**The “Gaming Geeks”**

I chose to interview my son’s group of friends, who self-identify as ‘gaming geeks’. This group consists of all boys, in the age range of 12-15, and who at the current moment all attend the same middle school. I was granted the opportunity to sit in during one of their gatherings, in which they were cutting free plastic model parts from molding armatures and gluing them together in order to create miniature ‘troops’ for a tabletop war game that they play together called “Warhammer 40k”.

 When I arrived at my son’s friend’s house with him, the kitchen table was already prepped for their activity: there was a coarse fabric drop cloth covering the table, and arrayed on top of the table were boxes of the model parts, tools, and model glue ready to go. The host was already at work, and we sat down at the table, awaiting the third member of the ‘miniature party’ to arrive. The group was working on troops for this third member, and everyone collaborated to get his ‘army’ ready for a competition they have planned for the host’s birthday party, soon to happen within the next week.

 While the kids arrived ready to do some crafting, their outfits were no different than they would normally appear – they wore comfortable clothing such as sweatpants, loose-fitting jeans, or track pants, with either tee shirts (emblazoned with gaming/geeky logos and images), or short-sleeve striped polo shirts worn completely without irony, for their comfort. This affirmed their participation in their own ‘youth culture’ that holds an emphasis on leisure and their own particular form of ‘hedonism’, which mostly involves entertaining themselves with computer and tabletop games.

 The group’s image and language or ‘argot’ emphasized a decidedly ‘uncool’ and ‘geeky’ disposition, with no attempt by any member at guile or holding himself aloof. Their language was also encoded with plenty of internal references, reinforcing their belonging to their group through mutual understanding of phrases and words that were related to games they played together, or media they consumed. The group members were free and casual with their interactions, mostly focusing on providing informational and instrumental support to one another – in this case, focusing on completing the task of building the army for their group member, so that he may fully participate in the planned future group activity.

 Because the group was participating in an activity that required the use of both their hands, they requested that I ask them the questions verbally, and in turn they would answer them for themselves. I was concerned that perhaps hearing each others’ answers might influence their own, and I requested that they try to answer for themselves as authentically as they could, without being unduly influenced by the answers of others, and I also chose to vary who was asked the question first. I suspect there was a little bit of influencing happening in the answers, but I also suspect that the group shared opinions on a great deal of the questions, and also the act of conforming helped solidify their group membership.

 Through the comments made by the kids both in answering the questions, and their conversations around the questions, it was pretty clear that they self-identified as part of the ‘Academic’ and/or ‘Others’ crowd, and mentioned off-hand that they are ‘not jocks’, and defined themselves not only through positive associative aspects, but also in opposition to other recognized crowds. The group appears to have a solid sense of being in a ‘gaming geek’ clique, whether or not they would call it a clique themselves. They’ve chosen to selectively associate with one another based on their similarities in educational orientation (they’re all academically-minded), as wells as similarities in their hobbies (gaming) and their media and literature preferences. Within their clique, they use humor and inside jokes, some of which is self-depreciative, to reinforce the boundaries of their clique and the expected behavior of those who belong.

 The group sees their value in each other through the support they provide one another, not only the informational and instrumental support mentioned previously, but also in companionship (in their mentioning of hanging out and relying on each other for social interaction), and also with esteem support (they validate each other’s way of being). They also look to each other for validation in their judgments (one of the boys said they rely on each other for ‘second opinions’).

 There is concern in the group about transitions coming up, especially with the fact that the boys are heading into high school next year, and not everyone will be attending the same school. They can sense there will be difficulty in keeping up the same connections, but fortunately the group live geographically close to one another, and have a lot of shared interests that will have them spending time together even outside of school.

 Interestingly, when talking with the boys about their social media use, they at first didn’t really think they participated in social media, as only one of the boys has a Facebook page, and their clique does not use Facebook as a place to communicate, coordinate, or self-define. When I spent a moment and discussed with them other forms of social media, such as chat or Skype, they acknowledged their use of chat and Skype both as a means to coordinate their activities (micro-coordination) , and it became a place for them to hang out while they gamed together. They will often turn on their Skype for audio and have it running while they play a multi-player online game, or even when they’re just using the computer for other purposes (single-player games, searching the web), they will leave Skype open as a means to connect and socialize.

 After the interviews, the boys had a lot of restless energy, and they ended up moving away from the table and rough-housed a bit while making jokes, saying things like ‘we roll around like hermit crabs’ and ‘we have no sense of priority’, while throwing game cards at each other and wrestling. They were laughing and having fun, but I also suspect the questions got them feeling a bit self-conscious and were using the physical activity to work out the built up internal stress.

1. Other kids think we’re…
- “strange, smelly (just kidding), sometimes we’re cool, sometimes we’re stupid, sometimes we’re smart, sometimes we’re too smart.”
- “geeky, nerdy, a little bit strange. In our own group, not mixing in with the rest of the school. Smart, but not about things that others care about.”
- “…I don’t really pay attention, so I don’t know what they think.”
2. School is a place where we…
- “harass each other (joking). Get to see each other. Get to learn things. Get to waste time together out of class.”
- “learn, get an education. Hang out at lunchtime. Lots of discussions about games or stuff, something.”
- “hang out and learn, pretty much.”
3. We wonder if other people notice we’re…
- “Stupid (joking). Skilled.”
- “intelligent and actually caring about things. That we don’t always care what we are talking about.”
- “I don’t know or care about what other people think.”
4. Our biggest concern at the moment is…
- “high school – dealing with high school stuff, like getting in to what schools, and figuring out classes.”
- “high school, splitting up as a friend group.”
- “getting good grades in this trimester. Stressful times in our core class.”
5. Teachers treat us like…
- “the smart kids, most of the time.”
- “smart and intelligent, most of the time. Nerdy sometimes.”
- “pretty intelligent.”
6. We use social media to…
- “to coordinate, plan and communicate (over Skype).”
- “to talk with my friends and send annoying links to them.”
- “communicate and talk through skype.”
7. What we think is really important is…
- “[random gargling sounds] times to play games together. The Kobayashi Maru. Having enough time to do what we want. Also, Lord of the Rings theme songs. Joking!”
- “staying focused. Working together as a team, not goofing off. Staying with the party.”
- “wisdom [gaming reference joke].”
8. We rely on each other for…
- “social interaction. Human contact. Entertainment, conversation, sanity, insanity, magic.”
- “people to hang out with.”
- “Social interaction. Second opinions.”