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# Revenge of the (Angry Video Game) Nerd: James Rolfe and Web 2.0 Fandom

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Responding to the altered landscape of the Internet following the bursting of the dot-com bubble, Time declared its 2006 selection for "Person of the Year" as "You."<sup>1</sup> Commonly referred to as Web 2.0, this "new Web," which the magazine hailed as "a revolution,"<sup>2</sup> invites users to become engaged participants, as exemplified by websites like Wikipedia and YouTube. One of the most widely held beliefs about Web 2.0 is that its tools and principles "challenge corporate culture and logic, opening up cultural production, authorship, and distribution to seemingly anyone."<sup>3</sup> While the proliferation of user-generated content available online lends some theoretical credence to this democratic assumption, several critics have questioned such "You-topian rhetoric."<sup>4</sup> Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, for instance, argue that YouTube's popularity, in fact, "illustrates the increasingly complex relations among producers and consumers in the creation of meaning, value, and agency"<sup>5</sup> (my emphasis). Although disagreement persists as to the degree to which the relationship between media producers and consumers has changed, it can be agreed that this relationship has changed as a result of the participatory culture of the Web 2.0 era. For example, the relationship between filmmaker James Rolfe and his fans demonstrates how Web 2.0 has opened up a more participatory style of fandom. As one of the original "stars" of YouTube and as founder of Cinemassacre Productions, based at [Cinemassacre.com](#), Rolfe has created a highly devoted fan base with The Angry Video Game Nerd (2004, 2006-Present), a web series of satirical reviews of "bad" retro video games. A participatory ethnographic study of the fandom surrounding The Angry Video Game Nerd (AVGN) demonstrates how independent content producers can use Web 2.0 strategies to create a franchise in order to attract attention to the rest of their work.

## METHODOLOGY AND POSITION

This fan analysis draws from the participatory ethnographic tradition practiced by Henry Jenkins in Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture (1992). In this landmark study of media fans, Jenkins "offers an ethnographic account of a particular group of media fans, its social institutions and cultural practices."<sup>6</sup> Jenkins argues that, when applied to Cultural Studies, ethnography allows for "develop[ing] a more sophisticated understanding of how these groups relat[e] to the mass media and draw upon it as a resource in their everyday life."<sup>7</sup> Understanding the relationship between James Rolfe and his fans necessitates exploring the audience's emotional response to his work and calls for a qualitative rather than purely quantitative approach, since this culture, like those Jenkins writes about, "defies attempts to quantify it, because of its fluid boundaries, its geographic dispersment, and its underground status."<sup>8</sup> As the connection between Rolfe and his fans is situated within the participatory culture of Web 2.0, my ethnography involved participation within this subculture, an approach in line with what Jenkins sees as those that offer "accounts in which participation is often as important as observation [and] the boundary between ethnographer and community dissolves, and community members may actively challenge the account offered of their experience."<sup>9</sup>

Conducting ethnography of any culture requires observation of and within a specific space. The online

community of Rolfe's fandom, however, is not easily observable in a physical space, but rather in cyberspace. As such, I adopted a Web 2.0 approach to ethnography by becoming a participant within the fan culture and by taking part in a number of websites' discussion forums and blogs. Although I have been a fan of Rolfe's work since 2007, prior to my research I had occupied what is known as a "lurker"<sup>10</sup> position within his fan community.<sup>11</sup> In other words, while I had consistently kept up-to-date on Rolfe's work, I had rarely interacted with other fans except for those I know personally.

To understand how the fans relate to Rolfe and his work, I developed an online [survey](#), combining quantitative and qualitative questions in order to glean a more holistic conception of this audience. To distribute the survey, I created accounts at websites whose highly participatory users I thought would be willing to take part in my research. Although it had not been one of my goals at the outset, I came to discover that this process revealed some of the politics and problems of conducting ethnographic research within these online spaces.

At [Giant Bomb](#), which prides itself as being "the world's largest editable video game database,"<sup>12</sup> I created a user account in order to participate in the site's forums. As within most forums, a member's level of participation (such as one's number of posts) is plainly available for others to observe. With this in mind, I realized that I needed to actively engage in the forums, as it would have been inappropriate to immediately create a forum topic requesting survey responses without having first established myself as a contributing member of the community. However, after I posted the survey link and request, my first reply, written by a veteran forum member who had already contributed more than 9,000 posts, was one of resistance: "...always great to see how some people spend their first post on GB"<sup>13</sup> This was somewhat expected: Jenkins has noted that fans typically greet academic examinations of their subculture with skepticism or disdain.<sup>14</sup> Although I expected such opposition, I felt it necessary to situate myself as an academic and not as a market researcher or just a casual fan by providing my academic email address (@ucla.edu). I also attempted to curb further resistance by reasserting my legitimacy within Rolfe's fandom, video game culture in general, and Giant Bomb in particular, by addressing this resistance more directly: "Honestly, until today, I hadn't been to GiantBomb before, but my friend recommended it to me the other day, so I thought I'd sign up and I figured it would be a good place to find AVGN fans for my survey and to just talk about gaming stuff in general." After having said this, the posts from other members became more positive, as many enthusiastically responded that they had completed the survey and even wished me luck with my project.

In addition to Giant Bomb, I requested survey responses on other forums and blogs with varying degrees of success. My posting was strongly met at the forums of the gaming-related entertainment site [ScrewAttack](#). Aside from hosting [The AVGN](#), the site encourages its members, known as "g1s," to submit original content, such as blogs and videos. Perhaps it is because of this more direct connection to Rolfe's work as well as the participatory nature of the community that my survey was so warmly received. On the other hand, my request was not noticeably discussed on Rolfe's Cinemassacre.com. As the link to my survey had been included in a comment to the then-newly released AVGN review of the Super Nintendo title [Lester the Unlikely](#) (DTMC, 1994),<sup>15</sup> this lack of recognition may be the result of my request being lost amidst the proliferation of fan comments that greet each new [AVGN](#) episode at the time of release. Despite these widely varying terms of reception, my survey was completed fifty-two times within a two-week period.

## WEB 2.0 AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

These responses were collected through the participatory culture of Web 2.0, one that Rolfe has successfully courted to build a loyal audience. The term "Web 2.0" encompasses online features such as wikis, blogs, and sharing sites, all of which encourage participation, the harnessing of collective intelligence, and user-control.<sup>16</sup> Among the various high-profile online applications that most emphatically express these principles is YouTube, the video sharing site founded in February 2005.<sup>17</sup> According to Burgess and Green, the site's innovation at the time of its debut was that it "provided a very simple, integrated interface within which users could upload, publish, and view streaming videos without high levels of technical knowledge."<sup>18</sup> Concurrent with the mainstream adoption of the site was the ongoing trend of increasingly affordable, professional-quality digital video recording and editing equipment. "The videos were already being made," points out Katie Elson Anderson. "YouTube's usability," though, "provided the creators with an outlet to share them."<sup>19</sup> One of these creators for whom YouTube provided a highly visible content distribution platform was independent filmmaker James Rolfe.



Figure 1: James Rolfe.

### WHO IS JAMES ROLFE?

Born in 1980, Rolfe has been making his own films since 1989;<sup>20</sup> however, it was not until the advent of YouTube that he was able to share his work with a wider audience. Rolfe is best known for creating, producing, directing, editing, and starring in [The AVGN](#). In the DVD documentary [What was I Thinking?: The Making of The Angry Video Game Nerd](#) (2007), he explains, "What many people might not know is that I'm a filmmaker, so I'm actually more of a movie nerd than a video game nerd." He further clarifies that the name of his production company, Cinemassacre Productions, refers not to a partiality for horror films, but rather to his filmmaking style, one that "massacres cinema" and "defies traditions." Further elaborating on the name, he says, "To begin with, I always had a 'do-it-yourself' attitude, without any outside support. Things have improved since the old days, but I still have that raw [and] simple approach to filmmaking."<sup>21</sup> While this "do-it-yourself" (DIY) outlook seems ideally suited to the "Broadcast Yourself" logic of YouTube, Rolfe had been hosting videos online even before the site's debut.

In 2000, Rolfe launched Cinemassacre.com, which functions today as both a blog and archive of his work. During the early years of the new millennium, the site contained only a written filmography and "a gallery of stills to represent [his] films to the outside world."<sup>22</sup> Because uploading videos to the Internet was technologically impossible with his dialup connection, his work was exclusively distributed on VHS. In 2003, the site was upgraded, with videos made available to download in QuickTime format. Rolfe explains that, while some of his films, such as the horror-comedy short [The Deader The Better](#) (2005), might take years to complete, others are finished in a week or less. One of these simpler projects was a 2004 satirical review of the classic, but challenging, video game [Castlevania II: Simon's Quest](#) (Konami, 1987) on the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES).

The very first [AVGN](#) video.

Having critiqued games as a child growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, Rolfe created the review with an established sense of gaming's history and culture while embellishing it with over-the-top profanity.<sup>23</sup> The underlying humor of the video is that while Rolfe does indeed like the game in real life, the character he performs loathes it to such an extent that he has produced and distributed a video to vent his anger nearly twenty years after the game's release. Although the video's premise certainly is reminiscent of [Mystery Science Theater 3000](#) (1988-1999), the cult television series in which a human and his robot pals offer comedic commentary to the "bad" films they are forced to endure as part of a mad scientist's sadistic experiment, Rolfe's character plays the game out of his own volition, all in an effort to warn people against playing the game. In this review of [Castlevania II](#), the character even states his apparently noble intention through direct address to the viewer: "I feel horrible that I had to play this game in order to make this video. But I did it to demonstrate its dreadfulness, and I forced myself to play it, just so you don't have to."

Shortly after creating this video, Rolfe produced a second installment, in which he discusses [Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde](#) (Toho/Bandai, 1989), a more notoriously "bad" NES game. For the first time, his character appears before the camera,<sup>24</sup> drinking Rolling Rock beer and attired in his signature costume of eyeglasses and a white collared shirt with a pocketful of pens.



Figure 2: The Nerd's signature look.

At the time, Rolfe only distributed the videos (titled [Bad NES games: Simon's Quest](#) [2004] and [Bad NES games: Jekyll and Hyde](#) [2004, sic]) along with other Cinemassacre films on a series of VHS tapes labeled "The Cinemassacre Gold Collection".

### REACHING AN AUDIENCE

In 2006, Rolfe began making these videos available to a wider audience. Despite the [Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde](#) review having been intended to be the last (as it was the character's most loathed game), Rolfe's friends, who had enjoyed the first "Bad NES games" videos, encouraged him to create another. This review of [The Karate Kid](#) (LJN, 1987) was the first to name Rolfe's character as "The Angry Nintendo Nerd." Naming these videos "The Angry Nintendo Nerd Trilogy", Rolfe posted them on Cinemassacre.com. They only attracted a far larger audience, however, after he uploaded them to [YouTube](#) in April 2006. Within a matter of months, the videos had become so popular that Rolfe decided to shift his attention to creating more [Angry Nintendo Nerd](#) episodes at the expense of other Cinemassacre projects.

As the [Angry Nintendo Nerd](#) videos gained more views, they began to coalesce into a series and, eventually, a franchise. Episodes started to feature illustrated title cards, a theme song, and even "guest stars" such as [Freddy Krueger](#), [Bugs Bunny](#), and [Shit Pickle](#) (one of Rolfe's original animated characters that had previously appeared in other Cinemassacre productions). By December 2006, the show's title was changed to the less restrictive [The Angry Video Game Nerd](#) in order to allow the Nerd to discuss games not released on Nintendo platforms.<sup>25</sup> With the [AVGN](#) videos occupying more of his time and resources, Rolfe began infusing them with increased narrative complexity and filmmaking skill. The first of these more cinematic episodes, an October 2006 review of [Friday the 13th](#) (LJN, 1989), featured expressive lighting and camera angles to emphasize its horror film-themed narrative in which the Nerd is attacked by Jason Voorhees (played by Rolfe's friend Mike Matei) for disliking the game. Later episodes have alternated from straightforward game reviews to those with a narrative focus to those resembling a documentary, with Rolfe pointing out information about the game or gaming console under review.

Rolfe's two-part review of the Atari Jaguar demonstrates a documentary approach.

As the videos gained more attention, [AVGN](#) merchandise was introduced and the character even began to appear in other (fan-created) media. [The AVGN](#) had truly become a Web 2.0 franchise, and, in the process,

had come to embody the evolving relationship between media producers and consumers.

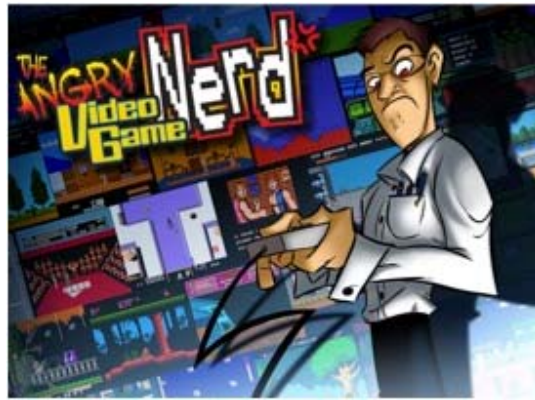


Figure 3: Example of AVGN fan art.

### WHO ARE ROLFE'S FANS?

One reason Rolfe has managed to garner such a large and devoted fan base is because of the accuracy of his theorization of his fans. On the section of Cinemassacre.com designed to elicit potential advertisers, he paints a broad portrait of his fans as "a diverse audience that loves entertainment and/or video gaming, movies, or just interesting stuff." This concept of his ideal spectator does not drastically deviate from the data I collected. Among the fifty-two responses to my survey, only two replied that they play video games less than once a month and only eight claimed to not be fans of any other web series. Given the retro subject matter and mature content of The AVGN videos, much of whose humor derives from the Nerd's penchant for swearing and scatological humor, I was surprised to find that respondents' ages ranged from 10-to-31. More surprising was their lack of gender diversity, as only four respondents (or 8%) were female. This disparity is most shocking given the Entertainment Software Association's 2010 estimate that 40% of gamers are female.<sup>26</sup> While this seems to imply that Rolfe's work does not appeal to as many females as gaming generally does, the Cinemassacre.com audience profile on [Quantcast](http://Quantcast.com) (Quantcast.com) lists that 28% of U.S. visitors to the site are female.<sup>27</sup> More likely, then, this gender discrepancy suggests that not as many females participate in the forums or blogs to which I posted the link to my survey. Although not a direct correlation, the relatively high number of completions of my survey points to the popularity of Rolfe's work within the communities built around these sites and the fact that his website, according to Quantcast, is visited by over 574,000 people each month.<sup>28</sup>

### WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THE ANGRY VIDEO GAME NERD'S POPULARITY?

Of all Rolfe's artistic creations, The AVGN is by far his most popular. As of this writing, on YouTube alone (excluding any inclusion on other websites), forty-four AVGN episodes have over 1,000,000 views. What is responsible for this popularity? In Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination (1985), a study of fans of the 1978-1991 CBS television series Dallas, Ien Ang argues that writing about the fandom surrounding a specific text involves analyzing the text's "characteristics ... that organize the viewer's pleasure" as well as its "mechanisms by which pleasure is aroused."<sup>29</sup> In other words, to ask what makes a particular text popular is to discover the methods by which its fans derive pleasure. From asking a series of questions in my survey and from my own theorization, I discovered a few reasons as to why The AVGN has created its own fandom and why many in this community have become fans of Rolfe's other work as well.

Much of The AVGN's appeal is its mining of "retro" culture. As Elizabeth E. Guffey explains, the term "retro" not only can function as synonymous with "timeless" or "classic" (in terms of what she calls "cultural advertising"), but can also carry "deep emotional appeal."<sup>30</sup> Rolfe notes that, while he has been asked if The AVGN will ever focus on contemporary games, the "show is all about nostalgia. After all," he adds, "I'm mostly a retro gamer."<sup>31</sup> As this suggests, retro culture is an inherent part of video game culture, a trend that implies a preference for technological obsolescence and "irrelevance sought out for its own sake."<sup>32</sup> Brett Camper argues, "[T]he breakneck leapfrogging of technology and periodic turning of game consoles provides a built-in obsolescence that almost guarantees the emergence of retro gaming."<sup>33</sup> By this logic, it is easy to understand why gamers have long been attracted to games and consoles of the past and why exploiting this attraction has become an established practice of GameStop and other companies in the video game retail industry that invite consumers to "trade-in" older titles and to buy used games. This commodification of retro gaming appeals to players' nostalgia, a feeling, according to Laurie N. Taylor and Zach Whalen, "best understood as a process of looking back to an unattainable past and trying to bring that past into the present."<sup>34</sup>

What makes The AVGN unique is that Rolfe is able to ironically tap into this "process of looking back." The



opening lines of the show's theme song emphasize this point: "He's gonna take you back to the past / To play the shitty games that suck ass." Certainly the show appeals to gamers' nostalgia, as mentioned by several survey respondents. The episodes, one explains, "really do 'take me back to the past' as I'm almost the same age as James Rolfe and played many of the games as a kid." As the song's second line suggests, however, the show's appeal extends beyond just nostalgia.

To a large extent, gamers identify with Rolfe's Angry Video Game Nerd. Having grown up in the 1980s, Rolfe is part of the "so-called Nintendo Generation," whose members "have grown to associate video games with [their] childhood and adolescence."<sup>35</sup> Not only does The AVGN trigger feelings of nostalgia for viewers of this generation, but also memories of bitter frustration. After all, the Nerd does not just play games from the past; he plays "the shitty games that suck ass." One respondent writes, "Having owned an NES when I was younger, I really know how James feels when he's tortured by a shitty game." Comments like this imply a level of identification with the Angry Video Game Nerd, who, it may be argued, serves as a viewer surrogate. In this sense, the viewer is able to achieve catharsis not by directly completing the game that the Nerd is playing, but rather by watching the Nerd attempt to do so.

A combination of review and documentary colored by a distinctly Web 2.0 aesthetic, the style of The AVGN is appealing to fans. Although Rolfe had created the initial episodes before the advent of YouTube, they bear a strong resemblance to many of the videos that would come to characterize the site. The DIY aesthetic and direct address of the pre-YouTube episodes are precursors to the popular "amateur" YouTube video form, which includes confessionals and video blogs (vlogs). As the example of lonelygirl15 famously demonstrated, adopting a DIY aesthetic can conceal a video's underlying commercial or fictional nature. There are AVGN viewers, Rolfe says in What was I Thinking?, "who take everything the Nerd says literally, like they don't understand I'm acting and they're also offended that I'm picking on all these old games." Perhaps, though, it is exactly this element of realism that lends the Nerd authority as both a video game critic and historian. Several survey respondents commented that the show's mixture of over-the-top reviews and documentary approach is its most appealing aspect. "He's entertaining," writes one fan. "It's interesting to see his opinions ... He also has [a] vast amount of knowledge regarding obscure games and systems I've never heard of." While a debate rages about if fans prefer what they perceive to be the "angrier" style of the earlier episodes or the more informational content of the recent ones, many voiced a preference for both.

In addition to The AVGN adopting a Web 2.0 DIY aesthetic to create an illusion of realism, Rolfe's work as a whole actualizes the participatory and democratic assumptions about the new Web. Among these assumed characteristics is the closing of the gap between content producers and fans, which stands in stark contrast to Jenkins's example of Lucasfilm mandating the limits of acceptable fan appropriation of Star Wars.<sup>36</sup> Rolfe calls on his fans to actively participate, a level of engagement encouraged by the second-person address of a significant portion of his work. Entire sections of Cinemassacre.com are dedicated to fan-authored content, including AVGN fan art, music, and even video games.<sup>37</sup>



Figure 4: AVGN: Game Over (2008), a video game created by fan Gavin MacLean.  
The "Game Over" screen parodies that of Friday of the 13th.

Not only does the site showcase this content, but Rolfe also engages with his fans' work in a number of ways. The most exemplary instance of this co-authorship is the Nerd's 2008 review of Deadly Towers (Brøderbund, 1987). In addition to its opening credits being composed entirely of fan art accompanied by an aural collage of numerous fan covers of the theme song, all of the episode's dialogue is the product of fans. In one of his most elaborate invitations for participation, Rolfe requested viewers to email him lines of dialogue for possible inclusion in the review.<sup>38</sup> The response was so enthusiastic that over 6,000 emails of dialogue were submitted. Although all of my survey respondents replied that they have never sent any creative materials to Rolfe, seventeen said that they have posted comments to the AVGN videos either at Cinemassacre.com or GameTrailers, which suggests that participation is an integral component to being a fan of his work.

Rolfe has proved an expert in cultivating the inherent participatory nature of his fans. Gamers, who make up a large portion of his audience (only one respondent claimed to “never” play video games), are already accustomed to participating with media. “As an interactive medium,” argues Sean Fenty, “video games give over a great deal of control to players that other media retain in the presentation of their content.”<sup>39</sup> Before the popularization of user-dependent websites like YouTube, gamers had long been blurring the line between media producers and media users. Games such as Doom (id Software, 1993) and Quake (GT Interactive, 1996) allowed players to design and publish their own levels for others to experience, and more recent titles like LittleBigPlanet (SCEA, 2008) and WarioWare D.I.Y. (Nintendo, 2010) even let players create and share entire levels or games. Beyond just games, a number of respondents note that they already are creators of their own content in various online spaces, including YouTube, deviantART, SourceForge, GameFAQs, and ScrewAttack.<sup>40</sup>

This marshalling of participation has empowered and inspired fans. Rolfe has moved some individuals to create their own spin on his film and game criticism. Among these critics, [The Nostalgia Critic](#), [The Irate Gamer](#), and [The Happy Video Game Nerd](#) have even managed to garner their own group of loyal fans. While not all of those whom Rolfe has inspired have gained such a strong degree of recognition, a number of survey respondents and fans commenting on Cinemassacre.com have remarked that they indeed have been inspired. One respondent referred to Rolfe “as an inspirational figure ... working toward his dreams and making wonderful, original movies without much money or the support of studios.” Implicit here is a celebration of not just Rolfe as an artist whose work is motivational, but of Rolfe as a motivational artist because he works outside the commercial mainstream of production culture.

## COMMERCIALIZING WEB 2.0

Despite fans applauding Rolfe for working outside the system, his career trajectory points to the possibility for Web 2.0 era content creators to form ties with media companies while also maintaining creative control and an independent, DIY ethos. Originally premiering on VHS in 2004, Rolfe’s “Bad NES games” videos were first seen by a mainstream audience once uploaded to YouTube on April 8, 2006. After the fourth [Angry Nintendo Nerd](#) episode debuted on April 24, ScrewAttack extended an invitation to Rolfe to host the videos in a dedicated feature section on its website, providing a more direct connection to the gaming community. At first, the videos remained only on ScrewAttack for a week before being posted on YouTube. In February 2007, MTV Networks’s [GameTrailers](#) negotiated a deal with ScrewAttack in which it would exclusively host a number of ScrewAttack’s most popular features, including [The AVGN](#). As part of this arrangement, similar to the film industry’s concept of release “windows,”<sup>41</sup> new [AVGN](#) episodes are available only at GameTrailers for one year, after which Rolfe has the option to upload them to his YouTube channel.<sup>42</sup> Because the episodes on GameTrailers are advertisement-supported, Rolfe notes, “[T]his was the first time I got paid for what I do. It was my big break, you could say.”<sup>43</sup>

This big break followed Rolfe’s own adoption of “big media” techniques. Having already emulated the film industry idea of franchises with [The AVGN](#), he has since created additional series (and potential franchises) with [Board James](#) (in which he reviews board games from his childhood), [Monster Madness](#) (his annual event of horror/science-fiction film reviews, with one video debuting each day throughout October), and [You Know What’s Bullshit?](#) (in which he plays “The Bullshit Man,” who rants about frustrating aspects of American culture, like the need for pennies). To support these various projects, Rolfe began to advertise on Cinemassacre.com. In a blog post dated December 15, 2006, he alerted fans to the introduction of advertisements on his site: “Yep, that’s an ad up there. If you buy ANYTHING through Amazon by clicking on it from my site, you are supporting me.” With this post, he explicitly stated the intention of the advertisements, and, by doing so, called on fans to “support” his work, an action in line with the participatory relationship he has always had with his fan base.<sup>44</sup>

Fans also are able to support Rolfe by buying [merchandise](#), which he introduced in 2007 after deciding to focus on freelance filmmaking as his primary source of income. In a January 13, 2007 blog post, he explained, “If you enjoy watching my videos, I can honestly say I enjoy making them as well, but it’s been very difficult to keep up with them on the side of a full time job. To be able to continue, I need some support. I’m releasing the new 2 minute 50 second theme song as a 99 cent download. T-shirts are coming soon. And after that, a DVD set compilation of all the nerd videos will be done.” After the first [AVGN](#) DVD was released on November 18, 2007, the initial pressing sold out in less than a week, and three more DVD volumes have been released in the time since.



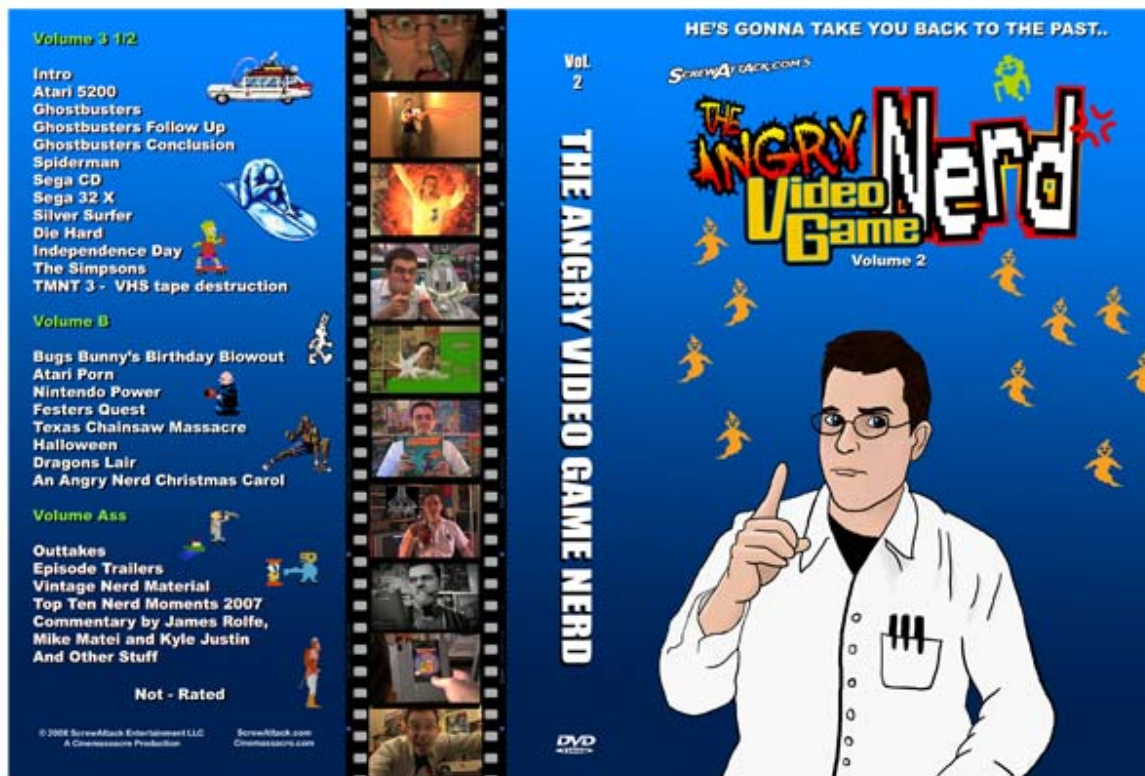


Figure 5: The Angry Video Game Nerd, Volume 2 was released on DVD in 2008.

What is remarkable about so many fans purchasing the DVDs is that the AVGN videos are available to watch online at any time.<sup>45</sup> With the DVDs initially releasing for over \$20 each, it seems likely that fans bought this merchandise to financially support Rolfe as an artist. Although forty-nine of fifty-two respondents claimed to not own any Cinemassacre merchandise, only nine strongly objected to the video advertisements that precede content on Cinemassacre.com. This implies that the majority of his viewers realize that the ads are necessary for Rolfe's work to continue.

It is possible to see connections between the development of Rolfe's career and the development of YouTube. At first a wholly independent filmmaker, Rolph eventually allied himself with a media company as his work became more popular. Besides compensating Rolfe for his AVGN episodes that appear on its GameTrailers site, MTV Networks also owns [Spike.com](http://Spike.com), which hosts Cinemassacre-produced film and television reviews and "Top 10" countdowns (all of which share the same nostalgic appeal of The AVGN). Despite this relationship, Rolph maintains his association with YouTube, where, in February 2008, his channel was the eighth "Most Subscribed." Although his channel today is only the 72nd "Most Subscribed," it still has over 585,000 subscribers. Ironically, the reason for this lower ranking is likely due to the fact that YouTube, initially an independent company, has allied itself with media companies, whose channels now occupy several top "Most Subscribed" and "Most Viewed" positions. Although Google purchased YouTube in 2006 and now works with media corporations, much of the site's content maintains a DIY, amateur aesthetic (even if this aesthetic is found to be professionally fabricated, as was the case with *Lonelygirl15*). Similarly, fans have continued to remain loyal to Rolfe despite his forming a relationship with MTV Networks and his adoption of mainstream media practices because he has been able to maintain creative control and retain a DIY focus.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE AVGN AND ROLFE'S OTHER WORK

Having built a franchise and a fan base with The AVGN, Rolfe has been able to use its popularity to draw attention to his other projects. One author of an online article reports that although gamers may initially have been attracted to the series because of its content, they began watching Rolfe's non-AVGN work in between the release of new episodes: "Like me, other people weren't just AVGN fans anymore, they were James Rolfe fans." As my participation in gaming forums demonstrated, discussion topics within these spaces extend far beyond just video games, as members discuss all aspects of media. Therefore, it is not surprising that those who might have been drawn to The AVGN because of its subject matter have also found themselves drawn to Rolfe's other work, including his short films, documentaries, animation, and other web series. In fact, only six survey respondents (or 11.5%) claimed to not watch any other content available at Cinemassacre.com, and many comments found on the site attest to the notion that The AVGN has given greater exposure to the rest of Rolfe's filmography. A comment to The Deader The Better reads, "I also started with being a avgn fan but

when i saw cinemassacre 300 [[The Dragon in my Dreams](#) (2010), a documentary in which Rolfe explores the initial impetus for his passion for filmmaking] i started to watch every project of cinemassacre." As comments such as this make clear, although the idea began as a joke, [The AVGN](#) has become the driving force behind Rolfe's filmmaking career.

### THE FUTURE OF THE NERD

In [The Dragon in my Dreams](#), Rolfe remarks that he hopes to one day make his first feature film. However, as he found himself needing to devote more and more attention to producing [AVGN](#) videos, with episodes typically debuting once every two weeks, he consequently discovered that he had less and less time to focus on other projects. While he has managed to work on some non-AVGN content since the series became popular in 2006, on March 17, 2010, after eighty-nine episodes, Rolfe announced on his Cinemassacre.com blog that, due to the scheduling pressures of constantly producing new [AVGN](#) videos, the show would begin a less frequent release pattern, with one episode per month. This announcement led some fans to speculate that he was slowly beginning the process of retiring the Nerd character. Much to their surprise, though, on September 21, 2010, Rolfe announced his intent to make a feature film starring the Angry Video Game Nerd. "You got to understand," Rolfe tells his fans, "that making movies has been my life's mission, and that the Nerd series was a side project, or at least at the time it was, and what do you know? It exploded, and it took on a life of its own." Although he admits that it had always been his intention to adapt the series into a film, it is nonetheless ironic that this side project has not only created a fan base that has brought attention to his other work, but that it also is allowing him to realize his dream.

### CONCLUSION

Like Rolfe, many media producers are seeing the benefits of building closer relationships with fans. San Diego Comic Con, for instance, has increasingly become a major event for film studios since the first convention was held in 1970. Hollywood has even experimented, to differing degrees of success, with incorporating fan participation. Arguably beginning with "The Beast," an alternate reality game (ARG) designed for [A.I.: Artificial Intelligence](#) (2001), subsequent ARGs created for films, television series, music albums, and video games extend the experience of the product while also functioning as promotion. As 42 Entertainment's "Why So Serious" ARG for [The Dark Knight](#) (2008) showed, the success of any ARG depends largely on its ability to harness fan participation, even though the fans' collaboration might not be evident in the central product around which the game is built. A notable example of Hollywood attempting to more directly incorporate fan participation took place in 2006 when, after the concept of [Snakes on a Plane](#) (2006) became an Internet phenomenon prior to its release, the film was re-tailored with re-shot footage and even a vulgar, fan-authored catchphrase for star Samuel L. Jackson.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, however, this fan service had little impact on the film's domestic box office, which totaled about \$34 million.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps because of this film's infamous financial failure, incorporating fan-produced content has yet to become a common Hollywood practice.

Rolfe, on the other hand, has found success in channeling the participatory nature of Web 2.0. By doing so, he has cultivated a dedicated fan base for [The Angry Video Game Nerd](#), which, in turn, has brought exposure to his greater filmography and allowed him to develop a relationship with MTV Networks. While being a fan of Rolfe for some is due to a perception of his working outside the mainstream, for others it is the idea that he has achieved his "big break." For this latter group, Rolfe's career actualizes the Web 2.0 dream of forming professional ties while simultaneously challenging the corporate production culture by maintaining creative control. Perhaps these fans identify not so much with the Angry Video Game Nerd, but with James Rolfe himself as an artist who has managed to achieve success on his own terms.



Figure 6: One fan's response to The Deader the Better (from Cinemassacre.com).

## NOTES

1. Grossman, Lev. "Time's Person of the Year: You." Time. 13 December 2006.
2. Ibid.
3. Gray, Jonathan. Show Sold Separately. New York: New York University Press, 2010. 164.
4. Ibid., 163.
5. Burgess, Jean and Joshua Green. "How YouTube Matters." YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009. 14.
6. Henry Jenkins. Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture. New York: Routledge, 2006. 1.
7. Ibid. 1.
8. Ibid. 3.
9. Ibid. 4.
10. Busse, Kristina and Karen Hellekson. "Introduction: Work in Progress." Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays. Eds. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006. 11-12.
11. This "lurker" position, however, is certainly more respected than that of a novice, or what gamers would call a "n00b."
12. "GiantBomb.com ~ Video Game Reviews, News, Videos & Forums – Giant Bomb," accessed November 22, 2010, <http://www.giantbomb.com/>.
13. As writing in online discussion forums and blogs tends to be highly informal, I have opted to maintain the original character of the writing by not correcting the grammar and by not including [sic].
14. Jenkins, 6.
15. When citing video games, I parenthetically list the North American publisher and year of release.
16. O'Reilly, Tim. "What is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software," last modified September 30, 2005, accessed November 19, 2010. <http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>.
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18. Burgess and Green, 1.
19. Anderson, 140.
20. Rolfe, James. "Filmography," accessed November 23, 2010, <http://www.cinemassacre.com/2006/04/08/filmography/>.
21. Ibid.
22. Rolfe, "Cinemassacre.com 10 Year Anniversary." 8 April 2010. <http://www.cinemassacre.com/2010/04/08/cinemassacre-com-10-year-anniversary/>.

23. Frustrated, for instance, by the fact that the playable character, Simon Belmont, dies from touching water, Rolfe's character observes, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever seen. This guy can go all over fighting hordes of evil monsters, but he can't even fucking swim?"
24. Rolfe's character offers the following justification for appearing on-screen: "With Simon's Quest, you heard the sincerity in my voice. But now see the sincerity in my eyes."
25. This name change also facilitated merchandising of the franchise without the threat of facing accusations of copyright infringement from Nintendo.
26. Entertainment Software Association, "2010 Sales, Demographics and Usage Data: Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry" (2010), PDF.
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29. Ang, Ien. Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination. New York: Routledge, 1985. 9.
30. Guffey, Elizabeth E. Retro: The Culture of Revival. London: Reaktion, 2006, 9. 11.
31. Rolfe, "FAQ."
32. Guffey, 10.
33. Camper, Brett. "Retro Reflexivity: La-Mulana, an 8-Bit Period Piece." The Video Game Theory Reader 2. Eds. Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf. New York: Routledge, 2009. 187.
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35. Taylor and Whalen, 6.
36. Jenkins, 30-31.
37. Although a corresponding hyperlink is no longer included on Cinemassacre.com, there also exists Angry Video Game Nerd fan fiction, including Charles Xavier's "Angry Video Game Nerd Saves Kingdom Hearts!"
38. Similarly, in 2010, Rolfe requested fans to submit their own vocal recordings to be included in the introduction of Monster Madness.
39. Fenty, Sean. "Why Old School is 'Cool': A Brief Analysis of Classic Video Game Nostalgia." Whalen and Taylor, eds., 19-31.
40. While all of these examples of participation seem to suggest that the relationship between media producers and fans is developing into one of equality, Jenkins reminds us that "[n]ot all participants are created equal" as some "may have different degrees of status and influence" (see Jenkins, Convergence Culture: When Old and New Media Collide, 3). For example, the creation of much online content, especially video, requires specialized technology that not all fans may possess. This prerequisite access to technology is demonstrated in a young fan's comment posted in response to Rolfe's The Deader The Better: "I tried to make an action movie with my 13 year-old friend, but i don't know how to digitally edit. Where do you get a computer studio for that?"
41. This concept refers to the scheduling strategy by which a studio will release a film in theaters before carrying it to home video, video rental, pay-per-view, premium cable (HBO, Starz, etc.), and, finally, to broadcast television.
42. However, even these post-February 2007 episodes still contain advertising when uploaded to YouTube, as they each begin with a title card proclaiming that the episode had previously premiered on GameTrailers and conclude with a screen that includes the GameTrailers logo and URL. For reasons not yet revealed, the 2010 AVGN Christmas Special (How the Nerd Stole Christmas) is the only episode since February 2007 to have debuted on YouTube.
43. Rolfe, "FAQ."
44. Fans are also able to support Rolfe with donations through a PayPal account, whose hyperlink is included at the top of Cinemassacre.com.
45. It is worth noting that each DVD volume contains a plethora of extra material, including "making-of" documentaries and outtakes.
46. Sharon Waxman, "'Snakes': A Letdown After Hype on the Web." The New York Times, 21 August 2006.
47. "Snakes on a Plane (2006) – Box Office Mojo." <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=snakesonaplane.htm>.



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