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Wednesday, September 7, 2005

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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Onetime social outcasts rule pop culture

By [William Loeffler](#)

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Tuesday, August 30, 2005

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a geek as "an unfashionable or socially inept person or a knowledgeable and obsessive enthusiast, such a computer geek."

A dork probably wrote that. Because television, cinema and even the fashion runways are thronging with a new class of beta male with more brains than brawn and a wardrobe that is so far from cool it circles round and links up with cool at the other end.

People are letting their geek flag fly. The reigning leading man at the box office is not some pumped-up action hero, but a sweet, lovable doofus who collects them, "The 40 Year-Old Virgin." Earlier this summer, there was worldwide anticipation over the latest book that chronicled the adventures of a skinny, bespectacled boy magic geek named Harry Potter. Kids who shop for back-to-school clothes at Target can find a line of clothes based on the 2004 sleeper hit, "Napoleon Dynamite," whose hero is a curly-haired, pigeon-chested high school outcast who plays tetherball.

Geek connotes a specialized knowledge of, say, physics, chess, Dungeons & Dragons, forensics, ham radio, model trains, comic books, Star Trek or

Photo Gallery

[click to enlarge](#)[Cynthia Closkey](#)

Steven Adams/Tribune-Review

Geek gods

Some of the more well-known geeks of our time:

Rock star geeks: Beck, Ben Folds, Rivers Cuomo of Weezer

Computer geeks:

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Star Wars -- usually to the exclusion of a social life and anything resembling fashion sense. Like their predecessors -- the nerd, the nebbish, the Poindexter -- they usually dressed like they worked in research and development at Westinghouse in 1955.

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The '90s technology boom, ushered in by supergeeks Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates and Apple Computer founder Steve Jobs, gave geeks a new power as the gatekeepers of technology. Geek no longer was a pejorative term.

In Pittsburgh, Geek Night became a way for the tech community to

keep in touch. The bimonthly socials are held at the Church Brew Works in Lawrenceville.

"In the late '90s, people changed jobs a lot and there was a lot of volatility in the local tech scene," says Cynthia Closkey, of Butler, a self-professed geek who runs her own business-consulting and Web-design company, Big Big Design.

Closkey, 38, has impeccable geek credentials. She went to computer camp, back when the prevailing languages were Fortran and Pascal. A graduate of MIT, she's a regular at Geek Night.

"It's pretty big on the whole, but it's hard to tell because geeks aren't very social in person," she says, when asked for geek demographics. "We live online a lot of the time."

Geeks have come a long way since the term was used to describe a performer in a traveling carnival sideshow who bit the heads off live chickens and snakes.

Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, Apple founder Steve Jobs, anyone whose job description contains the word "firewall"

"Jeopardy!" geek: Ken Jennings

Economics geeks: Alan Greenspan, Ben Stein

Physics geek: Stephen Hawking

Hollywood geeks: Matthew Broderick; Joel and Ethan Coen; the Wachowski brothers, Andy and Larry

Magic geek: Harry Potter

Tools

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The first great American flowering of geekdom might have occurred in the 1940s, during the golden age of comic books in New York City. Superheroes often were created by physically unprepossessing kids who flexed their most powerful muscle -- their imagination -- and dreamed up their creations as a way of endowing themselves, by proxy, with powers they themselves could only dream about. Spider-Man's alter ego, Peter Parker, was a high-school chemistry major who was bitten by a radioactive spider in the geek's den, the laboratory.

Today, the Internet is to the geek what a publicity is to Courtney Love. A click of the mouse can get you to esoteric Web sites by geeks devoted entirely to, say, Bob Denver of "Gilligan's Island," Victorian surgical instruments, ceramic penguins or the history of the circus.

Dean Haglund, actor, inventor and stand-up comic, played the computer hacker Langly during the nine seasons of "The X-Files," beginning in 1993. He agrees that the information age has helped a lot of people awaken their inner geek.

"Where, at one time you could be a generalist and know about a bunch of things, now with the Internet and the blizzard of information, if there's something you like it's easier to glom on to it and gather the stuff you like," he says.

He says he can remember in '93 or '94 when "the rock-star look went from long hair to short hair with glasses." That happened, he said, with a nerdy-looking bunch of guys named Weezer, whose leader, Rivers Cuomo, was a skinny but brainy four eyes who put the band on hiatus while he attended Harvard. Their best-known song: "Buddy Holly."

Mary Jo Matsumoto, fashion designer and style expert in Beverly Hills, Calif., says the geek look has infiltrated the fashion and music industries.

"The whole idea is taking couture or a nice suit or making it look like it came from the thrift store," she says. "The figure that is kind of needed to pull this off is skinny. Skinny as in never having worked out because you're a geek. It's kind of the latest update of heroin chic."

The latest trend out of England, Matsumoto says, is "Tweak Chic," which incorporates a bit of rock-star cachet to elevate the geek to heartthrob status. Matsumoto says it was inspired in part by the series "Dr. Who" and is best exemplified by Peter Doherty, former singer and guitarist for the Libertines and the boyfriend of supermodel Kate Moss.

Japanese culture, with its blithely ironic distortions of preppy Americana, also helped influence the current geek trend, she says.

The look makes a statement that you're too busy in intellectual pursuits to care about conforming to the

whims of fashion. Closkey, the proud girl geek, says that trying too hard to look fashionable can impact your geek credentials.

"If you dress too nicely and you're selling yourself as a genius, and you wear a suit, you're undermining your image a little bit," she says. "You almost have to dress a little sloppy."

The word "geek" came home to the suburbs when Best Buy founded the Geek Squad, a group of computer techies whose uniform is a skinny black tie, a badge and what might be the quintessential geek accessory: a short-sleeve button-down dress shirt. They're the go-to guys for people with computer problems, a sort of 21st-century Maytag man.

One of those who wears his geek badge -- literally -- with pride, is Braden Houser, 25. Houser, who lives Ross, is a geek squad "double agent," meaning he is authorized to make house calls when he isn't working at the Best Buy on McKnight Road. He sets up wireless networks, removes virus and spyware infections and sets up PCs.

"When we first started the Geek Squad last year, they thought we were joking," he says. "They thought it was a spoof, like a Geico commercial. We get people so excited that we're coming. I've posed for multiple pictures with peoples' kids."

"We're a 24/7 computer support task force," echoes Joshua Showman.

Showman, 25, of Oakland, is an agent with the Geek Squad at the Best Buy at the Waterfront in Homestead.

"We're passionate about technology and Napoleon Dynamite," he says. "But we're also normal people who you would like hanging out with."

Geeks through time

Milestones in geek history:

1611-12

William Shakespeare's "Cymbeline" mentions a "Geeke," a variation of the word "Geck," meaning simpleton or fool.

1947

William Shockley, John Bardeen and Walter Brattain invent the transistor at Bell Laboratories.

1962

Marvel Comics issues Amazing Fantasy No. 15. Peter Parker, science geek, is bitten by a radioactive spider and becomes Spider-Man.

1977-78

David Byrne of Talking Heads, Elvis Costello, and Devo become the new geek rock stars.

1975

Best friends Bill Gates and Paul Allen start Microsoft.

2004

"Napoleon Dynamite" becomes the unlikely hero of high school geeks.

2005

The geek gets the girl in "The 40 Year-Old Virgin."

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