Genre Impact on the Identity of the “Nerd”

The concept of a “nerd” is a very important one in the grand scope of both the entertainment industry and the world at large. Just by mentioning the word, a flood of images come to mind regarding the characteristics of them, images such as video games, excessive acne, social awkwardness, etc. Any random person could be asked if they had recent contact with a “nerd” without any defining parameters, and that person would most likely answer by describing someone that they had seen watching anime in class or playing some video game in the library. These “nerds” have been traditionally ridiculed, excluded, and generally misunderstood, with their portrayal in mass media leading the way. Recently however, there has emerged somewhat of a new hope for the “nerd,” as society seems to be reacting to his interests and characteristics with more of an open mind; examples of this phenomenon are: a *Washington Post* article, “What do owners of the Patriots, Rams, Grizzlies and Flyers have in common? A big bet on eSports.”, a movie, *The Imitation Game*, a show, *Stranger Things*, and a commercial, “The Perfect Match.” Each of these genres present nerds in a palatable, even amiable, fashion, working to erase many of the social stigmas that being “nerdy” has accrued over the years.

Taking the title of both most recent and most logical argument for taking “nerds” and their activities seriously is *The Washington Post* article “What do owners of the Patriots, Rams, Grizzlies and Flyers have in common? A big bet on eSports,” by Noah Smith. Published on January 17th, 2018, it coincides with the launch of The Overwatch World League, the newest addition to the world of professional video gaming, commonly referred to as esports. As the title suggests, the article details the investments made into its creation by huge names in sports such as the owner of the New England Patriots, Robert Kraft, an ethos argument for the mainstream adoption of esports. The article presents their willingness to invest in terms of logos, citing large prize pools and viewer counts for games such as Dota 2, signaling to investors that this trend is no longer something to be brushed off. According to the article, “The live stream of the OWL’s (Overwatch World League) opening day averaged 408,000 viewers per minute” while the National Hockey League (NHL), an established mainstream sport, averaged 336,000 viewers per minute on a similar platform. Smith also mentions a $90 million streaming deal the league signed with Twitch, signaling to the audience that there is money to back up the viewership. These facts show that the article is well equipped to win over skeptics in the older, middle class demographic that the Washington Post targets, finally showing them that video games and the nerds that enjoy them are no longer the basement dwelling losers of the past. Written in an informative tone, the author does little more than state facts, providing little to no commentary of his own, as one would expect in the reporting of a distinguished publication like *The Post*.

After analyzing recent portrayals of “nerds” in the media, it may be useful to look at how they were treated in past eras through the lens of the historical drama *The Imitation Game.* While the film has been criticized for some historical inaccuracies, it can still be used as a useful depiction of “nerdy” characteristics for entertainment purposes. The film follows a team of British mathematicians as they attempt the nearly impossible task of decrypting the code that the German military used for most of their communications during World War Two known as Enigma. Leading the charge on this project is the eccentric and socially awkward mathematician Alan Turing. One of the first scenes is his job interview with a commander in the British navy where he is shown to lack such basic functions as recognizing a joke. Soon after landing the job, he is introduced to his team, and he gets them to dislike him right off the bat with his arrogant attitude and inability to process words beyond their literal meanings, such as when he misses an invitation by his colleagues to lunch because they say, “we are going to lunch” instead of “will you come to lunch with us.” Rather than focus on the traditional codebreaking methods, Turing spends his time trying to create a machine that will break enigma for him, leading his team to believe that he is wasting their time, and rather than trying to win them over, Turing simply ignores them. His persecution at the hands of his coworkers and high command are demonstrative of the traditional attitudes towards nerds, in that they should be punished or excluded because of their refusal or inability to “play nice” as it were. Along the way, the audience learns to empathize with Alan despite his aloof demeanor through flashbacks to his childhood where it is shown he is bullied, and asides to his friend Joan Clarke, where he reveals that he has little to no understanding of social cues, even though he implies that he would like to, signifying a pathos appeal. The character’s “nerdiness” is perfected with the casting of Benedict Cumberbatch, who’s skinny and pale features bring the stuttering, awkward man on screen a degree of realism that probably couldn’t be achieved by a muscular bronze god like Hugh Jackman or Zac Effron.

While the tone of the movie is clearly sympathetic to Turing’s struggles from the beginning, there is a marked shift after his conversation with Joan in how the other characters treat him as he begins to try to befriend them, leading to his gradual acceptance. This genre clearly works to reinforce the stereotypes associated with being a “nerd” to the general public (for the purposes of this essay, the general public audience is defined as “normal people”, those that you would find in the suburbs or in the grocery store without having a second thought about) audience that it is marketed to, but at the same time it tries to get this audience to sympathize with people they conceive as “nerdy” through pathos in portraying Alan’s backstory and showing that everyone has a reason for acting in the way that they do. It also tries to get people to appreciate the achievements that such people contribute to our society, as Alan Turing is considered one of the fathers of computers as we now know them and was commemorated such posthumously in 2013 by Queen Elizabeth. This logical argument for the social acceptance of nerds can be summed up by a powerful quote from Turing himself that is used multiple times in the movie: “Sometimes it is the people no one can imagine anything of who do the things no one can imagine.”

With “nerds” being cast as heroes in real life, it should come as no surprise that their success has bled into the realm of fiction as well. While less realistic, the achievements of some Dungeons and Dragons players are no less impressive as they attempt to save their missing friend in the hit show *Stranger Things*. The premise of season one of the show is that a boy has gone missing, mysteriously kidnapped by a strange monster, unbeknownst to the people of a small town in Indiana. In season one episode five, all hope seems to be lost when a body is discovered in the local quarry and everyone begins to come to the realization that they probably won’t see the boy, Will, again. Everyone except his mother and his basement dwelling, socially awkward, dungeons and dragons playing friends, that is. With help from a girl with strange powers, they use knowledge from their favorite game and their A.V. club at school to formulate the idea that Will is trapped in another dimension that is parallel to our own. This creates a turning point in the desperate search for Will, and the mainstream audience has no choice but appreciate the geeky yet genius solution presented by the lovable losers that the writers have created for them.

Dungeons and Dragons to the mainstream viewer is the epitome of “nerd.” Partially cultivated by the show itself, the prevailing image suggested in its mention is a group of acne-ridden outcasts taking a game a little too seriously. In the time that the show is based in, the 1980’s, there were many campaigns that said that the game had satanic themes and that it was corrupting youth, leading to calls for its ban. The shows creators managed to make playing the game slightly more acceptable with a cast of characters that certainly looked and acted the part of nerds, but acted in an appealing manner, with playful banter and moderate cussing allowing the audience to relate to the characters, leading to acceptance of their actions, in this case playing the game. More important, however, is once again the appeal that the writers make to the audience that the type of creative, outside the box thinking inspired by a fully imaginary game like Dungeons and Dragons and very prevalent in “nerdy” types is constructive in situations where all else has failed. This is especially obvious when taken in context that at the time the town chief of police, who serves as a foil to the D+D trio in that he is decidedly “cool”, has no idea what could have befallen Will at the same time onscreen in a different plotline. These ideas project to the world that it’s the “nerds” turn to save the day, after all who would be better equipped to handle alternate dimensions and monsters than some boys that do it on the daily?

Perhaps the most telling of all the mentioned genres in this paper as to the ascended status of the nerd is its feature in the most important thing in American culture: consumerism. Not just consumerism, a 32 second ad in the SuperBowl of 2013, the place where companies come to flex their marketing departments and have a good time, with the largest yearly television audience watching in anticipation as to what genius advertisement can make them buy something they may or may not need in the year to come. “The Perfect Match,” an ad presented by Godaddy.com is relatively simple, it features race car driver Danica Patrick talk about the smart and sexy sides of the website, represented by a slightly chubby, nerdy looking guy named Walter and supermodel Bar Refaeli, respectively. Danica Patrick and Refaeli are clear signals of ethos, as Danica Patrick is widely respected as being the first female NASCAR driver and what could be sexier than a supermodel? The interesting point that this commercial makes is its appeal to the character of a nerd directly, something none of the other genres do. Patrick and the supermodel both see the nerd, and that is a good thing, as he represents something that is desirable in this situation, intelligence. This clearly reinforces the stereotype that people who are good with computers are all nerds and vice versa, but it isn’t necessarily a bad thing in the context. Patrick states that “together they are a perfect match”, and Walter and Refaeli begin passionately kissing. When the audience sees this, the clear message is being sent that the nerd is a winner here, the shock value of seeing something so unexpected makes certain that they will be paying attention in the future, simply because a “nerd” is not supposed to kiss an attractive girl in such a fashion. The genius behind this commercial is not only insinuating that being a nerd is a good thing in the right context, they also managed to sell a lot of godaddy.com web domains with shocking, yet not entirely unfeasible breaking of social stigma.

Clear as it may be that nerds have gained cultural traction in the past several years, the question remains as to why and how such a proliferation has occurred. Perhaps the people in charge of creating such things were nerds themselves, and because of their “nerdiness” are in the successful positions required to partake in such endeavors. More likely, the mainstream audience can relate to the troubles of the nerd more than they care to admit, with most people having partaken in a socially unpopular activity or having felt alone at some point in their lives, and such media formats make them able to relate to that side of themselves without making to many concessions about their “coolness” to themselves or their peers. Whatever the reason, it is almost certain that the upward trajectory of the nerd will continue into the future, and while it will probably never be “cool” to be one, maybe the kids watching anime in class or playing video games in the library won’t seem all that weird anymore.

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