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CASE 4.2

Nerdfighters

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It’s not easy to be a teenage nerd, even if you self-identify as one.¹ You may be interested in very different things from your peers: the Museum of Natural History rather than the mall, a band singing about Harry Potter rather than Taylor Swift, making videos on YouTube rather than watching music clips, watching two brothers on YouTube called the “VlogBrothers” chatting about world history, politics, and cute animals rather than . . . whatever it is those other kids are watching. For many of those young nerds, discovering the VlogBrothers on YouTube and becoming part of the community of Nerdfighters—online, and often also face to face—is like finding kindred souls in a sea of strangers (see figure C.4.2a).

One way to describe Nerdfighters is as an online community of young people who coalesced around the YouTube channel of the VlogBrothers, John and Hank Green (see figure C.4.2b). John Green is a best-selling author of young adult fiction, and Hank Green is a musician and entrepreneur. Both engage in a wide variety of online educational projects. Since 2007, the two brothers (inspired by video artist Ze Frank) have uploaded two to three videos a week to their YouTube vlog (video-blog) channel, about “nothing in particular,” though always with their unique look and feel, including fast-paced speech, multiple jump cuts, and various inside jokes and jargon. Their topics range widely, from “How to Make Friends” to “Revolution in Egypt: A 4-Minute Introduction.”

My focus in this study is the community of Nerdfighters—the predominantly young followers of the VlogBrothers. As the brothers’ YouTube vlog became increasingly popular, the name Nerdfighter emerged: In one of the vlogs, John encountered an arcade game called Aero Fighters and mistook its name for Nerdfighters. The brothers’ followers adopted the term to describe themselves, and since then the VlogBrothers have addressed many of their vlogs to Nerdfighters or Nerdfighteria. Through time, Nerdfighters came to exist as a community,
Figure C.4.2a. A meet-up of a local Nerdfighter group (making the “Nerdfighter gang sign”). Image courtesy of CalNerdCon.

Figure C.4.2b. Screen shot of the YouTube video “How to Be a Nerdfighter: A Vlogbrothers FAQ.”
Nerdfighters coalescing mostly online, on YouTube, Tumblr, or on Facebook group pages, but also face to face in meet-ups of informal local groups.

Nerdfighters connect not only as followers of the VlogBrothers but also around a broader shared identity as “nerds.” They see themselves as having shared interests in “everything nerdy,” varying from video production to costume design to making group excursions to the Planetarium. They share a passion around a broad universe of popular culture content, from Doctor Who to Harry Potter. Many Nerdfighters also consider themselves part of the wider YouTube community of video producers (see Lange 2007), where they follow the videos of other YouTubers, and many young participants create and post their own videos. Young people find their way to Nerdfighteria through varied channels: through John Green’s books (or the popular 2014 movie adaptation of Green’s The Fault in Our Stars), through other YouTube video bloggers, or through the brothers’ multiple educational YouTube projects (such as SciShow or CrashCourse). The barriers of entry to Nerdfighteria are purposefully kept low. As the VlogBrothers quip: “Am I too young / old / fat / skinny / weird / cool / nerdy / handsome / tall / dead to be a Nerdfighter? No!! If you want to be a Nerdfighter, you are a Nerdfighter.” At the same time, informal boundaries to participation may arise, as when participation in the Nerdfighter community relies on familiarity with its content world of niche popular culture or its unique jargon.

Over time, the Nerdfighter community has reached significant proportions—the average VlogBrother video is viewed more than 400,000 times. In the yearly “Nerdfighteria Census” of 2014, conducted by the VlogBrothers, more than 100,000 Nerdfighters participated. As this census shows, Nerdfighters are mostly high school and college age (60 percent of Nerdfighters are between the ages of 16 and 22) and mostly American (distributed pretty evenly across the nation, with some international presence as well). Nerdfighters are predominantly female—in the Nerdfighter census, 72 percent were female and 26 percent male. The community also has a significant number of people identifying as genderqueer, gender fluid, or questioning. In terms of race and ethnicity, the group is relatively homogenous: 85 percent identify as white, 6.5 percent as Latino, 3.5 percent as East Asian, and 1.6 percent as black.
This case study is based on a three-year investigation of Nerdfighteria, including 15 interviews with members, media content analysis, and online and offline ethnographic observation (Kligler-Vilenchik 2013).

“Decreasing World Suck”

As part of their shared identity, Nerdfighters pursue a shared social agenda, which they loosely define as “decreasing World Suck.” As the VlogBrothers enigmatically define it in their YouTube video “How to Be a Nerdfighter,” “World Suck is kind of exactly what World Suck sounds like. It’s hard to quantify exactly, but, you know, it’s like, the amount of suck in the world.” This broad definition leaves much space for individual Nerdfighters to interpret what “World Suck” (and decreasing it) means to them. In interviews with participants, examples ranged from personal behaviors, such as being a good person or cheering up a friend, to collective acts that fit within existing definitions of civic engagement, such as donating money to charity or volunteering.

Nerdfighters create a vibrant community that builds on participants’ shared interests, their shared practices, and their sense of community, and translates it toward real-world action. A prominent example is the Project for Awesome (P4A), an annual event in which Nerdfighters are encouraged to create videos about their favorite charity or nonprofit organization and simultaneously post them on YouTube. The first year P4A was launched, its goal was to somewhat rebelliously “take over” YouTube’s front page for one day with videos of charities and nonprofits. Since then, the project has been conducted in explicit partnership with YouTube. In the 2013 P4A, Nerdfighters uploaded hundreds of videos, and more than 24,000 people donated money to the Foundation to Decrease World Suck—a 501(c)3 charity created by the VlogBrothers—through Indiegogo, a crowdfunding website. The donations came to $870,000, divided among the 10 causes whose videos received the most votes by the community. According to the Nerdfighter census (Green 2014), 25 percent of Nerdfighters participated in P4A, and 1.8 percent created a video for the project themselves.

P4A encourages the mode of expression preferred by many Nerdfighters—video production. The videos uploaded for the project vary from those by semiprofessional “YouTube celebrities” (video artists
well known within the YouTube community, though not commonly outside of it), such as “The Wheezy Waiter,” to those uploaded by young Nerdfighters, who range widely in terms of their video-production experience. One video, created by two boys in their early teens, was uploaded vertically, with their caption explaining, “I know its [sic] sideways but there’s no way I’m shooting this again.” Striving toward the inclusive ideals of a participatory culture, Nerdfighters promote creative production by lowering the barriers to expression and encouraging all members to see themselves as potential contributors.

P4A not only encourages Nerdfighters to upload videos; it also supports their creativity through structural features. On projectforawesome.com, one of the ways to pull up videos is by pressing “Random Video,” ensuring that each video has an equal chance of being viewed. The website encourages viewers to comment as much as possible on the videos viewed, with more than 460,000 comments submitted to the 2013 videos. This practice stems from the early days of P4A, when “most-commented” videos would rise to the top of YouTube’s browse page, but it has been kept “partly out of tradition and partly to help videos by lesser-known YouTubers become more popular in search results.” “Comment-bombs” are also encouraged through the 48-hour livestream, during which the VlogBrothers and other guests feature P4A videos and comment on them with increasingly silly behavior (cross-dressing and smearing peanut butter on the face are some VlogBrother favorites). Finally, the “perks” offered to those who donate through the Indiegogo website reflect the wide range of content Nerdfighters are fans of, with merchandise related not only to the VlogBrothers but also to different YouTube celebrities (Wheezy Waiter, Charlie McDonnell, Meghan Tonjes), as well as art created by the wider Nerdfighter community.

Through P4A and other campaigns, Nerdfighters build on fan practices and a broad shared identity as nerds, as well as a wide but shared “universe of taste,” while each individual can choose his or her own flavor or point of entry.

Nerdfghteria and Video Production

Creative production—particularly video production—occupies a central space for the Nerdfighter community. The creative drive can be seen
as a shared trait of Nerdfighters; as Theo, an Asian 15-year-old from New York, claimed, “These communities are really based on creating content.” Joanna, a white 25-year-old from California, described Nerdfighters as “a certain kind of kids” who are creative both offline and online: “They’re not the kind of kids that just sit on the rug playing video games and doing nothing else, these kids are like ‘I’m going to film something’ or ‘I’m going to write a song’ or ‘I’m going to do this thing’ and they’re all just really proactive.”

Lange and Ito (2010) discuss the “trajectories of participation” underlying creative production, including stages that move from tinkering and playing to acquiring more advanced skills. Nerdfighters highlight the importance of the group context in helping participants move along these “trajectories.” As Inez, a 16-year-old Latina Nerdfighter vlogger from a California border town, explained, key steps in such a trajectory include creating a YouTube channel and uploading one’s own content: “I have my own channel, which I started before I got into VlogBrothers, and I never, I just got it for favoriting videos and liking stuff, commenting and stuff like that. I subscribed to a couple of people, but after I got into VlogBrothers, it’s when I started making content.”

Nerdfighters are embedded in the wider video-creator community of YouTubers, but they occupy a niche genre within this community; specifically, their videos are closely inspired by the VlogBrothers’ own mode of creative production in terms of their structure and tone. Examples include keeping their vlogs to no longer than four minutes or using some of the VlogBrothers’ recurring genres (e.g., “thoughts from places”). Nerdfighter YouTube channels can often be identified by their reference to common terms in their titles, such as “nerd,” “awesome,” and “cool.” Another notable influence is the use of “collab channels,” or YouTube channels that are shared by several people who each vlog on a certain day of the week.

Collab channels can be seen as helping young people overcome some of the challenges of online production (see figure C.4.2c). Creative production is a high-effort endeavor. Producing a video involves multiple stages of planning, scripting, filming, editing, posting, and tagging. Being in charge of creating one video a week is a much lower bar than trying to maintain daily content, which was the format the VlogBrothers adopted their first year of vlogging (and which many
YouTubers still attempt during the month of April for “VEDA”—vlog every day in April. Members of collab channels often set a theme for the week (e.g., “the Oscars” or “your first kiss”) that solves the problem of deciding what to talk about. Being assigned a regular day means you have a responsibility to the other group members, and you do not want to disappoint them. Some collab channels even impose playful “punishments” for not creating a video on your day, often consisting of dare-like tasks such as smearing peanut butter on your face while talking.

In his discussion of digital media creation in schools, Peter Levine (2007:129) notes the “audience problem”: Many civic education projects online reach a frustratingly limited viewership. “We communicate in a public voice in order to address someone, and it matters who listens. It is discouraging to build something if no one comes,” Levine explains. Like many other YouTube video producers, some Nerdfighters show interest in the size of their audience as a form of status and recognition. Yet at the same time, other Nerdfighters have explicitly explained that they vlog not for the goal of reaching a high number of views, but as a mode of expression and interpersonal communication with other Nerdfighter friends.

Through their community, Nerdfighters overcome the “audience problem” in several ways. First, Nerdfighters serve as each other’s audiences.
The common etiquette of Nerdfighter reciprocity states that if someone subscribes to your channel, you should subscribe to his or hers. Beyond subscribing, a level of active engagement is the cultural norm. As Joanna, the white 25-year-old from California, explains: “I think within the Nerdfighter community, you know when you have this video and you post it . . . they’re going to watch it and they’re going to, like, talk to you about it. If you’re talking about something that they can relate to they are going to comment back and you’re going to create that sort of friendship and that connection.”

This engagement, moreover, is sustained by norms of encouragement and friendliness, in which, as Joanna further described, “everyone’s really accepting and welcoming.” Receiving positive, encouraging reactions to videos is an incentive for further production, whereas criticism, cynicism, or meanness (the behavior of “haters” in the YouTube jargon) inhibits expression. Nerdfighters shelter most community members from some of the harsh reactions confronting other amateur creative production on large, public sites such as YouTube.

Learner Story

Adrian, a white male from California, was first interviewed as a 17-year-old high school senior. At the time, Adrian was an active Nerdfighter—he participated in a local Nerdfighter group and attended all of its meet-ups, and he also played Quidditch (the sport from Harry Potter, with brooms, but without flying) on weekends with Nerdfighter friends. Adrian was involved in a range of creative activities: He created LEGO stop-motion animation videos, engaged in luthiery—making his own instruments (specifically ukuleles, which are quite popular in Nerdfighteria)—and vlogged on a collab channel.

Adrian became involved in Nerdfighteria through online participatory culture more broadly. He got a laptop when he was 11 years old and looked for things he liked—he found a LEGO blog and discovered that you could talk to people through the comment section. While looking for new content on YouTube, he found the VlogBrothers and thought that they were “interesting people who had intelligent things to say and fun videos to watch, that sort of get you thinking about stuff.” He
subscribed to the VlogBrothers’ channel, and, as part of becoming a devoted *Nerdfighter*, went back and watched all the VlogBrothers videos since 2007. “I went through and watched all of them that I hadn’t seen. It was over winter break and I just, that’s all I did for two days . . . it felt like I had this duty that I had to fulfill.” When Adrian attended his first face-to-face meet-up with *Nerdfighters*, he enjoyed seeing the online phenomenon manifested off-screen: “It’s cool on the internet but there is a certain quality about seeing these people in real life.” He joined a collab channel, where he was responsible for uploading videos one day a week. He enjoyed the informal vlogging he and his fellow collab channel members engaged in, but he also wanted to achieve a higher quality of videos: “You need inspiration. You need a good idea to talk about, or else it’s not really interesting.”

At Adrian’s high school there were not a lot of *Nerdfighters*, and he thought there was a stigma against having online friends. But within *Nerdfighteria* he found people who had a common interest in online communication and making friends. Adrian thought of his online community as a little wider than *Nerdfighters* to include the broader YouTube community of video producers. “I’ve got friends who I’m not sure identify as Nerdfighters, but we’re all sort of part of the same online community.” Through his experience with video production, Adrian also secured an internship at a video-editing studio—the executive producer of the company, whose daughter went to school with Adrian, saw his video work and offered him the job. Adrian said that commercial editing would be the kind of work he’d like to eventually do—or so he thought at the time.

Two years later, I reconnected with Adrian, now 19. During this time, Adrian had connected his interest in online video and his involvement in the YouTube community to his academic and professional life—though this was at times a challenging task.

After finishing high school, Adrian enrolled in the film department at a midwestern college, where he wanted to focus on producing for the web. However, he thought that people in his department “would openly laugh at the idea. . . . There wasn’t much respect for new media platforms, or really anything except the ‘fine art’ of film.” Disappointed, Adrian left that department, and in a TV department at the same school
found a professor who was working hard to introduce a new media curriculum. Under the guidance of this professor, Adrian conducted an independent study project with the aim of building an online resource library for people who want to study web video. As part of that project, he created a website hosting a “new media resource library,” compiling both academic literature and multimedia resources related to the study of digital media. On the website, Adrian explains that the project is “a way for me to formalize and promote my ongoing personal study of web video.” Adrian worked on this project for several months. However, when the professor Adrian had worked with left to take another job, Adrian felt he had “no support left at the school.” He transferred to a new college in Southern California to “continue my independent work and be closer to the web video industry.”

As he’s waiting to start the school year at his new school, Adrian is working on several independent projects. He now has an independent YouTube channel where he uploads several videos a month around topics that interest him, such as “How We Talk about YouTube,” “The Science and Dangers of YouTube Celebrity,” and “How to Build a YouTube Community.” Adrian participated in several web video conferences, for example, as a host on a “Young YouTubers” panel at VidCon. He’s also working on writing an independent academic article tentatively called “Notes toward a Critical Understanding of Vlogging,” and he is working on a syllabus on new media literacy, both for the university level and for middle school. He hopes to transfer schools again, to a university with a division that specializes in new media, where he can continue to write and make videos, and also to minor in education so he can teach new media literacy in classrooms or write for an educational web series.

Adrian is no longer a very active participant in Nerdfighteria, but he sees the experience as central to his current endeavors: “My participation in Nerdfighteria definitely sparked the flame for all the work I’m doing. Though I don’t participate very much anymore, I still appreciate that Nerdfighteria is one of (if not the) most fully realized participatory cultures out there.” One of the most valuable contributions that Nerdfighteria made to him was “being in a very diverse and accepting community,” which was “a huge confidence-booster.” He explains: “I feel capable to do the kind of independent work that I’m doing now thanks to the support of lots of friends to whom the work directly relates.”
Adrian concludes with a vision of the future: “I’ve been engaged in web communities for nearly 9 years, and those communities have had a profoundly positive effect on my life. My hope is that now, at the onset of the growing phenomenon of new media, I can help set a precedent for an open, responsible community of media participants.”