The Roanoke Times

[Roanoke.com](http://www.roanoke.com)

Thursday, July 06, 2006

It's good to be a geek

The term is no longer synonymous with "nerd." Today, a true geek is proud to have "a set of skills that are highly prized in our society."

By Aline Mendelsohn | The Orlando Sentinel

The word itself is versatile. It can be a noun (as in, I'm a geek), an adjective (I'm geeky), a verb form (I'm geeking out), a superlative (She is geekier, but I am the geekiest).

He had a pocket protector, taped-up glasses and wimp written all over him.

Onscreen, he was stuffed into a locker. Or simply mocked for laughs, as was Steve Urkel, the bespectacled, suspender-wearing character on the TV show "Family Matters."

That was the old geek.

The new geek can recover your lost files within minutes when your laptop crashes. The new geek probably has a patent pending for his or her latest invention. The new geek is cool.

It's a good time to be a geek.

Numerous businesses capitalize on the word, from the computer-support company Geek Squad to the technology store [geeks.com (http://geeks.com)](http://geeks.com) . Some stores specialize in geek apparel and novelty items such as Geek Awareness bracelets. Seriously.

Even Hollywood is coming around. Movies once relegated geeks to stereotypes or portrayed geek-to-god transformations, but now they honor the geek. Witness the success of "Napoleon Dynamite" and "The 40-Year-Old Virgin," which celebrate the geek without attempting to change him.

Geeks have become more accepted because technology has become an integral aspect of life, says John Gallaugher, a Boston College information systems professor.

"We're all geeks now," Gallaugher says.

And the geekiest among us embrace that moniker with pride.

In its original form, geek, as defined by Merriam Webster, was a carnival freak that might bite the head off a live chicken or snake. An alternate definition from the dictionary: a smart person who faces disapproval.

However, a poster on the interactive slang reference site Urban Dictionary notes that geek has a positive connotation among groups of geeks -- but the word should not be confused with the derogatory "nerd."

Further, the Urban Dictionary contributor states, "That most software geeks now easily earn twice as much as the average laborer just sweetens their defiant embrace of the term."

The word itself is versatile. It can be a noun (as in, I'm a geek), an adjective (I'm geeky), a verb form (I'm geeking out), a superlative (She is geekier, but I am the geekiest). It can even denote a school of thought, or as some might see it, a state of bliss: geekdom.

A geek could be someone with an affinity for technology or a keen interest in a hobby, such as computers, weather, amateur radio.

But they're no longer apologetic about it. Emily Mohundro, a recent Winter Park, Fla., high school graduate and member of a local robotics team, admits to participating in heated arguments about how wheels move. Mohundro, 18, says being a geek means "loving what I do."

The negative connotation of the word began to disappear with the rise of the Internet in the '90s, Gallaugher says.

The success of Bill Gates, perhaps the world's most prominent geek, gave way to geek pride.

Now, "geek" is synonymous with "a set of skills that are highly prized in our society," says Mike Thompson, 26, a computer systems geek -- that is, engineer -- for Lockheed Martin in Orlando, Fla.

One need only look at the Forbes 400 list of the wealthiest people in America to see the payoff, Gallaugher says. It's topped by such names as computer/software magnates Gates, Paul Allen, Lawrence Ellison and Michael Dell.

"Geek, geek, geek, geek," Gallaugher says, checking off the names.

Kevin Inscoe, a Web site manager and administrator from Deltona, Fla., considers himself "a geek of all trades." His interests range from amateur radio to weather and electronics, and, of course, computers. Inscoe is one of the region's premier geeks, having assembled an online gathering place for his ilk called Central Florida Geeks (cfgeeks.org (http://cfgeeks.org)). On the site's message board, participants chat about electronics, trends and sometimes news items that "we think are sufficiently geeky." Inscoe encourages closet geeks to be true to themselves. "Geek people are the inventors, the creators," Inscoe says. "They fix things, keep things going."

Geeks have long thrived during college, a time for "the geek to come in from the wilderness into the safe and welcoming world," Gallaugher says.

Today, in this age of MySpace.com (http://MySpace.com) and text-messaging, if college-age students express fear of computers, "they're a pariah," he said. "Everybody would sort of turn their heads and raise their eyebrows and say, 'Who is this stone-age cretin?' "

On campuses, "Texting [text messaging] is as important as working a keg pump a few years ago would be. It's a critical part of the life of young people."

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