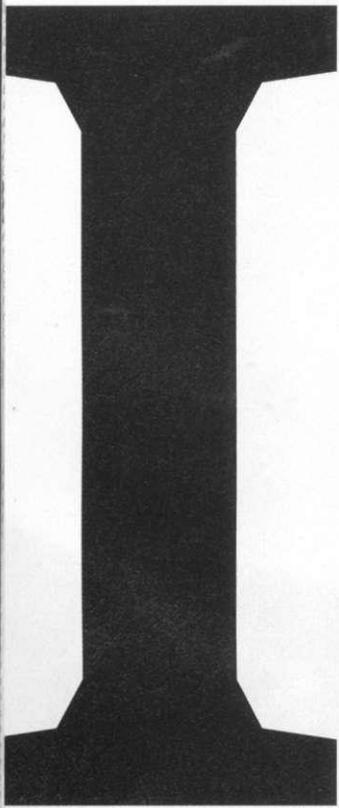


WAKE UP, GEEK CULTURE. TIME TO DIE.

That's it. We won. Nerd-dom is now mainstream. Which means everything is ruined. But comedian and author Patton Oswalt has a plan for reviving the subculture.





I'm not a nerd. I used to be one, back 30 years ago when *nerd* meant something. I entered the '80s immersed, variously, in science fiction, Dungeons & Dragons, and Stephen King. Except for the multiple-player aspect of D&D, these pursuits were not "passions from a common spring," to quote Poe. I can't say that I ever abided nerd stereotypes: I was never alone or felt outcast. I had a circle of friends who were similarly drawn to the exotica of pop culture (or, at least, what was considered pop culture at the time in northern Virginia) – Monty Python, post-punk music, comic books, slasher films, and videogames. We were a sizable clique. The terms *nerd* and *geek* were convenient shorthand used by other cliques to categorize us. But they were thin descriptors. In Japan, the word *otaku* refers to people who have obsessive, minute interests – especially stuff like anime or videogames. It comes from a term for "someone else's house" – otaku live in their own, enclosed worlds. Or, at least, their lives follow patterns that are well outside the norm. Looking back, we were American otakus. (Of course, now all America is otaku – which I'm going to get into shortly. But in order to do so, we're going to hang out in the '80s.)

I was too young to drive or hold a job. I was never going to play sports, and girls were an uncrackable code. So, yeah—I had time to collect every Star Wars action figure, learn the Three Laws of Robotics, memorize Roy Batty's speech from the end of *Blade Runner*, and classify each monster's abilities and weaknesses in TSR Hobbies' *Monster Manual*. By 1987, my friends and I were waist-deep in the hot honey of adolescence. Money and cars and, hopefully, girls would follow, but not if we spent our free time learning the names of the bounty hunters' ships in *The Empire Strikes Back*. So we each built our own otakuesque thought-palace, which we crammed with facts and nonsense – only now, the thought-palace was nicely appointed, decorated neatly, the information laid out on deep mahogany shelves or framed in gilt. What once set us apart, we hoped, would become a lovable quirk.

Our respective nerdery took on various forms: One friend was the first to get his hands on early bootlegs of Asian action flicks by Tsui Hark and John Woo, and he never looked back. Another started reading William Gibson and peppered his conversa-

tions with cryptic (and alluring) references to "cyberspace." I was ground zero for the "new wave" of mainstream superhero comics – which meant being right there for Alan Moore, Frank Miller, and Neil Gaiman. And like my music-obsessed pals, who passed around the cassette of Guns n' Roses' *Live Through This* and were thus prepared for the shock wave of *Appetite for Destruction*, I'd devoured Moore's run on *Swamp Thing* and thus eased nicely into his *Watchmen*. I'd also read the individual issues of Miller's *Daredevil: Born Again* run, so when *The Dark Knight Returns* was reviewed by *The New York Times*, I could say I saw it coming. And I'd consumed so many single-issue guest-writing stints of Gaiman's that when he was finally given *The Sandman* title all to himself, I was first in line and knew the language.

Admittedly, there's a chilly thrill in moving with the herd while quietly being tuned in to something dark, complicated, and unknown just beneath the topsoil of popularity. Something about which, while we moved *with* the herd, we could share a



Before we can start to
rebuild geek culture, we first
have to destroy it.

wink and a nod with two or three other similarly connected herdslings.

When our coworkers nodded along to Springsteen and Madonna songs at the local Bennigan's, my select friends and I would quietly trade out-of-context lines from Monty Python sketches – a thieves' cant, a code language used for identification. We needed it, too, because the essence of our culture – our "escape hatch" culture – would begin to change in 1987.

That was the year the final issue of *Watchmen* came out, in October. After that, it seemed like everything that was part of my otaku world was out in the open and up for grabs, if only out of context. I wasn't seeing the hard line between "nerds" and "normals" anymore. It was the last year that a T-shirt or music preference or pastime (Dungeons & Dragons had long since lost its dangerous, Satanic, suicide-inducing street cred)



could set you apart from the surface dwellers. Pretty soon, being the only person who was into something didn't make you outcast; it made you ahead of the curve and someone people were quicker to befriend than shun. Ironically, surface dwellers began repurposing the symbols and phrases and tokens of the erstwhile outcast underground.

Fast-forward to now: Boba Fett's helmet emblazoned on sleeveless T-shirts worn by gym douches hefting dumbbells. The *Glee* kids performing the songs from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. And Toad the Wet Sprocket, a band that took its name from a Monty Python riff, joining the permanent soundtrack of a night out at Bennigan's. Our below-the-topsoil passions have been rudely dug up and displayed in the noonday sun. *The Lord of the Rings* used to be ours and *only* ours simply because of the sheer goddamn thickness of the books. Twenty

years later, the entire cast and crew would be trooping onstage at the Oscars to collect their statuettes, and replicas of the One Ring would be sold as bling.

The topsoil has been scraped away, forever, in 2010. In fact, it's been dug up, thrown into the air, and allowed to rain down and coat everyone in a thin gray-brown mist called the Internet. Everyone considers themselves otaku about something—whether it's the mythology of *Lost* or the minor intrigues of *Top Chef*. *American Idol* inspires—if not in depth, at least in length and passion—the same number of conversations as does *The Wire*. There are no more hidden thought-palaces—they're easily accessed websites, or Facebook pages with thousands of fans. And I'm not going to bore you with the step-by-step specifics of how it happened. In the timeline of the upheaval, part of the graph should be

interrupted by the words *the Internet*. And nowhere we are.

The problem with the Internet, however, is that it lets anyone become otaku about anything *instantly*. In the '80s, you couldn't get up to speed on an entire genre in a weekend. You had to wait, month to month, for the issues of *Watchmen* to come out. We couldn't BitTorrent the latest John Woo film or digitally download an entire decade's worth of grunge or hip hop. Hell, there were a few weeks during the spring of 1991 when we couldn't tell whether Nirvana or Tad would be the next band to break big. Imagine the terror!

But then reflect on the advantages. Waiting for the next issue, movie, or album gave you time to reread, rewatch, reabsorb whatever you loved, so you brought your own idiosyncratic love of that thing to your thought-palace. People who were obsessed with *Star Trek* \ **CONTINUED ON PAGE 140**



Patton Oswalt
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 101

or the *Ender's Game* books were all obsessed with the same object, but its light shone differently on each person. Everyone had to create in their mind unanswered questions or what-ifs. What if Leia, not Luke, had become a Jedi? What happens after Rorschach's journal is found at the end of *Watchmen*? What the hell was *The Prisoner* about?

None of that's necessary anymore. When everyone has easy access to their favorite diversions and every diversion comes with a rabbit hole's worth of extra features and deleted scenes and hidden hacks to tumble down and never emerge from, then we're all just adding to an ever-swelling, soon-to-erupt volcano of trivia, re-contextualized and forever rebooted. We're on the brink of Etewaf: Everything That Ever Was—Available Forever.

I know it sounds great, but there's a danger: Everything we have today that's cool comes from someone wanting more of something they loved in the past. Action figures, videogames, superhero movies, iPods: All are continuations of a love that wanted more. Ever see action figures from the '70s, each with that same generic Anson Williams body and one-piece costume with the big clumsy snap on the back? Or played *Atari's Adventure*, found the secret room, and thought, that's it? Can we all admit the final battle in *Superman II* looks like a local commercial for a personal-injury attorney? And how many people had their cassette of the *Repo Man* soundtrack eaten by a Walkman?

Now, with everyone more or less otaku and everything *immediately* awesome (or, if not, just as immediately rebooted or recut as a hilarious YouTube or Funny or Die spoof), the old inner longing for more or better that made our present pop culture so amazing is dwindling. *The Onion's A.V. Club*—essential and transcendent in so many ways—has a

weekly feature called Gateways to Geekery, in which an entire artistic subculture—say, anime, H. P. Lovecraft, or the Marx Brothers—is mapped out so you can become otaku on it but avoid its more tedious aspects.

Here's the danger: That creates weak otakus. Etewaf doesn't produce a new generation of artists—just an army of sated consumers. Why create anything new when there's a mountain of freshly excavated pop culture to recut, repurpose, and manipulate on your iMovie? *The Shining* can be remade into a comedy trailer. Both movie versions of the Joker can be sent to battle each another. The Dude is in *The Matrix*.

The coming decades—the 21st-century's '20s, '30s, and '40s—have the potential to be one long, unbroken, recut spoof in which everything in *Avatar* farts while Keyboard Cat plays eerily in the background.

But I prefer to be optimistic. I choose hope. I see Etewaf as the Balrog, the helter-skelter, the A-pop-alyse that rains cleansing fire down onto the otaku landscape, burns away the chaff, and forces us to start over with only a few thin, near-meatless scraps on which to build.

In order to save pop culture future, we've

wild sex in *Grand Theft Auto*. Hell, *Grand Theft Auto*, period. And yes, I know that a lot of what I'm listing here seems like it's outside of the "nerd world" and part of the wider pop culture. Well, I've got news for you—pop culture *is* nerd culture. The fans of *Real Housewives of Hoboken* watch, discuss, and absorb their show the same way a geek watched *Dark Shadows* or obsessed over his eighth-level half-elf ranger character in *Dungeons & Dragons*. It's the method of consumption, not what's on the plate.

Since there's no going back—no reverse on the out-of-control locomotive we've created—we've got to dump nitro into the engines. We need to get serious, and I'm here to outline my own personal fantasy: We start with lists of the best lists of boobs. Every Beatles song, along with every alternate take, along with every cover version of every one of their songs and every alternate take of every cover version, all on your chewing-gum-sized iPod nano. *Goonies vs. Saw*. Every book on your Kindle. Every book on Kindle on every Kindle. *The Human Centipede* done with the cast of *The Hills* and directed by the Coen brothers.

That's when we'll reach Etewaf singular-

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got to make the present pop culture suck, at least for a little while.

How do we do this? How do we bring back that sweet longing for more that spawned *Gears of War*, the *Crank* films, and the entire Joss Whedon oeuvre? Simple: We've got to speed up the process. We've got to stoke the volcano. We've got to catalog, collate, and cross-pollinate. We must bring about Etewaf, and soon.

It has already started. It's all around us. VH1 list shows. *Freddy vs. Jason*. Websites that list the 10 biggest sports meltdowns, the 50 weirdest plastic surgeries, the 200 harshest nut shots. *Alien vs. Predator*. Lists of fails, lists of boobs, lists of deleted movie scenes. Entire TV seasons on iTunes. An entire studio's film vault, downloadable with a click. Easter egg scenes of

ity. Pop culture will become self-aware. It will happen in the A.V. Club first: A brilliant Nathan Rabin column about the worst Turkish rip-offs of American comic book characters will suddenly begin writing its own comments, each a single sentence from the sequel to *A Confederacy of Dunces*. Then a fourth and fifth season of *Arrested Development*, directed by David Milch of *Deadwood*, will appear suddenly in the TV Shows section of iTunes. Someone BitTorrenting a Crass bootleg will suddenly find their hard drive crammed with Elvis Presley's "lost" grunge album from 1994. And everyone's TiVo will record *Ghostbusters III*, starring Peter Sellers, Lee Marvin, and John Candy.

This will last only a moment. We'll have one minute before pop culture swells and blackens like a rotten peach and then

explodes, sending every movie, album, book, and TV show flying away into space. Maybe tendrils and fragments of them will attach to asteroids or plop down on ice planets light-years away. A billion years after our sun burns out, a race of intelligent ice crystals will build a culture based on dialog from *The Princess Bride*. On another planet, intelligent gas clouds will wait for the yearly passing of the "Lebowski" comet. One of the rings of Saturn will be made from blurbs for the softcover release of *Infinite Jest*, twirled forever into a ribbon of effusive praise.

But back here on Earth, we'll enter year zero for pop culture. All that we'll have left to work with will be a VHS copy of *Zapped!*, the soundtrack to *The Road Warrior*, and Steve Ditko's eight-issue run on *Shade: The Changing Man*. For a while—maybe a generation—pop culture pastimes will revolve around politics and farming.

But the same way a farmer has to endure a few fallow seasons after he's overplanted, a new, richer loam will begin to appear in the wake of our tilling. From *Zapped!* will arise a telekinesis epic from James Cameron.

Paul Thomas Anderson will do a smaller, single-character study of a man who can move matchbooks with his mind and how he uses this skill to pursue a casino waitress. Then the Coen brothers will veer off, doing a movie about pyrokinesis set in 1980s Cleveland, while out of Japan will come a subgenre of telekinetic horror featuring pale, whispering children. And we'll build from there—precognition, telepathy, and, most radically, normal people falling in love and dealing with jobs and life. Maybe also car crashes.

The Road Warrior soundtrack, all Wagnerian strings and military snare drums, will germinate into a driving, gut-bucket subgenre called waste-rock. And, as a counterpoint, flute-driven folk. Then there'll be the inevitable remixes, mashups, and pirated-only releases. A new Beatles will arise, only they'll be Iranian.

Shade: The Changing Man will become the new *Catcher in the Rye*. Ditko's thin-fingered art will appear on lunch boxes, T-shirts, and magazine covers. Someone will write an even thinner, sparser, simpler version called *Shade*. Someone else will write a 1,000-page

meditation about Shade's home planet. Eventually, someone will try to kill the Iranian John Lennon with a hat, based on one panel from issue 3. A whole generation of authors under 20 will have their love—or disgust—of these comics to thank for their careers.

So the topsoil we're coated in needs to wash away for a while. I want my daughter to have a 1987 the way I did and experience the otaku thrill. While everyone else is grooving on the latest Jay-Z, *5 Gallons of Diesel*, I'd like her to share a secret look with a friend, both of them hip to the fact that, from Germany, there's a bootleg MP3 of a group called Dr. Cali-gory, pioneers of superviolent line-dancing music. And I want to her to enjoy that secret look for a little while before Dr. Cali-gory's songs get used in commercials for cruise lines.

Etewaf now! ☒

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