

Ethnographic Project:  
**The Gaming Geek Culture**\*

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### **Perspective**

As one goes through life, one realizes that people branch out into different groups. These groups are based on common interests shared within its members, and become further distinguished as the years progress. This becomes especially apparent during the middle school and high school years. One group that has caught my eye is naturally the one that stands apart from all others, the one that does not appear to have any part, or care, about high school society.

They met every day to engage in group activities in my English teacher's room, and were oblivious to everything going on around them. Furthermore, I appeared to have no influence over them, and being a relatively prominent figure, I was naturally captivated.

I started out seeking to find what made the members of this group different from everyone else— what characteristic gave them the title to be acknowledged as a clique. Getting into the depths of this sub-culture at our high school would be the equivalent of an anthropologist setting out into the jungles of Africa in order to do fieldwork; I wanted to explore the wildest of the wild.

With my subject and motive in mind, I will let you in on a slice of my research, and allow you to interpret my findings as you will.

### **Methods**

As I mentioned, I was not fully conscious of the Nerd group until high school, when I could distinguish them as a separate group, people with shared ideas. The particular clan I have come to study is found in my English teacher's room every recess period. They stick out from the other small clusters of people who occasionally spend time in my teacher's class during break and lunch. For one thing, they were not there either to finish up homework or against their will. Being in the room was a form of recreation for them. The other people of the class during breaks were nomadic, and came in small groups, if not alone, for some quiet study time or as a punishment. The Nerd group, on the other hand, was a loud bunch of, as a rough estimate, fifteen members.

\* Editor's Note: This paper has been edited from the original for style and grammar, while trying to retain the content and most of the teenage usage.

These wild people inhabit my very school, and I saw them on a daily basis. I was only made aware of their existence, as a group, as one realizes something upon frequent exposure. I was one of the itinerant people of my English teacher's class, and the separate group was brought to my attention by their number and noise level. They stuck out of the ideal studying environment with their aforesaid characteristics, but did not seem to care that people shot them weird looks and occasional annoyed glares. What group was this that could be so distanced from the rest of the high school student body?

I planned to research my topic in various ways. The first approach I took was observation. During my lunch hour, I would head straight for Room D-15, my English teacher's classroom. For the first couple of days, I distanced myself, watching the group and attempting to distinguish each person's role from an unobtrusive corner of the room.

After I had reached a sound theory of the basic preliminaries of the group (the leader, the activities, the camaraderie, etc.), I observed from a physically closer position, with the hope that the group had grown familiar with my presence and would continue acting as they normally would. From this closer vantage point, I could not only see what appeared to be happening, but overhear the dialogue going on between the members of the group.

When this stage was complete, I sought out another person who was a regular in the room during recess times. I then was able to conduct an interview about an outsider's opinion about the group, how she (representing the general public) interpreted their actions and so forth.

Naturally, my next step was to have an in situ interview with a member of the Nerd group itself. At first, I started by approaching the group as a whole. I asked questions and extracted answers about themselves and what they thought of their group. Gradually, the questions became directed at one person, who happened to be answering my questions most frequently and clearly.

Originally, I had wanted to participate in their computer games. It was my hope that I would persuade them to teach me the "Way of the Raygun." Unfortunately, lack of cooperation, or more likely simple disinterest, on their part barred me from taking part in one of their chief rituals.

There were no extremely intimate cases of revelation with any of the people I interviewed, the members of the Nerd group especially. I felt that there was no strong need to hide anything. As a student in the field, I received their permission and simply observed and interviewed informally. There were other people in the classroom during these times, but I kept the situation as inconspicuous as possible with no obvious sign of watching.

When the ethnographic project was first proposed in my anthropology class, I began generally questioning some of the members of the Nerd group, that I could easily distinguish, about their life. I also took stronger notice of the group when I was in the classroom on break. There were no notes taken during this period; it was more of getting familiar with what I was about to investigate, and to develop an idea of who I was dealing with, so I would not be shocked upon first beginning my research.

The first few weeks of May marked my intensive study of the Nerd group. On those days, I brought a brown-bag lunch and spent the precious minutes of my recreation time taking note of my informants. Information was recorded by hand, in a notebook. This was the method I used both in observation and interview.

## Description

“Why are you wearing that Sciencepalooza t-shirt?”

“I like science, okay?”

“You nerd!”

(conversation overheard in hallway)

This was one of the first pieces of dialogue that I heard on beginning my observations of the group, and I think it an appropriate way to start my description. In just a few lines of English, two members of the group have been able to portray a basic explanation of the intelligence and irony that their identity is based on. Repeated observation of the functionings of the group, seemed to me, to have a subtle pattern. I will develop this idea further in my analysis. Though I have observed the Nerd group for a sum of many hours, their daily schedule does not change dramatically.

At the beginning of break, I head over to Room D-15 (the group headquarters) and find a spot at the front of the class behind my teacher’s desk, as far away as possible from the group, who are gathered at the back of the room. As I arrange my pen and paper, I can already hear voices begin to rise as computers click to life to begin another day of gaming for the members. Four I-Macs sit along the back wall of the classroom, one of which does not function. This computer is left in isolation while eager members waiting to play surround the remaining three. This particular day of observation is a Teacher Inservice Day. All of our periods are shortened, resulting in lunch beginning at 10:50 a.m. By 10:55, six people had the three computers up and running.

These first six are all of an Asian ethnicity. Though the majority are freshmen, there are two sophomores. There is nothing appearance-wise that sticks out about these people; they all wear similar tennis shoes, jeans or khakis, and oversized t-shirts.

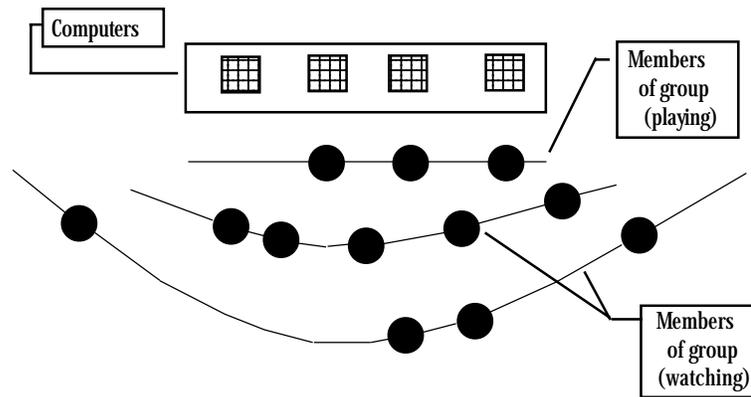
A member, Conner, finally says in exasperation: “Danny, switch with someone else! You’re not even worthy!”

Danny ignores the comment, and continues resolutely. After a few minutes, I hear his voice escalate as he jumps out of his chair, proclaiming: “I killed him! I’m worthy! I’m worthy!”

At this time, there are approximately eight other people in the classroom. These are students who are either lounging around or poring over thick textbooks. No one pays attention to the group at all, with the exception of one boy. He is sitting with two other people, both males, who seem to be in an involved discussion. However, he does not pay attention to his companions, but strains his eyes to see the activity going on in the Nerd group’s computer screens. Everyone else is oblivious to the group; the action was mutual.

There is a sudden shift in the group’s physical position, and something catches my eye. Brent, a person who I have grown to know by sight as a member of the Nerds, had become isolated

from the rest of the group. The Nerds are sitting in a semi-circle; four computers sit in the inner most ring, and the members all face the monitors in such a fashion:



Brent is off to the far-left corner, away from the group. Though they cannot face each other and watch the game play at the same time, the Nerds do not leave each other out. However, it is obvious that they are turning their backs to Brent, and leaving him out of the conversation. Brent attempts to look over their heads and watch the three current players, but after a few minutes gets up and leaves. No one notices, but keeps their eyes on Star Craft.

More members of the group trickle in throughout lunch, whenever they come, they do not leave.

At 11:17 Brent returns, and tries once again to get into the conversation of the Nerds, but is virtually ignored. The watchers pay attention to the players, who in turn are focusing on the performance of the other players.

At 11:20, the Nerds begin to eat. There is nothing extraordinary about their food; it is either the standard Cup of Noodle, corn dogs, Hot Pockets, and sodas from the lunch lines or chips and candy from the vending machines. From backpacks or desks these high school goodies are brought out. There is no actual pause from game play to eat; the Nerds munch away at their food as they watch fellow members continue to play Star Craft. At this time, there are thirteen people in the group; ten are Asian (Chinese or Vietnamese) and the remaining three are Caucasian.

The school bell rings at 11:30, signaling the end of lunch. Within the first minute, the Nerds have exited their games, shut down the computers, gathered their belongings, and left the classroom with no trace of their ever being there. There is no lingering, but challenges are yelled to each other, and promises of a continuation of Star Craft after school.

Leaving the minute-to-minute account of the day, and I would like to tell you some other things that I noticed while observing the Nerds, things that do not necessarily have a set timing. First of all, as each new member of the group first entered the room, they would hastily make their way to the back of the class, where the other Nerds were situated around the computers. Oversized backpacks would be carelessly dumped on the ground, while steaming lunch trays were left to cool on desks. The member would then go on to sit where they belonged within the group. After observing them for some time, I noticed four distinct categories within the Nerd group. These were: 1) the main players, 2) players, 3) back-seat-driver watchers, and 4) silent watchers.

The main players were the ones who have the most game play time; they were most frequently in front of the computer screen. These people were also the ones who I would call the alpha geeks; the leaders of the group. From what I was able to gather, Danny, Conner, and Josh were the main players. What also distinguishes them from other members of the group, and raises them to almost the level of dictatorship, was the fact that they were the ones that nobody argued with. If they wanted to use the computer, they could simply push the current player out with not too much hassle.

The alpha geeks were also the ones who gave the most criticism both to each other and the other players in the Nerd group. Although they were plainly superior to the other group members, the main players (the alpha geeks) were also extremely competitive with each other. They were constantly striving to outdo each other, not only in reaching the highest score and killing the most enemies in their computer game but in their knowledge of academics, specifically in math and science.

The players were the members who had the courage to wrestle the main players for some gaming time on the computer. There was a very small number of these people, for no one really stepped up to an alpha geek's face and challenged him for his spot. While there were three main players, there were only two players who participate in Star Craft in between the main players' games. I think that the fact that other players had little success in convincing the main players to surrender the computer contributed to this.

Back-seat-driver watchers were members who, while I never once witnessed them playing the game, were constantly berating the players on how they were performing. This could mean anything from sarcastic comments to advice on which technique to use in a particular situation (with the former being, by far, the more popular call out). There were approximately six of these types of watchers.

The rest of the Nerds were the silent watchers, those who sat without a word, staring intently at the screen as the players progressed. The members' viewing distance from the monitors was in respect to these categories, with the main players being closest to the screen and silent watchers the furthest.

The focus of the group was primarily on the game, Star Craft—they were either playing, talking about it, or watching it. There was no other apparent activity, except once a silent watcher took out a Gameboy. He played the hand held video game (muted) for a few minutes before giving up and returning to the action going on with the other group members playing Star Craft. All of the members seemed comfortable with the space they occupied; they sat and acted like one would act in a familiar setting.

Physically, the Nerds did not appear all that different from other students. All of the group members wore similar outfits of either a hooded sweater or a silk screened t-shirt, jeans or khakis, and tennis shoes. Each member also owned a sports watch. Their hair was either partially gelled and slicked to the front, or left to go about in its natural ways.

The Nerds were not the only people in the classroom; there were other students who came in for a place to study, or just to relax. If the Nerds come together at a regular meeting place, at a common time, eat the same food, and dress similarly to what everyone else was wearing, then why were they isolated from everyone else?

I believe that it was the Nerds' style of language that set them apart from the others in the school. First of all, the members of the Nerd group were loud to an extent where it was considered rude by the other people in the room. Sitting across the room from them, I could still hear each word they said without straining my ears. They were never quiet, but were either talking about Star Craft, or yelling at one another. Although the yelling

was not in any way serious, there was a competitive edge underlying all their conversation. For example, a Nerd could begin talking about a certain technique used to navigate an area in the game. The other people in the group would join in, but then each person would begin to argue that he was the best at performing that task.

Secondly, the subject matter of the Nerds' conversation was not that of other groups that I have experienced during my time at high school. The basic things that most of my friends talked about was people, events, activities, and their life outside of the academic setting. There were two main subjects that the Nerds' conversations revolve around Star Craft and the group members' classes at our high school. They would go over the facts of the game and the ideal way of playing Star Craft in such a level of detail that their dialogue was no longer an exchange of ideas and opinions, but merely technicalities, and arguments about who was right. Their other main topic of conversation, and source of competition, was academics. They were forever comparing English grades, test scores, and challenging the limits of each other's knowledge.

Thirdly, the Nerds not only talked in complete sentences, using words with more than six letters, they had started inventing a vocabulary of their own. These new words dealt with playing Star Craft. For example, there was "telephragging," which I later learned to be the technique of teleporting a game unit behind an enemy and blowing him up. This was one step up from "phragging," which was to kill your enemy from the front. I think that what made the Nerds stand out from all of the other high school groups was the fact that they used the English language in such a different way, discussed academics, and speaking in such a loud volume that everyone noticed the difference.

The rest of my days of observations were similar to the one that I have described. There were never any significant changes; the group seemed to function upon a repetitious cycle. However, there was one day where I started out observing the Nerds, but staged an in situ interview with one of them, Conner. This was during lunchtime on May 3, 2002.

By the time I arrived at 12:30, there are already nine group members at the three working computers. Danny and Josh have not yet arrived, so Conner is the only main player present, the game being played is of course still Star Craft. I gradually make my way to the center of the group, and approach Conner. My reason for picking him, from any of the other Nerds, is simply because of the fact that he is in two of my other classes (Band and Integrated Science 1), and I feel more at ease with him than the others.

My first question is: "Why does his group play computer games as their principal activity?"

Conner: "It's like an unreal tournament, we get to kill people. We do two things homework and computer games. Computer games are more fun."

By this time, two others members, Brent and Stephen, had edged into Conner and my little circle and join in on the interview.

Brent supplies: "It is legal violence, and we can feel righteous at being better. It's a form of entertainment."

Suddenly, from the middle of the group, someone yells, "Do not answer questions!"

I feel uncomfortable for a minute, but Conner yells at the anonymous person to shut up, and asks me for the next question. (Ah, an alpha geek flexing his power.)

My next question is: “How much they got into the game?”

Conner immediately says: “Some people, like Danny, totally get immersed in Star Craft. It all depends on that person’s characteristics.”

He then declared that he played computer games, but didn’t let that become his reality. The other members contradict his statement.

Right then, Conner, Brent, and Josh decide to leave the room to check if they had passed a recent test to get into Honors English 2A. Conner says he will be back, and makes a quick demand for Stephen to continue the interview. While they are gone, the rest of the Nerds ignore me. I attempt to throw questions at the group for anyone to answer, but after an obvious lack of cooperation, I give up and remain silent. For approximately five minutes, I stand in the midst of the Nerds, not doing anything. I am too close to openly take notes on what they are doing.

There is not much conversation, but only the click of keyboards as fourteen pairs of eyes look on. I am almost relieved when the door slams open, and Conner and Brent come tumbling through the room in victory. They have been accepted into the advanced English class. Josh follows behind; he has not made it, and takes pleasure in informing the other alpha geek and his close friend, Danny, that they, too, have not passed.

After a few minutes of triumph, Conner remembers that I am waiting patiently for him, and returns to my side. We continue the interview. When I ask why they chose this classroom; the answer was unanimous: they needed a place where they could use computers, and this room’s teacher was the only one who would allow them to play such violent games that are otherwise banned on school grounds.

My next question is: “When did they became a group and what did they do then compared to now?”

Conner covers this one, saying: “We just came together in small groups and . . . merged. We had the same hobbies, and friends of friends kind of introduced each other. Everyone wanted a place to hang out . . . we just wanted a place.”

Brent then cuts in: “Yeah, we do it because we like math, physics, and male bonding.”

I continue: “Did you always hang out with these people?”

Conner: “No, it just started this year. I hung out with different people up to the beginning of this year, the one’s *outside* [Conner puts an emphasis on this word.] I don’t know, they just got boring. I think they got kind of mad that I ditched then but whatever.”

Diana: “Do you think you will ever go back to your original friends?”

Conner: “Yeah, probably next year. Yeah, next year.”

Intrigued by this, I asked: “How are the people here different from your old friends? What did you and your other group do?”

Conner thinks a while before answering: “My friends here . . . they’re weird. They’re really set on school, getting good grades, and playing games. We don’t always play Star Craft, some days we play cards or something like that. I guess I have more in common with these people. My old friends . . . we didn’t really do anything. They still don’t do anything.”

Satisfied, I move on: “Do the people here do anything outside of school?”

Conner: “No, we only see each other during breaks at school.”

Diana: “Is everyone here friends? Who do you consider your friends?”

By this time, Brent and Stephen have gone, which leaves a more personal level of questioning for me to address to Conner.

Conner: “We tolerate each other. It’s kind of a network . . . but everyone is independent. Brent and I are close friends, we do some things outside of school, but it usually has something to do with assignments in our classes. Danny and Josh are close; everyone else just kind of floats around.”

Diana: “Have you noticed that you guys come across as a group? What do you think people think of you?”

Conner laughs offhandedly, and replies: “Yeah, people think we’re weird. They come in, and we’re loud and everything. But we don’t care. Whatever.”

Brent suddenly adds: “When people come in, they always notice that we’re on the computers. They’re curious, and want to know what’s going on. But after a while, we get boring. People ignore us.”

The bell suddenly rings, and my interview with Conner (with some input from Brent) was brought to an end as the Nerds packed their things and left.

I tried to look at the Nerd from as many different vantage points as possible. After observing them for quite some time, I came to understand what they thought of themselves through interviews such as the one above. I wanted my final look at the Nerds to be through the eyes of an outsider. I wanted to know what another “regular” student in the classroom thought of the group, and how she interpreted their actions.

The person I chose to interview was Cynthia. She was in the room during break, lunch, and both before and after school. She estimated that she has spent well over 100 hours in the room alone, and stays there just to hang out and study. Being a junior, and having all those tests to prepare for, I can understand this behavior.

I first asked her to bring to mind the Nerd group. I asked her what she thought about them. Cynthia responded, “They are consistent. Every day, they turn on their computer games and are very loud.”

I asked if Cynthia saw them as an actual group, as I had deduced they saw themselves. She thought that they were not an in-your-face exclusive group, but they were still friends set apart from other people. They were the same collection of people who hung out regularly. Cynthia then supplied me with the fact that they had been together all year, but that they were a new group to the school which was composed mainly of freshmen. From what she saw in their classroom behavior, Cynthia thought that the alpha geeks were Josh (whom I had concluded to be one of the leaders), and a sophomore, named Tyler.

I found this observation to be interesting. I recall talking to one of the members of the Nerds, and asking who they thought were their leaders. The member responded, “It is definitely the sophomores. They rule the freshmen.” From what I saw happening within the group, the few sophomores melted into the background. However, from their own viewpoint, and that of at least one of the regular people in the classroom, it was the tenth graders that led the Nerds.

Cynthia told me that, in addition to meeting during the school day, the group got together for about twenty minutes after school, just to continue playing Star Craft. She noted that while there was no physical barriers to the group, it was simply the fact that they “talked weird” that kept other people from joining the Nerds.

Cynthia added that they spoke to each other very technically. When I asked her to explain this, she said that they got into arguments about the specific details about any comment a Nerd member made. If someone proposed something, he had better have adequate evidence and facts to back up what he said.

Cynthia said that, in her opinion, the Nerds were also extremely competitive. She saw this in their striving for the highest academic grades. But she felt that it was most evident in their concern with who could get the highest scores in the computer games.

Finally, Cynthia said that what set the group apart was that its members were very negative about everything. They were always criticizing the school, aspects of society, each other, everything. Furthermore, they talked about these things at such a volume that the other people in the room could not fail to notice what they had to say.

Cynthia: “People notice them, but they are not the center of attention or anything. People are just annoyed by the way they [the Nerd group] talk so loudly. They create a noisy environment, and [they] are just annoying some times.”

I ask Cynthia what she thought were the characteristics of the Nerds.

Cynthia: “They are really smart, especially in math. It is mostly Asian guys, though there are a couple of others . . . Yeah, it’s their talk that sets them apart. They are never missed, everyone knows that the group is there.”

On impulse, I give Cynthia the general image that the group projected (that they were gaming geeks). I have her verify this theory, and I then ask her what she thought the members of the group thought about their reputation.

Cynthia: “Well, they know about their position, people think they’re different and annoying and they don’t care. They’re really dismissive about what other people think of them. It doesn’t matter who you are, they just don’t care.”

Cynthia, her final statement: “They’re *weird*.”

## Analysis

My original hypothesis, that the Nerd group would be similar to other groups at our high school, was not quite on the mark. After observing the group for a period of time, I began to find patterns in their behavior which are different from other groups I have known. As we have learned in Anthropology class, all cultures are built upon patterns; repetitions of rituals, characteristics, meeting places, and times, the people I observed [the Nerd group] are no exception. While I may have gathered some insights into some of their behaviors, the most important pattern is the one which they collectively believe pulls them together. Thus I will attempt to clarify this pattern first.

The Nerds have one prime activity; playing computer games. Therefore, I have been able to classify them not simply as nerds, but as Gaming Geeks. This identity is exactly what its name implies. Their interest in this activity, along with school work, ties the group members together. None of the people in this group knew each other before the school year began. The group formed as small clusters of people, who knew other people, were introduced to each other. The group slowly built up as strangers became friends with the same interests who got together regularly.

These people are Gaming Geeks, but why it is games that they have chosen to take part in, and not anything else? From their answers to my interview questions, the manifest reason for playing such a game was that it was “legal violence.” They were able to wreak havoc and kill people while still staying out of jail.

To an outside viewer, this looks like a bunch of bloodthirsty boys who are addicted to action games, a typical stereotype. However, I found other reasons for their game playing that may not be as obvious, a set of latent functions to their play. In addition to the acting out of violent urges, belonging to a group, being like others, competition and defying the rules may have played a role in their behavior.

From what they have said the members of the group know they are geeks. People who are excluded as “misfits” by most school groups. While they give out the general message that they both recognized that fact and do not care what others think of them, they are still human beings. Human beings are naturally social animals, and desire approval and acceptance from others. The Gaming Geeks did not start out playing Star Craft; in fact, they had not started playing computer games at all when they first came together. The original activity of the Gaming Geeks was to get together, to hang out, and to do homework. My first speculation is that they desired to belong to a group, any group, even if it was a group of people that did not “fit” into any other group.

My second speculation is that while they were being excluded from other groups at school they would still like to be like them. It was not until a couple weeks after school started that the Gaming Geeks got into playing Star Craft. I recall that other people in our school had joined the Star Craft craze at around that same time. People of distinction in the high school hierarchy played this same game. This might have been a supporting reason for the Gaming Geeks to pick up the hobby; “normal” people played it, they could, too. However, for the people *outside* their group the craze had just come to an end as most people moved on to other interests.

A third reason for their engaging in such a game was the competition. From what I could gather, the members of this group are over-achieving individuals who are constantly at each other's throats, fighting over who had the top performance. Playing Star Craft gives them one more thing to be the best at.

The final and most subtle reason I conclude for the Gaming Geeks to have taken up this computer game was the fact that it was against school rules. Violent computer games are prohibited on school grounds. By knowing that it was against the rules and doing it anyway, under the officials' noses, gave the group members an adrenaline rush. The thrill and addiction of risking getting caught doing what you know is wrong. The Gaming Geeks were getting more than simple vicarious thrills from playing their game.

A second behavior that I want to bring to light is in how the members participated in my interviews. Instead of simply giving answers to my questions the Geeks would take the questions to the next level and began to analyze themselves for me. For example, when I asked them what they do, they would go one step beyond simply describing their actions and they would answer, "Oh yeah, we do this because . . ." The best example of this was when Brent answered the question about why they played video games by saying, "Male bonding."

The Geeks were at that level social interaction where they knew I was examining what they were saying, and in a small act of defiance, they analyzed themselves for me. They had the mind set of stepping out of themselves and observing what they did. The fact that they did this made my job hard at times, since they were performing my task for me.

The final part of my analysis concerns what the Geeks think of themselves. Others, whether it is the people *outside* [the classroom] or just random people also occupying the same space as the group in that room, have formed a label for that group. First, this is a recognition that they are indeed a group. Through the regular assembly of the same set of people they have become members of a group. These people have a place and time where they convene. They are set apart from others because of the way they act and speak. These people do not act like others and they do not have the same interests. They are strange, they are nerds. (Note: this is not a personal opinion, but the summarized view of what people [around the school] generally think of the Gaming Geeks).

Were the members aware of the title they that has been given them? The answer is yes. They recognized that others thought they were strange, but they did not care. In fact, they used the sub-distinction—they knew they were nerds, and they were proud of it! The image that others created for them has become their identity marker, who they are. They were the "norm for geeks." By gathering the opinions of people outside the group, I have been able to compile a list of what features make a "geek": 1) one who makes school work his number one priority with little else after that; 2) a person who is not well know by many; 3) though he is tolerated, he is not necessarily liked; and 4) he will be the butt of many jokes. This was what the members of my study group, the Gaming Nerds, were known to be, this is what they were expected to be. Naturally, such an expectation grows on a person until it actually becomes what they believe themselves to be. Though the Gaming Geeks did not communicate with others outside of their circle, they were still influenced by what these outsiders thought.

The Gaming Geeks are "different" from others, but it is not their appearance, meeting time, place, or activity that really sets them apart. Rather, it is the way that they talk. This is an interesting idea that can be applied to not only this one group, but to the foundation of entire cultures. It is the means of communication that they use, to exchange ideas, convey thoughts and feelings, and work with each other, that binds them together.

For the Gaming Geeks, their language showed to others who they were as people, how they acted, and what to think of them.

Having studied the Gaming Geeks for my class project, I became interested in finding out if anyone else had done fieldwork on this subject. I found some interesting articles via the Internet. *“Culture Overdose: The Meaning of Geek,”* by Kathryn Joan Fox, dealt with the definition of geeks, who they were, and why they were different from everyone else. Fox states that being a geek is based on more than just common interests, as I have concluded from my own observations. Fox said that geeks were people who “sought to be on the periphery of otherwise central people” because they did not conform to the majority of certain moral beliefs, etc. Fox believed that this identity was something that was formed through time. Geeks had come into being through a special set of circumstances, the ideology of the Generation-X’s and advances in technology and communication (for example, the modem).

As Fox saw it, being a geek was both a personal choice and natural state of being for such a person. These people did not wish to be trapped in the ruts created by the rest of society, and sought their own route. The geeks are people who struggle with the two contradictory choices of doing what is common or doing what they believe to be right. Fox’s final opinion was that, though they were isolated, the geeks had sound heads on their shoulders and would invest their time in things that would ultimately benefit them later on in life, no matter how unpopular those actions may appear to others at the time they were doing them.

### **Interpretations/Reflections**

As I have mentioned, the Gaming Geeks were “different” from other people. It is the way they talked that set them apart. Their language showed to others who they were as people, how they acted, and what others should think of them. Through my observations, I confirmed this view expressed by one of my interviewees who, though she was not a member, saw the Gaming Geeks on a daily basis. Further research on this topic, enabled me to discover that I was not the first to note that a culture’s language has at least some impact on what that culture will become and how it is seen by others.

Secondly, I will repeat the fact that the Gaming Geeks did not hold the best reputation within the school society. Normal students even avoided them for their various quirks. Through my research, I have found that the Geeks were fully aware of this, and that they had matured to that stage where they were dismissive about acceptance from others outside their own group.

Things which had meaning to others, outside of their group, were not valued by them. In a way, the Gaming Geeks did not have the same desires and outlooks about things that were generally standard to most regular students, such as: being accepted by others, being liked, and being a part of the general student body. None of these things were of importance to the Nerd group. As a result, they were set apart from others. Of course there were other groups of students, but there are basic principals, that all of the groups followed. The Geeks did not seem to be ruled by these principals. While every group is different, the Gaming Geeks seemed to have taken this concept to the next level.

This idea, that the Gaming Geeks were shunned by the normal students because they were different to a level of being strange, “too different” if you will, also goes another way. The members of the Geek group were fully aware of what the others thought of them. They not only did not care, they almost embraced the title that they were given. They basically said, “We are Nerds, and we are proud!” The image that they portrayed

was their identity marker, who they were known to be. While before they were generally thought to not fit in anywhere, the Gaming Geeks now fit in because they had their own identity.

The Gaming Geeks anti-stigmatized the reflections that others shot at them. They took the not-too-pleasant remarks that people made and bounced them right back at everyone. The fact that they stood apart now had become a source of pride. This, I believe, was the core of that group. While they had the same interests, and came together through the game, what they did was not special. Others played video games with that same level of obsession. They wore and ate nothing that significantly set apart from everyone else. The Gaming Geeks did not have activities together outside of school and they were not especially close friends. These were individual people who, while not accepted by others, had found others equally excluded from the general flow of high school society. With this isolation in common, they were able to establish a name for themselves, a place to belong.

Once I had learned this, I think I can be reasonably accurate to conclude that, in our culture, no matter who you are, you will always be influenced by what others think of you. Although the Gaming Nerds claimed not to care of what the others thought of them these opinions that formed the foundation of their group. It does not matter how “anti-social” you claim to be, you will always act on what others make of you.

When I chose this group as my ethnographic project, I simply wanted to know what made this group different from everyone else, and if the stereotypes people held about them were really true. I expected to find that a shallow difference set them apart, but I found that it went much deeper. The stereotypes I found to be more or less true. These were the characteristics that the members had in common that helped bring them together. The group was who they were because they held these characteristics (like their style of language) that brought them together in defiance of “everyone else.” The Gaming Geeks were a group that was almost of a rebellious nature.

I, being who I am, have always been the center of my own universe. I have never before actually sat down and watched the lives of other people. For this project I have had to do a great deal of that and it opened my eyes to many things. The most important thing I have learned is the extreme impact that we have on each other. It is the influences that other people have on us that guides us in how we should think and act in our daily lives. The significant role that the beliefs of others have on who we actually become, no matter how far from these confines we attempt to escape, is apparent in the Gaming Geeks. Reflecting on this, I am able to step outside of myself and see how I act as a part of the “bigger picture,” American culture. I think the most useful thing that this field project has taught me is how I can remove myself from my personal position and look at my life from an outsider’s point of view.

## **End Notes**

1. Pseudonyms have been used so as to protect the informants’ identity.
2. All research was done during school hours.
3. Members of group observed have been informed of investigation and signed release forms.

## **Bibliography**

Fox, Kathryn Joan. “*Culture Overdose: The Meaning of Geek.*” Online source, since removed from the net.