—for example, reading news and gossip related to them or participating in discussions online?
- How would you describe your current standard of living or social class?
- Could you tell me a little bit about what your parents did for a living?
- How would you describe your standard of living or social class during your childhood?

Education. Changing topics somewhat, I’d like to ask you some more questions about your experiences of schooling and education. Obviously, school is a big part of all of our lives when we’re growing up, and it seems from some of the people I’ve talked to that that’s also when they start discovering some of the interests and hobbies that stay with them for the rest of their lives. So, I’m hoping you can tell me some about your own experiences in school.

- What is the highest level of education you have attained? What years would you have started and completed [high school, university, etc.]
- In general, did you like school? I mean, would you say that you had a good experience going to school?
- Were you a studious or academically “good” student? What were your favourite classes and subjects?
- Did you participate in any formal extracurricular activities (i.e., clubs or teams) at your school or [college/university]? Could you describe what those involved for me?
- Could you tell me a bit about what you did outside of school? Were there any informal extracurricular activities or hobbies that you participated in at that time in your life?
- I’m wondering if your family put any pressure on you about school or academics. Could you describe your parents’ attitudes to school? For example, were they involved in what you were doing? [What about any other adult role models?]
- *Social life.* Of course, academics and official clubs are only one part of the school experience. I’d like to ask you some questions about the social life at your high school, how it was organized.
- Most high schools have a series of different crowds or cliques, but there are obviously differences in every school. Could you describe for me some of the different groups that there were when you were in high school? I’d like to know what groups there are and what you would have called them. Like, let’s say we pretend that you’re back in grade 12, and I’m a new transfer student, and you’re going to give me the grand tour of the school’s cliques. What would I need to know about them to survive my first day?
- Clarify usages. Cue for additional groups as necessary.
- Would you say that you belonged to any of those cliques in particular? Were there any major rivalries between the group(s) you were a member of and any of the other cliques in your school?
- Did you develop close friendships while you were in high school, or were you more of a loner, maybe? Have you kept in touch with any of those friends since?
- Dating?
- Repeat for college/university/grad school as necessary.

Religion, politics, life philosophy.

- Do you follow any religious or spiritual practice? If so, were you raised in that tradition?
- Do you follow politics at all, or are there any public issues that are important to you? For example, it seems like a lot of people who participate in nerd culture have strong opinions about copyright and intellectual property. Could you describe some examples of issues that are important or significant to you?
- Would you say that you have a general life philosophy? How would you describe it?

Subcultural membership. That's all very helpful. It helps put your experiences into some perspective. So, I'd like to ask you some questions now about your leisure activities, interests, and hobbies and what "nerdiness" means to you.

- As you know, I'm interested in learning about your participation in what we might call "nerd culture" or "geek culture." These are terms that are used a lot in the media—in the newspaper or on TV. But I'd like to know more about what they mean to you, from your perspective. Are "nerd" and "geek" words that you ever use? Are there any other words you might use to mean the same thing?
- Could you give me some examples of how you might use them? Like, what kinds of sentences might you use them in when you're talking with friends? If examples are positive, cue negative uses, and vice versa.
- When you use these terms or think about them, are there any particular images, characters, or people that you associate with them? For example, characters from movies or television, like Steve Urkel, or maybe a public figure, like Bill Gates. How well do these images/characters/people reflect your own experiences? From your point of view are these just stereotypes, or do you think there is any truth in them?
- [Is there a difference between a nerd and a geek? How would you describe the differences?]
- When I started this project, I thought I knew a lot about nerd culture because, you know, I read comics and played some D&D when I was in high school and so on, but now I realise that there are a lot of aspects of nerd culture that I didn't know anything at all about. In your opinion, are there different kinds of [nerds/geeks]? I'd like to try to get a list of the different kinds of [nerds/geeks]; can you describe them to me?
- Recap and cue for additional categories.

Nerdy commodities/activities. I'd like to talk with you about some of the things that you yourself do. Based on what I've read and what people have told me, it seems like many people define their participation in terms of the things that they're "into", that they follow, buy, or do on a regular basis. I'd like to get a list of all of the things that you do or buy or
follow that are related to [nerd/geek culture]. For example, I know from your email that you [whatever]. Could you tell me some of the other things you're into?

- You've mentioned a number of things that I'd like to talk about in more detail. Can we start with [thing mentioned above]? Do you remember how you first became involved [in/with] this? Could you describe your earliest memory of it?
- How would you explain this to someone who had never heard about it before? What would they need to understand in order to 'get' it? What is attractive to you about it?
- Ask for different kinds of participation/sub-activities. Again, I'm interested if there are distinctions that you make within this category. Are there different kinds of [participants]? What are some of the terms you would use to describe them?
- That's great. But I'm curious how significant you think these distinctions are. When I ask you to, you can come up with a list of them, but is this all an academic exercise? Or, do these categories represent really different groups within the [activity]? For example, can you think of examples of people who cross those boundaries? [How common is that?] How much time do you devote to [practice] on average?
- Could you describe some of the regular things you do as part of participating? What are some of the routine or periodic events or activities that you do because of this interest that you have?
  - Weekly?
  - Monthly?
  - Annually?
- Are there different levels of engagement in [practice]? For example, can you tell the difference between hardcore participants and less involved people, or do you think it's possible for someone to be too involved?
- How much money do you regularly spend to participate in this? Is it an expensive hobby to get involved in? Can you think of any times when money was an obstacle to participation for you?
- Could you describe any strategies you have for reducing the cost of participation? For example, are there ways of accessing the things that you're interested in more cheaply or even for free?
- Are there any other factors that limit or constrain your participation?
- I'd like to know a bit more about how you keep up to date with this activity. How do you hear about new products or events, for example? Where do you regularly get news or information about these things/activities? If you had to do some research to learn more about some aspect—imagine you overheard someone talking about a [comic/book/film/game/event] that sounded interesting to you—where would you look?
- What are some of the ways that you would describe something that you like? Say, we're meeting for a coffee and you know that I'm into [practice], too, and you've just [read/seen/played/been to] a [comic/book/film/game/event] that you think is really good. How would you tell me about it? What kinds of things might you say?
- What about something bad, something you didn't like and thought I shouldn't bother with. What are some phrases or sentences that you might use to describe something like that, something bad?
• Is there anything that comes to mind as an especially meaningful or significant experience that you’ve had related to this activity? Have you had any really negative experiences participating in this activity?

• Repeat as necessary for all named commodity/activity categories. I’d like to go back and talk some more about some of the other interests that you mentioned having. Basically, I want to ask this same set of questions but about [next activity].

Micro-social dimensions. I’d like to ask you some questions now about the place that these interests have in your overall social life.

• Do you have a rough idea of how many of your friends share some or all of these interests that we’ve been talking about?
• Could you describe some of your best or closest friends? Who are the people you spend the most time with or who do you most like to spend time with? Can you tell me a bit about them?
• How important do you think shared interests are to a friendship?
• How do you discover if someone you know shares your interests? Can you think of some of your friends and how you first figured out that they were also into these sorts of nerdy hobbies and interests?
• Could you tell me about some of the different ways you spend time with your friends? Do you tend to socialize with friends one-on-one, or do you get together in groups?
• Would you say that your circle of friends are pretty similar to one another, or are they different from one another? For example, do you have many close friends of the opposite sex or of different age groups?
• Do you think it would be fair to talk about a “nerd scene” or “nerd community”? Or, maybe plural, “nerd communities”? Would you ever use phrases like that?
• In your view, are there some ways that nerds or some groups of nerds are [like/different from] a community?

Change and mainstreaming. One reason that I’ve been interested in talking to people about nerd culture is that it sort of seems like the last decade or so has seen a lot of changes. While people have been talking about the "revenge of the nerds" since the ’80s, it’s become a much more prominent theme over the course of the 2000s. I’d like to ask you some questions now about changes within nerd culture that you’ve maybe observed while you’ve been a participant.

• When you think back over the time you've spend pursuing the interests that we've talked about, what strikes you most strongly as different? How is it different to be involved in those activities or to pursue those interests than it was when you first started?
• Do you think the participant base has changed or shifted at all in the time when you’ve been involved? Does the “community” look different now than it once did?
• Is nerd culture becoming mainstream? How would someone know? Could you describe some things that would indicate to you, one way or the other, whether it was the case? How do you feel about that?
• Could you talk a bit about changes in media and technology? For example, the move to DVDs and now Blu-Rays or the Internet and smartphones. Have new technologies or new media affected how you and people you know participate? Are they providing new things
you couldn't have done before, or helping you to find new ways to do things you've always done?

Taking leave. I think that maybe is enough material to cover for today. I promised I wouldn't take up too much of your time all at once. I want to thank you again for agreeing to talk with me. It's been very helpful: I really learned a lot today, and I appreciate getting a chance to get to know you. We didn't end up covering [missed topics from descriptive questions]. And I'm sure I'll think of some more questions when I get a chance to go over my notes and the tape. You've certainly given me a lot to think about. Before you go...

- Do you have any questions or concerns about how things went today?
- Okay. I'm really looking forward to continuing this conversation. Could we meet again soon?

I'll be in touch to confirm with you closer to then. I really want to thank you again for your time. This has been very interesting and I've learned a lot. I'm looking forward to talking with you again soon.