

## Game Geek's Goss: Linguistic Creativity In Young Males Within An Online University Forum (94/M3 933k'5 9055oneone)

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### Abstract

In this paper the authors explore the use and adaptation of a language specifically developed for, and by, a community of young people who play computer games. Leet speak or 1337 5p34k, the language used by the participants in this study, incorporates symbols and numbers as substitutes for the letters contained in words. Described by the group as an 'elite' language or 'leet speak', the authors' interest was captured by the derisive and ironic use of the language in an online forum for a tertiary first year unit of study. Rather than merely defining its participants within an elite cultural boundary, 'leet speak' is utilised ironically to unearth 'wannabees' (those seeking entrance and acceptance into the game world, generally 12 –16 year olds). Of particular fascination to the authors was that despite the clear self-demarcation of the group from the users of 'leet speak', and their insistence on its use solely by 'newbs and wannabees', the group continued to use the language to communicate with each other online. In this research, language defines the cultural group of games technology students in terms of the group's continual subversion of the language's very foundations whilst still using it to communicate. Perhaps most interesting was the group's nonchalant admission that they perceived this to be the function of all languages 'all languages are created purely for communication so dont [sic] have a cry about ppl been [sic] lazy'.

**Keywords:** games technology, game culture, education, language

## Defining the ‘Game Geek’

This project focuses on a group of first year tertiary students enrolled in a unit offered for the first time, *Game Fundamentals*. The unit offered an online forum for students to discuss topics relevant to games, specifically the topic of ‘Leet Speak’

Of the 295 students 12% or 40 chose to participate in the research project (see Figure 1). Of the 40, 10% or 4 were female and the other 90% or 36 were male (see Figure 2).

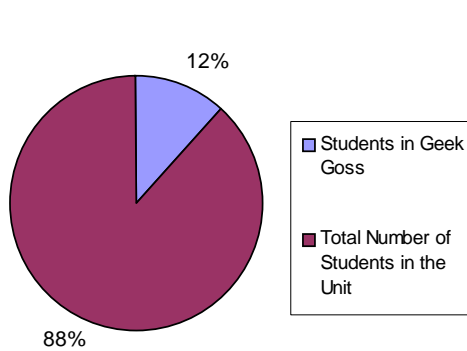


Figure 1. Participation of Students

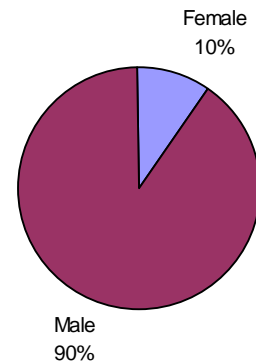


Figure 2. Gender of Participating Students

Whilst clearly a male-dominated domain in terms of participant numbers, paradoxically given the stereotype of “game geeks”, it was the small number of female participants who contributed and often directed the majority of discussion threads. In addition it was the female participants who issued the reprimands and developed ad hoc “guidelines” for the use of the forum by the imposition of implied “rules” for “trolling” and correct usage of English and leet. 32% of the posts were by the female participants with the two highest numbers of posts, 23 and 19, by female participants (see Figure 3). The four females collectively posted 45 of the 141 student posts. The number of students who contributed to the discussion varied (see Figure 4).

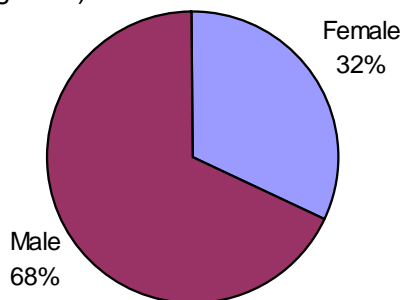


Figure 3. Level of participation by Gender

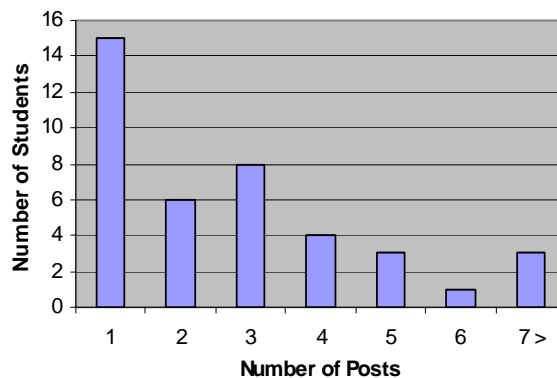


Figure 4. Contribution of Posts by students

In addition, the researchers posted 21 comments, questions and responses.

Enthusiasm for Games Fundamentals and in particular the expectations of the content were exemplified by the record number of messages posted in the first two weeks of the unit in the online forum; ‘OMG, [D@T](#) is teh Rox0rz!!!111oneeleven’. This was unique in both the number of posts and participants. This enthusiasm was not only confined to the online

discussions. Lectures were also highly social and interactive occasions that allowed these students to "come out" in a safe environment, with like-minded people.

omg What the hell is this crazy shit? a place where people can speak in the gaming language that they are otherwise to [sic] embarrassed [sic] to use?

well heres [sic] one for ya [sic]

sifnt r0x0r in your j0x0rs as I pwn your 133t mama!!!!!!

There was general and widespread derision amongst the participant group for leet speak. Although many claimed to use it for ease and speed purposes, they were quick to point out that they were always aware of the irony in their use.

Most of the 133t-age I see is used mockingly, against the people who use it and the concept itself. Proper 133t is just a joke a now

Alternatively, some of the participants were willing to admit their use,

...the language is not mostly limited to 16 year olds. An online community in which i partake in [sic] (which has a VERY wide age group range, and is quite highly populated) use the language quite frequently as a means of communication

## Research Inquiry

The methodological approach used by the authors was carefully selected to reinforce our pedagogic philosophy within the unit being taught. It was imperative that we shared the power of the knowledge production with the student group being researched. As the group determined the research focus, they continually subverted the positivist notions of knowledge and research as the exclusive domain of an intellectual elite, 'the professor'. Equal value was accorded to the postings of all participants whether student or staff. A positivist approach valourising objectivity, causal laws and validity claims was deemed inappropriate given our hermeneutic concerns for the way in which the experience shaped the participants.

Within such a methodological framework, emphasis was not just on the description, understanding and explanation of the group behaviour, nor on the knowledge produced or the methodology employed in gathering the data but rather, on who decides the research agenda in the first place. Such a methodology thus advocates the replacement of existing forms of social organization ie. University, where 'young male geek' is constructed as a pejorative term by the older preceding generations. The authors readily admit to the problematic nature of their particular content and methodological choices. Whilst we acknowledge that the issue of methodological construction is far more complex than our use would suggest, particularly given the focus of gender in this study, any framework that attempts to contain geek culture will inevitably transgress and indeed perhaps even reinforce the very stereotypes it seeks to deconstruct.

Whilst clearly data/evidence has been collected, it emerges from the experiences of the participants. This project's epistemological foundations are thus not to be sourced in inevitably negative contrasts with positivist frameworks. Whilst reliability, replicability and universality may be the hallmark of positivist research, such terms have little applicability in this project.

It is however, genuinely 'scientific' in its emphasis on careful observation of the behaviour of the participants as they manage to effect and manage change within their own social milieu.

In this study the social milieu of focus for data collection is the University's online teaching facility which offers students various opportunities for discussions, in this case 'leet speak'.

## Results

### Leet Speak Or 1337 5p34k

Leet speak or 1337 5p34k is primarily associated with 'gamers', according to Edwin Kee (2002), and our group of students further refined the language usage by suggesting that it was specifically used by 'CS gamers' (players of Counter Strike). In addition when asked what they believed the origins of the language to be, the group came up with a number of suggestions,

Hacker "Sp33k" for leet, or elite. Originating from 31337 'eleet', the UDP port used by Dead Cow Cult, a hacker group, to access Windows 95 using Back Orifice, a notorious hacking program. 1337 h4x0rz pwn j00!

Clearly intended as a joke on the researchers, the '1337 h4x0rz pwn j00!' directly translates as 'leet hackers own you' but basically means 'ha, caught you out/gotcha/I win'.

Jeff Caroso defines leet speak as 'unpronounceable words' (Caroso 2004) used to communicate in online mediums such as chat boards. One student noted:

A group of hackers originally used 1337 speak to confuse authorities in what they were going to attempt hacking into an organisation or company [sic]. Once the authorities realised that this was a form of language used by a hacking group they employed interpreters to find out and decipher what was going on. As with almost everything, this language was leaked onto the internet and was quickly embraced by gamers around the world.

Leet speak or 1337 5p34k incorporates symbols and numbers as substitutes for the letters contained in words (MacDonald 2005). The following example (Table 1) proffered by a student within the group indicates possible 'translations'. It is important to note however that leet speak is volatile and ephemeral in form, function and meaning and thus continually subject to change.

Table 1. Breakdown of Leet Speak

A = ^ or 4	J = _	S = 5
B =  3 or l3 or 8	K =  <	T = 7 or +
C = ( or [	L =  _	U =  _
D=  ) or  >	M = ^\	V = V
E = 3	N=  N	W =  ^
F =  =	O = 0	X = ><
G = 6	P = 9	Y = \-/
H =  -	Q = (,)	Z = 2
I =	R =  2	

Cindy MacDonald (2005) suggests that in leet speak the rules of grammar are often 'out the window'. Differentiating between capitals and lower case for example is irrelevant and often become interchangeable. Vowels may be absent from certain words altogether.

David Neal (2005 p.1) notes, words such as blog, phreak and cyberslacker have gained a place in the 2004 Oxford English dictionary. According to Neal (2005) leet speak may be the next addition, as rather than considering leet speak a perversion of English, Neal notes many positive aspects of this form of communication concluding that, 'though much of this communication is inaccessible to the uncomprehending, it actually complements, rather than damages, standard english' (Neal 2005 p. 20)

Carooso suggests that 'Hacker is classified as a Dialect, like redneck' (Carooso 2004), yet amongst the group, hackers were not perceived as those who use leet speak. The leet speakers in the group perceived hackers as heroes, although were very careful in their articulation of their admiration. Leet speak is now classified by hackers and those who speak it, as a glorified Hacker language. Once used, in its infancy, as the language to access the 'back orifice [sic]' of IT systems, it is now used as an online communication language, particularly by gamers. As one student notes:

'1337 sp33k is simply the generic mainstream version of hacker slang. They are effectively the same thing however there [sic] purpose is different.'

The 'purpose' of leet speak was further expressed by other students:

'Hacker slang was created in order to stay under the radar when it came to pirating. In the early days search engines would not pick up words with number and other symbols in them. Hacker slang was there for [sic] used to keep piracy web sites out of search engine to try and prevent prosecution.'

Other students proposed a different view, such as:

1337 (leet) speak is an acronym-ised & abbreviated version of english, pretty much been around since the dawn of geeks as a social class/category. It's origins center around computer gaming activities and computer/technology knowledge.

The transformation of leet speak, from a hacker language used to avoid detection to the online communication mechanism of today, testifies to the ubiquity of available technology for communication for the youth of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Widespread access to the internet has resulted in a dilution of the 'geekiness' attributed to frequent users.

Students specifically highlighted the way in which the language is constituted in progress. For example:

Quite a bit came of it came about as either distorted 'in jokes' or spelling mistakes.

## Discussion

### Leet Speak: Not For The Faint Hearted Or Illiterate.

Whilst most of the participants could be readily recognised as, and assumed to be, 'geeks' (hard core gamers) by their own admission, 'I may be a geek but at least I can still speak the English Language...' and further, to suggest that they are not like 'regular people', yet not one of the participants claimed to be part of 'the community' preferring to relegate

membership to others such as 'CS people' (counter strike players). Indeed most of the participants expended a great deal of time distancing themselves by discussion of 'others' behaviour.

Observers would assume the language of leet speak or 1337 5p34k to be entirely foreign to them,

'1|=\\ Ou |{4N r34|) t|-|15t|-|3N\\ Ou i5 t3|-| |\_337

||

Sif speak like that!

Thus the use of such a language could be deemed to constitute a cultural group defined by the mystery and magic of a specialised knowledge and resolutely maintaining the very marginality and exclusivity that we seek to deconstruct. Also problematic is that this same exclusivity, whilst sought by the participants, is also perceived as the source of their social and cultural inadequacies. This cultural group is marked by observable and self-confessed loneliness and social awkwardness. As a cultural and social group these students are defined, by their non-geek peers and family, according to their arcane knowledge of bits and bytes. Their ability to understand and, importantly, to translate the workings of machinery shrouded in mystery, fear and 'magic', ensures their status as 'whiz kids'. All the participants admitted that they were the wiz kids in the family group, 'being the wiz kid is a pain, as peoples [sic] computer problems can get overwhelming'.

Accusations of 'illiteracy' are regularly thrown at this generation and whilst there are real problems in literacy levels in our young people we do not believe that it is related to their ability to communicate as is so regularly invoked. As one student asserted, 1337 5p34k was '...created purely for communication'. These students do have difficulty using the language of their parents due to its gendered and racially evocative nature. They don't wish to be constrained by the rules and boundaries of previous generations. One student went so far as to define his own generation as 'permanently hung over', suggesting that 'conformity to group think' by many young people results in marginalisation of anything new and those whom espouse it, hence the explanation for the 'whole geek thing'. Students also referred to the 'permanently hung over' generation as the 'cynical' generation, that is, derisive and mocking of the fads that were once popular, 'guess we somehow feel its more amusing to make fun of those previously in groups and simply join our [own] groups in a decidedly nonchalant way'. Thus their use of leet actively reinforces both their exclusivity and the very marginalisation the authors seek to address. Whilst functioning as a vehicle for the exercise of freedom, leet speak is simultaneously pivotal to maintaining the margins and borders of the participant's power over a particular arcane knowledge. Since before ancient Roman times previous generations have always disparaged the new, hence there is a generational imperative to distance self and define one's own language and symbology.

it takes less time to read and its cool to have ur own language that regular people dont understand :)

ive always thought of "1337 5p33|<" as a meme derivative (wikipedia > memes crossref: "all your base are belong to us"/ "english") it has something of a pallel with the use of latin back in the dark ages etc used to create a barrier between those who were in the know and those who werent (n00bs vs 1337's?)

languages evolve, this is not a perversion of the english language but simply the next step, 100 years ago the language was very different, and 100 years before

that,...each generation adds their own 'slang' to the language and by the next generation that slang is now a real part of the language

This is best represented by the evasive and slippery nature of the words, eluding definition or stability of meaning or content. Words and their spelling can continually change, 'It's important to remember that the leetspeak community encourages new forms and awards individual creativity, resulting in a dynamic written language that eludes conformity or consistency' (Microsoft 2005)

'1|= \ Ou |{4N r34} t|-|15t|-|3N\ Ou i5 t3|-| |\_337'

This translates as: 'If you can read this then you is the leet!!' and is another example of the intricacies of the language. The representation for a letter is often constructed in situ. For example in the above sentence \ is used to represent Y, however other leet speakers generally use \-/.

### **Amateurs vs. Experts: n00bs vs. 1337's**

Of particular interest was the way in which the researchers/authors were regarded (affectionately we hope!) as 'Noobs' or 'newbs' (newbie – someone who is new to the game). When the author would ask for clarification 'I'm still wondering what lollerskates means?', the response was often a conspiratorial 'giggling' from the rest of the group 'he he he he he ;P' an indication that we just didn't 'get it'. Lollerskates just 'is', it has no meaning, is deliberately nonsensical and our attempts to derive meaning from it simply made it all the funnier to the group. Interestingly, our own interpretation that it might mean 'lolling about unsteadily', unwittingly and metaphorically illustrated our own efforts to understand. 'Again', as one participant commented 'always the newb!'

Not only is leet speak composed of the alphabet as shown in Table 1, many of the words used in Leet and gaming language are originally derived from incorrect spelling generally due to speed of typing, and then deliberately and repeatedly used as incorrect. For example the term 'owned' is used as 'pwned' in leet conversation. 'Pwned' refers to performance. For example: 'I totally pwned you in that game'. Writing the term as 'owned' immediately identifies the user as outside the group and they are designated with the term noob (or newbie) or lamer, meaning someone new.

'Kathy [researcher] =n00b? O.o heheh' and as warning that the researcher was getting close to being very un-cool, 'Your [sic] starting to sound like a Noob Kathy [researcher] "

Leet is a highly metatextual language characterised by increasingly complex layers of signification with each subsequent use of the term coined in the discussion and constant reference within the word itself to its previous iterations:

- 1 'Sif'
- 2 'sifnt'
- 3 'Sifn't!'
- 4 'rofl omfg gg lollerskates'
- 5 '...err lollerskates? --- is that some kind of weird laughing? :p'
- 6 'OMGWTFBBQ'
- 7 'roflcopter ^\_^ ... eheheh :D'

3 'lol! The Rollarskating guy isn't getting very far :( Maybe he needs a nudge to get started'

1 'ROFL HARRIS!!!'

8 'Its the ROFL copter now armed with WTF bombs!! xD'

The introduction of new words is immediately taken up and used without the need for 'translation', as context is everything.

Thus the concept of the floating signifier was never more apparent. In the use of the playful signifier, a hybrid (liminal) form that resides precariously between the signifier and the signified, the students invoke both literal/denotative and metaphoric nuances of word and symbols and a melange of both which is further complicated by ever-increasing concentric circles of complexity in its usage by the group. The conversation becomes a kind of verbal sparring, a game of linguistic one-upmanship –ROFLCOPTER where the “copter “ acts as a nonsensical addendum, an attempt to “out silly” each other – the game is ‘won’ by ‘ROFLWTFBBQ’ – where BBQ is the finale – a linguistic manifestation of the cynicism and irony that permeates Australian culture.

The language of leet is constructed via a participatory design process, even collusion, specifically intended to ‘send itself up’, and thus functions as a meta-textual commentary on the irony of its use!

Initially some students did not take the research seriously:

'I find it amusing how some people are actually taking this seriously

It seems highly unlikely that [researcher] would actually undertake research in this...'

This was further exemplified in the discussion group's assumption that the authors' initial posting and interest in leet speak was an April Fool's joke with many declarations of 'Sif' and 'I'm pwned'.

### **Think Before You 'Troll'**

Certain 'rules', boundaries, were imposed (although unwittingly) by the group to determine correct usage and to monitor 'trolling' (abuse) and as previously noted, generally monitored by the female participants.

Generally the tone is polite and respectful (yet playful teasing is rife) however the students deliver the admonition if they feel it is required. Interestingly offence is generally never taken and resolution quickly achieved.

1 'man, your all a bunch of geeks'

2 'really @\_@!!??...I hadn't noticed! /sarc :p'

3 'You're. You ARE all. Your would mean that, at some point in time, I came into possession of an 'all a bunch of geeks'. I may be a geek, but at least I can speak the English language. If you want people to think you actually matter try learning it before you troll'

1. 'wat u talkin bout i talk engrish fine :p'



### **Leet Speak Is A Legitimate Form Of Online Communication**

Online communication has been the focus of research for over a decade however online gaming communication has emerged only recently. As Kurt Squire (2002) suggests, 'despite the maturing medium, the ... social context of gaming has been woefully unexamined'. Squire (2002) further suggests that the study of game playing communities requires further 'qualitative' explorations to uncover complex social structures that exist. However, despite Squires' admonitions, since 2002 most studies emerging from the technology disciplines have continued to focus on a more quantitative approach. The education and sociology disciplines have been rather more active qualitatively speaking with highlights such as Catherine Beavis (2005), and James Paul Gee (2003).

Mark Davis (1997) predicted the need for culturally diverse groups such as 'game geeks' to develop their own methods of communication, 'to cope with the new diversity, new social technologies will be needed' (Davis 1997, p. 267). This study has attempted to address this dearth of research by working in collaboration with the participants in order to try to understand their use of technology as a vehicle for their unique style of communication.

Whilst we readily acknowledge that geek culture, as evidenced in this study, remains inevitably bound by borders and margins, the change is represented by the imposition of those borders by the cultural group, the participants. Language, as Jacques Derrida (1976) and a myriad of others since, remind us, is inextricably hierarchical. In this study, our leet speakers function as the self proclaimed border guards to the new, currently exclusive, realm of the gamer. As Walter Ong (1982) might have suggested, in this study the participants are restructuring consciousness to embrace their particular hybrid form of externalisation of thought into sms, leet and other forms of online communication.

Young people will always find new ways to represent their cultural concerns, in ways that inevitably alienate the previous generation. Such linguistic creativity as 1337 5p34K, characterised by adaptation and modification, has evolved from the game geek's need to express and communicate within a supportive community of like-minded participants. This study was enthusiastically supported by our game geeks group because they intuited that the researchers credited such creativity and innovative invention/activity with legitimacy and value.

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