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“Dick in a Box”: Hypermasculine Heroism in Geek TV and Film

A teenager accelerates the stolen car down a desert road, music blasting. We hear sirens and see the cops chasing him even as he speeds towards a cliff. As the car goes over, the young man—James Tiberius Kirk—jumps away from certain death and just makes it to the ledge.

This is the introduction of a classic alpha-male character in J.J. Abram’s 2009 reboot of *Star Trek*, one of the two most iconic science fiction series in geek culture. Kirk is the perfect example of a geek-approved hero: an unknowable, all-knowing badass. As William Shatner’s classic Captain Kirk says in the opening quote, his type of hero is powerful, able to cheat death, celebrate his victory, and reflect upon his own actions, and, occasionally, hubris. He’s continuously successful in his pursuit of women, regardless of their planet of origin, and rarely has committed relationships or serious emotional entanglements. Captain James T. Kirk originated as the womanizing, occasionally rebellious leader on the original *Star Trek*, a show that Ferguson et al. (1997) note was credited with critiquing stereotypes, race and class while remaining entirely traditional in its depiction of gender: “the boundaries that separate racial and class identities, and sometimes species identities as well, were frequently de-neutralized. But conventional gender identity went unchallenged: men were men, and women were women ... strength, reason and autonomy were reserved for males.” While *Star Trek* has gone through many generations since then, some things remain constant, as the iconic machoism of the 2009 Kirk reminds us. By examining Kirk and his contemporaries, we can develop a compelling portrait of the geek hero and the nature of his masculinity.

Kirk's indestructibility in the face of death-defying scenarios is not unusual. Although many storylines put their heroes within rather perilous straits, the reader can rely upon the fact that they will make it out again alive, if a little bruised. They embody every desirable trait and their negative aspects are often shallow or easily mediated by the remaining cast. This means that the heroes are stronger, wiser, faster and altogether just better. Even their weaknesses can't hold them back and in many cases are the actual source of their strength. From Superman's well-known weakness to shards of his former planet to the Doctor's alien nature and intellect, geek heroes embody and define desirable masculine traits. They are above and beyond our current abilities, but with the superficial weaknesses they are made approachable, open to connection with normal humans. Many geek heroes have transcended their cult media roots to achieve mainstream recognition as cultural icons of masculinity and heroism, most notably Superman himself. Weltzien (2005) notes how Superman can convey epic male heroism through the mere act of removing his suit:

the pose Superman is most famous for—establishing a kind of Superman iconography—shows him ripping off his shirt, revealing the triangular “S” on the hero suit, instead of a hairy chest that one would see were he not Superman. This is *the* icon of performing masculinity by the changing of dress.

It is no coincidence that Superman's “real” suit is usually found underneath the male power suit, suggesting the raw masculinity and heroism that waits below the crisp fixings of more bureaucratic and civilized power.

With their masculinity and heroism constantly on display, the most iconic of these heroes are humanized through juxtaposition with their compatriots. The audience cannot enter the hero's mind and truly understand how he works, but through the gaze of the supporting characters who know him we can sometimes get a perspective on his thoughts. Very often the hero within these stories is not the character the audience is meant to identify with: that role falls to the secondary, supporting cast. We can view the hero and stand in awe of his deeds and power alongside Rose Tyler, Deanna Troi or Commissioner Gordon, but we are never capable of seeing him beyond the idyllic glow that the secondary characters impart. The secondary cast is an important part of the story, providing a consumer stand-in for interacting with the hero and displaying the proper types of desires we should have when faced with him. Nowhere is this clearer than with Kirk and his crew, which includes his unemotional foil, the Vulcan Spock, with whom he

shares a relationship so intense that Kirk/Spock fanfiction became quickly known as one of the definitive examples of a "slash" pairing.

The *Star Trek* universe is one of the most progressive in mainstream science fiction and thus may seem like an odd choice to introduce a discussion of stereotypical and over-the-top masculinity. Certainly, as the universe has expanded, the complexity of character portrayals has correspondingly risen. *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001) has an interesting example of how the gendering of desires and traits are treated by science fiction. Although there are a number of interesting characters within the series, two have similar starting points for their emotional development over the course of the series: Lieutenant Commander Tuvok and Seven of Nine. Tuvok is a Vulcan and second officer of *Voyager*. He embodies many of the traits of the Vulcan species as laid out by earlier series and is extremely logical and non-emotional, arguing for the most rational course of action against the more hot-headed human members of the crew. Seven of Nine is a member of the Borg Collective that *Voyager* saved and helped to de-assimilate. Seven begins her time on the ship acting as a very Borg-like entity: mechanical, non-emotional, cold and logical. Despite different starting points, both characters have similar emotional ranges and interests at the beginning of their story arcs. However, during their development they begin to differ greatly. Tuvok goes through numerous experiences and interactions that support his desire for control of his emotions and reactions. Although he learns how to better connect to the more emotional human species, the fundamental aspects of his Vulcan nature are not challenged. When he experiences the challenge of the sudden onset of Pon farr, the Vulcan mating urge, the crew attempts to support his needs and help him overcome the "emotional difficulty" that he is experiencing (McNeill 2000). His inherent Vulcan nature is validated as being good.

Seven of Nine develops along a very contrasting character path. Although her life began as a human, she was assimilated into the Borg Collective at a young age and displays most of the mental traits of a cybernetic species. After her initial introduction, she is pushed very strongly by members of the crew, the Doctor and Captain Janeway in particular, to develop her more human traits. Her arc could be categorized as a "mulatta" narrative, which often serve to reinforce social hierarchies: "by showing women of mixed race who cannot find a place in society, mulatta narratives reify the importance of racial distinctions, even as the figure of the mulatta herself acknowledges the arbitrariness and social construction of race" (Roberts 2000). Of course, Seven of Nine is played by blonde actress/model Jeri Ryan, complicating the construction of her identity and the desirability of her as an object. During

story arcs that focus on developing her character there is a strong thematic trait of teaching her how to accept emotions, softness and human frailty. In the latter seasons of the show, Seven is tasked with fostering a group of children rescued from the Borg and must develop her nurturing maternal instincts despite personally disliking the task and suggesting several times that there are crew members more fit for the duty. Unlike Tuvok, Seven's Borg nature is not validated by members of the crew. Her development requires that she take on my acceptable female traits and characteristics to grow as a person. Although some of this could be ascribed to Seven's original birth as a human, the character herself recognizes and identifies more as a member of the Borg, although an individual rather than collective. She knows her human birth name but decides to retain her Borg designation and will willingly identify herself as a Borg when interacting with characters who are not members of the Voyager crew. Due to the gendering of psychological traits, it is important that Seven be distanced from the more masculine emotions that the Borg typically display. While it is only natural that Tuvok, as a prime example of Vulcan masculinity, keep his logical, emotionless nature, Seven, as a woman and character offering a great deal of heteronormative sex appeal, must be distanced from it and taught to embrace the essentialist feminine nature.

To the audience, heroes are the central focus of the story and their interpersonal relationships are the engine that powers the story's action. The secondary cast is developed to highlight the uniqueness of the hero, motivate them to action and reflect upon their triumphs. In order to fill this role properly, the secondary cast is often more identifiable, with very human qualities meant to highlight the exceptionalism of the main character. They also do not often get development beyond their relationship with the main character or what is necessary to drive a particular story arc. The hero must be unknowable but relatable; women must be both desirable and available. So, in the end, we have shallow supporters who serve to provide the hero with relationships that show parts of their personality without the identification or knowledge that would be provided by a first-person viewpoint. Television and film are particularly prominent mediums for this type of hypermasculine hero, who we often associate with genre films such as the macho action movies of the 1980s. However, the more geek-oriented spaces of science fiction, fantasy and comic adaptations hold their own archetypes of this same machismo glorification at the expense of internal development and meaningful relationships, particularly with the women who at best hold secondary roles in the same franchises.

Hero-worship and aspirational hypermasculine role models abound in geek-friendly popular culture. This chapter will examine the construction of male heroism that dominates modern media tagged as geek-oriented, with attention to science fiction. We will expose the silence of women in these same franchises, as characters such as Amy Pond, River Song and Clara Oswald are defined by their relationships with the male main character and exist only to serve his story. Doctor Who, Indiana Jones, Tony Stark, Sherlock and other intellectual yet action-ready figures build on familiar archetypes while epitomizing the dominance of a masculine space to such an extent that fan blogger RoachPatrol (2014) labeled the Doctor as "a predatory dick in a box." This label, which evokes the sexual positioning of these characters, serves as a reminder that while geek heroes often forgo the traditional trappings of action movie masculinity, they still perform a cisgendered, heteronormative sexuality. From these heroes, we will draw a working definition of geek masculinity, with special attention to the outsider status they frequently display.

Defining Hypermasculinity

Within media broadly and science fiction specifically, there is often little range or depth in depictions of masculinity. The 1980s action hero comes to mind as a caricature of an ideal: Susan Jeffords suggests that Reagan is responsible for a particularly American masculinity on display in movies such as *Rambo* (Feitshans and Kotcheff 1982), *Lethal Weapon* (Donner and Silver 1987), and *Top Gun* (Simpson et al. 1986; Jeffords 1994). Although slight traits may vary, by looking at the shared characteristics between different stories and media it is possible to identify trends in defining what it means to be a man and how one acts out that role properly. This pattern of gendered behavior and presentation is threaded through many video games, comics, movies, and television. For those who consume these media, the presented models act as an identifying trait: to be like them is to be a man in an analogous way. Despite the fact that people do not unquestioningly follow the behavior they see within their media, the repeated lack of variation in geek manhood creates a stale cultural well from which people draw comparisons for themselves and their actions. Many people do identify areas of overlap or deviation between themselves and a character show. A favorite activity on social networking sites like Facebook include brief quizzes to "Find out which character of *The Big Bang Theory*/*Firefly*/*Star Trek* you are!" While the audience may not be mindless consumers of the mediated identi-

ties presented to them, there is a pattern of self-identification with at least specific aspects of the presented identities.

In many cases, the types of masculinity on display as acceptable for geeky men or on display within geeky media is reductionist in its handling of the complexity of identity. Although it has improved, the masculine ideal in much of science fiction has been defined as directly oppositional to the feminine. To be a male is to not be a female. This still leaves a large amount of variation of acceptable activities and interests, but they must be watched carefully to avoid areas of overlap between the groups. Although oppositional identities are not uncommon, they are often overly reductionist and restrictive in how behavior is labelled as acceptable or unacceptable. There needs to be a firm boundary between identities for them to continue in the oppositional format. If there is blurring or overlap between these boundaries it becomes almost impossible to plausibly define one identity from another. This form of constructing masculine identity as presented in geek media today is often labeled with the term hypermasculine.

Hypermasculinity has recently been drawn from the field of psychology by cultural scholars hoping to better understand the gender interactions within various social spheres. This term was originally coined to describe the exaggeration of masculine cultural stereotypes within subcultures (Parrot and Zeichner 2008). It can apply to an overemphasis upon masculine-gendered physical traits and/or behavioral patterns, particularly dismissal or hostility towards feminine displays (Mosher and Sirkin 1984; Mosher and Anderson 1986; Parrot and Zeichner 2003). Hypermasculinity and the systems which construct it rely upon clearly defined gender roles with strong opposing characteristics. For there to be a clear definition of masculinity, and personal execution thereof, the traits which identify male and female must be strictly defined and bounded. These traits become mutually exclusive and all encompassing. Since to be defined as a man under these roles means excluding every possible part of the feminine, little room for variation or alternative presentations of gender is available. Ambiguity is to be avoided at all costs since being unable to be clearly defined as either masculine or feminine breaks the system of traits.

Typically, analysis of hypermasculine characteristics can be broken into two general groupings. The first is the identification of masculine physical traits and acts. The second is behavioral, emotional, and thought patterns. Both groups are essentialist in their identification, relying upon concepts of innate manhood or masculine identity. Embodying these traits is displaying manhood while lacking them is a loss of manhood. For many heroes, this essentialist division plays out as an interesting tug of war between the needs

of a story-driven media and the limitations of masculinity as depicted within that media, limiting the variation of characteristics that may be embodied by the cast while still allowing for a recognizable individuality.

A physical hypermasculine presentation focuses upon clearly identifying and emphasizing those traits that separate the cultural concept of man from woman. As the media feeds off from its own presentation these traits often become overemphasized to make the degree of masculinity held by a character stand out against the cultural background. This is particularly true for those that the story identifies as the hero or main character. They must be seen by the audience as being inherently more than the other men present within the story or those from other comparable stories. From simple visual standpoint, this concentration of traits can often be exaggerated to the point of parody, as in the overly muscled bodies drawn by well-known comic artists such as Rob Liefeld (Fig. 2.1).

Those physical traits identified as belonging to men are played up to make the character seem superhuman. They are taller, stronger, more powerfully muscled, lacking in softness or curves, and just physically larger than those around them. But in a media, like comics, where superhuman physiques are rather common, this can be taken to the extreme. From the bulging of muscles, some of which don't exist, to the squareness of the jawline, to the relative size of the chest and shoulders, Liefeld's Captain America has all the individual pieces of a unique specimen of manhood, but much like Dr. Frankenstein's creation their assembled whole is monstrous. Captain America has possessed some of these traits since his origin comics in the 1940s: as Jason Dittmer (2009) notes in his analysis of the first issues of *Captain America*,

The degree to which his chiseled masculinity permeates the comic book cannot be overstated. Women of all walks of life (at least, of all those portrayed in the comic book—white, generally middle to upper class) find him attractive, including actresses and female secret agents. Captain America's physicality imbues his representation of the nation as a particularly masculine one.

But in this more modern image, he has been pushed so far into the extreme that he isn't entirely recognizable as human. Although this picture is often used to mock the abilities of the artist, it does represent an idea of what the physicality of manhood should be, if only in the most extreme conclusion. There is no feasible way that this figure could be confused with that of a woman.



Fig. 2.1 Cover of *Captain America* Vol 2#6 (Leifeld 1997). Cover Image: Marvel Comics

Yet this physical extremism is only one form of hypermasculine identity performance, and it is in fact the subtler aspects of hypermasculine construction that are strong forces in geek culture. We will examine how psychic hypermasculine ideals are also used heavily within the world of geek

media, although they are sometimes more difficult to pinpoint since they aren't often as visually recognizable. For these, manhood is an emotionless state. The best men are cold, calculating, and highly logical, as with Kirk's foil Spock. They rarely let moods get the better of them and if they engage in any emotional display they should be angry, occasionally brooding. The blogger Jen Dziura (2012) observes the effect this type of portrayal has on popular culture expectations, as the emotional range that men are often allowed to engage in is often very limited as the expression of feelings gets typed as feminine. This requires parsing and limiting what becomes defined as emotion or emotional in a way that excludes those states often experienced and outwardly projected by men, as Dziura parodies:

This is incorrect. Anger? EMOTION. Hate? EMOTION. Resorting to violence? EMOTIONAL OUTBURST. An irrational need to be correct when all the evidence is against you? Pretty sure that's an emotion. Resorting to shouting really loudly when you don't like the other person's point of view? That's called 'being too emotional to engage in a rational discussion. (ibid.)

Due to the construction of masculinity, these items cannot be emotions and more so are desirable traits. For heroes like Spock, Sherlock Holmes, Mal Reynolds, and the Doctor, their inability to give into the weakness of emotions is what makes them great. It often is the key item that allows them to defeat the villain of the week or story arc. And when they must make some display of emotion it typically falls within narrow boundaries and can be "rationally derived" as the only acceptable consequence of what it is happening around them. Although the media presentation of hypermasculine ideals is obvious and often seen as being over the top, this cyclic strengthening makes hiding the less obvious and distorted presentations easier and less likely to receive active examination or criticism. Engagement in media that portrays this extreme type of hypermasculine action has often been linked to a form of expectation shifting (Scharer 2004; Cohn and Zeichner 2006). It is seen that these stimuli and their implications affect individuals well beyond the period to which they are exposed, setting a higher "baseline" for response in general (Reidy et al. 2009). In general, this connection between player and presentation is seen as desirable. As Anjun Anhuit (2014) says,

Performing masculinity requires the rejection of the socially accepted opposite: femininity. If we accept the observation that mainstream games are devices for male gamers to perform masculinity, then they need to be devoid of emotions (except anger maybe), they need to be sexist, they need to be

misogynist, they need to be transphobic and homophobic ... and the individual gamer needs to be those things as well.

Geek media can often reinforce hypermasculine stereotypes, despite the continued tension of geek “masculinity” as defined in opposition to athletic masculine norms (Dill and Thill 2007; Taylor 2012). The appearance of characters, their actions, and their perceived role within the media’s society have all been addressed as problematic areas in the development of players’ masculine identities (Kirkland 2009; Yao et al. 2010). Duke Nukem, a classical figure within the history of gaming, represents this problematic approach to framing masculinity as well as the issues that occur when this type of masculine character is shown as being the player’s default character and point of view.

Hypermasculine underpinning within the media positions women into background roles in a man’s heroic quest. They exist to admire and define the degree of the main hero’s masculinity and act as the reward for the hero’s actions, either as a damsel to be rescued or simply an admiring audience for the hero’s actions. This subconscious narrative of establishing male geeks as the heroes of their own community requires the establishment of villains and sets up the community’s shared ego to be vulnerable. Not only must women and feminine presentations be rejected as a potential hero or member of geekdom, but so must any ambiguous presentation, even in otherwise very masculine characters. In this community, the simple acknowledgement of any non-conforming individual is a direct attack upon all of geek culture, setting up a battlefield upon which “no retreat, no surrender” is the default. Although all feminine-coded items are rejected within a hypermasculine culture, those that transgress traditionally proscribed gender roles often elicit the highest levels of aggressive response (Parrott and Zeichner 2008).

This focus on hypermasculinity has several negative outcomes for the formation of a modern subculture that fosters healthy mental standards for its members. Although women are often the targets of abuse in these subcultures, the men that emulate or surround themselves with these messages also suffer from the impossible standards and inherent emotional disconnect that they foster. Studies of subcultures particularly grounded in masculine ideals taken to these extremes tend to demonstrate certain characteristics:

Masculine subcultures with high rates of group rape share a core set of social norms, values, and practices. According to O’Sullivan (1998), these include: (a) women being viewed as a threatening “other”; (b) heterosexual sex without intimacy (men who are tender with women are ridiculed as “pussy-whipped”);

(c) pervasive homophobia; (d) a sense of entitlement due to their group prestige; (e) cooperation combined with competition, especially competition to perform risky acts; (f) cultural practices of misogyny, such as songs and jokes glorifying sexual violence; (g) sharing of sexuality, for example through mandatory reporting of sexual experiences and through voyeurism, or watching each other have sex; and (h) hazing as a common practice. (Franklin 2004)

We will further explore some of these consequences as demonstrated in geek culture: however, we can also understand these hypermasculine subcultures as on display within geek-targeted works and genres themselves. Geek heroes often construct certain subcultures, or social communities, around themselves. These are demonstrated through the relationships between heroes and the secondary cast. Some of the most obvious consequences can be seen in the idealizing of sex without intimacy (as in Kirk’s many conquests) and in continual practices of misogyny and the isolation of women as other from social “in-groups” in geek spaces. We will examine the expression of these types of heroism through several shows currently dominating geek fandom, and we will revisit the theme of this type of hero throughout this book as we address hypermasculinity more broadly as a transmedia phenomenon.

Modern Manhood: Celebrating the Hypermasculine

Now my Doctor, I’ve seen whole armies turn and run away. And he’d just swagger off back to his Tardis and open the doors with a snap of his fingers. The Doctor in the Tardis. Next stop, everywhere. —River Song (Lyn 2008)

The Doctor, titular protagonist of the long-running sci-fi show *Doctor Who*, is both a literal and figurative alien. He represents an advanced race called the Time Lords, who have mastery over the flow of time and events within history due to their technology and culture. While the Doctor has a fascination with the human race, he often comes across as being distinctly separate from humanity. One of the unique features of the Doctor’s species is an ability to regenerate after taking lethal physical damage. This regeneration imbues the Doctor with a new physical form, set of habits, expressions, and interests. The new Doctor also takes a new set of human companions who will accompany him on his travels through space and time. The companions are always presented in a way to offset the characteristics of the Doctor in some way. If the Doctor is older and world weary, they represent youth and

hope for the future. If the Doctor is silly and avoidant of real consequences, they serve to ground him and make him see his actions through to the end. Throughout much of science fiction this cast configuration is repeated. The male hero is surrounded by those who serve to balance them while still supporting their heroic aspects of character. Rose Tyler serves in this humanizing role quite well within the series. As Rose and The Doctor grow close, a love blossoms between them, which serves to strongly show the characteristics of the Doctor as an alien and a hero. Throughout the course of their relationship Rose serves to cause the Doctor to feel new emotions, from the awe of her ability to absorb the core of the TARDIS to the sorrow at her limited lifespan:

The Doctor: I don't age. I regenerate. But humans decay; you wither and you die. Imagine watching that happen to someone that you—[breaks off]

Rose: What, Doctor?

The Doctor: You can spend the rest of your life with me, but I can't spend the rest of mine with you. I have to live on. Alone. That's the curse of the Time Lords. (Hawes 2006)

No human's longevity can match the average Time Lord's lifespan and we do not have the technology to experience the universe in the same way that they do. But through the Doctor's interactions with his human companions and loves, we can feel a connection to that kind of life that allows for the audience to bond with the story and characters. We can hope to find a Doctor for ourselves that will elevate our lives out of the ordinary and humdrum.

This style of character development fits closely with the cycle of the hero outlined in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell (1949). The hero's journey is a solitary one by necessity. Although they encounter many during their progress, few stay with them throughout the full venture. They arrive within the story when the hero needs to grow, advance, or be challenged, and they leave when the hero no longer needs that source of development. One of the key points Campbell raises is that the hero always returns to their starting point, changed, unable to slip back into the life they had before. For characters like the Doctor, that life literally belongs to someone else. It helps as a way of perpetuating the drama of the story by allowing this cycle to continue in perpetuity. By changing who the Doctor is, we change how he needs to develop and can successfully send him out on another hero's journey at the start of each regeneration.

Doctor Who is one of the longest-running science fiction shows of all time, and it plays a vital role in British culture as a children's show. However, its influence is much broader than that, particularly thanks to its revitalization in 2005 by the BBC with showrunner Russel T. Davies. The rebooted show owes much to the transition of fans to authors: as Matt Hills (2010) notes, in *Doctor Who*, "fandom is not just an audience identity: *Doctor Who*'s fans have officially taken over the running of the show." As the original show aired between 1963 and 1989, it is unsurprising that the new show skews to an older audience that demographically correlates with showrunners and fans who grew up during and after that era. Correspondingly, the Doctor himself has changed and become a more directly hypermasculine and aggressive figure. Within more recent seasons, the character of the Doctor has taken on a more sinister aspect. Although still largely presented within any episode as a jovial, goofy, or harmless person, the lore of the Doctor presented by villains or supporting cast is that of an all-powerful, vengeful demon. Even to the Doctor's main love interest, River Song, acknowledges his stance within the larger galactic community in this section's opening quote. The Doctor projects this power through his interactions with others, and that is really set up as being part of what is attractive about him, the danger. Although the Doctor doesn't engage in violence within the view of the camera there are many stories shared by secondary cast where he decimates his enemies. This view of the Doctor aligns closely with the classic presentation of the hero within modern media. The stories about the Doctor shared within the individual episodes sound more akin to Rambo's blood rage than a congenial British chap.

The companions in many geek media also serve to highlight the unique nature of the hero. Through building his story, they underline the aspects of the hero that simply do not fit with normal human life. Lando Calrissian has many similar qualities to Han Solo, but his responsibilities keep him from filling the same hero status as Solo (Kershner 1980). He must contend with the requirements of running a city during wartime and having to put the needs of many people above his own desires. Lando's choice to betray the crew of the Millennium Falcon for rather utilitarian reasons shows off Han Solo and Luke Skywalker's more heroic qualities. Because they are the heroes of the story line they are not tied down by the regular connections and obligations and can make their decisions based upon what they feel is best instead of being forced to assess the tradeoffs of living in a complex world. Similarly, the connection between the Doctor and Rose and the human qualities this exposes makes many of the Doctor's decisions stand out as harsher and more alien to the human mindset. Because we can see that he is a caring individual who has

both shame and pride in his race and a long history of interaction with others in the universe, the Doctor's choices can come across as more monstrous. From actively capturing and sealing away his entire civilization to allowing Amy Pond to be captured and experimented with during a season, we can see the alien thought patterns and behaviors that simply do not align with the more human characteristics that he displays. With the controversial 2017 casting announcement placing a woman in the shoes of the Doctor, it is possible these patterns will change as new gendered expectations are brought to the role.

Beyond a stunted emotional range, hypermasculine identification of characters also limits the interests that are acceptable for men in the media. Within the cult classic *Firefly* (2002–2003), three of the male leads are good examples of how variety in interests is capped. Jayne displays the most stereotypically masculine interests, liking guns, booze, and looking at women. Mal is focused on fighting, his pride and honor, and being the hero or leader of those around him. Simon is interested in medicine, displaying his intelligence, and acting as a protector for his sister. All three characters' interests are embodied in the gendered expectations of what men are naturally drawn towards. Beyond a strong focus on heterosexual desire among the male members of the cast, each is seen as being unable to separate their interests from their inherent identification as men. Mal can't help but pick a fight about the Brown Coats in a bar because that's just who he is as a man (Whedon 2002). Simon can't help but squash others' intellectual inputs in a conversation because to know more than others is important to his manhood. Jayne is Jayne, because, really, it's Jayne. The potential exceptions to this are Shepard Book, a peaceful religious preacher who in the early series is more focused on keeping the other characters from coming to blows than typically masculine pastimes, and Hoban 'Wash' Washburne, the pilot and husband of First Officer Zoe. Shepard Book is portrayed as seeming to embody more feminized traits and interests at the series start, but as the story of the show is developed his background shows a history of gendered actions and violence which would make even Jayne feel proud. Even at the end of the series, Book represents a natural leader and hero, fighting off invading forces at his commune and managing to survive long enough to give the crew of the *Serenity* vital information. Shepard Book embodies the toughness, wisdom, and vitality of an ideal man. Wash, on the other hand, loves to fly, still plays with toys, and adores his wife. Overall, he is presented as an amazing pilot, but his character is developed entirely in relation to his marriage. He demonstrates the value of a devoted man, but is often shown as being weaker and lesser psychologically than the unattached male cast members. Much like Book, Wash's moment of masculine triumph, successfully pulling off a very dangerous and technical

landing, occurs directly before his death (Whedon 2005). Wash manages to get the rest of the crew to relative safety at the expense of his life. Both deaths are emotional moments within the series and serve to drive the remaining cast forward, motivating them towards the final conflict with stronger convictions because of the sacrifices. While these presentations add interesting diversity to the masculinities of the cast, it is very apparent that they also receive the harshest punishments. The deviations of Wash and Book from the traditional masculinities needs to be dealt with harshly by ultimately ending the characters for plot devices that drive the development of the more traditionally masculine members of the crew.

In *Firefly*, the women central characters are offered some freedom and feminine spheres are critiqued, but Christine Rowley (2007) notes that:

the utopian and dystopian representations of gender relations in F/S [Firefly/Serenity] focus on changes in and to feminine identities, leaving masculinities unchallenged ... likewise, the concept of the (female) companion may be radically different from contemporary western society's representation of sex work, but there are no unfamiliar masculinities in S/F that function in a similarly critical way.

This is a recurring problem of imagination in science fiction, particularly those mainstream works that dominate television airwaves: dystopias tend to echo, rather than test or challenge, the boundaries of gender representation.

Hypermasculinity and the Cultured Noble

Amy Pond: 'I thought ... well, I started to think you were just a madman with a box.'

The Doctor: 'Amy Pond, there's something you better understand about me,' cause it's important and one day your life may depend on it. [he smiles] I am definitely a madman with a box.' (Smith 2010)

Throughout modern media's history there has been a dichotomy portrayed between the different masculinities that occur within our culture. Although the most oppositional portrayal of these diverse types is represented within artifacts aimed at the tweens, teens, and young adult age groups, the general identification can be made in media of all types, targeted at all age groups. This dichotomy is often identified within geek media as the jocks vs. nerds.

The jocks are portrayed as filling all the required boxes of the masculine identity. They are handsome, good with women, and physically talented. Within media presentations, this often comes alongside increased social standing and general popularity and respect. Even when aimed at children, the jock identity is a natural born leader of men, the type of person who just naturally arises in a crisis to take control of the situation and lead their team to success. This is often portrayed, even in geek media, as being the better masculinity. It best fills the roles of men as they are defined by modern culture and is held up as being the type of masculinity that all men must strive for within their lives. Failure—if one member fails to conform properly—is held as an unacceptable weakness or emasculation that should be purged by the community.

This forced conformation is often focused upon the other major masculinity presented: the geek or beta male. Much like femininity is defined oppositional to masculinity, the beta male is defined oppositional to the alpha masculinity. The geek is physically weak, typically unattractive or unconventionally attractive, extremely intelligent, and socially poor or awkward. The mythos of the geek male is established to make that identity fulfill an outsider status. While general society rewards the alpha male for his innate abilities, it punishes the geek for not living up to those same standards. Persecution is a key part of the formation of this cultural definition. To be a beta is to have suffered throughout for not being man enough. Women will reject betas and find them unattractive, or simply use them for their few assets. Because they lack the social skills to network and stand up for themselves, they often fill low power positions or roles that will help to reinforce this mentality.

When seen from within a geek-oriented viewpoint, these struggles are what adds value to the geek identity. To have suffered is to understand what it means to not fit it. Interestingly, geek media often follow the standard story arc of a revenge fantasy. The plot of the movie *Office Space* is that of several nerds getting revenge on those they feel have taken advantage or otherwise used them through their superior technical knowledge. One of the most nerd-typical, Milton (shown in Fig. 2.2), illustrates every stereotype from pocket protector to poor social skills (Judge 1999). Usually, these stories show the geek as being a critical although often overlooked member of their organization. They are the ones who are smart enough to make everything work, but the rewards go to others who better embody the traits that society values.

The characters in *Office Space* might seem like an odd choice for an argument on hypermasculinity as the principal heroes of the film are physically



Fig. 2.2 Milton Waddams in *Office Space* (Judge 1999). Screen capture, 20th Century Fox

unintimidating, put-upon, and in many ways appear to be losers at the game of life (Judge 1999). However, they do demonstrate several of the characteristics we see in masculine subcultures, and by the “geek” hypermasculinity yardstick of intelligence they are (in their own perception at least) privileged. The three heroes of the film form—Peter, Michael, and Samir—form their own exclusively male inner circle with their boss as an enemy. When Peter’s girlfriend is found to have previously had a relationship with said boss, social shunning erupts, as Peter accuses her: “He represents all that is soulless and wrong! And you slept with him!” (ibid.). Likewise, discussions of sex and its availability factor heavily in their decision to conspire against their company:

Peter Gibbons: [discussing the possibility of going to prison] This isn’t Riyadh. You know they’re not gonna saw your hands off here, alright? The worst they would ever do is they would put you for a couple of months into a white-collar, minimum-security resort! Shit, we should be so lucky! Do you know, they have conjugal visits there?

Samir: Really?

Peter Gibbons: Yes.

Michael Bolton: Shit. I’m a free man and I haven’t had a conjugal visit in six months. (Judge 1999)

According to Hunter (2003), the *Office Space* approach to masculinity is particularly, dangerously, relatable: “the depictions of masculinity in 1990s

office movies were possibly even more ‘dangerous’ (that is to say, dependent on characteristics like aggression, physicality, competition, dominance over women, and so on) than those of the Reagan-era action films because they invite so much comparison with the elements of ‘real life.’” This lends a credibility to the call-to-action delivered by Office Space’s “hero,” Peter: “It’s not just about me and my dream of doing nothing. It’s about all of us together” (Judge 1999). Hunter (2003) points out that, given the absence of women in the movie, “all of us together” might as well read “all of us men together,” as “Peter not only determines specific causes of the crisis of masculinity[;] he encourages all of the men together to make a change before it’s too late.” The plight of white middle-aged masculinity thus becomes a rallying cry for change, a position statement not unlike that you might encounter in a Men’s Rights Activist Subreddit.

In fact, it is this focus on being intelligent and knowledgeable that often serves as comfort to the geek male when he feels like an outsider to the cultural identities of masculinity. Although geek males do not represent the alpha-male version, they have an extreme intelligence that is valuable as an asset and tool to both society and the geek himself (Chamberlin 2012). Those who find themselves on the wrong side of this intelligence will be forced to deal with the consequences of their poor decisions once the real value of manhood is better understood.

Last week I left a note on Laura’s desk
 It said I love you, signed, anonymous friend
 Turns out she’s smarter than I thought she was
 She knows I wrote it, now the whole class does too
 And I’m all alone during couple skate
 When she skates by with some guy on her arm
 But I know that I’ll forget the look of pity in her face
 When I’m living in my solar dome on a platform in space

As Jonathan Coulton’s (2008) song showcases, what the beta masculinity yearns for within these revenge fantasies is not the removal of an unbalanced social system that benefits one type of masculinity, but simply the inversion of the system to support their form of masculinity. This fantasy leaves the cultural norm of unequal power in place but changes the form of masculinity that benefits from high societal standing. Within this power structure, the perceived rewards and placement of everyone outside of the traditional masculinities remains the same, not truly creating a fairer world but only making minor adjustments to the inequality of the current one.

The power structure defined within geek revenge fantasies is reminiscent of times before modern media. The worship of the intellectual aloof and the disdain for the physical engagement mirrors the traits valued within Western aristocracy up until the early twentieth century. Within this role, the geek and jock are now new masculinities manufactured by modern media, but simply inverted rebranding of older social roles. The dominance of the geek-aligned masculinity can be seen within the media of the nobility during the Enlightenment and Victorian eras. To be a man of value was to have the time to pursue higher intellectual goals and to be deeply grounded within a number of subjects. The noble could see things from afar and understand their implications given their superior intellect and social standing. They were not involved in the everyday politics of survival, but had the ability to engage in the larger topics of governance, philosophy, and science because of the social standing their wealth afforded them.

Alpha masculinity, accordingly, was devalued within this system. To be physically strong was to be a laborer. Someone whose talents were best suited to the factory or the field had not time or inclination for intellectual pursuits. These were men who were too involved in living their day-to-day lives to provide a valuable contribution to their society. This was a boon due to their inability to reach the proper emotional distance that was needed to govern or pursue knowledge. Often, being relegated to the role of laborer was seen as being beneficial to these men, because it kept them from getting too involved with their uncontrollable urges and baser natures. They may be physically gifted, but they were given to violence, anger, aggression, and if not distracted would cause problems through interfering too much in matters above their heads.

Basically, the whole “geeks versus jocks” thing that gets drilled into us by media and the educational system isn’t about degrees of masculinity at all. It’s just two different flavours of the same toxic bullshit: the ideal geek is the alpha-male-as-philosopher-king, as opposed to the ideal jock’s alpha-male-as-warrior-king. It’s still a big dick-measuring contest—we’re just using different rulers. (Prokopetz 2015)

Although modern media has inverted the powers within the system, both identities are based upon a test for dominance in which men are placed at the top of the hierarchy and vie for control and power. The hypermasculine definition of manhood is not challenged within a geek identity but simply redefined to be focused on slightly different traits. It is still seen as being oppositional to femininity, but instead of physical strength and weakness the

distinction is based upon intellectual ability. The geek hypermasculine ideal is found in Batman, not Superman: while physical prowess is still lauded and demonstrated, intellectual achievement, technical mastery, and other skills are perhaps even more important. Prokopetz's admittedly crude suggestion that intellect and insider knowledge is the "ruler" for measuring this type of masculinity plays out clearly in many geek cultural contexts.

Within several episodes of *The Big Bang Theory*, Sheldon and Amy's intellectual identities are pitted against one another. Sheldon brings with him the mental baggage of the geek masculine mentality and often ridicules the challenge, quality, and value of Amy's work within neurobiology. Although Sheldon isn't often successful in these challenges, he doesn't seem to be able to learn from them either. He is wedded to the idea that to be a valuable geek man is to be smarter and engaged in more difficult intellectual work than those around him. To admit that Amy's work is more valuable or simply as valuable as his own is threatening to his identity. This hierarchy of knowledge being the arbiter of value is seen throughout the show and the relationships between the main characters, with Sheldon and Leonard being the main males, Howard being constantly criticized for his lack of doctorate-level degree, and Raj for his disinterest in really applying his intellect and display of more feminine interests in his social life and romantic partners.

When the typical hierarchies of athleticism or physical prowess are replaced with these intellectual and social measures, what results can become the gatekeeping mechanisms of a culture. We will address these consequences more directly in Chap. 3 when we look at comic books and the identification of the "fake geek girl."

In the long view, the different forms of masculinity represented with modern geek media are still as restrictive and built upon harmful hierarchies of power as the traditional hypermasculine definition. The application of hypermasculinity to geek media is as important as its application to traditional media. Geeks fall into a unique area where they are actively being sold two definitions of manhood: the traditional definition of the hypermasculine, physically oriented leader and the alternative inverse of the intellectual, distanced noble (O'Malley 2013). While individual consumers are often acknowledged within geek-centric media to be lacking in physical definition, they are still marketed many products that allow them to embody that experience. As game designer and blogger Anjin Anhut (2014) says:

Mainstream game developers/publishers capitalize on that desire for status and foster an environment through marketing that has performing cis straight male as the top of the social hierarchy. They encourage social anxiety around

that ranking system and provide the remedy for that anxiety by creating most of their content in a way that is all about performing masculinity, from the way protagonists are designed, the heavy emphasis on combat gameplay and conquest, to the rejection of anything feminine.

By extending the definition of hypermasculinity to include these non-physical traits that support the existing harmful hierarchies of power it becomes possible to really examine how the relationships between men and women within geek media are defined according to deeply gendered beliefs despite existing as a response to traditional masculinity.

The Geek Hero and His Band of Admirers

Pepper Potts: Am I gonna be okay?

Tony Stark: No, you're in a relationship with me, everything will never be okay. But I think I can figure this out, yeah. I almost had this twenty years ago when I was drunk. I think I can get you better. That's what I do, I fix stuff.

Pepper Potts: And all your distractions?

Tony Stark: Uh ... I'm gonna shave them down a little bit. (Black 2013)

Tony Stark's relationship to the other Avengers and his main romantic partner, Pepper Potts, is a prime example of how the modern geek hero is both larger than life and incapable of acting as a normal person. The very interests and abilities that make them ideal candidates for admiration is what must necessarily distance them from anyone who could get too close. Tony wouldn't be Tony Stark, let alone Iron Man, without his all-consuming fascination with technology and drive to understand how things work. If he didn't lose himself in this desire to tinker and understand, he would not have been as successful as he was in the creation of his inventions. And if he hadn't been the brilliant, distracted, sometimes sweet person this allowed him to become, he probably would not have been successful in his wooing of Pepper Potts. The support characters within the Iron Man series of movies serve to humanize Stark, who left to his own often comes across as hostile or megalomaniacal. The obvious love and tolerance shown by Pepper and Rhodes, Tony's two main friends and supporters, as well as their interactions show that there is more to Tony than his money and genius. Beyond helping to advance the storyline at a few critical points, these characters are the humanizing forces within the plot line. They draw Tony out of his distant shell,

make him express his approachable human emotions and allow the audience as viewers to connect to his motivations and actions as a reasonable extension their own. Very few people have the technological genius that Stark displays, but many can empathize with having a friend or family member who is just a little bit out of touch or out of control. We can easily see ourselves within the role of the secondary characters, doing our best to make sure that those we love are safe and happy, even while we dream about being the hero himself.

Our main quality for defining heroes within geek media is elusive: they must somehow be larger than life. They are more intelligent, faster, bigger, stronger than your average person. Even when they experience troubles or anxieties, they are somehow more. Stark's drinking issues and womanizing seem more interesting than their real-life counterparts. Steve Roger's issues fitting into a new century is well beyond our capabilities to grasp, even if we have struggled with surviving in a foreign culture. Because the hero must stand out from the average person to be an aspirational figure to the audience, he must be pushed towards the extremes. While we live in a culture saturated with hypermasculine traits and advertisements, many people do not have strong personal connections to these types of identities. After all, if they did, an extreme would not be extreme. But this does pose a difficult problem for the creation of media that rely upon this viewpoint. If the main character must be so far beyond everyday experience, how can the audience connect with him and care about the story being presented? Within our capitalist culture, this connection is vitally important. It allows not only for the presentation of a story, but for the creation of a mythos and marketing platform. If I as a consumer do not feel a connection to the main hero of a story, I will not be likely to seek out the media that story is in, nor will I purchase related media or platforms that build upon that story's characters and plot.

The construction of Stark's suit as a weapon that projects a masculine identity is essential to this discourse. Without it, the difference in muscular strength between Steve Rogers and Tony Stark is noticeable: with it, the suit is constructed in a way that is suggestive of some physical strength. However, it is very different from the suits it spawns: in the first *Iron Man* movie (Favreau 2008), Stark's rival Obadiah Stone builds his own suit, one far more massive and traditionally intimidating, while Iron Man's sometimes ally Rhodes dons a noticeably bulky and muscular War Machine suit in *Iron Man 2* (Favreau 2010). The first *Iron Man* also establishes Potts' reluctance in the role of superhero comic girlfriend. As Tony Starks suggests when propositioning her to fill the role, "If I were Iron Man, I'd have this girlfriend who knew my true identity. She'd be a wreck. She'd always be worrying I was going to die, yet so proud of the man I've become. She'd be wildly

conflicted, which would only make her more crazy about me” (2008). These sequences (along with Stark’s playboy credentials, which are established when a reporter asks if he went 12 for 12 with this year’s Maxim models), cement Stark as a perfect wedding of geek intellectual credibility with hypermasculine sexual prowess, attitude, and skills.

In a memorable moment of *The Avengers*, Tony Stark is confronted by the more traditionally masculine Captain America, who aggressively suggests that Stark is nothing without his technology: “Big man in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?” Undaunted, Tony Stark replies: “Genius. Billionaire. Playboy. Philanthropist” (Whedon 2012). Notably, his self-descriptor starts with the measuring stick of geek masculinity—his intellect—then proceeds through more traditional masculine traits, including wealth and prowess with women, before unexpectedly ending with social generosity. Captain America continues to hold Stark to a more traditional hypermasculine standard and finds Stark lacking: “I know guys with none of that worth ten of you. I’ve seen the footage. The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You’re not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you” (ibid.). Tony Stark’s reply is a perfectly calculated testament to geek masculinity: “I think I would just cut the wire” (ibid.). The tension on screen between these two characters takes Steve Roger’s traditional military masculinity and puts it in contrast with Tony Stark’s “brain-over-brawn” approach to the world, a mindset that would make the scientist behind Captain America’s transformation more of a hero than the man himself. As Stark puts it, “Everything special about you came out of a bottle.” Predictably, Steve Rogers retaliates by suggesting violence, telling Stark: “Put on the suit. Let’s go a few rounds” (ibid.).

Stark’s manliness is confirmed later in the movie when he goes alone to confront Loki with a warning. His robots remove his armor as he enters, buying time before he can launch his next weapon. In the exchange, Loki questions Stark’s ability to threaten him without his weapon, and Stark admits to Loki’s advantage in a physical conflict:

- Loki: Please tell me you’re going to appeal to my humanity.
 Tony Stark: Uh, actually I’m planning to threaten you.
 Loki: You should have left your armor on for that.
 Tony Stark: Yeah. It’s seen a bit of “mileage” and you got the “glow-stick of destiny.” Would you like a drink?
 Loki: Stalling me won’t change anything.
 Tony Stark: No, no, no, threatening! No drink? You sure? I’m having one. (ibid.)

Tony's relationship with his suit is explored more thoroughly in *Iron Man 3* movie (which follows *The Avengers* in the Marvel Cinematic Universe sequence). The film separates Tony from his armor for most of the film, forcing him to again demonstrate the type of scrap-metal and personal ingenuity that shaped his identity in the first *Iron Man* (Black 2013). In that film, he literally forged his armor, while in *Iron Man 3* he instead must fix his suit and fight a new supervillain.

Iron Man 3 ends with a voiceover from Tony Stark after he destroys many of the automated Iron Man suits he has been working on for much of the film: "My armor was never a distraction or a hobby, it was a cocoon, and now I'm a changed man. You can take away my house, all my tricks and toys, but one thing you can't take away—I am Iron Man" (Black 2013). The comparison of the suit to a "cocoon" suggests that Tony Stark has emerged into a hero at a new level, fully integrated with the identity of Iron Man as superhero that he had previously only "worn" as another costume. It's worth noting that this separation of man from armor has consequences to Iron Man's identity: as Hogan (2009) notes, "Iron Man is one of the few characters in the North American comic book industry whose costume can change on a regular basis without causing a fan outcry." This is very different from the way in which "the suit makes the man" for a character such as Superman. For Stark, his brain is the essential ingredient to his success, and his most hypermasculine scenes are not found in the donning of armor, but in his exchanges of wit and clever plans.

The hypermasculine presentation of the hero within geek media is a careful balancing act of presenting the larger than life alongside the humanized and intimate. The audience must be able to feel that they connect with these characters and story, while also being in jealous awe of the fantastic lives that they get to live. The more humane supporting cast often takes on the bulk of this work by providing the main character with opportunity for development and emotional connection, while also highlighting their extraordinary nature. Be it Sherlock's intelligence in relation to Watson's approachability or Captain Mal's impulsive bravado to Zoe's stoic calculation, geek media relies upon the hypermasculine definition to shape and present characters across all its platforms.

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