

## Tracking *Geekus Unixus*: An Explorers' Report from the *National Geographic* Website

Tom Chmielewski and Barry Wellman  
Department of Sociology, University of Toronto  
contact info: wellman @ chass.utoronto.ca

January 2, 2000

For Publication in *SIGGROUP Bulletin*, Winter 2000

### In Search of *Geekus Unixus*

Many readers of *SIGGROUP Bulletin* know the *National Geographic* magazine, with its yellow covers, nifty maps, and wonderful photographs. The *National Geographic* also has a website (<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/>). As part of its millennium celebration, National Geographic Interactive mounted a web-survey between Labor Day and (US) Thanksgiving Day 1998. All 4 million visitors to the site were invited to participate. A sizable number did so: 46,350 North American adults (18+) -- 40,851 Americans and 5,499 Canadians -- along with 13,215 adults from other countries.

Our research group (including Keith Hampton and Mac Parks) have had principal responsibility for the internet, participation and social network components of this survey. Our undergraduate member, Tom Chmielewski, thought it would be fun to see how Unix users differ from others.

Unix users *are* different from Windows and Macintosh users. (Despite the myth of Mac exceptionalism, preliminary analysis did not find any substantive differences between Mac and Windows users.) In the rest of this field guide, we compare *Geekus Unixus* with WinMac users. We caution that visitors to the *National Geographic* site are not a representative sample of Internet users, and that those who chose to answer this survey may not be a representative sample of visitors to the site. Given the nature of the web-site, survey respondents probably are more family-oriented and more concerned with foreign cultures than are other *Geekus Unixus* roaming the wild Internet. Please interpret generalizations to other *Geekus Unixus* populations with caution.

We limit our report to North America, as Internet foraging conditions are different elsewhere (paying for connect time by-the-hour, etc.) Remember that *Geekus Unixus* is but a species of the genus *Geekus*. Many other *Geekus* species lurk in the Mac, Windows (especially the NT sub-species), and the rarely-sighted OS/2 and Amiga habitats. This is but a preliminary report on Unix users, so that you will recognize the species when you see it in the wild. Except for the "anomie scale," the large sample size means that all differences between the two species are statistically significant.

### Field Identification of *Geekus Unixus*

***Geekus Unixus is a rare beast.*** Of the 46,350 North American adults who answered the survey, only 1% (308) principally use the Unix platform as compared to 89% (41,468) who use Windows and 10% (4,497) who use Macs.

***You can't differentiate *Geekus Unixus* from WinMacs by the color of the coats.*** They are almost always pinkish-white: 87% for Unix users and 94% for WM. You may have better luck spotting a rapidly-proliferating red-hatted sub-species of *Geekus Unixus* that is building huge nests by means of a strange breeding device called an "IPO".

***Males Predominate.*** While WinMacs had nearly equal numbers of males and females (53% male v. 47% female), Unixus is unusually dominated by males (70%). Like other male-dominated, predominately-celibate sects, *Geekus Unixus* reproduces primarily through indoctrination and conversion.

***Geekus Unixus is wary of mating.*** Where only 48% of Unix users are married (or living together), 60% of the more docile WinMacs are so cohabiting. We suspect *Geekus Unixus* mates only once a lifetime, if at all.

***Geekus Unixus is young.*** Unix users must be breeding rapidly, as their mean age (33) is much younger than those for WinMacs (39). Possibly, they die at a young age due to an overdose of Coca-Cola. Legend has it that many even mutate into WinMacs when they turn 40.

***Geekus Unixus is a seasoned resident of its habitat.*** Despite their youth, only 3% of Unix users were “newbies” to the Internet (using it the first time within the last 6 months) as compared to 12% of the WinMacs. Indeed, fully 86% of Unix users have been using the Internet for more than 2 years as compared to 58% of the WinMacs. Scientists have found members of *Geekus Unixus* preserved in amber along with hardware dating back to the ARPANET years.

***Geekus Unixus often frequents the underbrush of university habitats during their prolonged pre-adult period.*** 36% of Unix users have a graduate degree, while only 23% of the WinMac species have the same. One third (32%) of Unix users were enrolled in full or part-time studies as compared to only one-quarter (24%) of the WinMacs. This may explain one of the dominance calls of *Geekus Unixus*: “I think, therefore I use Unix.”

***Geekus Unixus is fond of “green” solutions.*** Ninety-one percent of Unix users are gainfully employed with full or part-time jobs as compared to 75% of WinMacs.

***Geekus Unixus is a technocrat.*** Just about all of the Unix users have technical or professional jobs. Typical occupations are computer engineer, neuroscientist, doctoral student, modeller, technical editor, mechanical engineer, and university professor. Out of the more than three hundred we studied, the exceptions can be counted on one hand: a mail carrier, a factory worker, a fast food restaurant worker, and a pizza delivery driver. We suspect that these four are working while in apprenticeship nerd programs.

Alpha males are often called “SysAdmins” and are distinguished by their cry, “NT stinks,” referring to an aggressive sub-species that is trying to invade their habit. (The federal government is trying to develop a pesticide against this sub-species.)

## **Behavioral Patterns of *Geekus Unixus***

***Geekus Unixus lives on the Internet.*** They rarely stray from their screens: 44% use the Internet daily as compared with only 24% of the WinMacs.

***Geekus Unixus avoids Microsoft traps.*** It is difficult to find Unix users at a Microsoft watering hole (perhaps they are fearful of the Gates-asaurus Rex known to devour whole operating systems in a single meal). Not one Unix user uses *Internet Explorer*, 99% use *Netscape*, while a few use other browsers. By contrast, 26% of WinMacs use *Internet Explorer*, 74% use *Netscape*, and a few use other browsers.

***Geekus Unixus communicates node-to-node.*** Although Unix users are similar in behavior to WinMacs when it comes to sending cards, telephoning or meeting friends face-to-face, they differ in communicating with friends online. Eighteen percent of Unix users email daily to friends who live more than 30 miles away, whilst only 12% of WinMacs do this. More than one-third (35%) of Unix users email daily to friends living within 30 miles, as compared to 19% of the WinMacs.

***Geekus Unixus is rarely seen off-line.*** As a day only has 24 hours, the great amount of time that Unix users spend online means that they do much less recreation offline. Only 18% of Unix users say they "often" participate in offline recreation, as compared to 26% of the WinMacs. This is one of the few places where Mac users differ from Win users. 30% of Mac users "often" participate in offline recreation as compared to 25% of Win users. We believe that *Geekus Unixus* uses his scarce time offline to watch his favorite movie online: *Revenge of the Nerds*.

***Barry Manilow is a Geekus Unixus repellent.*** Only one-third (36%) of Unix users say they like Easy Listening music as compared with more than half (54%) of the WinMacs. A somewhat lower percentage (26%) of Unix users like country and western music than the WinMacs (32%). However, both species have roughly similar musical tastes in other respects. The majority of *Geekus Unixus* likes contemporary rock (60%) and jazz (61%) as compared to 66% and 62% of the WinMacs. Moreover, a majority of both species share a similar dislike: 61% of Unix users and 62% of the WinMacs dislike Rap/Hip-Hop.

***Geekus Unixus is an Individualist.*** Unix users have somewhat less sense of community -- including online community -- than do WinMacs (see Table 1). Both Unix users and WinMacs feel a somewhat greater sense of community online than they do in the "real world." *Geekus Unixus* belongs to slightly fewer clubs or organizations, a mean of 3.0 as compared to the WinMacs' 3.2. For example, only 23% of Unix users are part of a religious groups as compared to 38% of WinMacs. There are some exceptions: Reflecting their occupations, 54% of Unix users are members of academic or professional societies as compared to 40% of WinMacs. Both groups rarely join computer clubs: 11% of Unix users and 7% of WinMacs.

> Table 1 about here <

Unix users also have slightly less civic involvement than WinMac: *Geekus Unixus* has a mean of only 2.0 civic involvements out of the 13 we asked about, while WinMacs have a slightly higher mean of 2.4. The most popular activity was signing a petition: 44% of Unix users and 48% of WinMacs have done so. Thus the typical civic behavior of both species is to sign an occasional petition plus participating in one other activity. While a higher percentage of Unix users engaged in online political discussion (21%) than WinMacs (15%), this is still a small minority of both species.

***Geekus Unixus is an optimist.*** Unix users are not socially alienated in their attitudes. Although not heavily engaged in community, organizational or civic affairs, they feel as positive about society as do WinMacs. Both species have a positive mean score of 5.0 (out of 7.0) on the standard 5-item Srole *anomie* scale. Both usually disagree with statements such as "I cannot make sense of what's going on in the world" and agree with statements such as "The world is becoming a better place for everyone".

## Encountering *Geekus Unixus* in the Wild

This concludes our Field Guide to *Geekus Unixus*. You now have the right tools to spot this rare species. We have received some recent reports that many are mutating, growing an extra Palm. If you happen to encounter a *Geekus Unixus*, don't be alarmed. But chose your approach carefully: *Geekus Unixus* has been known to behave erratically when hearing the cry of "Y2K"!

**Table 1: Community, Organizational Involvement, Civic Involvement and Alienation**

|  | <i>Geekus Unixus</i> | <i>WinMacs</i> |
|--|----------------------|----------------|
| <b>Sense of Online Community <sup>a</sup></b>  | 4.2                  | 4.6            |
| <b>Sense of General Community <sup>b</sup></b> | 3.9                  | 4.2            |
| <b>Clubs Joined <sup>c</sup></b>               | 3.0                  | 3.2            |
| <b>Civic Involvements <sup>d</sup></b>         | 2.0                  | 2.4            |
| <b>Anomie <sup>e</sup></b>                     | 5.0                  | 5.0            |

<sup>a</sup> Calculated from a three-item scale, where each item was coded between 1=strongly agree to 7=strongly disagree. The higher the score, the greater the sense of community, with some items recoded in reverse to facilitate scaling.

<sup>b</sup> Calculated from a four-item scale, where each item was coded between 1=strongly agree to 7=strongly disagree. The higher the score, the greater the sense of community, with some items recoded in reverse to facilitate scaling.

<sup>c</sup> Count of number of types of clubs belonged to, out of a maximum of 20.

<sup>d</sup> Count of number of types of civic involvements, out of a maximum of 13.

<sup>e</sup> Mean score on standard Srole anomie scale. A mean score of 1 = strongly negative towards society and a score of 7 = strongly positive towards society.