Geek nostalgia: The reflective and restorative defence of white male geek culture

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Abstract
During recent decades, geek culture has become increasingly visible, and the geek has left the cultural margins, becoming more popular than ever. At the same time, nostalgia has emerged as a central component of geek culture. Framed by a post-structural understanding of gender and race and drawing on cultural theorist Svetlana Boym’s distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia, this article explores how and why geeks nostalgically long for a time when they were largely marginalized. We combine readings of Swedish online geek podcasts and YouTube channels with ethnographic visits to geek conferences and pop-cultural “geek fairs,” such as Comic Con and SciFiWorld. We argue that geek nostalgia represents a clinging on to a “constitutive wound,” allowing the geek figure to mobilize masculine victimhood in ways that simultaneously underpin geek privilege and allow the geek to continue operating as a white male gatekeeper of geek culture.

Keywords
Geek culture, gender, masculinity, nostalgia, race

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During the last decades, representations of what it means to be a “geek” have shifted significantly. While conventional understandings of geeks as “mainly white, middle-class heterosexual (but desexualized) males, lacking in social and interpersonal skills and obsessed with arcane and specialist knowledges” are still around, geeks have increasingly been “brought back in from the margins” (Bell, 2013: 78). Lori Kendall (1999: 261) captured this development early, noting that the previously liminal masculine geek has gradually been “rehabilitated and partially incorporated into hegemonic masculinity.” This increasing status of the geek is particularly salient in relation to popular culture and the formation of geek identities online, where social media technologies have enabled geek fandoms to form communities around particular interests, while “Hollywood makes billions on sci-fi, hobbits and superheroes” (Tocci, 2009: iv). Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett (2017: 4) describe this as a “geek cultural revolution” that has turned the geek into a “cultural icon,” squarely positioned at the centre of popular culture. Others have gone so far as to suggest that we now live in “the age of the geek” (Lane, 2018).

Simultaneous with this relocation of the geek, nostalgia has emerged as an increasingly central component of geek culture. We see this online, in blogs such as The Nostalgia Nerd, and at fairs such as Comic Con and SciFiWorld, where “vintage toys” and old video games draw large crowds and where self-proclaimed nerds and geeks re-create models of their favourite spaceship from Star Wars, manifesting an intense engagement with childhood memories. We can also see it in the reboot/remake hysteria dominating both video games and the cinema and as a theme in geek popular culture products themselves, like Netflix’s Stranger Things, where geeky children play Dungeons and Dragons in the basement acting out an imaginary version of the 1980s American suburban childhood.

How can we understand such enactments of nostalgia? Why do geeks nostalgically long for a time when they were largely marginalized? Consistent with a post-structural framing of gender and race and drawing on cultural theorist Svetlana Boym’s distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia, this article will address these questions. Combining readings of Swedish geek podcasts and YouTube channels with ethnographic visits to geek conferences and pop-cultural “geek fairs,” such as Comic Con and SciFiWorld, the aim of the article is to explore the role of nostalgia in the continued genering and racialization of geek culture. Boym’s distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia is helpful to our project, but we will argue that it ultimately collapses in relation to a geek culture where the reflective and restorative harmonize rather than oppose each other.

**Research context: geek status and nostalgia**

Both “geekology” research and geek culture itself are permeated by debates on the differences between being a geek and a nerd and to what degree different geekdoms overlap (Bell, 2013:76f). For this article, we use geek and nerd synonymously, both because only nerd has a direct Swedish translation (“nörd”) and because the terms are often used interchangeably in practice. We use geek as a “holistic concept” (Tocci, 2009: 8) but agree with Michael Salter (2018: 251) that the historical connection to online technologies is important to recognize, especially today when “the influx of female and more diverse
users into social media, video gaming and other technology-related fields has made the masculinity-technology conflation upon which geek masculinity rests increasingly untenable.” The broadening of what it means to be a geek is also intrinsically connected to an increased commercialization and commodification of geek culture, manifested not only in the form of “mainstreamed” geek fairs that we visited for this study but also in how the “convergence culture industry” finds value in opening up geek culture to new and diverse audiences in order to exploit fan and geek engagement for capitalist purposes (Scott, 2019).

This simultaneous commercialization and diversification of geek culture and increasing status of geeks have led to tensions in the geek sphere. Joseph Reagle (2015: 2874) has shown how “the popularization of geekdom itself has caused a crisis, because the geekdom/mainstream boundary has become more porous.” Similarly, Christina Dunbar-Hester (2017: 199) has discussed how geek communities are struggling with handling the new status of a “formerly marginal and derided social identity,” and David Bell (2013: 79) has shown how “geekologists” see in geek masculinity “a complex negotiation of outsiderhood and privilege, even outsiderhood as privilege” (original emphasis). Approaching this from a fan studies perspective, Susan Scott has discussed the paradoxicality of such complex negotiations, noting that:

Ironically, those initiating the backlash against fangirls or striving to police “authentic” fan identity along gender lines are typically those who have gained the most power and privilege from geek culture’s movement from the margins to the mainstream. It is thus, paradoxically and overwhelmingly, white, cishet men who tend to decry the loss of fandom’s subcultural authenticity, even as they reap the demographic, industrial, authorial, and representational benefits of this loss. (Scott, 2019: 4)

To summarize, the geek status/marginality complex is conflicted, and it is not without friction that the geek moves from margin to centre. We contribute to this discussion through focusing on nostalgia within this process. Nostalgia’s centrality to contemporary geek culture has been recognized by Rares Moldovan (2017: 246), who has shown how geeks’ attachment to their cultural selection is both “fuelled by nostalgia” and “fiercely territorial.” Similarly, Carly Kocurek (2015: 181) analysed the video game arcade as a “masculine enclave” where nostalgia “seems to express a longing for an adolescent homosocial space and transposes it onto the arcade.” Geek nostalgia as a cultural trope has also been discussed in relation to its presence in pop-cultural products like Stranger things, with Tracey Mollet (2019: Conclusion) arguing that this show enacts a “conditional nostalgia” that “acknowledges the popularity of 1980s geek texts while also seeking to correct some of the problematic elements of the hegemony and hyper-masculinity common to these narratives” (para. 1). Mollet’s (2019: 1980s Nostalgia, Geek Culture and Masculinity) apparent optimism does not, however, preclude her from observing that currently geek nostalgia is fuelled by “a longing for the geek sphere’s restoration as the exclusive realm of hegemonic white masculinity” (para. 3). This resonates with Salter and Blodgett’s (2017) treatment of nostalgia in geek and computer game culture at large.

While nostalgia is salient in geek culture, it is of course not unique to it. What Katharina Niemeyer (2014: 1) has called “the current nostalgia boom” permeates many sectors of
society. Zygmunt Bauman (2017: 1) characterizes our current condition as “the age of nostalgia,” imbued by a retrotopian longing for days past, while Simon Reynolds (2011) speaks of Retromania to capture popular culture’s increasing addiction to its own past. Furthermore, Niemeyer and Keightley (2020: 1640f) discuss the emergence of an “(online) ‘nostalgia business’” that embodies “the commercial exploitation and commodification of the very nostalgia produced and articulated in online communities,” echoing Fredric Jameson’s (1991: 287) description of nostalgia as a way to “consume the past.” Boym (2001: 38) also discussed how the “global entertainment industry of nostalgia” exploits nostalgia, suggesting that we think of the “‘inculcation of nostalgia’ into merchandise as a marketing strategy that tricks consumers into missing what they haven’t lost.”

In this context, the current geek nostalgia wave can be considered merely an instantiation of a broader societal trend. Nonetheless, as noted above, there are distinguishing aspects of geek nostalgia that make it particularly intriguing. Research that focuses on nostalgia in relation to gender and race often suggests that it be understood as a response to a sense of status loss. Particularly, nostalgia is seen as a way for white men to handle such loss. For instance, current white right-wing populism has been described as fuelled by nostalgia over a “glorious” past (Smeekes et al., 2021: 90), when white middle-class privilege was unquestioned (Hübinette and Lundström, 2014; Menke and Wulf, 2021). Similarly, in relation to gender, nostalgia has been shown to be deeply implicated in masculinist opposition to feminism, turning backwards and celebrating a “simpler time” when women’s place was supposedly in the kitchen (e.g. Doan and Hodges, 1987). As such, explanations of both racialized and gendered nostalgia share the idea that nostalgia can be considered a response to a sense of status loss. Such explanatory models do not immediately fit geek nostalgia. Even if we were to read geek nostalgia as a response to geek culture becoming more mainstream and geek identity less exclusive, the “clinging on” to a position that used to be derided and stigmatized does not straightforwardly map onto an understanding of nostalgia as rooted in status loss and an idealization of a “glorious” past.

Finally, much research on the geek is anglophone (mostly North American). We therefore consider it valuable to provide an analysis of geek culture situated in another context (cf. Kazakova et al., 2018). While the Swedish setting is highly influenced by US pop culture, Sweden also has a relatively visible and “prominent” position in relation to geekiness and technology worldwide. It is sometimes recognized as a country of “early adopters” of new technology; it has internationally well-recognized video game studios and is sometimes described as being responsible for initiating the last role-playing game boom across the globe. Furthermore, there is a strong consensus around the value of gender equality in Sweden, and Sweden likes to think of itself as the most gender-equal and anti-racist country in the world, although critical researchers have pointed out that Sweden largely lacks a language for talking about race and is highly segregated, despite superficially holding values to the contrary (Hübinette and Lundström, 2014).

Theorizing whiteness, masculinity and nostalgia

While it is the role of nostalgia in the (continued) gendering and racialization of geek culture that the article focuses on (and not how “the geek” is gendered and racialized per se), a post-structural understanding of gender and race underpins the study. We conceive
of both whiteness and masculinity as performatively constituted in discourse. We share Ahmed’s (2007) and others’ view that whiteness often “goes unnoticed” (p. 156) and operates as “invisible and unmarked, as the absent centre against which others appear only as deviants” (p. 157). Furthermore, as whiteness can be understood as the “effect of repetition” (p. 159), it resembles how Judith Butler (1990) describes gender performativity, where gender identity is understood as the effect of the repeated citation of gendered norms. Building on this, we understand masculinity as a shifting configuration of gendered practice that can be “hybrid” (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) in combining both marginalized and hegemonic elements of masculinity. Importantly, for a configuration of masculinity to stay hegemonic, it must respond to societal shifts and “absorb” new conflicts and challenges. As Connell (2016: 303) formulates it: “Hegemony under construction, rather than achieved hegemony, is the key concept.” Thus, the degree to which the white male geek can establish or preserve a privileged position in geek culture has to do with how it responds to challenges and negotiates calls for transformation at the arrival of “others” (Ahmed, 2007: 162ff).

It is as part of such negotiations that we take an interest in geek nostalgia in this article. Following our post-structural framing, we approach nostalgia not as an inner feeling but more performatively, asking with Niemeyer (2014: 2) “what is nostalgia doing”? (emphasis in original). This is compatible with the general queer-phenomenological understanding of emotions as orientation devices that we submit to (Ahamed, 2014 [2004]). As such, we are not interested in the psychological aspects of nostalgia, what perhaps “triggers” nostalgia or why some enjoy indulging in it. Rather, we are interested in how nostalgia orients geek culture, and what this does, in a discursive sense. In particular, we employ Boym’s distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia as a heuristic for identifying the different and sometimes conflicting dynamics animating geek nostalgia. For Boym (2001: 13), restorative nostalgia captures a conservative/reactive nostalgia that, sometimes aggressively, sets out to defend truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia delineates a more playful, sometimes ironic form of nostalgia that is self-aware and knows that the object of its longing is illusive and sometimes fictive. She introduces these two concepts not as “absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing” (Boym, 2001: 41). She acknowledges that “the two might overlap in their frames of reference” but insists nonetheless that “they do not coincide in their narratives and plots of identity” (p. 49). As such, “they can use the same triggers of memory and symbols . . . but tell different stories about it” (p. 49). As she explains,

Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on nostos (home) and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in algia, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. The first category of nostalgics do not think of themselves as nostalgics, they believe that their project is about truth. (Boym, 2001: 41)

Reflective nostalgia recognizes itself as nostalgia, and in emphasizing shared longing, it does not shy away from recognizing the phantasmatic aspect of the lost home or time that it yearns for. For Boym (2001: xvi), such “romantic” nostalgia is not so problematic. Unreflective restorative nostalgia is, however, more problematic because it “tends to
confuse the actual home and the imaginary one.” It is obsessed with authenticity, identity and truth, as in yearning for an authentic, true past that can, and preferably should, be re-erected identically in the present. In this, restorative nostalgia can give rise to a “mix of nostalgia and politics [that] can be explosive” (Boym, 2007: 10). This can be seen in current populist right-wing politics (Menke and Wulf, 2021; Smeekes et al., 2021) and, as we will see below, marks a connection between geek masculinity and forms of radicalized right-wing white masculinity that make up parts of the toxic assemblage of online masculinities sometimes referred to as “the manosphere” (see Ging, 2019; Massanari, 2017; Salter and Blodgett, 2017).

**Studying geek culture: material, methodology and analytical focus**

Mostly online-based and hard to delimit, what we describe as “geek culture” in this article is partly an analytical construct. Nevertheless, geek culture has also become increasingly self-aware, delimiting and articulating itself more explicitly over the last decades. This self-awareness is displayed and underpinned by the way that geek culture documents and speaks about itself, for instance in podcasts like Nördigt [Nerdy/Geeky], one of the empirical sources for this study. This podcast started in 2012 and releases new episodes weekly. Listening to Nördigt has been a way to immerse ourselves in the popular culture dimensions of geek culture and to keep track of things going on in “the geek sphere.” We started to follow it also because of its inclusive focus on several aspects of geek popular culture and because it is publicly recognized by central geek culture agents such as Comic Con, being allowed to live record an annual “Comic Con episode” at Comic Con Stockholm. Members from the Nördigt panel also get to do official talks and interviews with geek celebrities invited to Comic Con Stockholm.

A lot of the content in Nördigt is focused on reviewing new TV series, video games, movies and sometimes comics. There is, however, also a lot of “meta-talk” about geekiness and how geeks respond to geek culture events like the release of a remake of a cult video game or movie, the casting of an actor of a certain race or gender for a particular role, the plans for a new role-playing game and other happenings and events that have triggered geek rage or blessings. We consider Nördigt episodes temporary condensations of and commentaries on geek culture by geeks for geeks. We also share Mikael Jakobsson’s (2011: Methodology) view that tapping into podcasts like these “provides a strong sense of immersion in the studied culture” for online ethnographers (para. 3). Concretely, we started following Nördigt at episode 267 in 2019 but have also listened to the first three episodes from 2012 to see how it introduced itself, taking rough notes and timestamps on themes discussed in roughly 130 episodes.

Complementing this podcast-mediated immersion in geek culture, this article also draws on ethnographic visits to Swedish geek cons, namely Comic Con Gothenburg 2019 (1 day), SciFiWorld Gothenburg 2020 (1 day), Comic Con Stockholm 2021 (3 days), SciFiWorld Malmö 2022 (1 day) and a shorter visit to a “geek flea market” outside Gothenburg in 2021. Both Comic Con and SciFiWorld are highly commercialized “geek fairs” where geeks and others can buy geek and popular culture-related merchandise, meet-and-greet movie and TV-series characters, buy signed posters, play board games,
practice *Star Wars* light sabre fighting, dance to K-pop, compete in cosplay and listen to talks and interviews with prominent “geek celebrities.” During these visits, the first author documented what transpired in connection to and at the events, the products being sold, the celebrity guests invited for interviews and autograph signings and so on. He also sat in on lectures, speeches and Q&As. We consider these fairs condensed physical manifestations of a geek culture that is otherwise mostly online and partly elusive. In comparison with the reviewing and commentating on geek media products and events found in *Nördigt*, visiting these cons allowed for a glimpse into geek culture as enacted and “lived” by both sellers/exhibitors and visitors.

Mirroring how the *Nördigt* podcast can be understood as an arena for geek culture to reflect on and document itself, these fairs are also “self-documenting” and involved in representing themselves online. In particular, during the first author’s visits to these fairs, he recurrently encountered the YouTube channel *Nostalgi & Nördkultur* [Nostalgia and Geek Culture]. This channel started in 2017 and has produced around 100 short videos reporting from geek-related cons and events. In these videos, we get to meet merchants selling comics, posters, vintage games or toys at cons and listen to interviews with ordinary visitors, cosplayers and geek culture “celebrities.” Having already recognized the centrality of nostalgia in contemporary geek culture through *Nördigt* and through physical visits to cons, we decided to include this channel in the study. Concretely, this has meant watching around 70 of their videos, covering *Comic Con Stockholm* 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2021, *Comic Con Göteborg* 2019, *SciFiWorld Stockholm* 2017, 2018 and 2019 and a few short documentaries and interviews.

**Analytic approach**

To generate this article’s empirical base, we relied on a dual logic of picking our sources carefully but letting geek culture “speak for itself” through them. This lends the study validity because the themes discussed follow “emically” from these sources’ internal logics. As described above, this is how we decided to focus on nostalgia. A limitation is that this has not allowed us to “force” participants to speak on topics chosen by us, such as race or gender. They do so anyway, but compared with nostalgia as such, direct talk of how race and gender connect to nostalgia is less common. Nevertheless, our approach has allowed us to “follow” the field, being open to what participants make important, while at the same time allowing us to reflect on what this means for the continued gendering and racialization of geek culture in a more analytical register.

We consider the study theoretically informed in Paul Willis and Mats Trondman’s (2000) sense, because an overarching interest in understanding gender and race patterns in geek culture framed our investigation from the start, and we have ultimately allowed a theoretical understanding of nostalgia to guide our analysis. Concretely, after deciding to focus on nostalgia, we went back to field notes and photography from the events already visited for targeted analysis of nostalgia. Similarly, we returned to the set of tags/short notes from listening to the roughly 130 episodes of *Nördigt* and retroactively transcribed and translated passages that touched upon geek nostalgia. The analysis was guided by Boym’s (2001) distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Explicit mentions of nostalgia were usually flagged as an indicator of reflective
nostalgia, regardless of whether nostalgia was “romanticized” or discussed in a more critical register. Less self-reflective talk and actions oriented towards preserving “authentic” geek identity or “protecting” geek culture from change or external attacks were instead read as indicators of restorative nostalgia. All coding was done manually across our datasets, allowing us to take the context of utterances into consideration throughout the coding process.

Results: geek nostalgia resolving tensions between marginality and status

As discussed above, it is becoming a well-rehearsed statement that we live in the age of the geek (Lane, 2018). This sentiment is mirrored throughout our data. For instance, in one of the early episodes of Nördigt, it is suggested that we are witnessing how the “geek paradise is exploding” (Ep 3, 156:45). Similarly, interviewed at SciFiWorld Stockholm 2018, the well-recognized Swedish geek-cultural icon Orvar Säfström suggests that “for those of us who’ve been around for a while, it’s of course a golden age to be a geek” (Nostalgi & Nördkultur, 2018c, 1:43), and, a year later, that “the geek is the new normal” (Nostalgi & Nördkultur, 2019b, 0:01). This “normalcy” is reflected in our visits to geek fairs. Both Comic Con and SciFiWorld admit thousands of visitors, including families with small children, teenagers and middle-aged men and women. While some wear cosplay and many self-identify as geeks in the videos we analysed, these fairs are highly commercialized events that are popular beyond exclusive geek “inner circles.”

Reflective nostalgia: orienting geek culture towards its masculine past

Recognizing that it is “a golden age to be a geek” does not, however, stop geeks from nostalgically longing for times past. In the Nördigt podcast, this is evident both in the members’ commentary on geek and popular culture and in how they describe their relationships to geeky things. Sometimes appreciative and sometimes more critical, they often return to how contemporary geek and popular culture is awash with remakes and reboots, and that we are experiencing a “wave of nostalgia” (Ep 352, 47:30). In one episode, reflecting on the commercial exploitation of geek nostalgia, they state: “Forget the click-economy, it is nostalgi-onomy now!” and “everything has to be milked for nostalgia now” (Ep 267, 8:15). In another, they conclude that “we really live in this rehash time” and that the obsession with remakes “is more extreme than ever” (Ep 315, 3:20). Furthermore, commenting on the highly successful Kickstarter campaign for funding the remake of the classic Swedish board game Drakborgen [Dungeon Quest], originally released in 1985: “One should NEVER doubt nostalgia . . . Nostalgia and nerds! [Laughter]” (Ep 296, 4:50).

This centrality of nostalgia to geek culture is no less salient at the cons and geek fairs we visited. Almost without exception, there is a retrogaming corner, where you can play 20- to 40-year-old video games. These are popular, and you must usually wait in line to get a chance to play. Furthermore, a recurrent exhibitor at the cons we visited is Nostalgibutiken [The Nostalgia Store], which, as the name signals, sells old games and other products to trigger your nostalgia. Several other vendors also sell vintage toys and
video games. For instance, at the geek flea market, one vendor was selling issues of *Nintendo Magazine* from the 1980s and 1990s.

Unsurprisingly, geek nostalgia is central to the *Nostalgi & Nördkultur* channel. In one video, we meet a seller of vintage toys who self-reflectively describes his obsession with old *Star Wars* toys as not really about *Star Wars*: “For me it’s a lot of nostalgia. I’m almost . . . I’m more of a nostalgic person than a Star Wars lover really. So for me, this is childhood . . .” (*Nostalgi & Nördkultur, 2019c, 03:43).

The above exemplifies the articulation of a largely self-aware, reflective form of nostalgia. As explicated by the *Star Wars* collector quoted last, his nostalgia is not so much about the actual objects being collected (“the home” in Boym’s terminology), but rather about the longing itself, manifested in identifying as a “nostalgic person.” Nevertheless, given how male-dominated geek culture has been historically, such reflective longing is not culturally innocent but instead orients geek culture towards a white and male-dominated past. As one of Sweden’s most well-recognized designers/writers of tabletop role-playing games and self-proclaimed professional nerd, Gabrielle de Bourg makes explicit in a *Nördigt* discussion of the recent role-playing game boom: “old role-playing books might have charm,” but they are also “sleazy” and “it is sometimes easier to count the female characters that do not wear chain mail bikinis.” She clarifies that it is largely men’s childhood memories that geek nostalgia is catering towards: “Let’s be real, . . . roleplaying was a boy’s hobby” (Ep 352, 47:30). Highlighting how current role-playing game publishers capitalize on nostalgia, she explains that this means that “middle aged men” today emerge as an important market. One of *Nördigt*’s panellists further qualifies in relation to race and summarizes: “What are you saying: White guys over 40?”, laughs, and continues by sharing that he can spend thousands of kroner on role-playing nostalgia books and concludes that obviously, “it is me that she is describing here.”

Similarly, in an interview with two middle-aged men dressed up as *Star Wars* X-Wing pilots visiting *SciFiWorld Stockholm 2019*, it becomes clear that the geek childhood they are recalling is heavily gendered. Having just emerged from a 75% scale build of an X-Wing Starfighter, they explain: “It was great, it’s a boy dream come true! Before *Star Wars* it was WWII and flying Spitfires that was the big thing, and I guess this is the space equivalent of a Spitfire” (*Nostalgi & Nördkultur, 2019a, 0:42). We can read this as an enactment of a “geeky” configuration of masculinity that harmonizes with previously hegemonic forms, and the men’s highlighting of the historic continuity between these as manifesting “hegemony under [re]construction” (Connell, 2016: 303).

The preoccupation with boys’ toys is also evident in exhibitors selling vintage toys. That such trade can be a way of “handing over” a masculine passion from father to son is evident in the following excerpt from an interview with one vintage toy seller at *SciFiWorld Stockholm 2019*:

We have a lot of affordable figures that children can buy and play with. Like He-Man figures: two for a hundred, Turtles three for a hundred, and so on.

Interviewer: So it’s both so that dad can get a collector’s item and the boy can get a toy too?

Oh yeah! (*Nostalgi & Nördkultur, 2019c, 0:42)
The masculine character of this passion is here marked by the interviewer who assumes that it is about passing a passion from father to son, and by the same seller in another interview, where he explains that he previously had to partially hide his collection from his female partner, who “did not know what he had in the office” (Nostalgi & Nördkultur, 2017a, 02:20). He explains that he and his son have been collecting Star Wars figures together since the son was born, further exemplifying the logic that nostalgia is about letting a self-defining passion be passed down from father to son. Similarly, comic illustrator Jonas Darnell, who has drawn the classic Swedish comic Herman Hedning for the last three decades, explains in an interview at Comic Con Stockholm 2018 that most people approaching him “have beards” and that “it is kind of hereditary, it’s fathers forcing their sons—and daughters actually—to read the comics” (Nostalgi & Nördkultur, 2018a, 0:44). The assumption that geek passion is nostalgically passed from father to son is here re-affirmed, but supplemented by the suggestion that it can be passed to daughters too, possibly reflecting the ongoing gender pluralization of geek culture. However, there is no sign of mothers passing on similar passions. Instead, most who approach Darnell “have beards.”

That such nostalgic catering towards middle-aged men’s childhood interests still dominates geek fairs such as Comic Con and SciFiWorld is also indicated when this pattern is broken. For example, the Nostalgi & Nördkultur interview with a woman selling My Little Pony at SciFiWorld Stockholm 2017 opens:

Hi! Here you stand in a pink corner, amidst all that is dark.

Ah, well, I think it’s quite nice to brighten up the fair a bit with a little pink and rainbows and stuff like that (Nostalgi & Nördkultur, 2017b, 00:10).

With Ahmed (2007: 156), we can read this as a feminine presence marking the arrival of “others” and interrupting what otherwise “goes unnoticed” at these fairs, namely a normative orientation towards men’s and young boys’ interests.

From the above, we conclude that the often commercially oriented, “romantic” and self-aware nostalgia discussed in this section is a form of nostalgia that orients geeks towards a time when geek culture was largely white and masculine. Such nostalgia over rosy childhood memories can be considered reflective in Boym’s sense because it is self-aware and highly oriented around a shared longing. It is sometimes explicit about geek culture’s white masculine past and thus at odds with more plural understandings of geek culture, but it is not paradoxical because it does not frame the period it cherishes in terms of suffering or marginalization. One could imagine geek culture being “selectively forgetful,” reflectively recalling only rosy, albeit gendered, childhood memories as a way of underpinning contemporary homosocial masculine community building through shared longing. As we will see in the next section, geek nostalgia is, however, not selectively forgetful in this sense.

Reflective and restorative: establishing past trauma as constitutive of geek identity

If white male nostalgia is conventionally understood as a response to a sense of status loss, and nostalgia generally as the cherishing of “a lost past in contradistinction from a
present deficient in some way” (Niemeyer and Keightley, 2020: 1641), one could imagine geek nostalgia being articulated in ways that cover-over how geeks have “gained . . . power and privilege from geek culture’s movement from the margins to the mainstream” (Scott, 2019: 4). In contrast, rather than avoiding the potential paradoxicality following from nostalgically longing for times when geeks suffered from less status, past suffering is often explicitly articulated when geeks reflect on geek culture’s current success. For instance, when one vintage toy seller at *SciFiWorld Stockholm 2019* is asked what he likes best with these fairs, he responds:

You can be so damn nerdy! And it’s amazing, today anyone can be a geek, when we were young it was more that you didn’t dare to have these special interests openly. Today, it’s not even special interests, with social media and fairs like this, it’s a completely accepted culture, which is damn fine. (Nostalgi & Nördkultur, 2019c, 04:00)

This seller is well aware that geek interests were connected to suffering in the past and considers it “damn fine” that this is not the case anymore. More ambivalently, Nils Gulliksson, the illustrator and graphic designer who drew the Swedish tabletop role-playing game classic *Drakar & Demoner* [*Dragons & Demons*], reflects on “the old times”:

It was a good time, fun time. The thing that was most different then from today, was the acceptance that Sci-Fi and Fantasy absolutely did not have back then. It was very obscure and . . . uh, people looked very strangely at what you were doing. And it was, it was good and bad. It was good in the way that you just had to go to London, go into a comic shop like Forbidden Planet or something, and soak up that culture, and then you were about four years ahead of Sweden. (Nostalgi & Nördkultur, 2018b, 00:58)

In this quote, the previously marginal status of geek culture is neither denied nor rejected, it is instead nostalgically cherished. The quote highlights how the “obscurity” and non-acceptance of geek interests at the time contributed to a sense of exclusivity. Such valuing of exclusivity can be understood as a general “trouble with communities,” illustrating that they are “never as inclusive as intended” (Shaw, 2017: 153). Given the white male connotations of the historically “derided” geek position in the margins that geeks long for, we also suggest that this logic resonates with David Bell’s (2013: 79) description of geek masculinity as reliant on a notion of “outsiderhood as privilege” (see also Reagle, 2015 on the gendered dynamics of such “geek policing”). That a certain amount of suffering and outsider status can be seen as constitutive of a “true” geek identity is also identified by Säfström:

To some extent, the geek is the new normal. After all, we are the adults, the parents, those who sit in newspaper editorial offices and have television programs. And should our children want to revolt in some way, they will have to go golfing and listen to Tomas Ledin [mainstream popular Swedish singer/songwriter]. But we [geeks] still feel left out, at heart, we are outsiders who have a very special commonality as always, it is here that one feels that it is “we”. The others do not understand, and so on. (Nostalgi & Nördkultur, 2019b, 0:00)

Säfström here acknowledges the geek’s newfound status but then separates the geek from the mainstream through explaining that the core of geek identity is still a form of
suffering. He thereby connects authentic geekdom to suffering and marginalization in a way that, in its preoccupation with authenticity and delimiting what defines genuine geek identity, can be considered restorative in Boym’s sense.

The recalling of such suffering roots geek identity in a form of revanchism because it is against the backdrop of such suffering that the current status of the geek is understood (Massanari, 2017). We have seen above how the current status of geeks is contrasted with a time when “you didn’t dare to have these special interests openly.” While such stigmatization is no longer prevalent, having experienced it is still restoratively invoked as constitutive of true geek identity. In our material, the centrality of such revanchism in the articulation and legitimation of geeks’ newfound status is further evidenced when critiqued. In one Nördigt episode, the Swedish fantasy/horror author Sara Bergmark Elfgren is interviewed and suggests that the tendency for geek culture to gratefully embrace every new superhero movie is commercially exploited and problematic:

Sara: I can feel that this collective geek joy that exploded when the genre started to take over cinema, television etc. Well, now people can calm down a bit. After all, they are grown-ups. I mean really, how long can you ride this nostalgia wave? And there’s a huge company behind it. It’s Disney. That is Marvel, Star Wars. It is not a dear friend who sits around handing out little presents. But I still feel that . . . in geek culture, there is a gratitude towards that, and this has been going on for so long now, that we should be so happy that we live in this magical age.

Nördigt panellist: But isn’t that in light of the fact that we who were born in the early “80s, it was total f*ing darkness, we had like, Willow and Star Wars?

Sara: Well, I know, but that was quite a while ago. (Nördigt Ep 276, 71:25)

In this dialogue, the pleasure geeks today take in popular culture catering to their desires is understood as reflecting a previous suffering and marginalization of such interests. Bergmark Elfgren does not object to this understanding but suggests that such suffering should be irrelevant to the present.

This revenge trope is arguably as old as geek culture itself, captured in the 1984 film Revenge of the nerds and other “‘revenge fantasies’ of Silicon Valley founders” (Massanari, 2017: 332). Tocci (2009: 4) described how such sentiments of revenge underpin the new “coolness of the geek” but stand in conflict with an “unwillingness to abandon the authenticity marked by alienation.” Connecting such anxiety to the pluralization of geek culture, Reagle (2015: 2874) similarly discussed how it underpins a form of geek triumphalism rooted in the fear that “newcomers arrive from the mainstream without having paid the same dues as the ‘old-timers’”. Following Tocci and Reagle, we can thus understand the nostalgic orienting towards earlier suffering as mobilized to justify current geek status, because such status has been achieved despite previous suffering and marginalization from the mainstream. In its orientation towards authenticity and “having actually been there,” we consider it restorative, but through its self-awareness of representing a “nostalgia wave,” it is also reflective.

Hence, the above illustrates the operation of a form of “hybrid nostalgia,” combining reflective and restorative elements. The nostalgia mobilized here is reflective in the sense
that it knows that it is backward-looking and celebrative of “the good old days.” In simultaneously describing this period as “f*ing darkness,” the material highlights a tension around nostalgically mourning a place in the margins. The nostalgia articulated here simultaneously fits Boym’s description of restorative nostalgia, in being highly occupied with authenticity and articulating “true” geekiness (embodied in having experienced marginalization). That such restorative nostalgia serves to protect a specifically white male geek culture will become more evident in the next section, where we focus on the more unambiguously restorative aspects of geek nostalgia.

Restorative nostalgia: aggressively defending white male geek culture

If we understand geek nostalgia as animated by the revanchist notion that geek culture is successful today despite previous resistance from “the mainstream” and that cultural products that geeks love used to be derided, it is perhaps not surprising that anything that can today be understood as an attack against these cherished objects meets fierce opposition. In our data, the racialized and gendered dimensions of this defensive logic are repeatedly articulated. For instance, the combined misogyny and racism that faced Kelly Marie Tran, the first Asian-American actress cast in a lead role in Star Wars, is discussed in Nördigt and described as an expression of “toxic fandom” (Ep 319, 1:34:20). Similar themes are addressed in the commentary relating to the Ghostbusters franchise and to the release of the superhero movies Captain Marvel and Battle Angel Alita. In a Nördigt interview, Swedish comic book illustrator Karl Johnsson discussed how the almost simultaneous release of these two movies was turned into an ideological battleground in the geek sphere:

Nördigt panellist 1: Because it was so weird . . . there was such hatred against the character Captain Marvel on the internet, so people went out of their minds, and thought that you should go see Alita Battle Angel instead, for incel reasons! . . . This was one of the reasons that it went so damn good at the box office.

Nördigt panellist 2: Because people protest saw it, . . . so that it would beat Captain Marvel? . . .

Karl: I think the whole incel thing between the two films was very much about the perception that Captain Marvel had an agenda, a political agenda. Whereas Alita felt more kind of honest, “boyish” like . . . —a female heroine should be kind of “hot.” (Nördigt Ep 289, 66:05)

Both Alita and Captain Marvel are old comic book heroes. As Johnsson suggests, the effort to mobilize geeks to go see Alita can be considered the response to a perceived threat from “the mainstream” to alter such characters and make them more “politically correct.” In comparison with the reflective/romantic nostalgia described above, the nostalgia underpinning such reactions is more restorative and aggressive, celebrating Alita as more “honest” and authentic in its boyishness. The reference to incels (involuntary celibates) also marks the overlap between factions of geek culture and other masculinities of “the manosphere” that mobilize tropes of victimhood (Ging, 2019).
Similar rage met the 2016 reboot of the *Ghostbusters* franchise (Blodgett and Salter, 2018). This movie follows an all-female group of four and did not go down well in parts of the geek sphere. Instead, animated by what William Proctor (2017: 1106) calls totemic nostalgia, fans mobilized to defend the original movie from “being colonized by an invading text.” This “debacle,” as they call it in Nördigt, resulted in the studio producing another remake, commented on in Nördigt:

Nördigt panellist 1: It has some funny twists in the first 40 minutes, then unfortunately they just go [Nördigt panellist 3, interrupting: “The nostalgia train”] “ah, now we’re doing the plot from the first movie, and we’re just capitalizing on nostalgia.”

Nördigt panellist 2: It feels like, after the whole debacle and everything that was with this re-boot, somebody just kind of pulled the big handbrake and just “Now we’re not doing anything that could be perceived as offensive, by ANYONE here.”

Nördigt panellist 1: “Now we make a questionnaire and send it out, to the fans, and then EVERYTHING they come back with, we do, we put it in.” . . . And then, spoiler, spoiler, then all the old ghostbusters show up at the end, and then the movie shifts focus to them. (Nördigt Ep 367, 47:30)

This series of events encapsulates what we have sought to illuminate in this section: An 1980s cult movie with an all-male lead cast is remade but updated in regard to representation, which causes geeks to restoratively rage and the studio to try again, releasing a new movie that ignores the 2016 version and ultimately replicates the original, even using its old cast, ultimately rendering the movie a pure dwelling in nostalgia. In the failure to accept any difference between the original movie and its nostalgic remake, this gives evidence to how Boym (2001: xvi) describes restorative nostalgia as confusing the imaginary home of nostalgia with the actual home. In contrast to reflective nostalgia, which knows the difference between identity and resemblance and dwells in the longing itself (Boym, 2001: 50), this, we would argue, is best understood as the operation of restorative nostalgia working to re-establish direct links between past and present.

There are numerous more examples of this logic playing out in the geek sphere. For instance, centring race more than gender, the release of *The Little Mermaid* met restoratively nostalgic reactions turning often blatantly racist from geeks, raging against the casting of a black actress in the lead role (Nördigt Ep 378, 31:20). Similar reactions, highlighting both race and gender, surfaced after the release of a new *He-Man* show, summarized by one Nördigt panellist as: “There was a lot of those, incels, white offended men complaining that it was a woman in the lead role” (Nördigt Ep NOTY2021, 1:30:10). A last example is how someone made a male-only cut of the Star Wars movie *The Last Jedi*, with female characters removed. This should be seen in light of a series of events where fans of *Star Wars* have acted highly toxically in relation to the release of new products in the franchise. As commented on in Nördigt: “No one hates Star Wars as much as Star Wars fans” (Ep 319, 1:34:40). For our analysis, this quote perfectly captures how aggressively nostalgic reactionary sentiments underpin some white male geek fandoms and burst out as soon as anyone touches what the fans hold sacred. Combined, the above
also points to important overlaps between the restoratively nostalgic corners of geek culture and other parts of the online “manosphere” (Ging, 2019).

**Conclusion: geek nostalgia reproducing white male geek culture**

As discussed, geek culture is well aware of its newfound status. Still, it is highly nostalgic. Analytically, we have seen how this nostalgia operates in reflective, reflective-restorative and restorative registers. First, we documented the operation of a romantic, reflective and sometimes commercially exploited form of nostalgia where geeks know that they are nostalgic and engage with rosy childhood memories in a playful manner. This recalls a time when geek culture was dominated by white men, which is only sometimes reflected on explicitly, possibly because it is commercially beneficial to downplay this. Second, we demonstrated how such nostalgia recalls a time that geeks recognize as marked by suffering and marginalization. Displaying both reflective and restorative elements, such nostalgia positions current geek status as a revenge against marginalization and contributes to instilling suffering and marginalization as constitutive of geek identity. Third, we discussed the white male character of such aggressive sentiments evident in the more unambiguously restorative form of nostalgia described last. Recalling our final examples, producing an all-male cut of a *Star Wars* movie or protesting a black mermaid can be considered restoratively nostalgic insofar as such practices very concretely try to conjure up a geek culture that concerns only white men. Or, to quote Boym (2001: 41), try to “rebuild the lost home” that never was.

It can be argued that reflective, self-distanced, playful forms of nostalgia are more accepting of a potential pluralization of geek culture than restorative forms. For instance, in an essay on retrogaming and the feminist potential of engaging with 8-bit pixel art, Rachel Simone Weil (2016) has argued that nostalgia can be mobilized for “recreating, recuperating, and reimagining the past” in feminist terms (penultimate para). Nevertheless, we would argue that while Boym’s distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia has been heuristically useful in allowing us to provide an analysis of the different shapes that geek nostalgia takes and recognize geek nostalgia even when it does not name itself, it ultimately collapses in our case. This is because the playful, “romantic,” self-distanced nostalgia so common in mainstream geek culture harmonizes so well with the restorative form of nostalgia discussed last. So, while our findings are in line with Boym’s (2001: 49) assertion that reflective and restorative nostalgia might overlap in what “triggers of memory and symbols” they use, her insistence that they “ultimately tell different stories about it” loses its relevance. Even if the reflective form of nostalgia we describe is self-aware and knows that it dwells on a time that will never return, it fetishizes the same objects and contributes to restoratively orienting geek culture towards a highly gendered past. As such, the romantically nostalgic rosy attachment to precious 1980s childhood memories does not stand out in our analysis as innocent at all. Instead, such nostalgia feeds into a semi-aggressive revanchism or “triumphalism” (Reagle, 2018) that connects the historical suffering of the marginalized geek to its contemporary success. It gatekeeps current geek status from those who have, supposedly, not suffered,
that is all the “late-comers” to geek culture who are not white cis hetero men (Scott, 2019). As such, our analysis is in line with Salter and Blodgett’s (2017: vi) argument that “geek identity has taken assumptions of marginalization as foundational.” We would add that geek nostalgia is integral to this process and operates as a form of phantasmatic resolution to the tension between this perceived marginalization and geeks’ newfound status. In other words, geek nostalgia symbolically reconciles potential conflicts between status and marginalization, or mainstreamness and marginality documented by Bell (2013), Dunbar-Hester (2017), Scott (2019) and others. As such, geek nostalgia is not so much about idealizing the past but rather represents a clinging on to a “constitutive wound,” allowing the geek figure to harness contemporary societal currents working to reconfigure hegemonic masculinity through operationalizing “tropes of victimhood” (Trott, 2022: 1430). Such geekiness upholds its hegemony through embodying a form of under-privileged, marginalized masculinity, while simultaneously reserving geek privilege for white men who have suffered, ultimately allowing these to continue to “reap the demographic, industrial, authorial, and representational benefits . . . of geek cultures movement from the margins to the mainstream” (Scott, 2019: 4).

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