

## **Nerds, Curdled**

Why are modern business tycoons like this?

[George Dillard](#)



[Screenshot](#) from Mark Zuckerberg's Instagram

Say what you want about the robber barons, but at least they weren't weird.

In the previous [Gilded Age](#), men like John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and Cornelius Vanderbilt created immense business empires through often immoral means. They made their employees work in unsafe conditions, used violence to break strikes, and deployed their wealth to purchase political favors. They didn't all behave well in their personal lives. But they did seem like adults.

I was thinking about the robber barons the other day when reading about Mark Zuckerberg's latest announcements about changes at Meta (in which he essentially [agreed](#) to a wish list of changes supported by Donald Trump and his supporters). In his announcement video, Zuckerberg sports the new look he's been testing out in recent months. No more hoodie and jeans — now he's got a [\\$900,000 watch](#), a gold chain, longer hair, and designer T-shirts.

Some see this transformation as Zuckerberg embracing a sophisticated [style](#), but to me, it reads like he's Going Through Something. Here's a middle-aged man, one of the most wealthy and influential people in the world, dressing like a trust-fund frat boy out for a night at the club. Zuckerberg has, in addition to exploring new frontiers in style, beefed himself up and become fascinated with mixed martial arts. He speculated about fighting Elon Musk and told [Joe Rogan](#) that he wants to participate in a UFC bout someday. I'm not the only one who thinks it's not really working:



Jamelle Bouie on [Bluesky](#)

It's not just Zuck. It seems that all of the world's richest, most powerful men are Going Through Something. While Zuckerberg's wealth is estimated at \$212 billion, he's only #3 on the [list](#) of the world's wealthiest people.

Above him is Jeff Bezos, who has spent the last few years transforming himself from the goofy [geek](#) who founded Amazon into a musclebound, [workout-obsessed](#) guy who loves to show off his guns. He ditched his seemingly very nice first wife (who has since [devoted](#) herself to giving away her wealth to worthy causes rather than buying yachts or building rockets) and started to live a much more ostentatious lifestyle with his new girlfriend. One press report [described](#) Bezos' transformation as "the midlife crisis to end them all."

And, of course, the world's wealthiest man, Elon Musk (net worth: over \$400 billion), has been having a totally normal one over the last few years. The list of his erratic and immature behaviors is too long and too well-known for me to bother listing them here. But let me ask you this — could you imagine John D. Rockefeller or Andrew Carnegie asking people to call them "[Kekius Maximus](#)?"

So what's the deal with these titans of industry? Why can't our evil corporate overlords be like the top-hatted robber barons of yore, who were awful human beings but at least seemed like serious adults?

My theory is that this is what happens when nerdy boys get everything they want.

First, let me establish my bona fides. I know what it is to be a nerdy young man. Growing up in the 1980s and '90s, I spent all my disposable income on computers and computer games. In middle school, I carried the thickest library books I could find (thanks, Stephen King) to let everyone know how smart I was. I filled out my share of role-playing game character sheets.

As a teacher, I've taught generation after generation of bright, nerdy boys. Like I did at a young age, they love to show off their knowledge. Unable to dominate their peers physically or socially, they try to do so intellectually. This usually takes the form of volume

and velocity: knowing more stuff and saying it more quickly than anyone else. These are the kids who race to finish a test first because they believe everyone will see them walk to the front of the room to turn it in and say to themselves: “Jimmy’s done already? He must be smart!” (Pro tip, kids: this is probably not what everyone else is thinking)

There’s nothing wrong with this, of course. It’s a phase of development. These boys are just kids, and part of our job as educators and parents is to help them learn that there’s a difference between knowledge and wisdom, that the person who speaks the fastest and the loudest isn’t always the one with the most interesting things to say. Most nerdy boys have to grow up, often painfully, and realize that there are a lot of ways to be a smart and valuable person.

What if I had gotten insanely rich and powerful before I had the chance to learn these lessons? More importantly, what if I had come to believe that some of my worst nerdy instincts were the reason for my success?

Sometimes I look at these business tycoons and I wonder whether they’re stuck. They’re bright young nerds who never really had to grow up. They still believe that being quick and clever — whether or not they’re wise — is what matters.

Now, having become the richest people in the history of the world, they have the resources to indulge their fantasies. They want to go to space, of course — a classic nerdy teenage boy fantasy. They openly [cite](#) as inspiration the type of science-fiction book that boys devour (but often outgrow in adulthood). They base their ideas about human history (which they now help to shape) on *Civilization* and the other [video games](#) of their youth.

For a while, this was enough, but now they seem to be devoted to making themselves into the cool guys they couldn’t be in high school. They use their resources to make themselves [physically stronger](#), getting beefier than the bullies who may have tormented them in middle school. They slavishly court the popularity that may have been hard for them to enjoy as young

men, with Musk going so far as to buy himself a social network and then [tune](#) its algorithm to make everyone listen to him.

It's all so disappointingly shallow, like a lot of nerd culture. Erik Hoel has [written](#) about how adult nerds seem not to be embracing deeper intellectualism the way previous generations did:

*That's what some segment of nerds should be doing, metamorphosing from nerd into that more delicate but potent creature, the intellectual, but instead they are drawn to the easy honeypot of modern middlebrow culture because it is too nerdy, too attractive, too omnipresent, to ever leave. A key portion of nerds are supposed to complete a lifecycle and pupate into fancy-pants intellectuals, yet this natural process has been stymied by the very success of nerds in the first place. Looking around me at the rising "thought-leaders" (what a term) of my generation, the millennials, I see mostly either overly-political academics or ex-academics, or, on the other side, anti-intellectual populists. I feel a certain lack, an empty space where a particular kind of person should be — all those who used to read comic books but now want to do something more substantial culturally with their minds and their tastes.*

These tycoons are proof of Hoel's argument; they're plenty smart but not that interesting or deep. They indulge in surface-level displays of intellectual prowess and cartoonish fantasies. They literally want to be astronauts or action-movie heroes or ultimate fighters the way a 12-year-old would. They never seem to have learned that depth is more important than speed, that kindness is more important than cleverness, that complexity is usually better than simplicity.

In many ways, they're doing exactly what I would have done if I had become fabulously wealthy and powerful as a young nerd before I had to grow up.

It is possible for nerdy young business titans to grow up to be normal adults.

Bill Gates, who for many years exhibited many of the geeky attributes and ruthless business practices that these other guys have, doesn't seem to have gone through a very public midlife



crisis. In fact, he's even found a way to make himself into a reasonably respected philanthropist and civic leader. His philanthropy isn't perfect, but I'll take the sober, serious corporate overlord who takes climate change seriously and spends his money on mosquito nets for malaria-stricken areas over the guys who fantasize about Mars colonies and brag about their prowess at video games any day of the week.

So what happened to Bezos, Zuckerberg, and Musk? Is it the culture of the modern tech industry, where it's considered clever to name things after Lord of the Rings and other books that most people read in middle or high school? Is it the internet, which allows wealthy people to bask in the adulation of millions of lonely, stunted fanboys? Is it the general decline of seriousness as an aspirational goal for American adults?

I'm not entirely sure, but I do know one thing: when I see Zuck in his expensive streetwear, Bezos flexing his biceps among the supermodels, or Elon engaging in late-night "edgy" banter with his online fans, I see through the facade. I understand that they're nerds who never really had to grow up and, instead, have curdled into a sort of self-parody.

I wouldn't want the fate of the world to be in the hands of my teenage self, and neither would you, had you known me. But I fear that this is exactly what we're in for in this age of the Nerd Robber Baron.