

# Tampa Bay Comic Con and the Emergence of Public Nerdom



This weekend, I was elected the most amazing aunt in the world.

The Tampa Bay Comic Con was happening downtown, and I piled my sister's kids, aged 11 and 6, in the car and made the trek..

Luckily, we didn't have any swords or plasma rifles for the security guards to inspect, so we walked right in.

You should have seen those kids' eyes light up. We found ourselves in an unusual situation, a plainclothes minority in a world of wizards, monsters, space travelers, and superheroes. Every multiversal iteration of Spider-Man was present, together with five or six different Deadpools, an anti-hero with increasing popularity thanks to an impending major film release. Daredevil was there—would you prefer the classic costume from the comics or the one from the recent Netflix series?—and so was Iron Man, with each piece of armor lovingly crafted from high-density foam. If you're nostalgic for the 80s, you'll be happy to hear that I spotted at least

six different Ghostbusters, all with film-accurate, homemade proton packs that would have made any specter shudder. Even Spock was there, the spitting image of the late Leonard Nimoy in both appearance and gravitas. The kids took photos with all of them and more.

Since all I could muster was a Captain America t-shirt, I felt a little self-conscious. I was not a nerd at all. To these people, I was an outsider; an observer of their culture, not a member. I was merely partaking, not invested. I was a stranger in their domain, an alternate universe where vibrant costumes were the norm.

Isn't it fascinating that a place like this could even exist?

"Nerd culture has become prominent. It's all around us," I was told by Sexy Mario, one of the cosplayers specially invited to the convention.

If you met Sexy Mario outside of comic-con, you might never suspect his alternate identity. A mild-mannered professor at the Art Institute of Tampa, the Sexy Mario persona started as a joke with his students—but when the Internet discovered him, he gained a following that he enjoys interacting with year after year. "Tampa Bay Comic Con is great. There's a nice crowd. It's well-organized. Everyone is really nice, pleasant, friendly."

He admitted that events like this are a relatively new phenomenon. "Comic book fans are not 'in the closet' any more. A lot of the people here are college students. Maybe they've always been fans, but they just were afraid to say it.

"When I was in high school, I was on the football team, and my 'nerdity' was hidden away. Today, it's loud and proud."

Nerd Bunny, another featured cosplay guest, concurred. "Nerd culture has changed. 'Nerd' was an insult. Now it's an identity. I watch anime and read comic books. These used to be seen as the kinds of things only hermits and introverts would do, not the 'cool' people. But there has been a shift in our culture: it's now cool to be nerdy."

And you know what? These people were cool. Everyone was friendly and gracious to the kids when they asked for photos. And boy, were they the kings of photos. Daredevil pretended he was losing a fight to the six year old. SNAP! Deadpool threw out one-liners and slapped high-fives. FLASH!

Two dozen photo ops later, the kids were still just as excited as when we came in.

Seen in their natural habitat, these self-proclaimed nerds couldn't have been any farther from the stereotype. They had charisma, they had vision, and, most of all, they were fun to be around.

"There are a lot of smart, talented people here who are dressing up in costumes and having a good time," Sexy Mario pointed out. All of the attendees I spoke to, from students to construction workers to professional entertainers, said that they spent time building their costumes and dressing up because they enjoyed it. The proof was the awesome attitudes and broad smiles each of them possessed.

"You come into a place like this and you don't have to feel ashamed to be nerdy," said Lee, one of the Ghostbusters. "That's my favorite part."

This cultural shift is not limited to the hundreds of comic conventions and anime expos that take place all over the country, though. "Nerd culture" has seeped into the mainstream—and it appears to be here to stay.

"I think more people are getting into it and finding out that it's more than just a movie, more than just a book, whatever," observed Shirley, another of the featured cosplay guests. She wore an impressive *Guardians of the Galaxy* Star-Lord costume. "They are finding out that it's a lot deeper. They are exploring more. It's become a lot easier to be a nerd these days, and more people are choosing to identify themselves that way."

Another Star-Lord, Michael, agreed. "People aren't afraid to be a nerd now. I remember when I was in high school, people were like, 'You watch anime? You're weird!' Now those same people are asking me whether I've seen 'the new one,' and I'm like, 'I don't even know what that one is yet! Where did you find it?'

“People no longer care what other people think, so they just do what they want to do and have fun.”

According to Kenzie, a USF Marine Biology major who had painted herself green from head to toe as She-Hulk, “A few years ago, it wasn’t acceptable to dress up and be a nerd. But now, even the football players and jocks who made fun of you in high school are dressing up and coming to these things.”

What caused this shift? The attendees had their own ideas.

“I think the Marvel feature films have a lot to do with it,” contended Sexy Mario.

He has a point. With multiple films setting box office records, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has brought the world of comic book superheroes to the forefront of popular culture. They’ve introduced the masses to comic books, a medium they had previously dismissed as “dorky.”

Thomas, a University of North Florida student from Jacksonville, pointed to a deeper cause. “People are more open about what they like, and more open-minded about others’ interests. When I was in high school, people didn’t respect nerd culture. They’d hush it away, but then they’d go and do their own nerdy things on the weekend in secret. Now it’s out in the open.”

No one I met had more experience than Cody, who works at over 40 conventions a year for the vendor Blade Daddy, a purveyor of replica swords. I spoke to him while buying my nephews each a *Legend of Zelda* Master Sword and one of Deadpool’s trademark katanas. Never fear! They were made of foam!

“Everyone shares things now,” Cody said, referring to social media. “If one person is watching *Game of Thrones*, everyone is watching *Game of Thrones*. Everyone has access to the same giant library of media, and they are discovering stuff they never would have found otherwise.”

The result?

“This culture, it’s booming. Attendance at conventions is growing, and they are getting bigger.”

Even on a local level, the Tampa Bay Comic Con has grown from being stuffed into a small venue—a hotel lobby—to filling out the huge downtown convention center, all in the space of a few years. They continue to improve, drawing bigger and better guests every year. This convention boasted appearances from *The Terminator*’s Linda Hamilton, as well as *The Hunger Games*’ Jena Malone, *Doctor Who*’s Freema Agyeman, and Princess Leia herself, Carrie Fisher.

According to Nerd Bunny, who has worked at conventions all over Florida, “The Tampa Bay Comic Con has a great reputation.”

There’s merchandise and artwork you can’t get anywhere else, as well as plenty to do and see, so don’t miss next year’s event—even if you just go to check out all of the costumes.

“My favorite part is the people watching,” said Steven, a dude dressed in an ankle-length robe and carrying a five-foot long model sword—an outfit based on *Naruto* character Zabuzza. He didn’t fail to see the irony, laughing, “Even if I am one myself.”

After a full day of comic book adventure, we left the convention center and headed home. Along the way, we spotted Venom and the Punisher walking down Channelside Drive, followed by a crew of *Kingdom Hearts* Keyblade warriors.

*Good for you, I thought to myself. Today, you are the coolest people in Tampa Bay.*

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