

*Presentation notes for “The Well-Dressed Geek”
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INTRO

A. **SLIDE – TITLE SCREEN**

Today I want to talk about certain shifting ideas in what it means to be called a geek. I thought a good place to start might be with the geekiest shirt in my own wardrobe.

B. **SLIDE – VIVA MIYAMOTO**

The shirt looks like any of a number of other parodies of the iconic image of Che Guevara, but I bought my shirt at ThinkGeek.com. It was made by Penny Arcade, an online comic about gamers and geeks.

You might recognize the star on the man’s beret from Super Mario Bros. ... or if you’re even more into games, you might recognize it as the face of Shigeru Miyamoto ... if you followed industry and fan press, you might piece the whole joke together, as the shirt was made when the Nintendo’s new Wii console was still codenamed “Revolution.”

- C. You have to be a **pretty big geek** to get the whole thing, but that’s largely the point. The reference establishes a certain insider knowledge, while the style is **enough like** other hip clothing that this sort of shirt wouldn’t look out of place in youth culture fashion stores like Urban Outfitters or Hot Topic.
- D. ThinkGeek and Penny Arcade are just a couple of **manufacturers of identity apparel** openly marketed to self-identified geeks. These kinds of stores take advantage of the internet’s ability to reach out inexpensively to niche markets, respond quickly to in-jokes in various fan communities, and solicit feedback from their customers.
- E. The project I’m presenting today is part of an **ongoing ethnographic investigation** into geek cultures. **I’ll be focusing** on an area once thought beyond the realm of interest for geeks: fashion. Self-identified geeks and nerds today strike a balance between stigmatization and hipness, between outsider pride and assimilation. The **growing market of geek-branded apparel** addresses these concerns, offering some insight into how geeks **negotiate their identities** and how **media use practices pioneered** by geeks may be extending into youth apparel markets even beyond the geek-branded stores.

LIT REVIEW & STEREOTYPES

A. *SLIDE – REVENGE OF THE NERDS*

Of course, ‘geek’ was an insult long before it was a badge of pride, and it still is for many. There’s **not a lot of academic literature** that calls people “geeks” by name, but some of the most prominent stuff is about school hierarchies and stigmas. Kids who don’t wear the “right” clothes or do the “right” social activities get labeled by their classmates as geeks, nerds, and dorks, and many face much **worse emotional and physical harassment**.

- B. Some kids eventually find common ground in somewhat less popular interests like comics, games, and computers. In addition to this bond, the shared sense of rejection and awkwardness between geeks is one thing that helps build a sense of community, even cultivate pride in their nonconformity.
- C. We do have some sense that the status of geeks and nerds changes somewhat in adulthood. Lori Kendall has written about how computer nerds represent a “subordinated masculinity,” assumed to be physically weak and sexually inexperienced, but partially redeemed by the recent association of computers with wealth. Henry Jenkins noted similar stereotypes of “geeky” television fans in *Textual Poachers*, but focused more on fans creative appropriation and repurposing of texts. His more recent *Convergence Culture* suggests that the rest of our society may finally catching up with what you might call their “geeky” media use habits.

SECTION 1 – PRIDE, POWER, POLITICS

A. *SLIDE – GEEK HIERARCHY (close-up)*

Geeks and nerds are, of course, well aware of the stereotypes surrounding their interests, and they have their own ways of addressing these stigmas. One general approach is to embrace their **outsider status** and assert some sort of geek pride and **geek power**, defining the parameters of what’s an acceptable level of geekiness.

- B. Even among adult geeks, then, there’s a sense of hierarchy and stigma. One programmer from SXSW told me that **“there are a lot of people calling themselves geeks who aren’t really geeks”** (because they just write stories with other people’s characters, not tinker with computers). Meanwhile, media fans and gamers admit to me that some hobbies are geekier than others, and that they **“have to be wary”** about which hobbies they admit to enjoying.

(The image on the slide here is of the “geek hierarchy” from humor site Brunching Shuttlecocks, indicating who thinks they’re less geekier than whom.

The site's now defunct, but this chart still comes up a lot in conversations about geek identity.)

- C. Overall, there seems to be a fear that people will be judged on the **wrong side of doing or living** their hobbies – that they've **given up normal social interaction** in favor of computers, role-playing games, or what have you. Geeks end up getting stereotyped as **weak, anti-social, asexual, and just generally juvenile**.
- D. One way to fight back against these stereotypes within the geek community, then, is to assert power where the outside world thinks geeks have none. The slogans and jokes on t-shirts sold through geek specialty stores respond to some of these stereotypes, offering a site to establish subcultural capital and a sense of belonging.

E. ***SLIDE – BINARY SHIRT***

These come particularly in the form of **black t-shirts**. A couple guys working with geek stores told me that black shirts are the most popular; one offered two suggestions, noting that it's the shirt you'd just throw on if you're going to be in front of the computer all day, and it's also the color of **angry and disaffected** youth countercultures. Both of these examples highlight how these types of shirts function to set geeks apart from what they might call 'mainstream' culture.

Just about all of these suggest some special status about the wearer, making some kind of an us/them dichotomy (where the "us" is better). To get a little more specific, though, we see some **common motifs** cropping up. Just to offer a few examples...

F. ***SLIDE – CHOWN***

We see a lot of shirts **boasting superior skills**, particularly in multiplayer games or in coding ability. This is one way of reclaiming some sense of masculinity and power.

This particular shirt refers to the havoc hackers can cause with the "change ownership" command in UNIX. It also illustrates another common motif among geeky shirts in that it **celebrates outsider status** by making a deliberately obtuse reference: as the shirt's site indicates, "We don't need to explain this one. If you know what it means, you get the joke. If you don't have a clue, you should probably ask someone." One of the site's visitors comments that he'll buy it just for the blank stares it'll draw.

G. ***SLIDE – PRESS 'X' TO PICK UP***

It might seem unfair to characterize this as masculine power, as women can wear these kinds of shirts too. The ones made in women's sizes frequently specify

dominance over men, though – as Lori Kendall’s work indicates, male is the default coding for nerds, and women are often defined only in relation to men.

Plus, much more common in women’s sizes is clothing that casts the wearer as the **adoring girlfriend** or **willing sex object**, worn either earnestly or as an **unthreatening bid** to be accepted in a male-dominated culture. (The most common geek shirt I’ve seen on women at cons is some variation of the “**I ♥ GEEKS**” design.) Not a lot of geek-branded sites sell men’s briefs or boxers, but plenty sell panties.

H. *SLIDE – THE SUN IS TRYING TO KILL ME*

We also see a decent number of shirts **reclaiming** geek stereotypes, sort of in the same vein as people trying to reclaim ethnic or homophobic slurs. Again, it signals special in-group membership among fellow geeks (kind of like you wouldn’t wear a shirt calling yourself “queer” if you weren’t gay).

I. *SLIDE – F the RIAA*

Some shirts claim power through idealistic or political assertions. We see references to file sharing, hacking as a means of acquiring knowledge, Open Source coding as the enemy of profit-driven corporations, and so on. Some of it has a definite anti-corporate feel.

J. *SLIDE – HAN SHOT FIRST*

I see this as part of a broader discourse on intellectual freedom, including the ability to appropriate popular culture. As much as some computer geeks might want to make a distinction between what they do and what the media geeks do, it all comes back to sharing the basic units of interest to a subculture.

Both “textual poaching” and more technology-oriented “free culture” can be thought of as **geeky media practices** which have diffused into culture more broadly, and which are asserted in full force on geek apparel.

This shirt, for example, actively disputes a ‘canonic’ change to the Star Wars trilogy, asserting fan meaning over the official decision. (Any Star Wars fan born by the 1980s should be able to tell you that Han Solo shot Greedo the bounty hunter first – he does *not* shoot in self-defense, no matter what the new Star Wars special edition would have you believe.) Several stores have produced shirts with their own interpretations of this design.

K. *SLIDE – SERENITY SHIRT*

I think fans see this kind of unauthorized referencing as something as an inalienable right, as long as it’d done in the right spirit. So when Universal

clamped down on *Serenity* fans for trying to promote the movie with their own t-shirt designs, that was seen as something of a betrayal.

Fans aren't just appropriating this stuff to disagree with creators, like in the Han Shot First case. They're looking to connect with other fans, establish some subcultural capital, even promote the stuff they like. Geek cultures, after all, are based on shared affinities.

SECTION 2 – AUTHENTICITY AND ASSIMILATION

- A. The above motifs may be useful for asserting power among those who also feel powerless, but I don't see a lot of the black, super-obscure-in-joke shirts being worn in public, beyond fan and tech conventions.

B. *SLIDE – GEEK MONTHLY SPREAD*

InStyle magazine, among others, declared that geek is chic, and plenty of geeks took notice. There's actually a market for more fashionable shirts making more accessible references. This spread from *Geek Monthly* plays up the recent hipness accorded to some traditionally geeky pursuits.

- C. A lot of this new-found social acceptability may just be by association with computers; even my interviewees who **don't consider themselves computer geeks** often said that geeks have been cool ever since computer jobs became associated with money. Plus, as noted earlier, we now exist in a media environment where **textual poaching** and **digital collaboration** are more common practice, which might make it easier for geeks to enter social and cultural contexts where they might have otherwise been **too shy to venture**.
- D. Some other interests may be gradually shedding their geeky associations by reaching broader audiences and becoming known for more adult content, such as video gaming (which is becoming more acceptably masculine with **big-budget violent graphics** and successful **sports** franchises), and comic reading (which is becoming more acceptably adult as graphic novels are reviewed and winning awards alongside prose books).
- E. So in addition to the black shirts for the stay-at-home computer users and the hardcore countercultural geeks, one geek store founder tells me that they've got a whole line of more colorful shirts for the more fashion-conscious geeks.
- F. I mentioned before that one way of responding to geek stereotypes is to assert power and independence within the geek community, but another response is to attempt to avoid the stereotypes in the first place. If geeks get stereotyped for seeming like they *live* their hobbies rather than simply *do* them, maintaining some sense of fashion is a way of showing that they're on the socially acceptable side

of that line.

At the same time, fans and techies do have a vested interest in keeping their geek cred, as it were, to stay involved in certain communities and even subtly promote their interests.

G. ***SLIDE – 42 JERSEY***

One way that geeky clothing is designed to balance these is by **hiding references**. This shirt may signal to fellow geeks that you know the meaning of life, according to humorous science-fiction novels, but it's something you can wear without being branded a huge nerd.

H. ***SLIDE – EXPRESS SHIRT***

It's not particularly difficult to hide meanings in some cases, too, considering that plenty of mainstream fashion outlets in recent years have made t-shirts with references to non-existent places or funky-looking designs that essentially mean nothing.

I. ***SLIDE – BATMAN PWN or PIXELATED BOMB***

Another way to dress as a geek without seeming *too* geeky is to play on nostalgia value. You may have been into Transformers for many years now, but by the time you get to your 20s, it becomes okay to like them again publicly.

This shirt just has an icon of a pixelated bomb like you'd get in error messages on old Mac computers. It's still a geeky reference, but it has a lower barrier to entry, so to speak, than a UNIX command.

J. ***SLIDE – READING IS FOR AWESOME PEOPLE***

Potential irony also acts as a distancing technique, whether making fun of yourself ("I put the 'bad' in badminton") or the habit described on the shirt ("Reading is for awesome people").

Also, unlike the shirts described earlier, there's not so much of a declaration of power going on here, which might imply that "too much" of one's identity is tied up in geek culture.

SECTION 3 – THE GEEKIFICATION OF CULTURE

A. ***SLIDE – OPTIMUS PRIME SHIRT***

As the shirts sold by geek-branded stores increasingly take the fashion-conscious

market into consideration, you can see how they fit into a general sense of style at trendy, youth culture clothing stores. Some companies **officially license** their properties to Hot Topic and Urban Outfitters, cashing in on the nostalgia market, going for that artificially aged look.

B. ***SLIDE – PERIODIC TABLE***

To some extent, this is also just cashing in on the faddish hipness of the geek image more broadly – the nonconformist intellectual. Now, it doesn't seem so odd to have a periodic table or a shirt with the word 'nerd' in Urban Outfitters.

C. ***SLIDE – TRUST ME I'M A TREKKIE***

Arguably, though, we can see more substantial elements of geek culture percolating beyond the geek-branded stores. Web sites that don't even bill themselves as "geeky" are now selling t-shirts with decidedly geeky references, using the same kinds of distancing techniques – and media appropriation techniques – described above.

This shirt exists in an odd **middle ground** between the Urban Outfitters environment and the online geek store environment, with a **parody** of the "trust me I'm a doctor" shirt that **sold for awhile** in Urban Outfitters, listed under the "**Geek**" category on Noisebot.com (**one of many** categories, alongside categories you'd probably never see on geek sites, like "**Sports**" and "**Ethnic**").

D. ***SLIDE – I SAVED THE TRIFORCE***

I'm not confident that self-identified Trekkers are the actual target market, but this and other shirts on the site do display the kind of media appropriation common to geek stores, and it also hosts its own take on some of the more usual geeky shirt designs.

E. ***SLIDE – SPEAKER CITY***

BustedTees.com (a subsidiary of collegehumor.com) similarly does this kind of appropriation, but frequently for less geeky material, like this reference to a Vince Vaughn movie, *Old School*. The page for the shirt even uses similar text to the "chown" shirt discussed before, declaring "We definitely don't need a description for this. If you get it, you'll buy it. If you don't, you won't."

That may have more to do with legal concerns, but it's still worth noting the way the in-joke is supposed to **indicate esoteric knowledge**, though with an arguably **lower barrier** to entry (watching a movie vs. understanding how to maliciously use a particular UNIX command).

The internet, of course, makes it very easy to do the kind of appropriation and

repurposing that stereotypically geeky fans have been doing for years – which is why this design is being sold on many different sites.

F. ***SLIDE – DICK IN A BOX***

Busted Tees also demonstrates that you don't have to be a geek-branded store to quickly capitalize on internet-based phenomena. This shirt was made within days of a Saturday Night Live sketch's explosive popularity through YouTube. (If you don't recognize the reference, please don't make me explain it.)

G. ***SLIDE – THREADLESS VADER SHIRT***

Meanwhile, Threadless.com might be the ultimate demonstration of geeky media use practices making their way into trendy fashion. A user-generated content site that sells t-shirts based on community feedback and ratings, it's probably not surprising that the occasional geeky reference bubbles to the top, though it's not a geek site per se.

CONCLUSION

A. ***SLIDE – CONTACT INFO***

I started this presentation with an example from my own wardrobe (in part) because I want to be clear I'm not condemning anybody else's. My goal has been to make it clear that what it means to call yourself a geek is changing, faster for some than for others.

- B. Given the **different functions** (and potentially different markets) implied by the clothing described so far, it's fair to ask whether it's even sensible to talk about "geeks" as an **actual subculture**. The truth of the matter is that, unlike some other cultural groups, there's not really an easy way to demarcate the boundaries of geek culture. It's made up of people from a variety of **sometimes-overlapping communities and affinity groups** who occupy different roles in different contexts.

And as geeky interests and media use practices seem **less geeky over time**, some of the roles and contexts that geeks are now occupying might be more demanding of certain mainstream social conventions that geek culture hasn't traditionally been as interested in worrying about, such as fashion.

Depending on your perspective, this could mean any of a number of things.

- C. To those who cling to the idea of being in a **resistive subculture**, some of what I've talked about here looks like they're being co-opted by "The Man," becoming

too “mainstream.”

- D. To those whose brand of geekiness **hasn't been co-opted**, or even really recognized by the geek-branded stores, like the LARPerS, this may signal something **pure** about the particular value of their **styles of play**, or it may signal something about how the values of geek culture **reflect the values** of culture at large more than some would like to admit.
- E. To those who **feel left out** of geek culture, however, particularly women, this may come more as an opportunity to express themselves in **clothes that fit**: sites like Busted Tees and Noisebot typically have more women's sizes available than the geek-branded sites.
- F. Even as we see yet another story of the marginalized moving more toward the mainstream, this could provide a useful opportunity for even the most hardcore geeks – who are generally known for their interest in learning things – to consider what is most essential to their definition of geek culture.

Thank you.