THE GENDERED GEEK:
PERFORMING MASCULINITIES IN CYBERSPACE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to problematize the binary of hegemonic/non-hegemonic masculinities as set up by R.W. Connell through the prism of the figure of the geek. By putting the geek into a historical contexts and emphasising the connections between various masculinities which fit into the binary, I argue that Connell's framework is hindering the conceptualization of a hybrid masculinity, of which geek masculinity is a representative.

I use Connell's theory of masculinities, as well as Erving Goffman's theory on performance and presentation of the self. I analyze the genealogy of the geek figure with the help of Connell's hegemonic/non-hegemonic divide in order to determine which are the practices and performances that characterize the human-technology relationship which lead to the conceptualization of the geek as a subordinated male. I attempt to draw some parallels between the historical/imaginary figure of the geek, modern stereotypes in popular culture, as well as the geek as a social actor, the embodied computer user. In order to situate the performances of social actors in relation to the binary, I examine the performance of masculinity within an online forum for self-identified geeks by using Connell's threefold dimensions of masculinity.

I argue that geek masculinity is an example of hybrid masculinity which falls outside the binary while incorporating both elements of hegemonic, and non-hegemonic masculinity, and which can best be envisioned in relation not necessarily within the framework of the hegemonic/non-hegemonic duality, but rather as non-femininity in the face of socially constructed hegemonic expectations.

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INTRODUCTION

The cyberspace of computer networks is one of the most fascinating inventions in the recent past, but also one of the most misunderstood. It is neither a "parallel universe created and sustained by the world's computers" (Benedikt, 2000: 29), nor a limitless realm of pure information, but rather a mental geography (Benedikt, 2000: 30), a place metaphor applied to a network of computers (Adams, 1997: 155). The myth of the cyberspace was created by William Gibson, a prolific writer of cyberpunk stories which were set in a virtual world so very unlike our own that even bodies and selves were bereft of meaning. Gibson's improbable fiction gave its name to the 'world' of the internet, creating the illusion of a separate space disjointed from 'reality'. Online forums are places in cyberspace where people who are geographically disconnected can interact, and where shared values and meanings are constructed despite the fact that the actors are not physically 'there' (Kendall, 2002: 6). As social spaces, online forums are places where forum members perform identities. Geeks, people characterized both by their outcast status and their affinity for technology and other, more unconventional fields, have found a home for themselves in online forums, websites and chat rooms. It is still a highly debated question whether cyberspace has the power to erase difference and free people from the constraints of embodiment, leading to an egalitarian community where class, race or gender are irrelevant. However, what one can be sure of is that "cyberspace, without its high-tech glitz, is partially the idea of the community" (Stone, 2000: 507), which means that there is ample opportunity to see how people behave in these communities, how they perform gender and all other intersectional axes one can think of.

The central motif of this thesis is the geek, a figure which is as fascinating as it is paradoxical – seen as a social misfit, marginalized by society, yet a master of technology. Popular culture would have us believe that the geek's masculinity is deficient, not on par with 'real' manliness. The core of this research is the examination of masculinity in relation to geeks; more specifically, I question the usefulness of the binaries of masculinities in relation to the geek's gender performance. Although the performance of the geek in cyberspace is one of the primary elements of this paper, I am interested in building up a more comprehensive portrait of the geek than interaction in cyberspace can reveal. The multiple facets of the geek are the result of a social construction that did not simply evolve at the same time as computer technology, and as I will attempt to show, the geek can be traced back to far older origins, some historical and some metaphorical: circus freaks, mad scientists and even Victorian savants. I argue that geek masculinity, like the geek himself, is a liminal construct that defies categories while at the same time imposing the geek subject's need to rationalize and label the world.

I will be looking at masculinity as performed by geeks on the Slashdot forum, a rather ill-famed online community of geeks, in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the masculinities that are constructed by geeks in such circles. Slashdot, a discussion forum on technology and science-related matters, has been a space for geek socialization for over fifteen years, and has long since been branded by tech-oriented feminists as one of the most sexist places on the internet for geek women and women in general[1]. Despite Slashdot's reputation in geek feminist circles, as well as my own conclusions after reading and examining several thousand messages on the forum, it cannot be known whether the attitudes and opinions voiced in this medium are paradigmatic of online geek communities in general.

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[1] As according to GeekFeminism.org, a prominent website for geek women who espouse feminist politics and ideas.

Rather, this thesis wishes to be a cyber-ethnographical incursion (of limited scope) into a particular community in which a certain type of behaviour can be observed.

As a foundation for my exploration of geek masculinity, I am relying on R.W. Connell's writings on hegemonic masculinity, a configuration of practice that embodies the best way to be a man in a given time and space, and which claims to grasp relationships of power both within and between genders. Although the concepts of hegemonic versus non-hegemonic masculinities are contested ones, considering that the few scholars who have written about geeks have categorized geek masculinity as a subordinated masculinity (Jackson and Dempster, 2009; Phillips, 2004), I find it necessary to try and relate the masculine performance of geeks to this specific spectrum of masculinities in order to have a point of reference. My intention is to find out whether, and if so then how, geek masculinity can be matched into the framework proposed by Connell, and if that proves to be impossible, to see whether it can carve out a place of its own without relying on any binaries or constraints. While I have several anxieties regarding Connell's conceptualization of masculinity (these shall be discussed in Chapters 1 and 5), I believe that the binary of hegemonic/non-hegemonic masculinities can prove to be a useful starting point for an analysis of geek masculinity.

The other purpose of this paper is to engage with the figure of the geek through a series of analogies and metaphors. My goal was to explore the possibilities of geekiness in the present as well as in the past. I attempt to reconstruct a simplified genealogy of the geek by linking it to its etymological origin – the circus freak – and with an imaginary figure that can be considered as a 'spiritual forefather' of the modern geek – the mad scientist. I also make a brief incursion into one of the possible futures of the geek, the cyborg, whose liminal technologized body can already be glimpsed within the geek. These three figures offer a few of the key ingredients to geek identity: transgressed boundaries, affinity for technology, obsession and masculinity. They also help to conceptualize the geek as a contradictory figure

composed of several levels of meaning, far from the one-dimensional stereotype which popular culture is prone to proliferating.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on laying out the theoretical framework of the subsequent chapters, as well as to sketch out some of the differences and similarities between the ways in which popular culture represents geeks, and how geeks themselves identify and represent themselves. Its purpose is to render visible the binaries and contradictions which underlie the geek: real versus imagined, represented versus self-represented, hegemonic versus subordinated. In addition, this chapter represents a description of the tools that will help me to look in a (hopefully) concise manner at specific aspects of masculinity which will be laid out in the subsequent chapters. I shall look at masculinities through the lens of Erving Goffman's theory on performance, which offers, in my opinion, some rather convenient tools for the understanding of behaviour in cyberspace, especially since geek masculinity cannot be analysed independently of the identity group which performs it. Goffman's work permits a conceptualization of geek masculinity as an integral part of geek identity, of which it cannot be separated.

Chapter 2 begins with a short incursion into the history of the word geek, and its evolution from the meaning of circus freak which blurs the boundaries between nature and culture, human and animal, to the current understanding of the word as a person unusually gifted in and devoted to a certain field, especially technology. My intention is to trace the trajectory of the concept through time, and to establish, if possible, the connections between the figures of the circus geek, the Victorian scientist-geek and the modern computer geek. These seemingly very distinct figures are tied to one another through a series of binaries as well as transgressions, and I argue that they all have in common a liminal status which is essential to their identity, as well as the openness for being looked at through the lens of Donna Haraway's cyborg metaphor. The shift from the circus geek to Victorian scientist-geek

is especially significant, as it signals the geek's turn to male dominated environments and the appropriation of science and technology as markers of geekiness. The concept which is central to this chapter is Victor Turner's liminality, the state of being caught in a transitory condition between total hegemony and utter subordination. Liminality paves the way to the conceptualization of the geek, and therefore his performance of masculinity, as a hybrid that is able to transgress the limitations of narrow binaries.

Chapter 3 concerns itself with the figure of the mad scientist, a trope which can help to illuminate some of the most crucial aspects of geek identity: the obsession for science/technology, transgression of social conventions and the strong connection between masculinity and science. I also draw on Freeman Dyson's conceptualization of the scientist as a rebel, and on Foucault's writings on madness in order to establish a possible link between the quasi-mythical figure of the mad scientist and the representation of the geek. I argue that although the element of madness or obsession is essential to geek identity, the danger concealed within the geek is lessened by his representations and he is transformed into a figure which is easy to ridicule or despise.

A case study on the performance of geek masculinity in an online forum, Slashdot, is described in Chapter 4. Given the considerable size of the forum (thousands of messages are posted each day), my analysis is limited to four message threads which I have chosen for their relevance, as well as their length (each thread had over 800 messages at the time of the analysis). The threads "How do I make my netbook more manly?" (ScuttleMonkey, 2009), "Have geeks gone mainstream?" (Cliff, 2005), "Women dropping out of IT" (kdawson, 2010) and "Geek culture will never die...or be popular" (Soulskill, 2011) incited discussions which uncovered several of anxieties and tensions within geek culture, as Chapter 4 will show. The performance of geek identity was analysed by touching upon issues which, in my opinion, play a crucial role in the construction of geekiness: sexual desirability (and lack thereof) or

the pretence of sexual desirability and the performance of the role of the seducer; embracing or rejecting the geek stereotype, and employability and its relation to masculinity. My purpose in this chapter is to see how geeks relate to the way in which popular culture stereotyped them as subordinated, socially awkward males, and how they negotiate a masculinity that even they are sometimes prone to consider as subordinated. The relationship between geeks and women is the underlying theme of all these discussions, thus they are a valuable source of information concerning the power relationships between femininity and geek masculinities.

In the last chapter of my thesis I am attempting to engage with the hegemonic/non-hegemonic binary set up by Connell, and open up a discussion on whether these binaries help advance the study of different masculinities, or if they are merely a hindrance which can trap the subject in one or the other end of the binary. I argue that even if geek masculinity can evade the hegemonic/non-hegemonic binary, it is still conceived in its relation to femininity, thus setting up another binary which is not as easily erased. Finally, I would like to argue for a translation of geek masculinity, with its onus of subordination, into the alpha-geek, which I believe can express more adequately both the liminal status of the geek, as well as his flexible connections with hegemonic imaginaries of masculinity as well as femininity.

Although the conclusions drawn from this study of geek masculinity in cyberspace are representative of a particular community, there are several limitations to the scope of this analysis. Masculinity is both interactive and performed, and it is socially specific. The masculinity on display on the Slashdot forum might not the entirely compatible with geek masculinities performed in other online communities, and might have little resemblance to the geek masculinities performed at a geek convention, for example. In cyberfeminist and cyberspace studies there is a tendency to disconnect cyberspace and 'real' space and to infer that cyber performance can be utterly detached from actual offline performances. It can also be claimed that the power relations permeating our lives are inescapable in cyberspace, and

the agency of the individual who constructs an online identity is not given sufficient credit. As Lori Kendall puts it, "without prematurely closing down whatever moment of disruptive possibility exists in the ambiguities of online identities, it is important to examine the ways in which relationships of power influence online interactions and are reinscribed within them" (Kendall, 2002: 12). Therefore, the possibility that the results of this study are a partial reflection of a masculinity which is indeed performed outside of cyberspace as well should not be entirely cast away. Although the performance of masculinity on the Slashdot forum does not necessarily reflect lived experience, it is nonetheless an important component of geek masculinity.

1. MAPPING GEEKS, MAPPING MASCULINITIES

1.1. REPRESENTATION AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION OF GEEKS

Geek is a deceptively simple word, loaded with tangled meanings which are not always easy to navigate. When a person is labelled a geek it can mean anything from a term of endearment to a left-handed compliment meant to mark someone as an outsider. Although the most well known incarnation of the geek is a stock character in popular culture especially in (but not limited to) depictions of Western high schools, the concept itself is rich and elusive, and its implications go well beyond the stereotype, which seems to present a fixed set of characteristics and little agency on the part of the geek.

As a pejorative term, geek is certainly not limited to high school culture, although it does carry the implication of a relatively young age (Duerden Comeau and Kemp, 2007: 217). Its harshness varies according to the social context in which it is used (Kendall, 2000: 262). Michael Blake delves into the social meanings of the geek in his examination of identity-based hate crimes, and although he does not completely reject the possibility of the word being used in a positive manner, he claims that in many spheres, geek is a term of abuse which brands the labelled object as someone excluded from the victimizers' group (Blake, 2000: 130). Blake sees geeks as people with not much in common except for their statuses as potential victims of bullying or even hate crimes, however, he seems to collapse the cause and the effect of geek identity. For Blake, there is no geek prior to the act of marginalization - it is the marginalization that produces the geek. One becomes a geek through the process of marginalization, but he does not acknowledge the possibility that geek identity is voluntarily constructed on a basis other than exclusion from a specific group. However, other scholars

such as Lori Kendall or Deborah Lupton consider social marginalization as a *result* of the geek's espousal of a life embedded in technology and other 'geeky' pursuits. Geek agency is preserved; the geek, perhaps without embracing the label, constructs an identity based on affinities before experiencing exclusion.

The term geek can also convey affection and respect (Kendall, 2000: 262), when used within a particular group, and within a particular context. The *Geek Pride* movement[2] and voluntary self-identification as geek are increasingly widespread as a result of the growing role of the geek within technological industries (Blake, 2001: 130). Moreover, there are signs that the term is gradually shedding its negative connotations. According to a survey commissioned in May 2011 by American IT staffing company Modis revealed that 66% of the respondents under the age of 34 consider geek to be a compliment, although only 39% of those aged 65 or older[3]. The survey clearly shows the changing nature of the word geek, however, the same cannot be said of 'nerd' which is in many contexts is understood as synonymous with geek. The survey shows that the term nerd is still widely considered as an insult, even by self-identified geeks, of whom 81% prefer the denomination of geek to that of nerd.

As a stereotype or a trope, the geek can be often glimpsed in popular culture, but seldom as a central figure or in a position of power. Feature length films such as *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984), or television series like *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000) depict young geek in a perpetual conflict with their more 'popular' peers, while at the same time as preoccupied with non-masculine, geeky pursuits, some related to technology and others not. More recent media portrayals of the geek, in shows such as *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-), are not centred on a game of social inclusion/exclusion, instead underscoring the geeks' extreme infatuation

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[2] Michael Blake defines geek pride as a "phenomenon for wealthy, urban professionals, who are able to use their improved social standing to gain the pride and confidence necessary to use the word "geek" in self-description" (Blake, 2001: 130).
[3] The detailed results of the survey can be found at the following address: http://www.modis.com/about/press-room/article/?art=20110523_1&type=pr

with science, technology and various fandoms[4] (however, these obsessions are ridiculed and played for laughs), and their deviation from conventions (represented in the show through the stereotype of a blond, attractive woman with little knowledge of science and technology). These geeks are exclusively male, and even today, women are seldom portrayed as geeks, and when they are, the image is rarely positive (Farnall, 2003: 235).

Like in the case of many fictional accounts, it is hardly disputable that the geek on the screen is not an accurate representation of actual geeks, but as in the case of most fiction, a tiny overlap between the fictional figure and the person that it purportedly represents can usually be grasped. My intention is not to exaggerate the resemblance between the media figures and the social actors whose behaviour is examined in this paper, nor to force any links between the two. However, considering that cultural representations of the geek are an indication of how they are perceived in society, I believe that it might be useful to look not only at the stereotype, but also at the signs and meanings that geeks use in order to represent themselves and identify with the rest of their community.

Lori Kendall, who has conducted a considerable amount of research on geeks, concerns herself almost exclusively with the male geek. In the popular western imaginary, the computer geek is seen as a white, middle class male who did or does well in school, is has an above-average knowledge of computers; he is socially inept and has little interest in fashion, but he also fringes on the unsettling: "bad hygiene and lack of social skills create a category of human partitioned off from the rest of humanity, thus guarding against the taint of the potential compromise through close relationship with computers" (Kendall, 1999: 263). Deborah Lupton's analysis of embodiment in the case of computer users paints an even less flattering picture. The geek body is "soft, not hard, from too much inactivity and junk food" (Lupton, 2000: 481). According to Lupton, the myth of the geek in popular culture is a

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[4] Fandom, as according to

vicious circle involving the human and technology: physical unattractiveness and social awkwardness determines geeks to turn to computers, and their immersion into the world of technology and isolation from the 'real world' makes them even more unattractive and socially unfit (Lupton, 2000: 481). It is interesting to note that such descriptions automatically create a difference between a real world and a geek world, the cyberspace, but ascribe meaning only to the performance of the geek in the real world. Nevertheless, cyberspace can be a very powerful tool for self-representation (as testified by contemporary Western society's fondness for social networking websites), and even more so in the case of a group of people who are possible in closer connection to the network than the average person.

It is interesting to note that the stereotypical geek is not only middle-class, but also predominantly white. While there are a few examples of Black or Asian geeks in media (Steve Urkel from *Family Matters* (1989-1998) or Raj Koothrappali from *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-)), Ron Eglash criticizes scholars such as Sherry Turkle for positing gender/sexuality, and not race, as the principal feature of geek identity. In Eglash's opinion, geekdom does not create barriers against racial minorities or women (a very disputable claim), in the sense that technoscience is increasingly open to gender and racial diversity, but these newcomers are not seen as geeks (Eglash, 2002: 50).

The internet has had a tremendous importance in the creation self-identified geek groups, because it offered a social space where "personal and social identities are constructed, given meaning, and shared through the ritual of computer-mediated interaction" (McArthur, 2009: 63). One of the best indicators of how geeks recognize their peers, but also how they can measure their geek credentials, is the popularity[5] of self-assessment quizzes such as *The Geek Test,* a test of 280 questions created in 1999 by a self-identified geek as a means of quantifying geekiness (Beaudoin, 2003). While the characteristics listed by the test are far

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[5] The original Geek Test is at version no. 3.14, and it was taken by several million geeks, according to the test's author (Beaudoin, 2003).

more diverse than what one can find when looking at pop culture images of the geek such as those described by Kendall and Lupton, there are several overlaps: social ineptitude, physical characteristics (glasses, unfashionable clothes), little or no sexual desirability. However, the overwhelming majority of the 280 questions underscore the geek's dedication to a particular field, such as computer technology, science fiction and fantasy, computer games or the theatre. While the overlaps could be conceptualized as components of a gender identity[6], it is clear that geeks identify as such less on the basis of social relations (or ability to form social relations) and sexual attractiveness, and more on the basis of abilities and expertise. However, the majority of these interests are in one way or another related to technology and science, which have been culturally constructed as masculine, and have an overwhelmingly male demographic (Kelly, 1985; Massey, 1995).

Earlier research on geek masculinities and geek communities describe the geek figure as an exemplar of subordinated masculinity, a concept which will be detailed further on. Kendall, in her examination of the representation of geeks in popular culture, claims that the geek is one of many types of subordinated masculinities (Kendall, 1999: 264), and in her analysis of male interaction within MUDs[7] she capitalized on geeks' divergence from the model of hegemonic masculinity (Kendall, 2000), although she does admit that some of the characteristics of the geek can be seen as hypermasculine (Kendall, 1999: 264).

As a result of these apparent contradictions, the dimensions of geek identity are conflicted and numerous. Is geek identity the result of pop-culture's propensity to stereotype a group of people who are connected through superficial links, and erasing the difference within the group so that each member becomes a copy of the other? Or were geeks a self-constructed identity group whose image was borrowed by the media as a caricature of itself? Is this particular group of people who share a particular set of characteristics the result of society's

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[6] Some geek traits are gendered due to the conceptualization of science as masculine, as well as of hobbies such as science-fiction, board games or comics.

[7] Multi-User-Dungeon, a multiplayer real-time virtual world constructed primarily through text.

need for categorization? Or maybe it is simply the strategy of resistance against incorporation into the mainstream of a group who flouts social conventions to a higher or lesser degree? The question of geek identity seems to be the question of causes versus effects. The most moderate answer to the question is that there is a negotiation between the two, between representation and self-representation. Geek identity, like self-identity in the post-traditional order of modernity as theorized by Anthony Giddens, presumes reflexive self-awareness and "not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual's action system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens, 1991: 52). Geek communities are self-fashioned, yet they are in a symbiotic relationship with their representations: self-representation and representation feed into each other. In a Goffmanian framework, the individual has some agency in this process, but this agency is mediated by the possibilities permitted within the context where the individual functions: "selves cannot fashion themselves according to their whim, as frames[8] and felicity[9] conditions constitute constraining social contexts within which actions and interactions, and understandings and renegotiations of these, must take place." (Brickell, 2005: 31).

1.2. A HEGEMONY OF MASCULINITIES?

One of the key theoretical tools that allows an analysis of gendered behaviour among geeks is the concept of masculinities. As I shall describe in further detail in Chapter 2, the geek is abstracted as an essentially masculine figure, and it is only fitting that his gender performance should be inspected through the prism of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity has been a tremendously influential concept for the field of gender studies for almost three decades (perhaps because literature on masculinities is rather scarce), and while many

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[8] Frames are principles of organization which govern events, which "affect the construction of the definition of the situation in a particular" (Brickell, 2005: 30).
[9] Felicity conditions, according to Goffman, are "conventions for speech and interaction that bestow common ground and, therefore, the possibility that individuals might make themselves understood" (Brickell, 2005: 30).

scholars have debated both its benefits and its shortcomings, R.W. Connell's theorization of hegemonic masculinity is one of the richest in the field.

In Connell's formulation, hegemonic masculinity (as opposed to other types of masculinities) "embodie[s] the currently most honoured way of being a man", and requires all other masculinities to position themselves in relation to it (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832). If hegemonic masculinities are, so to speak, at the apex of the gender hierarchy, other masculinities follow behind: complicit masculinities, which benefit from the patriarchal order without being hegemonic, and subordinated masculinities, which consist of values, beliefs and attitudes that fall outside the prevailing framework of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832; Connell, 1995: 77-78). Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity holds no claim to monism, and in their 2005 revision of the concept, Connell and Messerschmidt answer accusations of essentialism by bringing up the multiplicity of social constructions of masculinity studied by a considerable number of scholars, which in their opinion proves that the concept itself is not inherently essentialist if used correctly (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 836). There are various relationships of power and difference between different types of masculinities, within particular types of masculinities, and between masculinities and femininities.

Gender roles, and therefore gender performances, are built on difference; masculinity needs something to be defined against, therefore 'true men' have come to epitomize the un-female (Connell, 1995: 68). The male body is the bearer of an idealized masculinity which is at the same time naturalized, entailing "tendencies to aggression, family life, competitiveness, political power, hierarchy, territoriality, promiscuity and forming men's clubs" (Connell, 1995: 46). In this biologically deterministic framework, the geek is far from being a true man. Of course, the true man is a myth, something that men are encouraged to strive for but can never achieve, and the interplay between sex, gender, class and race produces multiple masculinities

(Connell, 1995:76). The particular type of masculinity occupying a hegemonic position is subject to change and always contestable, depending on culture, time frame and gender relations (Connell, 1995: 76). Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell, 1995: 77). While figureheads such as celebrities can be bearers of hegemonic masculinity, hegemony is often the result of a correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, that is, business leaders, the military or the government (Connell, 1995: 77). However, Connell and Messerschmidt argue that there is no single hegemonic masculinity that dominates other masculinities by force (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 846). Hegemony entails a certain level of cooperation on the part of subordinated masculinities, and a complex interrelationship between masculinity and femininity on the one hand, and masculinities among themselves on the other. In this framework, masculinities that were once subordinated (or certain elements belonging to subordinated masculinities) can be appropriated by hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 845).

It would be a mistake to assume that simply because geeks are often seen as non-hegemonic males, there would be a less visible power asymmetry between them and women. Being in a position of subordinated masculinity does not entail support for any feminist agenda. Connell states that subordinated groups are in a relationship of complicity with hegemonic structures, although they themselves are also on the receiving end of some form of marginalization (Connell, 1995: 81). Complicit masculinities are constructed "in ways that realize the patriarchal dividend[10], without the tensions or risks of being the front-line troops of patriarchy" (Connell, 1995: 79). The tactics through which the hegemonic group maintains its

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[10] Connell defines the patriarchal dividend as the "advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women" (Connell, 1995: 79).

superiority over subordinated groups (women included) can range from intimidation to physical violence. According to Nancy Dowd, subordinated and alternative masculinities (which she claims are defined chiefly by race or class) "hold the promise of resistance . . . but also the concern that denial of power will translate into the oppression of others who are situated lower in the hierarchy" (Dowd, 2010: 27). In other words, subordinate masculinities can function as hegemonic masculinities if faced with masculine practices which are less valued. Masculinities are defined in relation to one another and in relation to women. Within homosocial and predominantly male environments men's perceptions of the roles of women and men in daily life, as well as the places they occupy, are constantly tested and evaluated by each other (Dowd, 2010: 28).

Masculinity, according to Connell, can be mapped out with the help of three dimensions: power, production and cathexis. Power relations in Western society, Connell states, are conducive to the maintenance and reinforcement of the patriarchal order, despite the fact that some reversals have taken place over the course of history, such as those achieved by the women's liberation movements (Connell, 1995: 74). Production relations are based on the gendered division of labour. Cathexis corresponds to sexual desire, the practices that shape and realize it, and its connection to men's position of social domination (Connell, 1995: 74-75). All of these dimensions can be indentified in the discussions which emerge on the Slashdot forum, and they can offer valuable insights into the ways in which geeks position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity. However, these dimensions seem to suggest that Connell's hegemonic masculinity can solely be conceptualized in a patriarchal framework. If hegemonic masculinity is indeed, as Connell claims, an idealized definition of masculinity constituted in social processes (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 838), it should not be necessarily rooted in a patriarchal order. A model of sexist, oppressive and capitalist masculinity seems to result from these dimensions, but such masculinity would be anything

but hegemonic in contexts where liberal, non-sexist values are the norm. Given the right context, any kind of masculine behaviour can be set up as hegemonic, and in this light, Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity seems to be dangerously fluid - dangerous because its hegemonic aspect is not conducive to positive social changes, but the preservation of the status-quo.

Connell's rigorous theorization of hegemonic masculinity is, therefore, not unproblematic, and in my opinion raises some questions that have not been addressed by Connell and Messerschmidt when revisit the concept: the process through which a particular masculinity becomes hegemonic at the expense of another type of masculinity is not accounted for. Additionally, the interplay of masculinities described by Connell does not give sufficient attention to the class dimension, and how it shapes the dynamics between various types of masculinities.

In order to avoid accusations of essentialization, Connell and Messerschmidt suggest that empirically extant hegemonic masculinities are constructed at three levels: local, regional and global. The local construction of hegemonic masculinity takes place through face-to-face interactions with the immediate community, in mediums such as the family or institutions. Regional hegemonic masculinities take form at the level of culture or the nation state, while global hegemonic masculinities emerge in transnational contexts such as politics, business or the media (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 849). Obviously, there are links and overlaps between these levels, and there is no simple top to bottom hierarchy between them. However, it is unclear what happens when these levels empirically overlap in terms of space, that is, what types of negotiations and competitions occur when a person performance of a local hegemonic model interacts with a global model. To take as an example, what would happen if a young, working class neo-Nazi accosted a prim, fit business man in a metro station? What is the type of masculinity that is constructed as hegemonic in such a case? Similarly, if an

exemplar of a particular type of hegemonic masculinity (from a particular socioeconomic and cultural context) is inserted into a context where a different hegemonic model is valued - if, for example, a successful athlete finds himself in a roomful of businessmen - who is in a position of hegemony? If the two models of hegemony which are pitted against each other originate from different class backgrounds, then it might be easier to predict the outcome (although not necessarily accurately), but simply because the question of hegemonic masculinity turns into a question of social hegemony.

Class, it seems, is another issue that was not addressed satisfyingly by Connell. Masculinities are clearly influenced a great deal by the social stratum in which they are created, but I believe that there are some similarities between the types of masculinity that are the most valued in a particular class cross-culturally. Class intersects with local/regional/global masculinities, and it is possible to imagine situations in which the hegemonic ideals of one class clash with the values of another. Mike Donaldson considers hegemonic masculinity as a cross-class ideal (Donaldson, 1993: 645), but that does not explain why working class masculinities, for example, are generally seen as subordinated (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 847).

1.3. PERFORMANCES AND EXPRESSIONS

In my case study of the Slashdot forum, I will be drawing on Erving Goffman's concept of performance. Goffman provided a very theatre-like framework for the analysis of human interaction by focusing on performance, which he defines as "all the activity on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman, 1959: 26). During a performance, the actor will do whatever is in her power in order to control the behaviour of others, and especially the way in which others will treat her in response of her performance (Goffman, 1959: 15). This is achieved through the control of the information that the actor chooses to convey, thus turning interaction into a game of

information. In other words, a performance is a "potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and rediscovery" (Goffman, 1959: 20).

A performance is limited in time and in space; it takes place for a defined period of time marked by the presence of a set of observers. Performances on the internet are rarely lacking an audience, even more so in case of forums where posting messages has the precise purpose of being read and interpreted and reacted to by the other members of that particular forum. One of the essential parts of the performance, and one which is easily identified in this case, is the setting. Goffman compared the setting of a performance as the decor where human interaction is played out (Goffman, 1959: 33). Unless the actor is located in the setting of her choice, the performance has no meaning, and when the setting is left behind, the performance ends. The possibility to envision a definite setting is of crucial importance in an examination of behaviour in cyberspace, because it provides an anchor that allows us to avoid the problems posed by the existence of two worlds instead of one: the 'real' world and cyberspace.

As the setting of the interaction is the online forum, I shall not take into account questions of embodiment and the unstable links between the cybersubject and its body, of which researchers of cyberspace have written extensively (Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Green, 1997). While this sort of inquiry is most certainly justified because cyberspace can fundamentally act as a curtain that hides 'real' identity, it is my opinion that this debate would prove to be counterproductive to the exploration of a particular type of gendered behaviour in a particular type of setting. It is impossible to say whether this cyber performance is a reflection of performance in a 'real' social medium. However, it undoubtedly incorporates some of the established values of a community (Goffman, 1959: 45), in this case of the geek communities of which Slashdot members are part of in real life. This is not to say that the results that my case study will yield are necessarily reflect the values of the individuals participating on the forum, since performances, as Goffman notes, are more often an

expression of the characteristics of a task (in this case, geek masculinity) rather than the characteristics of the performer (Goffman, 1959: 83). As stated in the introduction, this research will attempt to highlight a particular set of behaviours enacted by a specific group of people in a clearly defined setting, and since these subjects do not exist in a vacuum, they will naturally be at the intersection of various relations of power and resistance, which I will try to identify.

A performance, according to Goffman, involves two crucial yet different sign activities: expressions given, and expressions given off by a person. The expressions given suppose "verbal symbols or their substitutes which [the actor] uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the others are known to attach to these symbols" (Goffman, 1959: 14). Expressions given off, on the other hand, involve "a wide range of actions that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor" (Goffman, 1959: 14). In other words, the expression given by a person refers to what she claims she is, while the expression given off is how other people perceive her as a result of her performance. Management of expressions given and expressions given off allows the individual to influence other people's understanding of him and his actions. These two elements of performance can be very helpful in a discussion of behaviour on an online forum where the interaction between members is based on a continuous flow of messages posted in response to each other. Geeks on Slashdot are particularly given to convoluted conversations wherein they attempt to undermine each other's statements and doggedly challenge each other. Thus, Goffman's notion of theory on the presentation of the self permits an analysis of masculinities as embedded into specific social contexts. Identifying the tensions between expressions given and expressions given off can help unravel the layers of meanings and assumptions hidden in the messages, and lead to a better understanding of what, how and why they are performing a particular kind of masculinity.

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2. RETHINKING THE GEEK

2.1. AN ETYMOLOGY OF THE GEEK

Nerd, dork, dweeb, freak, geek. These words are some of the most versatile terms in contemporary English language slang, and while their meanings vary from extremely derogatory to a label worn with pride, they always bear some connection to intelligence, obsession or social ineptitude, in various combinations. The World English Dictionary[11] defines geek as either a "person who is preoccupied with or very knowledgeable about computing", a "boring, unattractive social misfit", or a degenerate. The Online Etymology Dictionary[12] traces back the origins of the term to gecken, a German term used in 18th century Austro-Hungarian Empire to describe circus freaks. The term was adapted into English as geek, a sideshow 'wild man' who in the 19th and early 20th centuries had the unpleasant task of performing the role of a 'wild' person by biting off the heads of live chickens[13]. The geek in the travelling circus seems the epitome of monstrous, degenerate humanity. As opposed to other sideshow acts, some of which were seen to be displays of real-life monsters (the 1932 film *Freaks* renders a vivid portrait of the 'deformed' carnival performer, although these bodies redeem themselves through sheer human decency), the geek was monstrous through its transgression of the norms of civilized (and socialized) humanity. The meaning of the term changed tremendously over time, but it did not completely lose its implications of

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[11] http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/geek
[12] http://www.etymonline.com
[13] according to the American Heritage Dictionary

abnormality. It can be assumed that the term extended its meaning to computer users after 1960, when the fist personal computers were starting to be commercialized (Polsson, 2010).

Although geek is still used as a derogatory term, it has been reclaimed by groups of people who identify with its definition of a "person obsessively devoted to a particular pursuit" or "extremely devoted to and knowledgeable about computers and related technology" (Dunbar-Hester, 2008: 206). Geeks, like other identity groups, have appropriated a disparaging term and transformed it into a marker of their "uniqueness from others and commonality with each other" (Dunbar-Hester, 2008: 206), although this act of reclaiming holds no overtly political meaning. It is nearly impossible to pinpoint the exact historical date of this turn, but one of the earliest mentions of the 'reclaimed' geek occurred during the 'Geek Pride' nights organized in a New York bar at the end of the 1990's ("Geek Pride Day", *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*). The first official Geek Pride Day was celebrated on May 25, 2006, and the movement has even produced a manifesto of its own[14].

Although in popular culture geeks and nerds are generally associated with computer science (Kendall, 1999: 3), a person with an unusual knowledge of, say, physics or chemistry, could also be called a geek, provided their knowledge is rooted in an uncommon dedication to the field.

2.2. SOME TERMINOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although geek and nerd are often used interchangeably, there are some subtle differences between the two terms, which are perhaps not relevant for someone who does not identify as either of them. But even within the nerd/geek community (such a community can be easily identified in cyberspace thanks to the extensive number of websites for geeks), it is a

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[14] The Geek Manifesto, penned by an unknown author but widely circulating on the internet, proclaims the rights of geeks to enact any and all stereotypes ascribed to the community: the right not to leave the house, the right to dislike sports, to associate with other geeks, to have few or no friends, unfashionable, to wear glasses and be overweight. Responsibilities include specialization in a particular domain, open displays of geekiness in the presence of non-geeks, etc ("Be Proud: Happy Geek Day!", *Geekologie*)

matter of debate who is whom, and how one can distinguish one from the other. According to a Venn diagram that went viral in online communities in 2009[15], geeks are intelligent and intensely passionate about a specific topic, while nerds are intelligent, obsessed, as well as socially inept. Other sources claim that the geek is an empowered nerd whose skills make him 'employable'[16]. Some discourses posit the geek as someone with a considerable knowledge of a particular domain (sports, music, science fiction), but not necessarily of above-average intelligence, while for a nerd a high IQ is a prerequisite (Konzack, 2006: 2). The term nerd, which can be traced back to Dr. Seuss's 1950 story *If I Ran the Zoo* (Kendall, 1999: 3), was first used with its current meaning in a *Newsweek* article in 1951[17]. As with the case of the geek, the nerd was an unnatural creature, a denizen of an imaginary zoo filled with animals that have no place in reality, possibly because they defied the laws of nature. If the nerd is essentially unnatural, he is only one step away from the technological, because unnatural things are created either by an error, or by the wilful manipulation of nature, i.e. through technology. In other words, from an outsider's perspective, geek and nerd are interchangeable terms, and the differences set up between them by particular groups are only a matter of perception and social construction of meaning at the micro-level of the communities where the terms are circulated. The fact that both geek and nerd can be traced back to an embodiment of unnaturalness indicates the similarity between their usages: both are employed with the purpose of designating an outsider.

I believe that some interesting links can be established between the early meaning of the word geek and its current usage, and a discussion of their similarities and differences can be conducive to a richer understanding of geek masculinity. Conversely, the forum discussions that I shall analyse make far more references to geeks than nerds, and the

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[15] http://www.cynical-c.com/2009/09/08/nerd-venn-diagram/
[16] http://articles.cnn.com/2010-12-02/living/nerd.or.geek_1_american-nerd-words-nerd-and-geek-nerd-today/2?_s=PM:LIVING
[17] *Newsweek* (1951-10-8), p. 16

overwhelming majority of the contributors to the Slashdot forum (or at least in the specific discussions that I shall address) self-identify as geeks rather than nerds. For these reasons, I will use the term geek throughout this paper instead of 'nerd'. Moreover, while this chapter will focus on the evolution of the geek in general, the main character of this paper is not any geek, but the computer geek, who is the chief demographic of Slashdot[18]. For brevity's sake I chose to refer to these actors simply as geeks in the following chapters.

2.3. CIRCUS FREAKS AND CYBORGIAN GEEKS

Much like the zoo, the circus straddles precariously the border between nature and culture. The circus workers, be they human or animal, are part of two worlds: the savage and raw nature that is put on display for the pleasure of a regular, socialized and civilized audience shaped by order and knowledge. However, unlike the zoo, the circus does not merely tame nature with the purpose of exhibiting it for the entertainment of the masses - the circus reworks nature, mocks it and brings out the ridiculous, the terrifying and the disgusting from within it.

The circus geek is not born a freak; he merely becomes one for the duration of his performance. Not many historical accounts of geeks can be found, but one can assume that the only prerequisite for the job was a sturdy stomach and no objection against animal cruelty. Sometimes the geek was not part of the circus, and was only a local tramp hired for the show and paid according to the grotesqueness of its performance (Alderson, 1953: 116). The circus geek seems to have performed an act that brought to the forefront the latent animalistic nature of humans. The vicious, messy, physical act of biting off the head of a live animal mimics the feeding habits of carnivorous species, or perhaps conjures up the image of primitive humans. Defined as a 'wild man' (the possibility of female circus geeks is not excluded, although I have been unable to find any references to them), the circus geek carries a hint of subhuman

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[18] As mentioned in the Introduction, Slashdot is

masculinity, and conjures up the image of the untamed man who does not submit neither to social conventions, nor women – an interesting similarity with the 'outsider' computer geek. The circus geek, like the undomesticated man, is applauded for its audacity, but only insofar as it offers a spectacle, as he is not a functional, useful member of society proper.

The circus geek can be interpreted as a liminal creature, "neither here not there . . . betwixt and between the positions assigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 1969: 95). In the eyes of those with a higher social status, liminal beings, Victor Turner suggests, have nothing to distinguish them from their liminal peers (Turner, 1969: 95). From the onlooker's perspective, a freak by any other name is just as aberrant.

In light of this liminal status, the geek is comparable to the cyborg in Donna Haraway's sense, a person in a liminal position within society (as a circus freak), but also within the circus itself (as part of the sideshow, the geek was merely a minor show in addition to the main exhibition (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)). Haraway's cyborg is "the awful apocalyptic telos of the West's escalating dominations of an abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency" (Haraway, 1991: 192), in which nature and culture are reworked and animal-humans collapse into the machine (Haraway, 1991: 193), and which walks the boundary between physical and nonphysical (Haraway, 1991: 195). However, Haraway's cyborg is a creature in a postgender world, and this is perhaps the most crucial distinction between the geek and the true cyborg, because the geek is already gendered, and very visibly so. Haraway writes that a cyborg comes into existence when two kinds of boundaries are transgressed simultaneously: that between animal (organism) and human, and the one between "self-controlled, self-governing machines (automatons) and organisms, especially humans (models of autonomy)" (Haraway, 1989: 139). So the cyborg can also be seen as a being with two faces: the circus geek, the nature(organism)/culture(human) hybrid on the one hand, and the computer geek, a human(autonomous)/computer(automaton) hybrid.

Lori Kendall also takes a cyborgian approach - the geek transgresses the boundaries of organic and artificial through his proximity with computers and other technologies (Kendall, 1999: 263). The geek "entices through the promise of power arising from the control of computers" (Kendall, 1999: 264). For the geek, the computer is no longer a tool that increases productivity or allows for the control of everyday life, because the artificial becomes integrated into the human, thus becoming an inseparable unit.

The sideshows of Victorian England might have been the birth-place of the circus geek, but there's another type of geek that can be identified in that age, one that was neither physically monstrous nor bearing the brand of the wild. The other Victorian geek was one that was rendered unusual through his obsession for the natural, but more importantly, the unnatural. In Victorian England, sideshow freaks (although probably not circus geeks themselves) were a curiosity eagerly subjected to the scientific gaze. The British 19th century medical journal *The Lancet* published detailed accounts of 'freak' anatomy, and these endeavours were criticized for using the study of physiology as an excuse for obscenity, and "pandering...to the lowest and foulest tastes" (Fox and Lawrence in Kochanek, 1997: 227). The monster was a scientific commodity at that time, and it is interesting to note that those who studied them (medical practitioners, scientists, naturalists) could very well earn the geek label nowadays – and they are the other type of geek that I am referring to, one that is surprisingly close in nature to the modern geeks examined in this paper. Victorian geeks studied freaks, ghosts and other curiosities, but at the same time they could be men of science and like modern-day geeks, they associated with each other in affinity groups.

The emergence of the Victorian scientist-geek signifies a turn in the class politics concerning the geek figure. While the circus geek was recruited from among the working class, from this historical moment on, the geek has been no less than bourgeois. The importance of the body's physical abilities was not preserved in the shift from freak to

scientist-geek, not only because a phallic body was less important for a middle/upper class man, but also because for the scientist, the mind was far more important than the body. The soft and weak body of the computer geek might be a symbol of the triumph of the mind (and implicitly, of technology) over the body, which becomes nothing more than a 'meat suit'[19].

It is also interesting to note that with the emergence of the Victorian scientist-geek and the figure of the mad scientist (I shall elaborate more on this figure in Chapter 3), the geek reached the top of class hierarchy, after which it started slipping down on the Gaussian curve of social status towards middle class, where the computer geek is currently situated. Since computers as commodities are increasingly more affordable, it is highly probable that they will be widely available to the underprivileged classes as well in the near future, which necessarily signifies a shift, if not a redefinition, of geek identity.

2.4. (CYBER) BOYS' CLUBS

While there was a considerable number of scientific societies in Victorian times which did not permit women to become members (the Royal Society of London, for example, started accepting women only in 1945 (Holmes, 2010)), other clubs and societies dedicated to intellectual debate had female members, so Victorian geeks were not exclusively homosocial[20]. An interesting example of a mixed-gender society is the Men and Women's Club, a debating society established by Karl Pearson in 1885 (Walkowitz, 1986: 37). Although the topics discussed at club meetings were quite revolutionary (despite the pervasive nature of Victorian sexual discourse, as Foucault discusses in Vol. 1 of his History of Sexuality, explicit discussions of sexuality and sexual mores were not common at the time) (Walkowitz, 1986: 37), and the club rules specifically claimed that all members were of equal standing within the club, Walkowitz's piece clearly shows that female members had less

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[19] In cyberspace, and especially in the cyberpunk fandom, the meat suit designates the human body and the burdens of corporeality as opposed to the freedom one can find on the internet.
[20] I use the concept of homosociality as defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: "social bonds between persons of the same sex" (Sedgwick, 1985: 1)

credibility and authority than their male counterparts (Walkowitz, 1986: 37-38). I think it is safe to assert that the acceptance of women into a male-dominated group does not automatically guarantee that they will have an equal share of privilege. These Victorian geeks accepted women into their midst, and while they treated female members with the respect befitting their social statuses, they believed the female sex to be an impediment in the way of objective knowledge and reason (Walkowitz, 1986: 39). Even more than at the present, the socio-historical context in which the Men and Women's club was created relied on a structural exclusion of women from education, and it was hardly deemed necessary for a woman to concern herself with hard sciences or other 'difficult subjects' (although of course there are exceptions, women who refused to fit in the mould and pursued their education at the cost of their reputations sometimes, like in the case of the brilliant mathematician Ada Lovelace, the first software programmer in the world).

Forming clubs with the purpose of studying a particular subject is not at all uncommon among modern geeks, and indeed, in high-school culture, extra-curricular science-fiction clubs, computer clubs can become a platform for 'geek' activities. A simple search with the Google engine comes up with countless numbers of high school clubs that can qualify as geeky. University computer science or engineering programmes, which are notorious for both drawing large number of geeks (CmdrTaco, 2011), and for having a very low female presence (Charles and Bradley, 2006: 189), are fertile grounds for geek communities. Even outside of education institutions, geeks come together at fan conventions, conferences or even venues purposefully created for geeks (the countless cafes in Tokyo's famous geek district, Akihabara, come to mind). Geeks who do not live in the same geographic area, but who share a common interest, can congregate on internet forums for discussions and exchanges of software or ideas. The vast majority of these geek institutions are dominated by males, with little female presence: according to a 2009 survey by Royal Pingdom, an online monitoring service

website, 84% of the current major social network websites have more male users than female users[21]. Sci-fi, fantasy, computer game or IT conventions have an overwhelmingly male presence (according to GeekFeminism.com's wiki page on fan/geek communities[22]). That is not to say, however, that there are no women on the geek side of the internet. Some geek women avoid the antagonism of their male peers by setting up communities of their own, but others brave the jungle of mixed-gender geek forums. "Half the time you probably don't even realise we're here", states one long-time user of the geek website Slashdot.com (CmdrTaco, 1998). In this respect, the dynamics of online geek communities resemble Walkowitz's description of the Men and Women's club: women are there, they are sometimes seen, but seldom heard and listened to.

One of the internet's most notorious cyber boy's club is Slashdot.com, a news and discussion forum established in 1997 by Geeknet, Inc., a Californian company that owns several computer tech-related websites and the online retailer ThinkGeek. The website describes itself as "News for Nerds. Stuff that Matters", and it features current-affairs, science and technology stories submitted by users. Users can submit stories that they find interesting, and successful submissions become the topic of discussion threads[23] that can sometimes reach thousands of individual messages. Unlike in other online forums, there are no designated moderators, and a user-moderation system is used instead. This system gives users a say in shaping the reputation of any member of the community. Randomly chosen moderators can rate each post[24] with a score from -1 to 1, and assign it one of the following tags: normal, offtopic, flamebait[25], troll[26], redundant, insightful, interesting, informative, funny, overrated,

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[21] http://royal.pingdom.com/2009/11/27/study-males-vs-females-in-social-networks/
[22] http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Category:Communities
[23] A thread (sometimes called a topic) is a collection of posts, usually displayed from oldest to latest ("Internet Forum", Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopaedia)
[24] A *post* is a user-submitted message enclosed into a block containing the user's details and the date and time it was submitted ("Internet Forum", Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopaedia).
[25] "Flamebait refers to comments whose sole purpose is to insult and enrage. If someone is not-so-subtly picking a fight (racial insults are a dead giveaway), it's Flamebait" (Malda, 2010)

underrated. The moderators' responses to a user's posts shape the user's 'karma', which can range from Terrible, Bad, Neutral, Positive and Good to Excellent. No message can achieve a sum of more than 5 points (Malda, 2010). The majority of comments on Slashdot are authored by registered members, however, users can also post anonymously under the dummy name of 'Anonymous Coward'.

According to the Royal Pingdom survey cited above, Slashdot has the worst female representation of all the websites that were taken into consideration for the survey. 82% of the users of Slashdot were male in 2009, and there are no reasons to believe that the situation has changed radically since then. My interest in this forum was sparked by an article posted on the website GeekFeminism.com in July 2010, titled "Male geeks reclaim masculinity at the expense of female geeks" (Restructure!, 2010), which links to several sexist threads posted on Slashdot.com. GeekFeminism's wiki page ("Slashdot", Geek Feminism Wiki) on Slashdot gives several examples of Slashdot threads were women readers are assumed to be invisible, where there are pigeonholed into sexist stereotypes, where biological essentialism is taken for granted and women are harassed and often solely judged on the basis of their sexual attractiveness. The boys' club reputation of Slashdot makes it a valuable and astoundingly rich milieu for an examination of geek masculinity, how it is shaped in relation to hegemonic masculinity, what are the conflicts and similarities between them and how they influence each other.

2.5. FROM MARGINALIZATION TO LIMINALITY

The geek is seen as a marginal figure which invites despise, mockery or revulsion. The very essence of the geek, from the Victorian age to the present seems to be to incite negative feelings on the part of normative society: the circus geek caused disgust, the mad scientist caused fear, and in modern times, the geek is the target of ridicule and even of hate crimes

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[26] "This is a prank comment intended to provoke indignant (or just confused) responses. A Troll might mix up vital facts or otherwise distort reality, to make other readers react with helpful "corrections."" (Malda, 2010)

(Blake, 2001: 127). Through his rejection of social convention, and hybridization of that which should not be commingled, the geek transgresses boundaries instead of being pushed to the margins. Relegating the geek to a position of marginality, on the outer fringes of society, might not fully do him justice. As seen in Chapter 1, geeks are often theorized as subordinated figures which enact a subordinated masculinity, despite being inherently hybridic. A more useful way of thinking about the geek is, in my opinion, as liminal creature instead of an excluded creature. These enigmatic characters seem to have forged for themselves a zone of indistinction where humans and technology, nature and culture collapse into each other. Claiming that such creatures are subordinated would negate the (often unacknowledged) power that they are capable of wielding. Like the liminal beings described by Victor Turner, which are "reduced and ground to a uniform condition" by their social betters, they develop their own form of resistance by developing a power of their own through comradeship and egalitarianism (Turner, 1969: 95). This could also explain the tendency of geeks to develop homosocial (or at the very least, male dominated) communities, because the introduction of a gendered other into their space might disrupt the harmonious relationship that they share with each other.

However, liminality is not a permanent stage; it represents merely a state of limbo between a higher status and a lower status (Turner, 1969: 97). The geeks of popular culture are fairly young, most of them in their teens or twenties (for example the characters from *Freaks and Geeks* (1999-2000), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007 -), *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984)). Interestingly enough, public or historical figures who fit in some measure to the geek stereotype (highly intelligent and highly passionate about their fields), like Bill Gates[27], Steve Jobs[28], Albert Einstein seemed to have attained a privileged status. The geekiness of these figures is not a mere rite of passage, it is a continual practice. It might seem like in the case of

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[27] Bill Gates is the co-founder of Microsoft Inc. and the creator of the MS DOS operating system, and later Windows.
[28] Steve Jobs is the co-founder of Apple Inc. and the designer of the Macintosh computer.

geeks, age is indirectly proportional with social acceptance, but the average age of Slashdot users contradicts this premise: 40.4 years, with only about 35% of the users under the age of 35, according to a survey conducted by Royal Pingdom in 2010[29]. The geeks of Slashdot are not mere teenagers dealing with high school bullying, there are adults who consciously choose their myopic focus on computer technology, even if that meant alienation.

The geek, therefore, willingly opts out from following some, if not all, social conventions. But the geek is also intensely intellectual, and his transgressions seem to me motivated by non other than by his devotion to computers. The geek is, to some degree, mad.

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[29] http://royal.pingdom.com/2010/02/16/study-ages-of-social-network-users/

3. MADNESS, SCIENCE AND GEEKS: THE MAKING OF A STEREOTYPE

3.1. MADMEN AND REBELS

Science, that is the system of knowledge concerned with the physical world and its phenomena (according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary), and technology, the practical application of scientific knowledge, can both be considered as loci of knowledge production which reciprocally build upon each other. After all, scientific discoveries offer the means to improve technology, and the attempt to improve existing technologies lead to the crystallization of these discoveries into scientific theory.

Science and technology are frequently seen as bolsters of civilized society - as one of the factors of civilization itself, in fact. After all, discourses about the savages from uncivilized, uncolonized worlds posit them as less developed not simply out of a xenophobic fear of the racial or cultural other, but also because they lack the technologies of the West, and supposedly have not yet reached the level of scientific sophistication of European learned men (Adas, 1989: 33). Science allows people to wield the forces of reason and to transform ignorance, barbarism and the incontrollable wildness of nature, into civilization (Adas, 1989: 224). The European disdain of Africa, for example, partly stemmed from the perceived lack (or crudeness) of African material culture: agriculture, warfare, poor technology (Adas, 1989: 38). On the other hand, the colonizers could not help but be impressed with the scale and intricacy of China and India's material culture, their architecture and various technological inventions. In general, however, explorers and colonizers believed that the West was technologically more advanced than the rest of the world (Adas, 1989: 52) and thus more

civilized. Technology, science and civilization cannot be separated, and man, as the harbinger of civilization, had to possess the ability to wield them.

It is not a secret that until the recent past, science has been largely unavailable to women, who were seldom initiated in it, and even more rarely allowed to produce it (Fox Keller, 1985: 7). It is important to note that science has a long history of androcentrism (and according to some critics of science, also misogyny), but scientific knowledge itself is not necessarily gendered, although this position is widely contested (Rose, 1994: 18). What is at stake here is that Western producers of science the past were almost exclusively white middle-class men (Fox Keller, 1985: 7), and through a slippage between producer and the knowledge produced, science has been gendered as masculine. Thus, science and technology were linked to the state of being a male, and to masculinity as a patter of behaviour. Who was to create science if not men?

No amount of cultural relativism can deny that science and technology are seen as of the most basic building blocks of civilization, despite the fact that often they are presented as if they might not necessarily be intended for precisely this purpose. There are ongoing disputes among historians of science when it comes to the reasons why we insist on producing knowledge. One side claims that knowledge production is driven by social forces, while the other is firm in its belief that science is driven by its own internal forces and objective facts of nature, without any interference from social forces (Dyson, 1996: 803). However, there is another perspective, the one espoused by theoretical physicist Freeman Dyson: scientists, the producers of science, are rebels or artists "obeying their own instincts rather than social demands or philosophical principles" (Dyson, 1996: 803). By conceptualizing the scientists as a rebel or an artist, Dyson brings to the forefront the humanity of the scientist, the sheer human need to fulfil one's desire for autonomy. The scientist is no longer a pawn in the great chess game of social forces, nor a servant of the nature, which can deign to give the scientist a

few glimpses of the universe's magnificence. Dyson's rebel scientist is an agent with free will who can make entirely arbitrary decisions for the sake of an ideal or beauty, without needing to justify his decisions in any way. Therefore the scientist's reason can be deployed unreasonably, on a whim or to satisfy a personal obsession - so the scientist is unavoidably tainted with mad, to a greater or lesser degree. For Foucault, madness is both "threat and derision, the vertiginous unreason of the world, and the shallow ridiculousness of men" (Foucault, 2006: 13).

Interestingly enough, madness was first interrogated by physicians and savants, who sought to discover its roots, to understand its mechanics and the natural space it occupied (Foucault, 2006: 175). Scientists sought to gain knowledge on the nature of madness, but that is not the only connection between them. Lust for knowledge and mental illness cannot be completely separated. According to Foucault, "there is in madness an essential aptitude for mimicking reason, which in the end masks its own unreasonable content" (Foucault, 2006: 177). During the Renaissance, madness was see as the uncanny within, "lurking at the heart of reason" and accepted as such (Foucault, 2006: 181), but from the 18th century on, madmen were given a category of their own, no longer connected to reason by even the thinnest thread. The madness/reason binary was formed, and the one was characterized by the absence of the other (Foucault, 2006: 182). What becomes of the mad scientist, in this case? Latin tradition would have no trouble in placing the mad scientist, because Roman philosophers recognized two types of madness: insania and furor. Insania was defined as the denial of all that was reasonable, and therefore of no threat to the wise, but furor, on the other hand, was the kind of madness which did not exclude rationality, and could affect any philosopher (Foucault, 2006: 183). However, the popularization in the 18th century of the figure of the mad scientist in fiction symbolized a slippage between the two forms of madness. The mad scientist manipulated science, and therefore was capable of grasping its rational basis. However, he

used it in unreasonable ways that defied the conventions of society. The mad scientist became a figure that could neither be included nor excluded, a contradiction of the paradigm of madness. He had all the symptoms of unreason, yet he was capable of using and producing science, the embodiment of reason itself.

Madness as seen by Foucault can refer to any kind of behaviour that defies social norms – those parameters within which a sane person is expected to operate. Pathological madness is not necessarily the characteristics of a mad scientist. He (because cultural narratives posit the mad scientists as unequivocally male) is mad because he does not keep in control his lust for knowledge, and pursues it without any regard of the consequences. Mary Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein, the scientist who created life and is destroyed by his creation, lost himself to the temptation of new discoveries. Sir Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, another kind of mad scientist, irreverently flaunts social conventions, yet his genius and extensive scientific knowledge allow him to see and understand what average people do not. However, he is a lonely drug-addict whose regard for people is conditioned by their usefulness to him. The motives of characters such as these are seen as morally objectionable to say the least, and their inability to

The madness of the scientist has several consequences: it makes him a source of terror and a social outcast. First of all, the mad scientist is seen as frightening and unpredictable because he possesses powers that he can turn against society. Science can build civilization, but it can also demolish it, and the ones who can do either one of the other are scientists. More than that, scientists can gather data, sift through it and distil pure knowledge at the expense of the social body, like the mad scientists who experiment on humans, mad scientists who create monsters (whether biological, chemical or technological) that can harm the social body. The mad scientist could also decide to purposefully go against the social body, like the trope of the evil scientist who seeks world domination. But there is another reason why the mad scientist

is such a reviled figure: the fear of science itself. Cristopher Toumey looks at the image of the mad science in literature and art, and concludes that he is the embodiment of a critique of science, or more than that, "modern-day exercises in the tradition of antirationalism" (Toumey, 1992: 2). The mad scientist with his disturbed and depraved personality is a metaphor for the evil of science. Knowledge is inherently dangerous because it can confer to its holders powers that threaten the rest of the social body.

The masculinity displayed by the mad scientist is a rather problematic one, because his essence can be broken down into two components which, as mentioned above, can be matched despite the fact that they negate each other. Rationality and science are masculine, while madness, the illogical and the unpredictable are traits associated with femininity. Cold, calculating intelligence unrestrained by emotions or ethical consideration is most certainly part of the hegemonic masculine ideal. However, it is the element of madness that turns the mad scientist a hybrid figure that is not quite hegemonic, but neither straightforwardly marginal.

3.1. FEAR OF THE GEEK?

The geek can be seen as a modern day, diluted and defanged embodiment of the mad scientist metaphor. A comparison between the two might seem preposterous, but some striking similarities can nonetheless be observed between them. Both embody the fear of the artificial (and therefore unnatural), as well as the dangers of excessive knowledge. They are both in a precarious position - not quite excluded, but not quite included either. They are on a threshold separating the hegemonic from the marginal, the individual from the collective and the physical from the intellectual. Computer technology possesses a potentiality for monstrosity, according to Deborah Lupton, because it poses a challenge to traditional boundaries (Lupton, 2000: 484), and because it threatens to consume humanity, to replace it. The wielder of computer technology is invested with the power to take control of humanity.

Geeks are therefore ridiculous and powerful at the same time, not included into the hegemonic group but neither relegated to the asylum, often brilliant minds in bodies turned monstrous by an excess of technology or science and slave to the pleasure that the machine, the unnatural, offers to them (Dr. Jekyll/Hyde and the pasty, soft geek of popular culture are two examples of this).

The special significance of the computer geek is that he not only has access to an impressive body of knowledge, but also that this knowledge is of, and acquired through, information technology. His relationship with technology is what makes the geek monstrous not only in the physically undesirable sense. His is fraternizing with the 'thinking machines' to the point of collapsing into them. Sherry Turkle explained the revulsion of the masses towards computers by uncovering the computer's potential of becoming an autonomous individual who can 'think' on its own, and might one day override the commands of its masters (Kendall, 1999: 263). Although technology, as a product (and producer) of science is surrounded by an aura of danger, computer technologies are far more dangerous than anything before. Unlike the pre-cybernetic machines haunted by a spectre, as Haraway mentions in her Cyborg Manifesto (Haraway, 1991: 152), a mechanism that could neither move on its own nor think on its own but functioned only through direct human manipulation, it is a machine that could soon get a mind of its own, but until then, it has its user to control and direct it. Because of his association with these dangerous cybernetic technologies, it is not clear whether the geek is allied with the machines, or with humanity, therefore he is seen as an unsettling and possibly duplicitous hybrid.

3.3. GEEK DOMESTICATED

As a fringe figure, the geek is rarely seen in the mainstream except as a caricature or a mythical figure that can redeem itself by converting to normality. A splendid example of what Slashdot users dubbed 'geeksploitation' (Soulskill, 2011) is the reality show *Beauty and the*

Geek (2005-2008), advertised as "the ultimate social experience", wherein a group of self-identified geeks live in the same house with a group of 'beauties' (conventionally beautiful young women who claim to rely mainly on their looks in social situations). Teams of one geek and one beauty are required to complete a number of challenges, and the losing group is eliminated from the show ("Beauty and the Geek", *Wikipedia: The free encyclopaedia*). Shows such as this, or perhaps the better known American comedy series *The Big Bang Theory*, branded as geeksploitation by some geeks since they do not attempt to integrate geeks into the mainstream on the same footing as other cultural groups, and instead of dismantling the stereotypes surrounding geek identity they perpetuate them and reinscribe them into the social fabric. Slashdot geeks often react with hostility to such media representations because they do not feel like their community, or the marginalization that they often experience are depicted accurately. Moreover, although some geeks are seemingly shown in a sympathetic light, they are often relegated to the role of comic relief. "We think we are cool because of the added attention towards geeks, but nonetheless are still the butt of the joke", commented one Slashdot member in reply to the suggestion that geeks are now part of the mainstream (Cliff, 2011).

According to McArthur, the popularization of computers and increasing numbers of media portrayals of geek characters resulted in a reinvention of the meaning of geek, and "what was once geek has become chic" (McArthur, 2009: 62). However, the mere fact that there are more representations of geekiness in popular culture or that fashion is appropriating geeky elements does not mean that the geek is a less marginal figure than before. The lived experience of geeks such as the users of Slashdot suggests that their performances, the knowledge produced and valued by geeks and their ways of relating to society and technology can still be assigned subordinate statues in specific contexts, as it will be seen in Chapter 4. While the geeks portrayed on *Beauty and the Geek* or *The Big Bang Theory* try to fit into the

mainstream, sometimes with negative affects on their status within the subculture, Slashdot geeks often display a daunting degree of resistance and even dismay at their 'domestication'. These geeks revel in their outsider status, and use their expertise in computer science as an alternative status symbol that the mainstream is not quick to recognize.

Popular culture managed to subdue the mad scientist in the form of the geek. Although there is little overt danger left in the figure of the frail and awkward computer obsessed geek, his most essential components can be traced back to much more menacing components. The geek's masculinity, however, was preserved in much the same fashion as what can be gleaned from the spectre of the mad scientist. Although laughed into submission, the geek still displays a degree of masculinity which, by virtue of its articulation in connection with science and technology, is close, if not equivalent, to the hegemonic ideal.

Masculinity cannot exist unless it is performed, and a setting is necessary so that the masculinity of the geeks could be examined. Cyberspace has allowed the creation of billions of settings in which subjects can perform, and geeks have not failed to take advantage of this.

4. PERFORMING THE GEEK IN CYBERSPACE

4.1. CYBERSUBJECTIVITIES

In his earlier work on masculinities, Connell emphasises the importance of bodies in the construction of gender (Connell, 1995: 45), but he adds that different types of masculinities may be displayed in different contexts. Therefore, although a person with a male gender identity will put on a gender performance that is socially constructed in connection to (but not solely based on) their bodies, factors outside of the body play a considerable part in this process. These factors can be as varied as class or ethnicity, but such qualifiers, although sometimes easily noticeable in a real-life situation, are concealed in online exchanges. Class, race or ethnicity, for example, can act as obstacles in the way of a desired performance in real life, but being invisible in cyberspace, they can be glossed over and the subject can theoretically make a successful attempt at a performance that is not limited by physical appearance, socio-economic status or even sex. In cyberspace, embodiment, economic status and relationships with people in the real world become relevant for a given subject's gender position only insofar as he or she integrates them into discourse – if he or she chooses to disclose them (Turkle in Wajcman, 2006: 102). It needs to be remarked that while the above mentioned axes of the embodied self (gender, sex, social or economic status, race) are eagerly debates and discussed on the Slashdot forum, the physical body is conspicuous through its absence. The lack of talk about the male body can be justified through the dominance of technology over the body, and the higher value assigned to intellect than to bodily strength, fitness or beauty, as seen in Chapter 3.

The utopian vision of the cyberspace as 'the great equalizer' is met with scepticism by theorists who opine that the cybersubject[30]'s freedom to construct an identity with no basis in material reality does not mean that she or he will choose to use this freedom. Feminist theorists such as Anne Balsamo, Zillah Eisenstein or Teresa de Lauretis claim that the cyberspace is merely a site for the reinscription of "cultural narratives of gendered and racial identities" (Eisenstein, 1998: 95), but completely discrediting the cyberspace's power of erasing narratives might not be wise. Cultural narratives of gendered and racial identities put men into predetermined subject positions, according to Arthur Brittan, but these positions are seldom accepted smoothly, and instead they are negotiated or even downright rejected (Brittan, 1989: 72; Brittan, 1989: 23).

What happens in cyberspace, then, is a continuous negotiation of subject positions, especially when it comes to gender. Online forums are an arena for role-play, and although roles can be reflections of the player's real-life identity, or entirely fictional constructs, more often than not they are likely to be a combination of these two. If enacting a fictional identity in certain cyber environments such as online role-playing games, in a forum such as Slashdot, which caters to a particular subculture, embellishing or fictionalizing one's identity is not always acceptable.

4.2. GENDER, IDENTITY AND DECEPTION

As discussed in previous chapters, the default identity of the geek is the white middle-class male. Naturally, there are many geeks who do not adhere to this stereotype in terms of race, class or gender, but these deviations from the norm can easily serve as grounds for othering the non-conforming geek. Perhaps the most important of these components of identity is gender, because of masculinity's strong association with technology (see Chapter

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[30] The cybersubject, according to Amrohini Sahay, is a dynamic subject who "takes her moment-to-moment (discursive) self-constitution (performance) as the simulacral nonground of her own free being and a mark of her own "self-invention."" (Sahay, 1997: 551).

III). Enacting a masculine identity, whether instinctively or by choice, is a prerequisite of being a geek in geek communities that do not welcome the presence of females. In the case of Slashdot, it is impossible to ascertain the gender/sex of the users who respond to a particular topic. While each member of a community may publish a description of themselves on their profile page, there is no option for the specification of sex or gender on this page. Of course, users may mention this is their profiles, but few seem to feel the need to do so. Out of a random sample of 20 users who replied to the topic "How do I make my netbook more manly?" (ScuttleMonkey, 2009), none stated explicitly their gender on their profiles, although in some cases it could be inferred from the contents of the profile.

Due to the difficulty of distinguishing between genuine and fictional identities in cyberspace, forum members can make use of deception in order to manipulate the way in which they are perceived by their peers. Given the cybersubject's relative freedom of action and the opaqueness of online mediums, it is impossible to talk about behaviour of any kind in cyberspace without taking into account the possibility of deception. According to Judith Donath, deception occurs when a member of a cyber community successfully projects an identity based on false information that fellow members accept as reliable (Donath, 1999: 30). Deception in cyberspace does not require a great deal of effort, because the cues that permit the categorization and labelling of a particular person in the physical world (skin, clothes, gestures, facial expressions, etc.) are absent in cyberspace, and consequently text is the only source of information about a person's beliefs, affiliations or relationships. There are two ways of obtaining information about a person in a cyber community - it can either be offered directly by the user, in which case there can be doubts about its veracity, or gleaned with the help of textual analysis, through a careful examination of the discourse.

Internet communications which do not use real time video technologies such as webcams are inherently deceptive, as there is no telling exactly who is sitting behind the

computer screen and whether their performance on the screen matches their performance in real life. Supposing that one can take for granted the notion that there is such a thing as the performance of a 'real' or genuine identity in personal interaction, this performance can easily be shifted or even completely remade when the person is in cyberspace. Sandy Stone's account of the 'cross-dressing' male psychiatrist who invented for himself an online identity as a disabled woman and successfully maintained it for several years (Stone, 1995: 65-81) is probably one of the most infamous cases of online deception, but certainly not the only one.

A forum user has the power to create as many personae as he or she wishes, without any obvious connection to their embodied selves. However, according to Donath, these personae are not connected merely through their creator, as there is a complex web of shared qualities between these multiple personae and their body of origin (Donath, 1999: 29). Donath claims that there *is* a number of cues that enable anyone to learn about the members of online communities and the ways in which they contribute to the creation of their community of choice. She claims that e-mail addresses, signature styles, vocabulary and virtual reputation can say a great deal about the user's identity (Donath, 1999: 30). However, these cues can easily be counterfeited, especially if the user does not offer a large number of cues to begin with. Amotz Zahavi's concepts of assessment signals and conventional signals can prove to be useful in distinguishing between reliable and unreliable information provided by a forum user. Assessment signals advertise a certain quality without stating it explicitly (Donath, 1999: 32) – in the case of a forum user who wants to posit himself or herself as an expert in the C++ programming language will have more success in achieving this by posting a solution to a C++ coding problem then by simply claiming expertise in the field. Assessment signals can be quite reliable if one is able to decode the signals - for example, if one is able to ascertain whether the piece of code posted by a user is indeed correct. Conventional signals, on the other hand, are open to deception because the sender of a conventional signal must not

necessarily possess a certain quality in order to advertise it - the user can simply post a message stating 'I am an expert in C++'.

Assessment signals are useful in determining whether a user is enacting a carelessly constructed persona, but these signals are interpreted in accordance with their conformity or difference from a default persona, that of the geek. The underlying assumption, whether conscious or unconscious, is that the people who post messages on Slashdot are geeks or nerds, because that is the profile that the website voluntarily created for itself[31]. Therefore, users are judged by their deviance or adherence to a certain convention, or a script. Gender performance can therefore not be dissociated from common understanding of geek masculinity.

It is impossible to deduce which users of a forum are deceitful without a very thorough analysis of their posts, and in the case of Slashdot, this would entail sifting through hundreds of thousands of posts. However, Slashdot's user-moderation system ensures that there is a punishment for deception, presuming that moderators are good judges of what is deceptive and what is not. These scales are obviously very subjective, and a comment rated -1: Flamebait by a moderator might seem like a insightful piece of irony to another reader.

4.3. EXPRESSIONS GIVEN AND EXPRESSIONS GIVEN OFF

There is marked conflict between what Erving Goffman calls "expressions given" and "expressions given off" (Goffman, 1959: 14) in online forums, and particularly in Slashdot where the intention of the original poster might be misinterpreted unintentionally or intentionally, with the purpose of either generating entertainment or sowing dissent (such the case of trolls and flamebaiters, as described in Chapter 2). Expressions given refer to the way in which the sender of a message wishes to be perceived, while expressions given off refer to the inadvertently disclosed information that can be inferred from the message. This conflict is

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[31] See Chapter III, section "Cyber boys' clubs".

very well illustrated on the Slashdot thread titled "How do I make my netbook more manly", originally posted by ScuttleMonkey on Monday March 30 2009, at 09:32PM. The original post is as follows:

> basementman writes
>> *"I recently purchased a 10 inch white MSI wind. As you can see it's a small computer and it's good for what I use it for. I get a lot of comments from women saying it is 'cute' or 'adorable.' Not the good kind of cute that will get me the attention I want though, the kind of cute that says they think I have a different presence than I actually want to portray. So how can I make my netbook more manly, or at least have some witty line to respond to the their comments?"*
>
> Hopefully basementman didn't get a netbook with the hopes of it getting him some action, but what cool mods (or witty one-liners) have others used to salvage their dignity from hardware that is "a good size"?
>
> (ScuttleMonkey, 2009)

A Slashdot user called basementman posted the original message on Monday March 30 2009, at 05:42PM. The story received no comments whatsoever, however, a few hours later it was reposted by ScuttleMoneky who added his/her own remarks, asking for the opinions of other Slashdot members. There is little reason to doubt that basementman posted his question with the utmost earnestness. The request for advice on how to interact with potential romantic partners is echoes a discourse of social inadequacy/lack of sexual desirability that it not at all uncommon among geeks in general, and Slashdot users in particular. Basementman displays an element of geek masculinity which is present both in the representation and self-representation of geeks (see Chapter 1). However, ScuttleMonkey's reposting gives the story a sarcastic twist – while basementman's adherence to the geek script of sexual undesirability is not questioned, it is not necessarily embraced as a marker of geek identity. ScuttleMoneky's mockery of basementman's message signals the fact that ScuttleMonkey either does not see this script as an necessary part of geek identity, or that he in particular does not enact this script, and therefore has the right to ridicule it.

There are several complex layers of tensions within the story submitted by ScuttleMonkey. First of all, basementman's question indicates that he is unhappy with the

contradiction between his expression given and expression given off, which is caused by the incorrect perception of his netbook as 'cute'. The netbook is a small, light and inexpensive laptop with limited technical specifications. The reduced size of netbooks in general, and possibly the colour scheme of basementman's netbook in particular, project a non-threatening image. Passers-by would hardly envision the netbook as an enemy-machine, or as a marker or tool of the mad-scientist/geek. Basementman's vexation is generated by the fact that his netbook does not garner him sexual attention from women, who react to the computer in the same way one would presumably react to a small child: calling it cute or adorable, but without a sex or sexuality. These reactions determine basementman to conclude that the de-masculinized machine does not allow him to perform a sufficiently masculine gender identity. Making the netbook more manly would entail sending assessment signals that indicate masculinity. Basementman's request uncovers yet another tension - that between the ways in which basementman wishes to be perceived by Slashdot users, and how the users actually perceive him. Basementman could try to imply that he is a person who enjoys the attention of potential sexual partners, in an attempt to win the appreciation of his fellow Slashdot members, in which case, his submission is deceptive – he does not actually need advice that will help him attract the attention of women. Conversely, he might be earnestly asking for advice for making more visible a masculinity that he already claims to possess, in which case he succeeds merely in undermining his own masculinity. The awkward phrasing of the message leaves it open to interpretations that can end up being less than flattering for the author, as proven by ScuttleMonkey's take on the text. The authenticity of Basementman's geek identity is called into question, and ScuttleMonkey insinuates that the author could be a pseudo-geek who is more interested in displaying the technologies which he possesses, and less in how powerful these technologies are: "Hopefully basementman didn't get a netbook with the hopes of it getting him some action". Basementman's authenticity as a geek is also

destabilized by his choice of technology. The MSI Wind is not a particularly powerful computer, and it is fit only for unsophisticated tasks such as text editing. According to Laptop Magazine[32], a computer technology review website, this particular netbook is valued more for its sleek look than its technical specifications, and thus targeted towards a non-expert audience rather than computer geeks. Basementman's connection to technology is Thus, basementman's expression given is not accepted as such, and both his performance of geek masculinity fall short.

If one were to ignore basementman's previous messages on other threads, the post could also be interpreted as the work of a troll, perhaps a man poking fun at the social ineptitude of geeks, or even a geek woman ironically commenting on the subculture's male centeredness. However, no one questions basementman's gender, because it is assumed by default that Slashdot users are male. It is basementman's gender *performance* that comes under the microscope. While basementman was the first target of gender policing on this particular thread: "Step one to being manly is to stop being an insecure dumbass worrying about looking feminine." (by humina on Monday March 30 2009, @05:58PM, (ScuttleMonkey, 2009). However, subsequent commenters are policed in similar ways. Basementman and other members who have somehow made a faux-pas in projecting a masculinity that the community deems hegemonic have transgressed a boundary and need to be held accountable for it by other members.

4.4. PERFORMING MASCULINITY

In the above example is possible to identify particular fragments of Connell's categories of masculinity. There are at least two very different types of masculinities at play on the thread initiated by ScuttleMonkey: hegemonic masculinity, and a non-hegemonic yet neither subordinated nor necessarily complicit masculinity that I will refer to as geek

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[32] The review in question is available at: http://blog.laptopmag.com/msi-wind-revealed-10-inch-mini-notebook-to-hit-us-in-june

masculinity. These two types of masculinity are seldom performed separately; instead, they can build on each other, reinforce each other, contradict each other and even enter a symbiotic relationship. Although as seen in Chapter 1, Connell's concepts are rather problematic, I believe they can serve well as a support for a discussion of masculinity among Slashdot users. I intend to employ hegemonic masculinity not as a given, but rather as a hypothesis that might or might not prove to be valid. Therefore, I shall attempt to see how geek masculinity can be related to hegemonic/subordinated masculinity and whether any convincing connections can be set up between these.

In most responses it can observed that the point of reference that these masculinities are linked to is femininity on the one hand, and women as monolithic entities on the other. Femininity is perceived as a set of traits that deter one from enacting a masculine gender, such as when members associate the adjectives 'cute' and 'adorable' with a lack of manliness. Women as embodied selves are a point of reference when they are posited as anatomically different others who either are, or have the potential of becoming sexual partners, and with whom it is desirable to form a romantic relationship.

The structure of this analysis follows Connell's three-fold model of masculinity, i.e. power, production and cathexis relations (Connell, 1995: 73) which are a useful framework for the examination of geek masculinity if one starts with the premise that geek masculinity can indeed be typecast into one of Connell's types of masculinity. Slashdot is very prolific in the adoption and formulation of discourses on sexuality and production, as proved by the extremely large number of threads on topics such as working in the IT, or dating tips for geeks. While it is difficult to separate these dimensions because they can simultaneously occur enmeshed into the same piece of text, subtracting the power dimension from the vast majority of the discussions on Slashdot is counterproductive. I choose to focus on sexual desirability/lack of sexual desirability, dissociation/association with the geek stereotype and

employability for several reasons. Reading into the discourse on sexual desirability or lack thereof can highlight relations of difference and dominance between geek masculinity and other types of masculinities. I will also look at the way in which Slashdot users position themselves in relation to the stereotype in hopes of sketching out the possible tensions within the category of geek masculinities. The discourse on employability suggests at least two agendas of geek masculinity: approaching the model of man as breadwinner, and delineating the status of women as inferior to men when it comes to working with technology.

These discourses will be examined in light of Judith Donath's concept of deception, and Goffman's notions of expressions given and expressions given off, which I deem to be helpful in uncovering the tensions extant within the above mentioned types of discourses.

4.4.1. LACKING/HAVING/PRETENDING TO HAVE SEXUAL DESIRABILITY

Possessing and displaying sexual desirability [33] is one of the most crucial configurations of practice within the model of hegemonic masculinity, because the ability to attract sexual partners of the opposite gender consolidates a man's status as a heterosexual male, and therefore dominant male (Connell, 1995: 75). Arthur Brittan examines in detail the great significance attributed to male sexuality in the performance of hegemonic masculinities in the past and present. Given the significance of sexuality in the construction of hegemonic masculinity, a lack of sexual desirability would constitute a serious impediment in the realization of sexual behaviour. A widespread trope in popular culture is that the geek lacks sexual desirability (Kendall, 2000: 265; Kendall, 1999: 264), and a considerable number of comments on Slashdot echo this perception of geek masculinity. ScuttleMonkey's post sparked a complex and lengthy discussion that touched several times on the topic of sexual desirability among geeks. Perhaps in a reflection of high school stereotypes, non-geek women are assumed to avoid geek men, and those members who claim to be romantically attached are

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[33] In the following sections, I shall use the term sexual desirability to refer to a man's appeal to potential sexual partners, which can include (but is by no means limited to) physical attractiveness.

either the exception, or simply trying to present a false image to the rest of the community. Although on this particular thread, several commenters claim to be in a relationship, their statements are often met with sarcastic incredulity: "Way to manage to work the term girlfriend into your post. This is /. right[34]? You know that was a total lie." (by Anonymous Coward on Monday March 30 2009, @09:47PM), or "You had a point right until you mentioned a girlfriend. NOBODY ON SLASHDOT HAS A GIRLFRIEND." (by Godji on Monday March 30 2009, @06:13PM, (ScuttleMonkey, 2009)). The often repeated claim that no Slashdot members have girlfriends is more than a way of setting up the difference between accepted, heterosexual masculinities and geek masculinity – it has become one of the unwritten rules of the community. Within the framework of Goffman's performance theory, this statement can be interpreted as a component of the setting: when they are in the space of Slashdot, users have to hide their 'successful' heterosexuality even if they are maintaining romantic relationships. The nature of the setting is such that active heterosexuality is denied, and users have to perform according to the rules in they want to convey and authentic self-presentation.

Commenters who state that they are involved in romantic relationships seem to be trying to redeem their heterosexual masculinity at the expense of the authenticity of their identity. As geeks, they are supposed to not have girlfriends and not perform heterosexuality adequately, but by reneging this aspect of geek masculinity, they are associating themselves with the hegemonic model. They might also be attempting to subvert the stereotype of the Slashdot user in particular as sexually undesirable, and try to frame it as a temporary state that can be overcome. This argument suggests that although some geeks are not sexually active (or as sexually active as the hegemonic model requires), they are merely developing at a slower pace than the average man.

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[34] Slashdot if often abbreviated as "/."

> "Ehm..... I've been reading slashdot since, I don't know exactly, but my bet is about 1998. In that period I had sex with three different women, one of which is my wife now. Sure, geeks are late-starters and compared to "real men" we had an insignificant amount of sexual partners (twenty++ is not out of the norm for non-geek guys)."
>
> by jawtheshark on Monday March 30 2009, @06:49PM, (ScuttleMonkey, 2009)

Heterosexual scripts of courtship[35] require men to actively pursue all and every sexual opportunity (Seal and Ehrhardt, 2003: 296), and failure to do so entails a failure at enacting a hegemonic masculinity, in being a 'real man'.

Alternatively, Slashdot geeks' insistence on claiming that they do not and cannot have girlfriends suggests a certain closeness to the circus geek, the untamed wild man. For a geek, a girlfriend would signify an integration into proper society, becoming a functional social actor who fulfils his responsibility as a heterosexual (therefore 'normal') member of the species. As a representative of uncivilized masculinity, the geek must not allow himself to be tamed by the 'other' unless he is prepared to sacrifice his status.

4.4.2. MEN AS SEDUCERS

According to Seal and Ehrhardt, traditional heterosexual script theory portrays men as the initiators and women as the boundary-setters of courtship (Seal and Ehrhardt, 2003: 296). The stereotype of the geek in popular culture is constructed so as to highlight the social ineptitude of geeks in general, but more particularly, it brings to forefront the geek's lack of ability to initiate romantic or sexual relationships (Kendall, 2000: 266).

Considering that being in long or short term relationships is explicitly claimed to be an accomplishment in two of the Slashdot threads examined in this paper (ScuttleMonkey, 2009; Cliff, 2005), the commenters frequently digress to long debates on methods of attracting women. Although there are two instances of commenters admitting to being gay (ScuttleMonkey, 2009; Cliff, 2005), their messages received no response and other

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[35] In *The Purchase of Intimacy*, Viviana Zelizer defines scripts of courtship as practices, meanings and relations that are conducive to the establishment of a long-term romantic relationship (Zelizer, 2005: 107-108).

commenters did not bring into discussion any mentions of other sexual orientation. If heterosexuality were considered to be the norm, it can be assumed that users who declare their non-heterosexuality would be punished in some way for their deviation from the norm. Since their openness about their sexuality is received with seeming indifference, it might be possible that the desire for heteronormativity might not be the reason why geeks insist on performing the role of the seducer or potential seducer. Instead, their desire to 'have girlfriends' might be related to a need of stabilizing their position in the web of power relations between genders, without actually having to submit to the heterosexual practices of 'domestication' that a relationship entails.

Women are objectified and a relationship with a woman (or more women) is often discussed as an indicator of masculinity, similarly to tropes of hegemonic masculinity: "Having women around you makes you more desirable." (by goose-incarnated on Tuesday March 31 2009, @06:24AM, (ScuttleMonkey, 2009)). The ultimate status symbol, the unquestionable proof of a hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, is seen to be a partner who conforms to conventional beauty standards:

> "Women don't trust, like or touch a man with no girlfriend. Unless they're dog-ugly. So you find one like that and ask her out. Suddenly you're attached. You're able to keep a woman happy. Sure, she's pig ugly, but women don't work on looks as much, so they don't worry about that. This makes you inherently more attractive to women. It also means you're less likely to hit on them, so you're safer to talk to, and to flirt with. At this point you can trade in the ugly girlfriend for a slightly prettier one. It only takes 4-5 trades to hit 'model'..."
> by Cederic on Tuesday March 31 2009, @04:30AM, (ScuttleMonkey, 2009)

As geeks on Slashdot undervalue their capacity to perform conventional sexual scripts, these tactics are seen as a suitable substitute to regular rituals of courtship. Women who are not seen as suitably attractive for long-term relationships are nonetheless found to be useful tools which can lead to a relationship that qualifies as a badge of heterosexual accomplishment. It is also implied that the geek body, which implicitly lacks desirability, is

not relevant in the establishment of a relationship: "women don't work on looks as much". The geek is rendered attractive through a display of sexual prowess, the physical proof of which is the possession of a partner – "this makes you inherently more attractive to women". The tool-women are acquired through deceptive tactics: the geek has to act out the part of an unavailable man in order to be able to approach women, who are assumed to be more receptive to the advances of a man who is 'already taken'. It is open to question whether the geek who posted the message, as well as the commenters who agreed with this theory, are indeed considering such tactics as valid methods of achieving a relationship. Whether or not Cederic is deceptive is not relevant, because in the context of the forum he manages to posit himself not only as someone who has an insight into women's psyche, but also has the means of making them comply with his wishes.

The hegemonic ideal of the man who can easily procure romantic partners is distanced from geek masculinity, and geeks frame themselves in a marginal position in this case. At the same time, they are complicit in the perpetuation of the patriarchal practices of objectification. By discussing dating in this manner, the geeks on these threads oscillate between giving off the expression of a type of hegemonic masculinity, while simultaneously depicting themselves as subordinated. Not all geeks manifest this kind of behaviour, however. Attracting women through deceptive means is seen as unmasculine by some Slashdot members. An anonymous commenter's answer to basementman's question is the following: "Real men don't care...try being more manly yourself and getting over it." (by Anonymous Coward on Tuesday March 31 2009, @02:00AM). Despite the expression given off by Cederic, that of a competent 'seducer', not everyone is convinced by such performances.

4.4.3. EMBRACING/REJECTING THE STEREOTYPE

Despite the semantic quandaries that the word geek can provoke in those who are not familiar with the community, the self-professed geeks who are active in the Slashdot

community seem to have clear ideas on what geek identity entails. The problem, however, is that almost no two definitions are the same. Some users define the geek solely in terms of the amount of knowledge about a given field ("walking calculator/encyclopedia"(Cliff, 2005)), while others also consider the social implications of the geek's exceptional mastery of a particular field. An overview of the definitions given by Slashdot users on the threads "Have geeks gone mainstream?" (Cliff, 2005), "Geek culture will never die...or be popular" (Soulskill, 2011) or "How do I make my netbook more manly?" (ScuttleMonkey, 2009) suggests that the identity of the geek is twofold: it has an intellectual basis, and a social/relational basis. Being socially unfit is often a crucial part of geek identity, and understandably so, considering the stereotypes established by popular culture. Intelligence and unusual passion for a subject are not enough to make one a geek - some degree of awkwardness is necessary as well. The most common assumption is that geeks are not able to fit into society because they are either not allowed to by mainstream members - the geek is excluded through what Paul Roberts calls 'censure'[36] (Connell, 2005: 834) or perhaps even physical bullying—or because they choose not to follow conventions.

> The true test is being so "Otaku"[37] about something that you can pretty much zone out the rest of the world. THAT is a geek. You may also be a geek if you have trouble focusing on a conversation because you are too entranced with your naval [sic] watching/ programming/ building/ collecting /studying you name it.
>
> by entirety on Friday November 18 2005, @11:53PM, (Cliff, 2005)

Social misfit status is embraced with pride by some Slashdot members, and exclusion from one group is seen as inclusion into another. "We're all misfits, I think. I admire those who don't care about what others think when it comes to pursuing their passions" (by digitalhermit on Monday January 31, @08:20PM, (Soulskill, 2011)). The expression given is usually that of an exceptionally gifted man with an above-average commitment towards his

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[36] Censure can range from informal name-calling to the criminalization of particular practices or life styles, such as homosexuality (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 834).

[37] A Japanese term used to refer to people with obsessive interests.

hobbies, whose intellectual abilities should redeem him from his marginalized status. However, some commenters suggest that the expression given off by geeks can be another matter entirely: that of someone who is useful to non-geeks only insofar as their abilities can help them in some way: "to do their homework and fix their computers". A difference is established between non-geeks, the attractive people who enjoy an active social life, and nerds, dorks and geeks:

> Geeks have this fucked up notion that the world loves a geek and that everyone sits around and admires the prowess of nerds, dorks and geeks. Guess what? THEY DO NOT. The people out partying and drinking and having a good time with other good looking successful non-geeks see you as someone to do their homework and fix their computers.
> by Seumas on Saturday November 19 2005, @12:03AM, (Cliff, 2005)

Other Slashdot members, on the other hand, consider themselves well-adjusted members of society, who defy the stereotype. Commenter Mordok-DestroyerOfWo states that some geeks, including himself, do not live in their parents' basements (in reference to the widespread trope that even adult geeks are unable to leave the parental nest and integrate into the world of adults), and "enjoy active lives that include direct sunlight" (Mordok-DestroyerOfWo on Monday March 30 2009, @07:17PM, (Cliff, 2009)). Other commenters also claim to lead fulfilling personal and social lives in spite of their geek identity. But while social ineptitude is not a mandatory part of the identity, a certain intellectual standing an absolute requirement. Trollertron3000, a Slashdot member whose idea of the geek is limited to computer science geeks, has a narrow definition of who qualifies to be part of the community: "If you can't write code you're just a scene whore in my trollish opinion. . . . Pick up a C++ book and become a real man." (by trollertron3000 on Tuesday February 01, @12:07PM, (Soulskill, 2011)). Interestingly enough, Trollertron3000 equates geek with man, and he suggests that a 'geeky' skill is necessary in order to be a 'real man'. An affinity for technology and the capacity for rational thought are posited as the recipe for hegemonic masculinity here. In a twist that conjures up the mad scientist, the geek is defined as someone

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whose masculinity is not dependant on his conformity with society, but on their cyborgian nature. Instead of setting the geek up as someone who can achieve hegemony by investing in the non-technological aspect of his identity, the marginal potential-geek reaches the apex of geekiness and real manhood by developing his ability to manipulate technology. The traditional relationship between geek masculinity and hegemonic masculinities is thus reversed: it is not the geek who must strive to be a real man; instead, a regular man can become a 'real man' only by performing a geeky act.

While trollertron3000's argument points obliquely to a rejection of hegemonic masculinity, other commenters flat-out refuse to be associated with mainstream culture (and its ideal of hegemonic masculinity): "What makes anyone think the geeks want to be a part of the filthy pop culture. Argh." (by bronney on Monday January 31, @11:45PM, (Soulskill, 2011)). This opinion hints at a celebration of liminality and a refusal to be included into the dominant group. Mad-scientist-like, the geek revels in his position "betwixt and between" (Goffman, 1969: 95), and a stark refusal to be domesticated. By association, geek masculinity does not need legitimization by conforming to the conventions of hegemonic masculinity, and more than that, he *must not* conform if he wants to keep his liminal status. Bronney's comment signals yet another reversal of positions between hegemonic and geek masculinity: that which is valued is the liminal, while the hegemonic is despised.

4.4.4. EMPLOYABILITY: "MEN MUST HAVE A CAREER, PERIOD"

Industrialization was the harbinger of change in the relationships between genders, but within genders as well. New forms of masculinity emerged as a result of the industrial turn – masculinities which were organized around the man's capacity to earn a wage, as well as his skills and the solidarity between workers (Connell, 2002: 253). The shift from Victorian scientist-geek to computer geek entailed a class shift as well, as mentioned in Chapter 2. From upper-class Victorian gentleman who could afford to invest his fortune into scientific pursuits,

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the geek fell back to a comfortable middle-class, and is in a downward slide on the scale of class privilege. At the present, while middle class is still associated with dignity, emotional restraint, respectability, it is also linked with work and values such as ambition and competitiveness (Crewe, 2003: 27-28).

With the development of information technology, an increasing number of companies are forced to employ people who are proficient in computer use. According to an article published in *Forbes* magazine in 1994, computer geeks are desirable employees because of their investment in their work, despite the fact that their geekiness makes them antisocial/asocial, and therefore less qualified to undertake the social aspects of work in a company (Kendall, 1999: 275). In the present age, computer geeks are employable in a variety of industries, but as the Forbes article portrays them, they are exploitable resources rather than human workers.

High technology companies where geeks are likely to be employed function within the context of a savage post-Fordist competition system, an important part of which are tenders (Massey, 1995: 488). The faster a contract can be completed, and the more the customer's needs are kept in mind, the higher a company's chances of winning a tender are. Naturally, these requirements depend on the employee's willingness to spend extra hours at the workplace. If *Forbes* is to be believed, geeks are already in the top tier of employability for companies of this type, because they 'have time' (Kendall, 2002: 35). Because geeks are assumed to lack a well-developed social life, and because their commitment to their fields, they are more seen as more productive than non-geek employees. Geeks are, therefore, highly employable, which gives them an advantage over non-geeks in general, and men who are inexperience in the use of technology in particular.

Connell points out that whereas in the past labour was essentially dependent on bodily strength, industrialization elevated the importance of skills (Connell, 1995: 55). The labour of

the working class men becomes less important because they are supposed to use the forces of their bodies rather than minds, while middle-class men are "increasingly defined as the bearers of skill" (Connell, 1995: 55). Even sedentary work that was traditionally performed by women in the past is now seen as the product of a particular talent. The software industry is dominated by males in the 21st century, but in the late 1940's, women were the ones who programmed the first ever general-purpose computer (Light, 1999: 455). It took fifty years for their work to be given due recognition (the programmers were introduced into the Women in Technology International Hall of fame in 1997), and although they were pioneers in the field of computer programming, by the time they were given their award, the IT had become a thoroughly masculinized field (Markwick, 2009: 3). Computers have come to symbolise power in a professional setting, as demonstrated by advertisements (Johnson, Rowan and Lynch, 2006: 8), and the machine is not seen here as a hindrance or a threat, but an amplifier of intellectual skills. In the field of information technology, the importance of the phallic body wanes in comparison with intellectual ability.

Being singled out for highly paid positions in high-technology companies puts geeks at the top of the employability scale. First of all, the overwhelming majority of students in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) fields, including information technology, are men (Cohoon and Aspray, 2008). Careers that suppose advanced computer skills are the fastest growing and most financially privileged occupations in this age (Singh, Allen, Scheckler and Darlington, 2007: 500). Geeks with IT degrees have high levels of employability due to their education and the increasing number of jobs on the IT job market, so clearly, some geeks have the resources to enact a type of hegemonic masculinity connected with employability. Certainly not all computer geeks have IT degrees, but those who do, have the possibility to approach hegemonic masculinity in ways that geeks with average-paying jobs do not. One anonymous contributor to the Slashdot thread titled "Women dropping out of

IT" starkly remarks that men "must have a career, period." (kdawson, 2010), as opposed to women, who can afford to quit their jobs without any repercussions to their femininity. This argument alludes to the fact that geeks consider work as a integral part of a masculine performance, and given the fact that geeks are more employable than other men, they are able to perform, and *must* perform hegemonically in this respect.

According to another anonymous commenter, women leave the field of IT because they have the option of choosing between a career and family life, whereas men do not. Having a job is presented as one of the duties of a man – being unemployed would make him a failure both on personal and professional level. Earning a high wage is seen as a sign of masculinity, and also a reward for masculine behaviour, according to commenter Shadowbot, because men "value money more on average while women value work environment and quality" (by Shadowbot, Saturday June 26 2010, @05:12PM, (kdawson, 2010)). The trope of the stoic, unemotional male is invoked here – men perform their duty irrespectively of their potential dislike of the work environment because they must comply with their breadwinner status.

Geekiness is seen as an advantage in the workplace by some commenters, but it is posited in such a way that it completely excludes women. This competitive attitude is certainly reminiscent of hegemonic masculinity, and it implies a "natural sexual division of labour in which man's work is given a higher status" (Brittan, 1989: 85). Geeks are more employable than women and non-geek men not only because they possess a set of special skills, but also because of the obsessive aspect of their identity. In this case, borderline obsession, one of the defining traits of geek identity, inherited from the figure of the mad scientist and the Victorian scientist-geek both, is the key to the achievement of a hegemonically masculine high-paying job.

> You take your biggest nerds, and typically they're pretty one dimensional.
> They are nerdy, geeky dweebs but they're very good at technology because

they live it. Most women don't live it, it's a job. If it's just a job you're not
going to be as good at it as someone who is borderline obsessive about it.
by RightSaidFred99 on June 26 2010, @06:27PM (kdawson, 2010)

It is also interesting to note that the commenter believes that geeks "live" technology, they do not merely use it in order to accomplish a goal. The cyborgian nature of the geek resurfaces as he enters the labour market, where he is able to become successful not due to his skills, but due to his very nature. Computers are a part of the geek, and because the human carries the mark of the machine on him at all times, he is better equipped to perform technology-related tasks than an average person whose contact with machines is of limited duration and depth. The task itself gains a new meaning for the geek – it is not "just a job", it is something that a geek does *because* he is a geek. Moreover, RightSaidFred99 alludes to the possibility that primary identity of the geek is that of the cyborg: the dominant dimension of their geekiness is their proficiency in technology use.

The workplace is an environment which allows men to behave in a way that one commenter dubbed "pseudo-macho alpha geek" (jjohnson on Saturday June 26 2010, @04:24PM, (kdawson, 2010)), and the presence of women is what allows them to perform this specific type of masculinity. The pseudo-macho alpha geek reveals an interesting web of deception and tensions between masculinities. On the one hand, the geek is performing a masculinity that is revelatory of what he considers to be hegemonic – machismo; conversely, he also acts as an alpha geek, a geek that has power over other geeks (and possibly other geek-types such as dorks, dweebs, nerds), and perhaps even non-geeks. On the other hand, the expression that the pseudo-macho alpha geek gives off to other geeks is that of deception. A non-geek might mistake the alpha geek's behaviour as justified hegemony, but to other geeks, this performance is clearly an effort to redeem a precarious masculine position.

Although it is clear that a large number of Slashdot members on this thread are upholding the male breadwinner/ female caregiver model of patriarchy, as proven by their

frequent references to what they believe is women's natural preference for the work of caring instead of a career, the financial rewards of a job are not the only benefits of a job, according to these specific geeks. Several commenters make references to the necessity of emotional and intellectual dedication to the job beyond what is required from a regular employee. Their self-professed investment in their job, which they see as a lifestyle rather than a simple career, is what purportedly distinguishes them from females working in IT, who are unwilling or incapable of making such sacrifices.

While the some Slashdot members indicate that they agree with the male breadwinner model (or at least with the idea that women should/do invest more in family life), there seems to be some resentment towards women's supposed freedom of choice between work and personal life. "The other thing that needs to be accounted for is the options women have that men don't. Women see having a family or having a career as a choice. They can do one, the other, or both. Men don't get to view that as a choice." (by Anonymous Coward on Saturday June 26 2010, @04:26PM, (kdawson, 2010)). Statements such as these echoes the conservative 'men belong in the workplace, women belong in the kitchen' type of discourse, with the difference that now women can have some access to the public sphere, but are still expected to be rooted in the private sphere. The author of this comment, as well as the considerable number of members who support this view adopt a hegemonic attitude which is so conservative that in come circles it could be considered anachronistic.

4.5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The excerpts analysed above suggest that geek masculinity is a far cry from the monolithic figures represented in popular culture. Geeks' self-presentation and their representation by their peers both vary widely, depending on which aspect of geek identity is being put forward. Geek masculinity does not fit neatly into Connell's model of hegemonic, complicit, subordinated or marginalized masculinities, because geeks tend to oscillate

between these types of masculinities (and even step altogether outside them) depending on the context. Geeks are an often marginalized group with a specific agenda which is not necessarily designed to uphold the status-quo, and yet it employs tools that often bolster it. Geek masculinity cannot be meaningfully discussed if our intention is to push it into one category or another, and instead, it might be more useful to analyse the intentions behind each act (which *could* otherwise be categorized) and the assumptions that underlie them.

On the subject of interactions with potential sexual partners, the majority of the comments, Slashdot users lean towards the model of a marginalized masculinity that is in a position of subordination not only by hegemonic masculinities, but femininities as well. However, despite the belief that women often find geeks contemptible, they are discussed as objects of conquest that are important to a masculine gender performance.

Unsuprisingly, in spite (or perhaps because) their masculine ethos, few geeks are prepared to admit that their unfair treatment of women springs from any kind of structural sexism, and instead they promote an ideology of sexual essentialism. By refusing to admit that patriarchy constructs women as subordinated others, they choose to blame women for their inability to become integrated into the geek community: "IT nerds don't have to give you respect *because you're a woman*. IT nerds give respect *when you know what you're doing* . . . women left the job not because of the men, but because of the pressures of the job" (by magamiako1 (1026318) on Saturday June 26 2010, @04:19PM (kdawson, 2010)). They claim to treat men and women equally, and offer them respect based on their abilities and irrespective of their gender. However, by suggesting that women are not equipped to overcome the challenges of a cyborgian life, they might be seeking to distance themselves from femininity in any way they can. The geeks' dismissive attitude towards women is not simply the manifestation of a patriarchal instinct for dominance; it seems rather like an endeavour to preserve their masculinity in the face of competing masculinities.

Geeks slip from hegemonic to subordinated masculinity if and when the context suits them, but perhaps the most accurate name for the type of masculinity that they are enacting would be hybridic and thus liminal: neither here, nor there, not hegemonic but neither subordinate, but combining pieces of the two extremes.

5. GEEK MASCULINITY: THE ALPHA-GEEK BETWEEN HEGEMONY AND SUBORDINATION

Even the shortest incursion into the Slashdot community offers a valid ground for claiming that geek masculinity cannot be easily dismissed as subordinated, but neither does it qualify as hegemonic. Geek masculinity is privileged, yet there is a constant temptation (on the part of pop cultural discourse on masculinity) to classify it as a masculinity which is in some ways undesirable.

This chapter does not intend by any means to reify a notion of geek masculinity nor to imply that anyone outside particular cyber geographies (such as Slashdot) are enacting it, as the present research does not allow for the correlation of a person's performance in cyberspace with their performance in real life. As mentioned in Chapter 4, cyberspace is a fertile ground for deception, and anything a person states or implies can be questioned. Although it is possible to link the texts produced by Slashdot geeks to several discourses on masculinity, as well as to categorize their attitudes and behaviours as symptomatic of one or more of Connell's categories of masculinity, it is by no means possible to claim that cyber-performances reflect the ways in which these geeks act or think in their personal, off-screen lives. Therefore, the model of geek masculinity which I shall attempt to map out in this chapter should be taken as a phenomenon that is observable (without being universal) in the Slashdot community and other similar, if unrelated online discussion forums for geeks.

5.1. A CASE AGAINST BINARIES

Hegemonic masculinities cannot exist without a non-hegemonic other in relation to which they must be positioned. The very idea of a hegemonic configuration of practice

implies that there is a non-hegemonic practice which constitutes its antithesis. Connell's conceptualization of masculinities rests on a duality which, in the best of cases, creates a continuum on which masculinities slide from one point to another. I would like to suggest an alternative vision of hegemonic masculinity, one which does not rely on a binary, and which, I believe is conducive to a better understanding of masculinities which are seen as subordinated.

Western popular culture, religious discourse, state discourse etc. narrate an idealized embodiment of masculinity that is in tension with the image of the geek. The two figures are depicted as polar opposites or as near-absolutes that negate each other, as suggested by the incongruity between geek representation/self-representation and the model of hegemonic masculinity conceptualized by R.W. Connell (see Chapter 1). As in the case of idealized masculinity, geeks such as the group of people described by Kendall (1999, 2007) or Lupton 2000) offer a fictional account of various configurations of practice widely associated with geekiness, rather than an accurate reflection of people who identify as geeks. As such, even if one accepts the characterization of geek men as part of a subordinated group, claiming that geeks either reinforce or challenge hegemonic masculinity (Kendall, 199: 279) might be an oversimplification of their performance. Clearly, there is an uneasiness between geeks as embodied computer users and the tenets of hegemonic masculinity, but one does not exclude the other – geeks can, and do perform hegemonic masculinity when suitable, and hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily have to exclude traditionally geeky practices. Considering Connell's description of the dynamics between different types of masculinity, formulaic characters like the stereotypical geek and the 'real man' are simplistic versions of the dialogical masculinities that can be observed in specific contexts both in real life and in cyberspace. More than a dialogical relationship between masculinities, I would venture to suggest that masculinities are better understood as pieces of a puzzle that can be assembled

and arranged in a myriad of ways – they might not always fit together perfectly and certainly they will not always produce a coherent, intelligible picture, but there are no rules than can stop the player from rounding up a postmodern gender identity that may shift, oscillate, flicker on and off or morph into something else altogether, into a hybrid. As long as the puzzle pieces conform to the player's conception of a hegemonic masculinity, the picture he assembles is perfectly capable of embracing hegemonic status if the time and place – Goffman's setting, in other words - are right. Given the right combination of social and cultural conditions, hegemonic masculine performance could theoretically incorporate at some point all the variables of geek masculinity.

I do not mean to deny the fact that some masculinities are more privileged than others in specific situations, but I would suggest that the hierarchical (if interconnected) relationship between hegemonic, marginalized and subordinated masculinities can be subject to a complete alteration if they are taken out of the context of their production. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, a hypothetical model of global hegemonic masculinity can lose its status in a medium in which a different local hegemonic masculinity is conceived. Even if a successful film actor is considered a model of global hegemonic masculinity (although not the *only* model), he might very well be a comical figure who is regularly mocked in a geek community because of the media's portrayal of this particular actor as charming, attractive and sexually active – configurations of practice which might not be in tone with the model that was designated as hegemonic by that geek community. Indeed, Slashdot members often joke about athletes and celebrities who are revered in other communities, because they do not fit these geeks' imaginary of what a 'real man' should be like. Nonetheless, this does not mean that geeks automatically reject everything that the hegemonic ideal advocates, but simply that one's hegemonic masculinity might be someone else's subordinated or marginalized masculinity at a given point in time and space.

I would argue that the concept of subordinated masculinities (which cannot exist without their hegemonic counterpart) is not particularly useful in connection with geeks because it implies an essentialization of geek subculture which suggests that there is an inherent element of marginalization when it comes to the relationship between geek masculinity and other masculinities. It is not excluded that other masculinities, and femininities as well, might try to push geeks to the margins of society (and considering the lived experiences of geeks on Slashdot, this is highly probable), but this is not necessarily by virtue of a difference which is seen as threatening. Rather, masculinities which are seen as hegemonic pursue their own agendas which come at the cost of certain 'privileges' for geeks. Geeks do not face any systemic discrimination, as opposed to other 'marginalized' masculinities, such those represented by homosexual men [38]. One cannot speak of a subordination of geeks in the wider meaning of the word [39]. Socially, economically and sexually, there is nothing about ideal geek identity that might warrant discrimination and marginalization (which does not mean to say that individual geeks cannot be marginalized or discriminated against). In other words, the marginalization of geeks implies a sense of agency on the part of geek subculture – there is a display of resistance against assimilation displayed by the geeks who embrace the geek community and voluntarily identify as geeks. Geek's self-representation, as seen in Chapter 1 as well as Chapter 4, coincides on several account with their representation in popular culture. It might not be completely implausible that geek 'marginalization' should be part of the agenda of geek masculinity, and more than that, it is an integral part of it. A geek who is not looked down on by the 'mainstream' loses his authenticity. Geeks who are or have been in relationships (a blatant defiance of the stereotype) are also jeopardizing their status within the community because they allow themselves to be

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[38] I do not mean to imply that there is such a thing as a generic gay masculinity; what I wish to highlight is the fact that gay masculinity is conferred a lower status by virtue of its transgression of heterosexuality.

[39] Submissive to, or controlled by authority, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

domesticated by women – hence the mantra of the Slashdot forum: "nobody on Slashdot has a girlfriend".

Demetrakis Demetriou's critique of Connell addresses some of these concerns. According to him, "hegemonic masculinity is not a purely white or heterosexual configuration of practice but it is a hybrid bloc that unites practices from diverse masculinities in order to ensure the reproduction of patriarchy" (Demetriou, 2001: 337). More specifically, Demetriou expands one Gramscian concept, the hegemony, into the hegemonic bloc. The bloc, as Gramsci envisioned it, is achieved through the dominance of a specific class; however, the elements that characterize the subjects of domination can be incorporated into the historic bloc (Demetriou, 2001: 345).

Although, Demetriou considerably expands the notion of hegemonic masculinity, he preserves Connell's presupposition that masculinity inescapably promotes patriarchy. Following this argument, if masculinities are indeed hybrid blocs which are in a constant dialectic of appropriation/marginalization and coalesce into new configurations of practice, the domination of men over women underlies all masculinities, not only the hegemonic model. Demetriou sees the hegemonic masculine bloc as a machine for the transformation of counter-hegemonic masculinities into "an instrument of backwardness and patriarchal reproduction" (Demetriou, 2001: 355). This logic results in a demonization of masculinity, which leads to an interpretation of all masculine performances as a tool for the subjugation of women. The possibility that hegemonic masculinity could be mobilized for dismantling the patriarchal order is out of the question, following this logic. But if hegemony, as Gramsci defined it, is based on "winning and holding power and the formation (and destruction) of social groups in that process" (Donaldson, 1993: 645), it is utterly inconceivable that a particular type of hegemonic masculinity (shaped by feminist politics) could help change sexist ideology as well?

The structural dominance of men over women is undeniable, and so is the fact that particular types of masculinities, such as an ideal of hegemonic masculinity for example, actively promote this agenda. However, the existence of an overarching category of hegemonic masculinities (or hegemonic bloc, as Demetriou would say) which is unavoidably in a dialogue with other masculinities, puts *all* masculinities (and all the individuals that enact them) under suspicion of patriarchal sympathies – which cannot always be the case.

I would suggest that looking at hegemonic masculinities as hegemonic expectations can offer a possible way out of the constraints of the binary, for those masculinities which are seen as hegemonic, as well as for those that are not. The idea of hegemonic masculinities suggests, as Mimi Schippers notes, a social position into which men are required to enter (Schippers, 2007: 86). However, a social position entails the idea of fixity, of precise coordinates even if these are established only for a short time. The notion of hegemonic expectations allows for more fluidity and the understanding both in terms of the flexibility of the expectations that are considered as hegemonic in a given context, as well as the subject's agency in meeting (or refusing to meet) these expectations. Conceptualizing hegemonic masculinity in terms of expectations is also useful in dismantling the notion of a subordinate masculinity, which becomes simply a masculinity which does not meet the hegemonic expectations. It is therefore possible to imagine hybrid masculinities, configurations of practice that meet the hegemonic expectations only partially, and which can incorporate elements which are traditionally regarded as feminine, without endangering their masculine status. Hegemonic expectations are still defined in relation to femininity, but they might have the potential to subvert currently established gender relations.

5.2. GEEKINESS AS NON-FEMININITY

While Connell (1995), Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), and Demetriou (2001) see subordinated masculinity as configuration of practices whose main (but not only) dialogical

relationship is with hegemonic masculinity/the hegemonic bloc, the case study in Chapter 4 suggests that geeks are more concerned with their relationality with femininity rather than other forms of masculinity. I would like to examine geek masculinity in light of its vacillating relationship with femininity. As seen in Chapter 4, geeks see women both as objects of desire and as others, intruders into their space. Non-geek men are hardly mentioned in the forum threads discussed in the case study, and in the vast majority of messages, geeks take as a point of reference not an ideal of masculinity, but an imaginary of femininity. Geek masculinity seems to use women as a stepping stone that can help them reclaim some lost sense of 'proper' masculinity, and the means through which they are achieving this is a reinscription of patriarchal values which put women in a position of inferiority.

It is possible that the geeks on the Slashdot forum are attempting to overthrow the geek stereotype by constructing a self-representation that contradicts some of the more emasculating tropes that popular culture has produced about the geek. I would suggest that geeks in this particular community are endeavouring to reconceptualise geek identity as entirely masculine. It seems that geeks are pressured into a specific performance of masculinity from the two opposing ends of the gender spectrum. Rationality and the mastery of technology are the markers of masculinity in geek identity and therefore losing their monopoly over this body of knowledge (due to the growing number of geek women and women working in IT) endangers their claim on masculinity. If women are allowed to claim rationality and technology for themselves, geeks no longer have anything to anchor them into masculinity. An affinity for computers is part of the geek group identity, and since femininity is not congruent with technological competence, "to feel technically competent is to feel manly" (Cockburn in Kendall, 200: 261). Consequently, sexist attitudes on Slashdot could result not from a deeply rooted hatred towards women *because* they are women, but from the fact that geek masculinity needs to resist the association with (or incorporation into)

femininity. Although geeks embrace liminality from other perspectives, their gender identity (but not necessarily their performance of gender) is firmly essentialist and unwilling to compromise itself through a potential overlap with femininity.

Although sexual orientations among geeks are surely as diverse as among any other community, geeks on Slashdot seem to consider that they are required to perform a heterosexual script. As mentioned in Chapter 4, it is extremely rare for Slashdot commenters to subscribe to a non-heterosexual orientation, and when they do, they are largely ignored. However, it should be noted that in the four message threads analysed in Chapter 4, there were not posts that alluded to, or explicitly revealed a homophobic stance. That is not to say that homophobia is absent from Slashdot, however, even threads that explicitly dealt with the topic of homosexuality (such as "Apple's App Store Accepts 'Gay Cure' App"[40], (timothy, 2011)), the vast majority of the comments showed support for the equal treatment of all human sexualities. The paradox is that the performance of a sometimes exaggerated heterosexuality does not necessarily imply a marginalization of non-heterosexual orientations, which does not concur with Connell's conclusion that adopting (or partially adopting, in this case) a hegemonic masculinity entails a demonization of homosexuality (Connell, 1995: 45).

A possible explanation for this generally liberal attitude towards homosexuality might be that geek masculinity has no reason to see it as a danger. It is the spectre of femininity that destabilizes geeks' firm grip on technology. I suggest that one of the defining traits of geek masculinity is neither hegemony nor subordination, but rather a rejection of the dangerous feminine other.

5.3. THE ALPHA GEEK MODEL

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[40] The discussion of this thread centers on Apple's controversial decision to include a "Gay Cure" application for their iPhone application store. The application is purportedly designed to help homosexual people become heterosexual and find "freedom from homosexuality" (Ozimek, 2011).

Geek masculinity could be the result of the social constitution of both genders through the "complex struggles for the acquisition and relocation of certain symbols and material positions" (Aboim, 2010: 39) not only between each other, but also within themselves. Geek masculinity incorporates much of the imaginary of hegemonic masculinity, and also some of the traits of stereotypical femininity, which it struggles to keep at bay. By borrowing the codes of hegemonic masculinity, geek masculinity becomes an accomplice in the upholding of patriarchy, despite the fact that geeks are often at disadvantage in a patriarchal social structure. Sofia Aboim sees marginalized and subordinated masculinities (and femininities as well) as simply a result of intersectionality, which is the idea at the core of Connell's reasoning as well. Put this way, one can look at hegemonic masculinity as material and sexual supremacy (Aboim, 2010: 46). Considering the axes of gender, race and class, the majority of geeks are by no means in a marginalized position. This framework does not adequately explain why geeks are so often regarded as second-class males.

The concept of geek masculinity as used by Kendall and Lupton has a strong implication of subordination and marginalization, but this is most certainly not the case *within* geek community. The practices, behaviours and attitudes of geeks on Slashdot are more indicative of what Slashdot member jjohnson dubs the alpha geek (kdawson, 2010). As a set of copied, reiterated behaviours, alpha geek masculinity might simply be the result of the clash of the narrative of the unattainable hegemonic masculinity with the particular set of practices that geekiness entails, irrespective of gender. By appropriating (consciously or not) aspects of hegemonic masculinity, male geeks end up performing a form of hybrid masculinity which "may sustain hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal domination but, even so, they also bring in change, flexibilization and resistance among a variety of social factors" (Aboim, 2010: 59). The geek is therefore a liminal being not only in terms of nature/culture, human/machine transgression, as see in Chapter 2. Geeks also developed a liminal gender

performance which is consistent within a specific group that encompasses a considerable portion (if not the entirety) of Slashdot users.

A setting is the scene that provides the background of a performance, and in its absence the performance has little chance of success. I believe that online forums can be conceptualized as settings, although their cybernetic nature limits the type of performance conducted therein. The benefit of using Goffman's concept in relation to hegemonic masculinities is that we can envision the possibility of the same person enacting a wide array of gender performances depending on the setting. Goffman postulates that a performance ends when the setting is changed (Goffman, 1969: 33). To be more precise, the fact that a geek performs alpha geek masculinity on the Slashdot forum does not lessen his social marginalization in certain contexts in real life, or perhaps even other types of forums.

Hegemonic masculinity is perhaps more helpful if it is regarded as an explanation of why certain types of masculinity are more accepted in a given social context, at given time, instead of a collection of stereotypes that males attempt to mimic in their endeavour to maintain their superiority. Hegemonic masculinity has more to do with the shifting balance of power between genders and a reactionary desire to keep this balance fixed in a certain point, than with a neutral concept that simply describes what men would like to become. In this framework, even alpha geek masculinity can be seen as hegemonic masculinity when performed within a community where the alpha geek is a desirable performance. Alpha-geek masculinity signifies an attempt to guard technology and science from the interference of women in order to preserve its privileged position. The prevalence of hegemonic behaviour among the geeks on Slashdot suggests that they are leaning towards an exaggerated masculinity in an attempt to distance themselves from femininity in order to redeem their masculinity. It is possible, in my opinion, that the contradiction within the figure of the geek, the tension between intensely masculine rationality, and quasi-feminine weak, soft bodies,

suggests the need to differentiate themselves from both hard, phallic masculinity, as well an emphasised femininity[41].

It is clear that alpha geek masculinity employs many patterns of behaviour which are seen as hegemonic, yet this mimicry is not necessarily a case of upholding the gender order. The replication, displacement and parodic re-enactment of hegemonic performances can result in a subversion of the hegemonic/non-hegemonic binary. Subversion, as defined by Chris Brickell, is a performance which has the tools to reconfigure subjectivities, action and interaction (Brickell, 2005: 37) – and consequently binaries as well. Subversion calls into question the usefulness of binaries; if both halves of a binary enact performances which are incorporating parts of each other, is it still necessary to maintain the differentiation between them? The alpha geek urges the dissolution of the binaries by gradually melting the boundaries between them. But the paradox is that the alpha-geek *is* a result of the binary which is seeks to destroy– through the very fact that he is outside it. The question that begs answering is whether the liminal can exist without binaries – can there be a geek masculinity without the imaginaries of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities?

The concepts of hegemonic and counter hegemonic masculinities are perhaps much too restrictive in a discussion of masculinity within the geek community, because despite their shifting nature and their status of continuous negotiation, they still form a binary which makes it more difficult to examine a masculinity that is decidedly liminal. Alpha-geek masculinity is unequivocally one such category-defying masculinity which constructs itself like a puzzle game out of fragments which have been labelled as either hegemonic or subordinated by cultural narratives and popular stereotypes.

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[41] Connell defines emphasized femininity as the female counterpart of hegemonic masculinity. Connell choose to call it emphasized instead of hegemonic in order to acknowledge the asymmetrical position of the two within the patriarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 848).

CONCLUSIONS

What are the prerequisites of being a geek? Massive amounts of knowledge about a narrow field, myopic focus on a certain subject, and interest in refining one's intellect, obsessively so. If the subject of the myopic focus happens to be computer technology, one is a computer geek. But this definition does not help us identify the geek, because the geek as a category does not exist. It is impossible to objectively put a person into this category on the basis of some subjective requirements. There is no instantly recognizable, essential geek, only a discursively constructed one. But if someone should decide that 'geek' defines them, they are more than free to do so. The geeks I have looked at are geeks because this is what they call themselves: this is the subjective label that they use in order to represent themselves. In some ways, claiming one's geekiness resembles identity politics, without the politics proper. And because one cannot call him or herself a geek without the implicit acknowledgement that there is something about them that makes them similar to other geeks, it is possible to talk about geek practices and geek performances. To avoid any generalizations, I must concede that what I attempted to uncover in this thesis are geek practices and performances which take place in a specific community, in a specific context. My intention was to situate this specific performance of the geek in a wider context of a geek imaginary. Although this thesis was intended to be an analysis of the geek (or rather, an imaginary geek) through the prism of masculinities, what resulted is an attempt at destabilizing the binary of hegemonic/non-hegemonic masculinities with the help of the figure of the geek.

The geek is not only difficult to define in terms of identity, but as a gendered being as well. While the gender of the geek is possibly one of the most unequivocal of its traits, his

gender performance cannot be grasped in simple terms. The geek is a liminal figure which transgresses the boundaries between nature and culture, human and machine, and it can be seen through the lens of the cyborg metaphor, both as an embodied and disembodied subject. However, whereas the cyborg is a postgender creature, the geek is most decidedly not, quite the opposite – it's liminality does not always extend to gender relations, and much less when it comes to his own gender. The geek destabilizes boundaries which are already leaky, and he is helped in this endeavour by its shifting nature. The geek mutated from a circus freak to an embodied computer user, but this is not a linear evolution. The geek figure connects its roots not only to the carnival performer, a figure representing the transgression of the boundaries between human and animal, but also the mad scientist, who shuns civilization by removing himself from it, and dedicates himself to the pursuit of knowledge at any cost. The Victorian scientist-geek in its domination of science and propensity for homosocial means of organization is the closest modern precursor of the geek – a geek without machines to embrace. The development of computer science technologies turned the scientist-geek into a cyborg intent on becoming one with the computer at the expense of his functions as a human. The computer geek is portrayed as an outcast who sacrifices his humanity for his obsession with machines, who lives through machines rather than through the body, which becomes frail and feminized.

The considerable intellectual and technical prowess of the geek (with its inherent promise of danger) is being domesticated, humanized in popular culture. The stereotype of the socially awkward, party-faced geek is a tamed version of the cyborg geek. His communion with technology is trivialized in order to highlight his human aspect, but the result is a deficient human, with a deficient gender performance. The emasculation of the pop-culture image of the geek has contradictory effects on actual geeks, or at least on those who are active members of the cyber geek community Slashdot. Although their appropriate markers of their

domestication, embracing (and at the same time struggling with) their inability to perform a socially accepted, sexually active performance of a masculinity which is seen as hegemonic, they voluntarily set up a difference between themselves, as the group capable of manipulating technology to an uncommon extent, and those who are not. There is a tendency among geeks to espouse the discourse on femininity being incompatible with rationality and technology, and I argue that the marginalization or exclusion of women from geek communities is a result of geeks' attempt to distance themselves from femininity. Although geek masculinity has been described and represented as subordinated masculinity, posited in opposition to a white hegemonic masculinity, my observations of the Slashdot forum are an indication that geeks perform a hybrid masculinity, neither hegemonic nor subordinated.

Whether they are seen as uncivilized freaks performing disgusting feats, mentally and morally (though not intellectually) corrupt gatherers and producers of knowledge, or simply very smart people who are socially awkward, geeks are always straddling borders without ever quite crossing them, becoming hybrids in a liminal space and negotiating their way through the murky depths of social expectations and 'proper' gender performances.

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