

In Defence of Media 2.0, or How to Stop Worrying and Learn to Love Being a Geek

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I am a geek. I always have been. According to the physicist, Professor Brian Cox, being a geek is “being able to be serially obsessed with things”. As far back as I can remember, I’ve always been a serial obsessive. First it was comics and computer games. Then it was *Warhammer* and the wrestling. Then I discovered cinema and *Moviedrome* and late-night seasons of Alfred Hitchcock and Jackie Chan movies on Channel Four. Thanks to Capital Gold and *HipHopConnection*, I became obsessed with *Dion & the Belmonts* and *The Beach Boys* and then later *De La Soul* and *GangStarr*. I spent my university grant in second-hand record shops hunting out not just every album by each member of *The Wu-Tang Clan*, but the DVD re-issues of every Hong Kong kung-fu flick sampled in each of their albums as well. Like most geeks, I am both a completist and a compiler of the most esoteric arcana surrounding any of my current, and often concurrent, obsessions. And like most geeks, I pepper my normal conversation with phrases like “esoteric arcana”. Actually, “*it improves your vocabulary*” was always the stock defense of the Latymer School Role-Playing Club whenever anyone suggested that pretending to be a hob-goblin might be a pointless waste of your lunchtime.

Being a geek is a creative act. It’s not just about collecting things and facts, although that is a lot of what it’s about. Like many of my friends, I didn’t just collect comics, although I did collect all kinds of comics: superhero comics; war comics; cowboy comics; american comics; british comics; japanese comics; comics about giant robots destroying cities and in later years, underground comics about giant robots with existential angst. But as well as collecting comics I’ve always created my own comics. When I was twelve I created a self-drawn mini-series based on a thinly disguised *Judge Dredd* rip-off, making copies of each issue by hand and stapling them together to pass around to friends. When I got older I made my own photocopied ‘zines which I used to pass around the same friends and eventually I got a couple of my comic-strips into a small-press magazine. It’s not quite the same as being snapped up by Marvel or Fantagraphics, but it felt pretty cool at the time.

In the same way my film-geekery has always extended to making movies as well as obsessively watching them. Or at least, attempting to make them. While still at school, a group of friends and I got together to create our own Sergio Leone inspired Western filmed in North London. Imagine something like *A Fistful of Dollars* meets *Son of Rambow*. Between us we had a fairly sizeable camcorder; some stetsons and replica six-shooters we managed to borrow from a local Wild West re-enactment society; a video-mixer I’d bought on sale in Dixons and the *BFI Encyclopedia of the Western* which I’d been given for Christmas the year before. I wrote the script on my Amiga home-computer, made copies of it on a dot-matrix printer and we held auditions, read-throughs and rehearsals at each others houses. I am pretty sure we

filmed (out-of-sequence) the climactic shoot-out in a friend's back-garden, but apart from that, I have no memory of ever finishing any of the rest of the film, let alone producing a watchable final cut of our suburban-spaghetti western.

This unfinished attempt at channeling the spirit of Ennio Morricone in Enfield was not my first or last attempt at amateur film-making. Before it I'd made *Adam & Joe*-style stop-motion animations using *Star Wars* figures in miniature home-made costumes I used to hand-sew myself. A few years later while avoiding writing-up my PhD thesis, some friends and I made a mockumentary about a useless street magician that went by the working title of *Magic Boots*. Now that did get finished. Sort of. We held auditions above a pub in East London with proper, wannabe-actors and filmed it on location in Wood Green with a mini-DV camera I'd got cheap from a friend whose dad worked for JVC. I finished a rough-cut, this time edited on my brother's PC but, just like the Western before it, I couldn't tell you where the tapes of *Magic Boots* are now. As well as trying our hand at film-making, my brother and I built a light-box to draw cell-animations and we taught ourselves how to create digital art on hooky software we downloaded on a dial-up modem. Ten years before *Red Dead Redemption* we had a go at creating an online Wild-West first-person-shooter which got as far as creating some Mexican bandit skins and a couple of badly rendered attempts at a repeating lever-action rifle (It should come as no surprise that I am a multi-platform Western geek!) !

Being a "serial obsessive" does not simply mean that I've started many more creative projects than I've ever finished, although that is, sadly, true. What it really means is that since the 1980s I have been an active participant in any number of different fan communities, some of them face-to-face networks of friends and fellow aficionados, some are "imagined communities" enabled through subscribing to and imaginatively "buying into" particular magazines or web forums, all the while creating and sharing my own re-mixes and mash-ups of my favourite media texts: from making my own *Star Wars* board game to play with friends after school to recording and passing round my own mix-tapes with other hip-hop fans at university. As Henry Jenkins argues, "participatory fan cultures" have been around long before the web, but the advent of the internet has just served to expand those communities and extend the opportunities they have to exchange knowledge, skills and ideas across limitless geographical boundaries. I was certainly part of "affinity groups" growing up, but the members all tended to live within a short bus ride from my house. To be honest, there weren't that many other Burning Spear fans in my school but now thanks to Twitter, I can start up a *#roots&culture* conversation with potentially anyone who's logged in and anyone who wants to hunt down those Wu-Tang references can now find online discographies complete with filmic cross-references and links to downloadable video. On the internet, someone else has always got their first.

The ability of young people to connect and communicate with others who share their interests and obsessions is beyond anything I knew as a teenager and I am still less than twenty years older than my students, however, the "everyday creativity" that they engage in, is no different from the stuff I was doing at the same age. What has

changed is the opportunities they enjoy to find a real audience to watch, listen to and read the stuff they are creating everyday. We made *Magic Boots* in 2001, before *YouTube*, before *Facebook* and before “google” was a verb. We used sites like *AltaVista* and *Lycos* to research production techniques, downloading plans and tutorials for how to build our own steadicam rig. But there was no way at the time we could have uploaded our footage and built an online audience. And if there was, we didn’t know about it. Yet, I now teach students who have been made *YouTube* affiliates and are earning cash money every time their videos are watched by kids in Kettering and California. I’ve never checked, but ten years after we had the idea, I like to imagine that *YouTube* is probably full of lo-fi comedies about crap conjurers and one or two of them might even have fairly impressive viewing figures.

More and more young people can and do make their own stuff now, and distribute that stuff online. Not only that, but more and more people have access to exactly the same means of production that were once the preserve of media institutions and the creative industries. Let me give just one example. When I did my Media Studies A-Level, you could have been asked to create a double-page spread from a local newspaper. This might involve writing a fictional news-story and mocking-up a page layout or it might involve going out and doing local reportage and photo-journalism and producing your simulated newspaper on desk-top-publishing software. Nowadays, a typical print media production brief might ask students to create a double-page spread from an imaginary music magazine. Students will normally begin by researching the generic conventions of music magazines; carry out research on their target audience; create page mock-ups experimenting with typography and layout; as well as numerous other stages of production from lighting a photo-shoot to subbing their copy for typos. While the process may well *simulate* all the elements required in real-world publishing, what the students will ultimately have produced – however technically polished or conventionally appropriate – is certainly *not* a ‘real’ music magazine, although the best work may well *look* like an extract *from* a ‘real’ magazine. And yet, the web is full of start-ups and services like *NewspaperClub* and *Blurb* which allow you to produce your very own magazines, newspapers and books printed on real paper and ink at reasonable and accessible rates. Why waste time making a copy of an imaginary newspaper, when you can write, print and then sell the real thing on your own Facebook page or PayPal store?

Media 2.0 with its attendant digital technologies and social media platforms is enabling students to become real producers of real products that they can now share online with real audiences. They can make their own webcomics, music videos, short films, computer games, iPhone apps, t-shirts, ‘zines, the list is limitless. The internet has enabled anyone to become, if not an expert in any subject, then a self-motivated autodidact at least, digging down through the wikipedia articles, blog posts, message boards and YouTube videos to find out about, and be a part of, what ever niche interest floats their individual boat. In many ways, my job as a Media teacher is much more about facilitating and guiding students through this maze of ideas, information

and new ways of belonging than it is about warning them of the dangers of NewsCorp or Syco.

In fact, digital creativity has important implications for every aspect of our own practice as Media teachers. The Media teacher can no longer operate within a purely theoretical, textual environment without sufficient attention to digital production, consumption and culture. The simple reason for this is that there *is* no longer any textual meaning, culture or activity to be critiqued outside of the interventions of digital worlds. The days when it might seem feasible – even desirable by some – to make distinctions between practical work and theory, between classroom teacher and computer technician, between critical evaluation and creative expression are no longer tenable in an age of user-generated content, visual methods and cultural convergence.

In other words, Media teachers need to get their geek on. I agree with the actor Simon Pegg, who argues that geek has been “reclaimed” in recent years. It used to be an insult, now “it just means you’re into your stuff. That you’re proud of what you love, and you’re happy to know a lot about it ... it’s about being enthusiastic. It’s a liberation.” We need to do the same for Media Studies. As David Gauntlett continues to argue, we need to liberate ourselves and our students from outmoded models of communication that refuse to acknowledge the connective power of everyday creativity and its transformative potential. It’s about developing creative skills, experiences and knowledge through play, through practice and through taking a punt on an idea even if it doesn’t work out the way you thought it might. A bit like *Magic Boots*.

References

Alice Bell, 2010, “Who’s the Geek?”, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2010/oct/28/geek-nerd-calendar>