GEEK WISDOM
GOES MAINSTREAM

HARD-CORE NERDS IMPART TEACHINGS OF 'STAR WARS' AND TOLKIEN.

BY ETHAN GILSDORF / CONTRIBUTOR

College, like many rites of passage in America, is all about wandering. So when the daughter of some friends headed off to college this fall, they told her before she embarked on her journey, "Not all those who wander are lost."

For those not in the know, that line comes from a poem in J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings." Good advice, and not just for hobbits.

The fact that geek culture has stormed the gates of Castle Mainstream is old news. Yet it's increasingly clear that nerdy passions – fantasy books, science-fiction movies, comic books, role-playing games – offer more than good times and camaraderie. They teach life lessons – guidance for a generation of nerds raised in a less conventional, DIY, "choose your own spiritual adventure" world, nerds who are now raising Geek Crop 2.0.

This reporter is one of them. In my 1970s upbringing, my post-hippie parents never took me to church. I tried Boy Scouts and 4-H, but these groups felt old-fashioned, too sincere. Then, in 1977, as a 10-year-old I saw "Star Wars." Suddenly, the idea that a "Force" surrounds and binds us seemed as plausible a theory for what glued the universe together as any religious teaching.

I began seeking moral counsel not from den mothers or teachers, but from pop culture priests like Yoda, Gandalf, and Gary Gygax (co-creator of Dungeons & Dragons). My friends and I recited "holy scripture" from "Monty Python" and "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." Seeking courage today, I still repeat Yoda's counsel: "Try not. Do, do. Or do not. There is no try."

And the Force is not only with me. "Every coach I know, in every sport there is, uses Yoda's 'There is no try.' It's the sports mantra," says Jim MacQuarrie, a blogger for wired .com's GeekDad.

"When I was a little kid, the two biggest books on my shelf were 'The Children's Bible' and 'D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths,' " says Stephen Segal, editor of "Geek Wisdom: The Sacred Teachings of Nerd Culture." Neither book felt to him more true or real than the other. "I fell in love with all their stories together, with the idea of fragile yet fiery humans struggling to contend with forces larger than themselves."

Later, when as an adult he pondered the light and dark sides of the Force, or scientific concepts of energy and entropy, "These things all made sense, because they all seemed to be describing the same universe, just in different imagery."

"Geek Wisdom" is one of several new books that collects the lore that hard-core nerds have been jabbering to each other for eons. Segal and his writers selected quotes from the movies "Ghostbusters," "Back to the Future," and "The Princess Bride," among others, to illustrate lessons for the self, relationships, and the universe. One pearl: When one finds oneself being drawn into a pointless fight, remember Matthew Broderick's words in the film "WarGames": "The only winning move is not to play."

Grant Morrison's "Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God From Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human" is another volume in the nerd-wisdom genre published this year. Even Deepak Chopra has gone geek: His latest book, "The Seven Spiritual Laws of Superheroes: Harnessing Our Power to Change the World," shows how Batman's struggle with his dark side leads to self-help.

What's going on here? Why might geek wisdom be so appealing, especially to the jaded? Scott Paeth, associate professor of religious studies at DePaul University in Chicago, teaches a class called "Hobbits, Hippogriffs, and Heroes: Fantasy in Literature and Society." He argues that even without a single, unifying cultural myth like Christianity, we still crave to fit our lives into meaningful narrative structures.

"People seek out other stories, even ones they don't believe to be true in a literal sense," Professor Paeth says, "in order to provide a framework for their common cultural experience, and to put their actions, their morality, and their suffering into some form of context."

That's the struggle charted by Peter Bebergal in his memoir "Too Much to Dream: A Psychedelic American Boyhood." The political and spiritual ideals of the 1960s worked for the hippies, he says, but they didn't inspire the "next generation of freaks."

"Many like myself turned to more fantastical narratives to fill the void," Mr. Bebergal says. Marvel Comics, Dungeons & Dragons, and Tolkien provided complex universes whose "sheer immensity of detail" felt real. "This is what happens to the richest kinds of myths, how they take on a quality of truth. Even Led Zeppelin sang about Mordor as if it [were a] place they had visited."

Bebergal says he inhabited this world in the 1970s and '80s. Role-playing games like D&D provided tools to act out these stories from Middle-earth and comics, even rock 'n' roll.

"Who doesn't want to be a hero?" says Shelly Mazzanoble, author of "Everything I Need to Know I Learned From Dungeons & Dragons." To be heroes, she says, we need mentors. That's why movies like "Lord of the Rings," "Star Wars," and "Harry Potter" feature bearded role models who help bumbling protagonists swing a sword. "Who wouldn't want to live next door to kindly old Gandalf? Wouldn't you just love visiting Grandpa Obi-wan at the senior center?" she asks.

Stories of derring-do and right and wrong have always been with us. But we don't tell tall tales around the hearth anymore. Instead, pop culture is our flickering campfire. Elyse Bartlett, a student at Emerson College in Boston and an avid gamer, grew up watching "Star Trek: The Next Generation." Each episode, the crew of the Enterprise grappled with the "Prime Directive," which forbids Starfleet officers from interfering with the social order of any planet.

"I've come to realize that those shows helped me learn more about my own beliefs and philosophies about life than any public school curriculum I ever went through," Ms. Bartlett says. "I can think of so many episodes ... that addressed questions like, What constitutes a 'life'? Why is life valuable? Who are we to decide if one life or culture is more valuable than another? Is it ever ethical to 'play God'?"

Speaking of play, Chris Hardwick's book "The Nerdist Way: How to Reach the Next Level (In Real Life)," published last month, shows how the mechanics of role-playing games (RPGs) can be harnessed for self-help. The chapter "RPG Your Life" uses gaming concepts that nerd personality-types understand – such as character attributes (the six classic ones: strength, dexterity, constitution, intelligence, wisdom, charisma), weapon inventories, and experience points – to combat anxiety, lethargy, and rejection.

"I like how gaming reminds me of my own moral compass," says Monique Bouchard, a graphic designer from Bangor, Maine.

"I'm just not the 'set fire to the orphanage' kind of girl, and I can't seem to play them in game either," she says. "My geekery has shown me that I really desire to be a hero, do the right thing, sacrifice for the weak, conquer the odds, save the helpless."

Of course, D&D – or "Star Wars" or Tolkien – isn't a religion (for most of us, anyway). The game provides a venue for empathy and magical thinking, but it doesn't take on big questions about the nature of the universe.

"It's certainly rich with religious themes and resonance," says James Wyatt, a former pastor in the United Methodist Church who works for game publisher Wizards of the Coasts. "If D&D happens to offer some good insights about how we ought to live in the world – never split the party, everyone contributes their unique strengths to the common cause of overcoming obstacles and vanquishing evil – then yeah, it has something in common with religion."

None of this is to suggest that traditional moral education needs to be fixed.

"Brainy nerds tend to throw out religion's baby with its admittedly filthy bath water," says Mr. Segal. That's why, he adds, his book "Geek Wisdom" "doesn't just look for the wisdom in geek culture, it also looks for the wisdom about the perils of geekdom that we need to be wary of: romanticizing: arrogance, isolation, condescension."

It's another way of saying that no matter how fantastical, geek culture ultimately mirrors life. The worlds of Tolkien, "Star Wars," and comics involve loss and sacrifice. In cooperative games like D&D, no one wins. Encountering strange new worlds and creatures means not violating the Prime Directive.

Live-action role-players may have the right idea, one geeky friend suggests. "Slow down, get to know the werewolf sitting next to you, and have actual conversations."

If all else fails, do as another friend instructs her children. When they are frustrated, instead of cursing, she tells them to channel Capt. James T. Kirk, and yell, at the top of their lungs, "KHAAAAAAAN!" ∎

> 'I like how gaming reminds me of my own moral compass.... My geekery has shown me that I really desire to be a hero, do the right thing, sacrifice for the weak, conquer the odds, save the helpless.'
>
> – Monique Bouchard, a graphic designer from Bangor, Maine

MARCELLUS HALL