

Geek Mystique

The word geek is not new to the American vernacular. In fact, it has been around for a century or more, but its usage seems to be exploding. A quick web survey of websites found 15 sites using the term “geek” within their URL. Within the same search I found six major product lines using the word geek in the naming of their products. There are board games, movies, clothing lines, and categories of geeks ranging from physics and math geeks to sports and art geeks.

It is possible for a person to read Geek Magazine, Geek Weekly, or Fashion Geek—the Book. You can watch “Beauty and the Geek” on television, you can buy geek wear on hats, shirts, and coats. I have even seen the words “Geek 4 Life” tattooed on a person’s arm, which seems to be a contradiction in lifestyles. Remember when it used to be the bad boy with the tattoo who picked on the poor, little, helpless, tattooless geek? The pop-culture acceptance of geekness has now blurred all those social categories. Face it, the term geek is far beyond cool and hip in the 21st century.

The word itself stems from early English and German dialects where it meant “fool.” The root still survives in Dutch and German dialects today. The more Western European and eventual American definition was originally used to describe circus performers who performed disgusting acts and side show novelties like biting the head off a chicken.

We are all much more familiar with the modern definition which is “a computer expert or enthusiast.” The term has been carried even further to now describe someone with super intellect and power. As we all know, it is now very chic to be a geek.

So how did the term geek outpace other terms and transform itself into the cool definition as it exists today? Why did other derogatory terms such as nerd and dweeb not make the same jump to social acceptance and then to status symbol? I will tell you why (and this is where I insert my opinion) but, it is an opinion with which I think you will agree. Geeks are cool because of the things they do which are exhibited everyday in software. They defend a nation. It can truthfully be said that the modern-day safety and defense of our nation rests, at least partially, on the shoulders of geeks. And that is one major reason why it is cool.

My personal opinion is our defense software engineering community is in personal possession of Super-Geeks; geeks that can do anything given the time to build it. It does not matter if they are computer scientists, electronic engineers, or some other derivative or hybrid of the two. They can do anything with software. I am completely and utterly impressed on a daily basis by the cool things our geeks do. The way they give new life to aging aircraft, the way they add new capabilities to previously listless systems, and the way they provide both physical and cyber security by the striking of a few keys on a keyboard.

I have entered the world of geekdom as a geek-geek, or in other words, I am geeky about geeks.

Just for fun, I began asking some of my co-workers if they considered themselves geeks, and if they welcomed the moniker. Here are two comments I received from some self-described geeks:

“I have been called a geek and I felt it was a compliment.”

“I like being called a geek because geeks have style. I do not like the term nerd, because I think nerds have no social skills.”

It appears there truly is a Geek Mystique and it is one of self-confidence, intellect, hipness, and to some degree—power. The geek shall inherit the earth, or from the looks of who is running things these days, they may already have.

Kasey Thompson
CROSSTALK Advisor