Rant In A-Minor

Loud, rude words about religion (and other annoyances)

The Geek Shall Inherit The Earth

Kris King – September 29th 2012

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Recently, whilst casually sliding through the list of potential choices for sonic accompaniment to my morning trek to work using the touch screen of my other half's MP3 player (he was asleep, he didn't miss it), I overheard a conversation from the back of the bus that actually put a spring in my step for the rest of the day. One of the normally self-absorbed and entitled little private school shits that I found myself daily sharing public transport with was thoroughly pwning one of her colleagues who, in spite of what must have been a not insubstantial educational investment by her parents, had expounded the idea that science was stupid and pointless. The devastating blow, delivered effortlessly by her contemporary, was the unassailable point that science was entirely responsible for eradicating the diseases that made her existence even possible. Just as I had done earlier in the month when reacquainted with moments in the life of one of my heroes, Neil Armstrong, I felt a twinge of pride at the thought that, as with almost every aspect of the modern world, a geek was responsible for the progress.

It goes without saying (an expression which almost universally precedes the moment when someone actually says it anyway, so let's go with that) that I will *obviously* be somewhat biased in my assessment of the contributions made by geeks to our civilisation; being a lifelong egg-head myself, with nerd credentials absolutely intact (at the age of 8, in absence of a real computer, I made a pretend one to play with by drawing a keyboard on a piece of an old cardboard box, and fashioned a monitor, complete with drawn-on buttons, using the underside of an upturned tomato crate), I will inevitably have a natural and automatic tendency to, quite rightly, big up the achievements of my fellow spods. However, before we can dial-up our modems, launch Netscape Navigator, and log on to Excite to go looking for my bias, it is first necessary to establish whether my fashioning information technology items out of discarded food containers from my grandparents shop is the kind of behaviour that constitutes geekhood as I had claimed. I mean, what is a geek anyway?

Well, first off let me tell you what a geek *isn't*. A geek isn't someone who owns a computer – thirty years ago it was, but not any more, not since every spack-hammer and the miserable teenage flesh-bags they jizzed into existence bought themselves each laptops and no headphones in order that they might share their love of "Family Guy" with an entire train carriage. Being able to boot-up a PC and connect to the internet so that you can locate a suitable repository of dwarf porn to fap away your sunday afternoon while your other half resists the temptation to shove your uncommunicative, text-obsessed kids in the duck pond on their walk around the park does not make you the kind of brainbox you used to beat up at school for merely *owning* a computer. You're not even a geek if your entire career revolves around a computer – you can be a network engineer, web developer, digital artist, or programmer, and still not be a geek for precisely the same reasons that a garage mechanic is not a car nerd. It's just your job – it's what you do for money.

Douglas Adams said that a computer nerd (for the purposes of this post we'll take it as given that these words are synonymous) was someone who would use a computer *just* to use a computer, and I think this neatly summarises the distinction. To a geek, computers are not simply utensils, like a spoon or a cheese grater or a stainless steel melon-baller with a rubber-grip handle; they're not just something functional – they're objects of **desire**. It doesn't matter what it is, smartphones, tablets, computers, it doesn't even have to be a piece of consumer electronics; what's important is that it's never simply a working relationship (not even the kind with an occasional drunken fondle in the stationary cupboard at christmas), it's an *infatuation* – a "borderline obsessive to the point of stalking" love affair that will very often transcend every human relationship a geek could conceivably engage in over the course of their life.

A geek isn't someone who bought the blu-ray box set of the extended editions of "The Lord Of The Rings" to play on their shiny 42" HD TV; they're someone who bought the theatrical releases individually, then the extended editions, then the double-disc release with both versions and another 2 hours of behind the scenes footage on each. *Then* they bought the blu-ray box set (on pre-order

the minute the release date was announced). They can tell you how Arwen was used to replace Glorfindel, why the scouring of the Shire and Tom Bombadil were left out, they know the date of Frodo's birthday (and the fact he shares it with Bilbo), and they can tell you of the importance to Tolkien of the tale of Beren and Luthien. They can tell you who the Argonath represent, and how they're related to Aragorn; they can describe to you the exact layout of every level of the city of Minas Tirith down to the last cubby hole, and they can do all this with a great sense of pride, despite the ultimate pointlessness of being in possession of such (largely) trivial knowledge.

While it is perfectly possible for someone to geek out over almost anything, it is fair to say that the overwhelming majority of nerdish leanings tend to list in the direction of science and technology – this is most obvious with things like computing, sci-fi, engineering, electronics, etc. but it also happily encapsulates fantasy novels, comic books, and other more seemingly esoteric fair. After all, when it comes to "sword and sorcery", what is a sword but a piece of technology? Think of how many geeks who fall in love with fantasy end up getting into massive arguments with people over the minutiae of specific weaponry, which races used it, what combat situations it was best in, how would one best equip an army with it … however you slice it (pun intended), it's about technology. And as for the sorcery part, well, what is magic if not applied science but with the equations and peer-review process left out? How often do we see wizards poring over dusty, faded scrolls filled with ancient knowledge to find the right spell, or mixing ingredients to make potions?

The top-shelf spaz-mag genre which has inspired and encouraged my own personal nerdgasms has always, as I'm sure you've already surmised, been the one dedicated to the subject of computing; ever since I've owned a computer I've been almost hell-bent on using them for any and every possible purpose, whether it was appropriate or not (I even met a future ex-fiancée using one, and this was back when there was barely an internet and those of us using it were treated with a great deal of suspicion by the general public). Since the age of ten I have crowbarred my computer into almost every task for which it was remotely possible that a role could be found for it, including maintaining a spreadsheet of the weights of our pet rats (complete with line graph showing changes over time) so that we could not only know *exactly* which ones should be getting fewer spoonfuls of Onken Bio-Pot cherry yoghurt, but also so that we had the cold, hard numbers to show them if they ever complained about the celery platter they'd been given whilst insisting that they were simply "big boned".

Despite the, occasionally violent, insistence of the varying genius minds responsible for creative childhood nicknames like "boffin", "brainbox", and "professor", I was never really the full-on science nerd they imagined me to be. It's true enough that computing is not just a fine example of science in action but also, undoubtedly, an entire branch of science all by itself, but I'm sure it was the nitty-gritty, test tubes and Bunsen burners end of the spectrum that they were thinking of specifically, and that was never entirely my thing. I loved chemistry, biology, and physics, sure (I took the latter to exam level and did ok), but I always felt more like a cheerleader for science, rather than one of the team and, like your traditional cheerleaders, I loved the game, understood the rules, and could explain them reasonably well to anyone, but I would always recommend you speak to the players if you want to know all the crucial details. Also, I'm quite good with a set of pom-poms and will happily sleep with the team if it allows me to bask in their reflected glory (although this might just be my thinking about "The Lovely" Professor Brian Cox here).

Since the whole "jocks" and "nerds" thing doesn't really exist in Britain (it's largely just "swotty kids" and "everyone else", and those who knew me growing up would undoubtedly attest to my belonging to the "swotty kids" camp rather than "everyone else"), and given everything that you've learned about me over the last few hundred words, it's fair to say that my initial claims to nerd-dom are very much supported by the available evidence (as is right and proper), and I say all of this with no small measure of pride. I have, in my formative years, been forced to run the gauntlet … or, at the very least, I've been forced to run like buggery from a gathering of the estate's finest paint-drinking, knuckle-dragging div-tards who, upon seeing a kid with glasses and an IQ that, unlike theirs, didn't put him on the same intellectual footing as a lobotomised gibbon, decided that the most appropriate course of action was to conduct their own scientific experiment into the elasticity of collisions between a child's stomach and several fists.

As I said, I wear my geek badge with pride, unlike a work colleague who refuses to ever acknowledge her nerdish attributes, instead choosing to defend herself with the fact that she's Indonesian (as if this somehow invalidates the argument). Sorry, Dee, it's got nothing to do with your place of birth – stereotyping a nation, even if it is your own, as a bunch of gadget-obsessed tech-nerds is not only a way of deflecting from the truth of the fact that you're a geek who clearly

grew up surrounded by other geeks, but it's also a little bit dodgy in a "pandering to a slightly racist view of Asians" sort of way. In any case, you should, like me (and many millions of others), stand up and be proud of your spoddy credentials, declare them openly, and pledge your love and support for your fellow geeks. We should none of us ever feel ashamed to put on our glasses, don our anoraks, grab our copies of "Advanced Dungeons and Dragons (2nd Edition) Player's Guide" and hold them aloft as a symbol of our unity in our obsessions. Why? Because, as I said right at the beginning, geeks pretty much built the world the rest of you live in.

That's right, every scientist you've ever heard of, and the countless others that you haven't, was a geek. Every disease you've been spared, every form of transport you've ridden, every life-saving invention that protected your safety, every house you've lived in, every meal you've eaten, every conversation you have ever had with someone who wasn't in the room, every modern convenience, every crucial necessity … for all of these things, and many thousands more like them, you owe your thanks to a nerd. In every nook, in every corner, in every conceivable facet of the industrialised world, somewhere, a geek has been driving the progress; somewhere behind every invention, every breakthrough, every quantum leap in human endeavour and the expansion of knowledge, there has been a (usually) solitary geek, eschewing social interaction until they can just get this thing they're working on finished, honestly, I'm nearly there, sweetheart, I promise I'll be along soon, I mean, I know I said that before, but it's only taken me twenty years of unwavering focus and devotion to the task at hand, a few more minutes won't hurt. Where's everybody gone?

Take, for instance, Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the world wide web (let's be clear, he didn't invent the *internet* – he came up with the hypertext protocol that took what was, at the time, little more than a network of interconnected hard-drives comprising untold millions of files and gave it a usable front end that transformed the way we live, work, communicate, and trade; that "http://" at the beginning of web addresses? You have Tim to thank for that). In his youth Tim Berners-Lee was a trainspotter, and learned all about electronics by dicking around with a model railway set. For those of you outside the UK who might not understand the implications of what I've just said, I should point out that if you ask someone here what the archetypal geek hobby was, trainspotting would almost always be right at the top of the list, and with bloody good reason; who else but a borderline obsessive, OCD-stricken über-nerd would spend *hours* sat at a train station (or railway sidings in the middle of nowhere), clutching a notepad and decked out in the traditional trainspotter uniform of an orange kagoul, writing down the stock numbers of trains as they go past?

Then there was Sir Isaac Newton. Most people know him as "the guy wot invented gravity", and if you are one of those people then I strongly urge you to wipe the drool from your chin, put down your copies of Richard Littlejohn's latest volume of pissed, pub-rant racism, and go back to school before you need someone to tie your shoelaces again. In addition to formulating the theory of gravitation, the laws of motion, and laying the groundwork for classical mechanics and optics, Newton invented calculus – most of us would shit a brick just trying to learn it, he fucking **invented** it before the age of 27. Not only that, but he had already, by that time, demonstrated that ordinary white light was composed of a spectrum of colours; at an age when most of us would still be struggling to drag ourselves out of bed, shake off a monstrous hangover, and rock up at work by 9am to do a day's graft, Newton was battling counterfeiters, trying to find hidden codes and meaning in the bible, and uncovering fundamental truths about the workings of the universe.

And what about Charles Darwin? Okay, I'll answer that for you because any theists reading might be answering, "Yeah, he's a stinking pagan atheist who created that disgusting satanic theory of EVILution which is, like, totally wrong and everything, despite what the overwhelming mountain of evidence proves". Darwin's geekiness, like his theory, is beyond debate, in fact his most famous work came about as a result of his obsessing over the differences he observed between species, particularly pigeons. In order that his ideas on natural selection might be taken seriously (even botanist Joseph Hooker, a close friend, said that "no one has the right to examine the origin of species who has not minutely described many"), he set about becoming an expert on barnacles. He spent *eight years*, cataloguing over a thousand different species (hundreds of which were not from his voyage but sent to him by mail from all over the world) until he was, unquestionably, the world authority on barnacles. There's not a geek alive who hasn't had an insane passion for collecting and cataloguing some thing or another.

At the end of the day, however, the one person who best represents the point I'm trying to make is Nikola Tesla. If you haven't seen The Oatmeal's comic for Tesla, you should go there right now; I find it impossible to agree more with their contention that he was the greatest geek who ever lived and, after reading more about his life and work, I'm reasonably confident you'd share that opinion too.
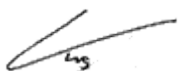
Tesla invented the AC electrical system that has powered your life, and the lives of everyone on this planet, for nearly a century; he built the first hydroelectric plant at Niagara Falls, discovered both the promise and the pitfalls of X-rays before anyone else, and his ideas made possible the work of Marconi, the invention of radar, and the transistor (without which you wouldn't be reading this and the modern world simply wouldn't be the way it is now). That he actively avoided dating and forming relationships in order to concentrate on his work should tell you how big of a geek this astonishing man was.

It's difficult to overstate just how much geeks have contributed towards the world we all occupy today. The case for geek pride couldn't be stronger when we have such a rich history of extraordinary people shaping our lives throughout the centuries, and when, still today, the planet is replete with nerds of every persuasion flying the flag and taking us all ever further into the unknown to reveal the wonders that await us. 2012 has been a fantastic year for those of us who sit at our computers, spodding out over things that most normal people think are "alright, I suppose, but could really do with some football, explosions, or tits on them if they want to appeal to a wider audience". What with the discovery of the Higgs-Boson (to a 99.996% probability) by the teams of particle smashers at CERN, the confirmation (also to a 99.996% probability) of the existence of the dark energy responsible for the accelerated expansion of the universe, and the landing of a complete science lab in the shape of the Curiosity rover on Mars, it's been wall-to-wall nerdgasms for the last 12 months.

At the beginning of this post I made reference to Neil Armstrong, a man who will eternally be a hero to me, and it's not simply because he was the first person from our planet to set foot on another world (someone had to be). It was because he was so completely modest about his monumental achievement, and never allowed his true self to be swallowed up by the hype and glamour, seemingly never buying into the media bullshit that had sprung up around him. In a rare public appearance in 2000, he said, "I am, and ever will be, a white-socks, pocket-protector, nerdy engineer"; **there** is my hero. You may be the sort of person who picked on the geeky kids at school, teased the swots and the brainboxes, and stole the lunchboxes of the class nerd, I don't know … if that was you, just remember this: not only did we build, and continue to shape, the world you live in, but we went to the **moon**, motherfuckers.

The truth is that we have already inherited this world – it's ours; we just let you live here. We gave you cars to drive, and medicines to keep you healthy; we gave you the internet for porn, and smartphones to keep your inane chatter from disrupting our work. Now, be good and let us get on with it …

To my fellow geeks I say this; stand up, wear your obsessions with pride, put a copy of "Revenge Of The Nerds" in the DVD player and crank up the volume. We've got a planet to save and a universe to explore …