

PLAYING PONIES:
A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS AND GENDER POLITICS AT
WORK IN “BRONY” FANDOM

by

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ABSTRACT

JUSTIN PHILLIP MULLIS. *Playing Ponies: A critical evaluation of religious elements and gender politics at work in “Brony” fandom.* (Under the direction of DR. KENT BRINTNALL)

This work aims to illuminate the cultural institution of the fandom by approaching it from the vantage point of Religious Studies while seeking to avoid the obvious similarities of devotion and social organization so often brought to the table with regards to the study of fandom and religion. By eschewing such facile analogues my aim is to offer a fresh take on the subject by instead drawing out the internal mechanisms which animate and propel both religious and fandom based groups to action while arguing that fandoms can be understood as functioning in ways which are similar, if not identical, to the practices of organized religions, thus constituting what scholar Robert M. Price has called “recreational religious activity.”

To better illustrate this argument this work will focus its attention on one fandom in particular, the relatively nascent group known as Bronies; or adult male fans of the hit animated TV show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010-Present). Since their inception Bronies have become figures of much media attention, attracting primarily positive but also occasionally negative commentary, as well as numerous misconceptions about their attraction to the show, their fan activities, and the internal gender politics at work within the group. This work aims to clarify these issues as well.

DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this work to my mother and father, Deborah and Phillip Mullis, who believed in the importance of both my education and that of my sister, Christa, when no one else did and who fought to make it a reality for the both of us. Thank you, and know that you have my full support now as you go out and help other kid's dreams of an education also become a reality. And a second thank you to my whole family – mom, dad, and Christa – for believing in me and my work and always encouraging me, no matter how weird the subject matter of my studies got, this present study included.

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I would like to acknowledge the contributions of my committee members Dr. Kent Brintnall, Dr. Joseph Winters, and Dr. Eric Hoenes for lending me and my work their continued expertise, insights, and critiques. I also wish to acknowledge Dr. Sean McCloud who originally pushed me towards the subject that is at the heart of this current exploration of the complex relationship which I believe exists between the institutions of religion and fandom. I also wish to acknowledge everyone in the Brony fandom who lent me their time and voices and allowed me to interview them for this project – your contributions are truly invaluable. I also wish to acknowledge Dr. Patrick W. Galbraith of Duke University whose work on Japanese *moé* culture not only proved highly influential but who was also kind enough to exchange e-mails with me and send me research materials relating to this present study. Finally I also wish to acknowledge my friend and colleague Mary Hamner. Not long after Sean recommended this topic to me I tried to foist it off on Mary. She was interested but ultimately decided not to pursue it. I'm happy she didn't, as this has come to be some of the most enjoyable and fulfilling research I have ever undertaken.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: OF BOURDIEU AND BRONIES	1
1.1 Investigative Methods	5
1.2 Disclosure	8
CHAPTER 2: A MOVE TOWARDS A RELIGIOUS STUDIES UNDERSTANDING OF FANS AND FAN CULTURES	12
2.1 Fandoms as “Recreational Religious Activity”	12
2.2 What it means to be a “Fan”	14
2.3 The Playful Process of Subjunctive “As-If” World Making	22
2.4 “Play” Theory	25
2.5 Tanya Luhrmann and Sato Ikuya: Play Gets Real	30
2.6 Why Children’s Media? Transitional Objects as the Building Blocks of Myth	37
2.7 Concluding Thoughts	40
CHAPTER 3: AN EXAMINATION OF “BRONY” FANDOM	43
3.1 Birth of a Show	43
3.2 Rise of a Fandom	45
3.3 Bronies as “Reluctant Insiders”	56
3.4 Straight from the Horse’s Mouth: My Little Pony and Edification	59
3.5 Bronies in the Media: Positive and Negative	65
3.6 Brony Masculinity and The Male Colonization of a “Girl’s Show”	78
3.7 Pony Proselytization	80
3.8 Interview Interlude: <i>My Little Pony</i> and the “Sentai of Friendship”	87

3.9 The Sexualization of <i>My Little Pony</i>	93
3.10 Of <i>Otaku</i> and Bronies	102
3.11 Equestrian Economics	123
3.12 Hyper-Masculinity and Colt-Fandom	130
3.13 Conclusions	138
BIBLIOGRAPHY	142

CHAPTER 1: OF BOURDIEU AND BRONIES

In an August 2012 article on “superfans” for the entertainment website *Zimbo*, associate editor Adam Wenger wrote: “When it comes to superfans, few are as misunderstood as the Bronies — ‘bros’ who unabashedly love an animated cartoon created to entertain little girls.”¹ The “cartoon” in question here is American toy and game mogul Hasbro’s *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* which premiered on October 10th, 2010 on the then Hasbro-owned cable network channel The Hub (currently Discovery Family, having reverted back to its original owners) and recently concluded its fourth season with a fifth in production.

As Wenger eludes the target demographic for *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* is elementary school age girls and possibly their moms; nostalgic for their 1980s youth. What Hasbro never expected however was that in addition to capturing the imaginations of young girls the show would also receive an “overwhelmingly positive response... from the unusual demographic of mostly 20-something, mostly white men.”² These adult male fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, known as Bronies, say the reason they enjoy the show is its interesting stories, attractive characters, catchy songs, beautiful animation, and positive

¹ Adam Wenger, “Bronies: Why It’s Totally Okay for a 20-Something Dude to Love ‘My Little Pony’” *Zimbo* (24 Aug. 2012) <http://www.zimbo.com/TV+News/articles/OonIKQ2bNCo/Bronies+Totally+Okay+20+Something+Dude+Love>

² Melody Wilson, “D.C. ‘bronies’ feel the love and friendship of ‘My Little Pony’” *The Washington Post* (6 April 2012) http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/dc-bronies-feel-the-love-and-friendship-of-my-little-pony/2012/04/06/g!QAajwc0S_story.html

outlook devoid of cynicism³ - elements for which the show has been routinely praised for by various critics.⁴

Nevertheless, there will undoubtedly be those who are still baffled as to why grown men would be attracted to a show like *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, even given its apparent positive attributes. In the face of such a conundrum many may simply decide that the best recourse is to throw up their arms and invoke the old truism that ‘There’s no accounting for taste’ and that the entertainment preferences of certain individuals are simply inscrutable. However such a recourse, I feel, would be a great injustice to the Bronies as well as any and all consumers of media as I firmly stand behind the contentions of acclaimed sociologist Pierre Bourdieu that an individuals’ tastes in art and entertainment can indeed be accounted for, as such aesthetic “preferences,” be they “in literature, painting, or music” or “clothing, furniture or cookery” are, like those of their religion and politics, almost always “the product of upbringing and education,” which is to say they are a product of a given person’s racial, sexual, economic, academic, and cultural positions within society.⁵

Meanwhile the mainstream media, both liberal and conservative outlets, has come to its own conclusions about why these adult male fans love a cartoon for little girls about fluorescent fillies, with the overwhelming majority deciding that Bronies are an indication that young men are casting off traditional gender stereotypes about the kinds of media men and women should and shouldn’t consume. This claim is made by both supporters and

³ T.L. Stanley, “A Brony gathering: SoCal men let their ‘My Little Pony’ flag fly” *Los Angeles Times* (19 April 2012) <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2012/04/bronies-let-their-my-little-pony-flag-fly.html>

⁴ A sampling of such reviews can be seen here: Emily Ashby, “My Little Pony Friendship Is Magic – Television Review” *Common Sense Media* (30 Jan. 2011) <http://www.commonensemedia.org/tv-reviews/my-little-pony-friendship-is-magic>, Todd VanDerWerff, “My Little Pony Friendship Is Magic” *The A.V. Club* (29 Apr. 2011) <http://www.avclub.com/review/imy-little-pony-friendship-is-magici-55168>, and Robert Lloyd, “TV Picks: ‘My Little Pony,’ Sondheim, Improv comics, ‘Doc Martin’” *Los Angeles Times* (5 Dec. 2013) <http://touch.latimes.com/#section/-1/article/p2p-78443528/>

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Harvard University Press (1984), 1 & 13.

detractors of the Brony fandom, who alternate between seeing the group as a beacon of social progress or an indication of the continued erosion of traditional cultural values. In either case such views echo one another and the assertion that Bronies' embracement of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* constitutes a genuine rejection of long standing gender norms, is a question at the heart of this exploration of the Brony fandom, its origins, its history, its members, and their cultural practices.

It is my own contention that such a view of the Bronies is not only based on an inadequate understanding of the fandom and their activities but is also far too simplistic, falling prey to "commonsense" notions which Bourdieu reminds us often conceal "the least visible forms of domination" at work within our societies.⁶ In this case "commonsense" would seem to dictate that a group of adult men who have wholeheartedly embraced a television series whose target audience are young girls must be acting in opposition to a culture which routinely and openly dismisses the entertainment of children and women as somehow inherently inferior to that of entertainment made for adult men. However as we will see, when taken as a whole – something that the mainstream media has continually failed to do – it becomes clear that what the Brony fandom is really doing – perhaps unknowingly and thus unintentionally – is colonializing and sexualizing a show that was originally made to empower little girls as a way for its predominately males members to reassert their own diminished feelings of masculinity, resulting in exactly the kind of "hidden domination" which Bourdieu warned about.

More broadly this exploration of the Brony fandom also seeks to illuminate the cultural institution of the fandom as a whole by approaching it from the vantage point of Religious Studies while seeking to avoid the obvious similarities of devotion and social

⁶ Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy*, Bristol, CT: Acumen (2007), 41.

organization so often brought to the table with regards to the study of fandom and religion. By eschewing such facile analogues my aim is to offer a fresh take on the subject by instead drawing out the internal mechanisms which animate and propel both religious and fandom based groups to action while arguing that fandoms can be understood as functioning in ways which are similar, if not identical, to the practices of members of organized religions, thus constituting what scholar Robert M. Price has called “recreational religious activity.”⁷

⁷ Robert M. Price, forward to “Horror Show” by Gary Myers in *The Tsathoggua Cycle*, ed. Robert M. Price, Oakland, CA: Chaosium Inc., (2005), 165.

1.1 Investigative Methods

One of the things about Bronies that make them so attractive to those with an academic interest in pop-culture fandoms is that they are still a relatively nascent phenomenon. However this also means that there has been very little scholastic work done on them. Two South Carolina based psychologists, Dr. Patrick Edwards and Dr. Marsha H. Redden, are, by their own accord, “the nation’s premiere bronyologists” having become interested in the fandom after Edward’s son, who was sixteen-years-old at the time, “came out” to him as a fan.⁸ Intrigued Edwards and Redden have, for the last several years, conducted a nation-wide statistical survey of the fandom despite some pushback from their own academic community who sees their interests in the group as trivial.⁹ Personally I am indebted to Edwards and Redden’s research which has provided me with invaluable data regarding the ethnographic make-up of the Brony fandom. Nevertheless I am troubled by their involvement with, and remain skeptical of their theories regarding, the fandom which, along with my critiques, will be discussed later on. As for now the point I wish to make here is that though Edwards and Redden have claimed a desire to remain “objective” in their study of the Brony fandom, they nevertheless have chosen to immerse and integrate themselves within the Brony community in a way which I find problematic from a methodological standpoint and has lead them to expound an overwhelmingly positive assessment of the fandom – they have described themselves as having a “pro-brony attitude” and being active “brony boosters”¹⁰ – a view which has colored Edwards and Redden’s research in a way

⁸ Lauren Rae Orsini, “Researchers strive to understand brony culture” *The Daily Dot* (21 Feb. 2012) <http://www.dailydot.com/society/bronies-brony-my-little-pony-study/>

⁹ Jessica Goodman, “Bronies: The Colorful Side of Millennial Escapism” *Mashable* (01 May. 2013) <http://mashable.com/2013/05/01/bronies-hey-ocean/>

¹⁰ Lauren Rae Orsini, “Researchers strive to understand brony culture” *The Daily Dot* (21 Feb. 2012) <http://www.dailydot.com/society/bronies-brony-my-little-pony-study/>

which I fear has prevented them from fully assessing the fandom and all its activities. Moreover, as we will see, I feel that their presence within the Brony fan community has also begun to color the community's view of itself, resulting in a certain degree of investigative solipsism.

With regards to my own research, my primary means of investigating the origins, evolution, and gender politics of the Brony fandom have been a combination of text and video sources supplemented by interviews conducted along the East Coast from Texas to Chicago with ten self-identified fans of the show. In addition to Edwards and Redden's statistical data I have also made use of a wide variety of theorists from multiple disciplines and backgrounds who have studied other fandoms and/or subcultures which I believe share certain similarities with the Bronies in order to gain insight into how I contend the fandom is operating. This includes, among others, the work of Religious Studies scholars Jonathan Z. Smith and Joseph P. Laycock, culture and media theorist Joanne Hollows, sociologist Amy C. Wilkins, historian Michael Saler, and those anthropologists and sociologists specializing in the field of "ludology" including Johann Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Gregory Bateson, Tanya Luhmann, and Sato Ikuya.

However I am, by far, most indebted to the work of those scholars who for the past fifteen years have broken ground with their compelling studies of the international fan community, commonly known as "*otaku*," which surrounds Japanese *anime* and *manga*. As celebrated media studies scholar Henry Jenkins recently noted, Japan itself has, in the past few years, produced some of the most "insightful" and provocative research on fandom, especially in regards to such scholars willingness to explore the often tricky subjects of sex

and sexuality as it relates to fan cultures and their practices.¹¹ However in the case of my own research on Bronies I have found precisely such insights into the world of *otaku* culture to be particularly astute and applicable since not only are the majority of Bronies *manga* and *anime* fans – therefore suggesting a link between the two interests – but also in that *otaku* themselves in many ways prefigure the advent of Bronies in the tendency of adult male *otaku* to gravitate to comics and cartoons made for and sold to little girls. As a result it is with much gratitude that I draw upon the exciting work of such scholars as Tamaki Saitō, Hiroki Azuma, Patrick W. Galbraith, Yoshimasa Kijima, Kotani Mari, and others.

¹¹ Henry Jenkins, “In Defense of Moé: An Interview with Patrick W. Galbraith (Part One)” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins* (26 Jan. 2015) <http://henryjenkins.org/2015/01/in-defense-of-moe-an-interview-with-patrick-w-galbraith-part-one.html>

1.2 Disclosure

In the interest of full disclosure I will say upfront that I do not consider myself a Brony nor am I a fan of the show *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. In fact, in what I am sure will no doubt become one of the most controversial aspects of this study, I have actually chosen to refrain from watching *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* altogether, outside of a few clips imbedded in documentaries or referenced on YouTube. I know that there are some who after that last sentence will want to stop reading what I have to say right now since there are few things as obnoxious as someone pontificating about a piece of media that they haven't even taken the time to review for themselves, but I ask that readers give me an opportunity to defend my decision not to watch *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* in regards to this study.

My primary reason for choosing not to watch the show *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* while studying the Brony fandom is, quite simply, that the subject of my study is not the show itself but rather its fans, who are a group of people I wish to do the justice of evaluating from as objective a stance as possible – see my earlier comments regarding Edwards and Redden's study, which while important, I feel lacks a needed degree of detached objectivity. In order to do this I felt that it was crucial that I harbor as few biases as possible about Bronies, including an opinion about the quality of the show which they have devoted so much time and energy to celebrating. The way I see it, I could watch *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* and decide that it is amongst the worst things I have ever seen, or I could watch the show and decide that it is amazing and immediately want to enlist myself

amongst the Bronies' ranks. Either way my perspective on the fandom is tainted and my study suffers as a result. For this reason I have chosen to refrain from watching the show.¹²

Others may challenge this decision by saying that by not watching the show it would be difficult for me to understand many of the references and in-jokes which make up much of the jargon used by the fandom. However I maintain that such concerns, while pertinent, are nevertheless unwarranted. With the internet at one's disposal it is fairly easy to search key words and phrases relating to any show – let alone one with a fan following as immersed in the digital world as Bronies – and quickly deduce their origin and intent. Furthermore using these same resources I feel I have also managed to achieve a more than adequate understanding of the show, its world, overarching plot, and most importantly its characters. Supplementing this are my aforementioned interviews with the fans, who in every instance have proven more than happy to explain the show's every detail to me in length.

Lastly I want to stress to readers still skeptical of my ability to objectively but fairly assess the Brony fandom that I too understand what it means to be passionate fan of media marketed at children and not widely understood by mainstream culture. In my case I am an incredibly enthusiastic fan of Japanese *tokusatsu* or live-action special-effects productions such as the Godzilla film series and superhero programs like *Super Sentai* – better known in the U.S. as *Power Rangers*. Such films and shows are children's entertainment in both their home country and abroad and what's more are largely seen in the western world as lacking in both artistic merit and adult appeal. Over the years I have repeatedly been greeted with

¹² I'm also making an issue out of this because as a scholar operating in the field of Religious Studies I have become increasingly sensitive to the issue of objectivity which I feel has become an on-going problem in the discipline as perhaps best articulated by historian Robert Orsi in the closing chapter of his 2006 book *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* in which he argues that scholar's evaluation of particular religious communities are often impinged upon by the scholar's own view – be it positive or negative – of the religion itself.

puzzle expressions by peers who fail to understand why a grown man in his late twenties would invest so much time and money in such media, its related memorabilia, or fly across country to attend *tokustasu*-themed conventions. I have listened patiently to love-ones attempt to write-off my interest in *tokusatsu* as a result of lingering childhood nostalgia and even occasionally endured a few jeers at the hands of self-appointed arbiters of good taste. I'm not going to explain why I love *tokusatsu* – not here anyway – as that is not the subject of this exploration, but I will occasionally invoke my own experiences as a fan throughout this work, so as to remind readers that I do understand fandom and what it means to be a fan because I am one (just not of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*) and as such I sympathize with the Bronies, even if I don't necessarily empathize with them. But I take fans and fandom seriously which is why I am writing this.

As a final word before concluding this introduction, I want to be perfectly clear that any and all claims made here with regards to Bronies and Brony fandom are not intended to be divisive or condemnatory in any way. I wish to pass no judgment of any kind on the Brony fandom but rather simply elucidate what I see as the complex and often contradictory state of social existence which Bronies have found themselves in as a result of, I do believe, genuinely enjoying a show that was not expressly made for them. In doing so, these men have become largely misunderstood “figures of fascination and derision in equal measures.”¹³ Hopefully this present exploration of the Brony fandom can begin to shed new light both on both the Bronies in particular as well as the global phenomena of fandom as a whole.

¹³ Emily Manuel, “Welcome to the Herd: A Feminist Watches My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic” *Global Comment* (25, Aug. 2011) <http://globalcomment.com/welcome-to-the-herd-a-feminist-watches-my-little-pony-friendship-is-magic/>

But to start we need to move towards an understanding of fandom as a manifestation of what I have previously referred to as “recreational religious activity:” actions which function in a manner similar, if not identical, to traditionally defined forms of religious behavior, only engaged in free of the shackles of moral strictures and dogmatic literalism.¹⁴ By engaging in such practices I will argue that fans find meaning and order in their lives through the consumption of pop-culture myths and the creation of what religious studies scholar Adam Seligman refers to as elaborate “subjective ‘as-if’ worlds,” brought to life by fans via various actions.

¹⁴ Mark Dery, “Kraken Rising: How the Cephalopod Became Our Zeitgeist Mascot” *H+ Magazine* (24 May 2010) <http://hplusmagazine.com/2010/05/24/kraken-rising-how-cephalopod-became-our-zeitgeist-mascot>

CHAPTER 2: A MOVE TOWARDS A RELIGIOUS STUDIES UNDERSTANDING OF FANS AND FAN CULTURES

2.1 Fandoms as “Recreational Religious Activity”

In his semi-autobiographical exploration of fantasy gaming fandom, *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks*, journalist Ethan Gilsdorf relates his early life growing up as a preteen in a small New Hampshire town with a single mom who, having recently suffered a debilitating brain aneurysm, was incapable of caring for him or his siblings. Faced with a world he found to be “chaotic and uncertain,” Gilsdorf sought refuge not in the arms of religion but rather in the fantasy and science-fiction worlds he encountered in popular-culture: “I didn’t believe in God, or in heaven and hell. But Middle-earth’s lands, or a D&D labyrinth, or a science fiction universe like *Star Wars* – those were places I could believe in, and visit as often as I liked.”¹⁵

In coming to an understanding of fandoms as tantamount to, or even as an expression of, the religious impulse in human culture, the testimonies of fans like Gilsdorf are extremely important and worth strong consideration. Even as a child, Gilsdorf found traditional religious ideas like God and an afterlife too inaccessible and unbelievable to be comforting but at the same time found the real world to be lacking the sense of order present in the fictional realms of *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, and even the classic tabletop roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons*. In discovering these mythical lands of literature, film, and games and choosing to immerse himself in them – that is, to become a fan –

¹⁵ Ethan Gilsdorf, *Fantasy Freaks & Gaming Geeks*, Guilford, CT: Lyons Press (2009), 8 & 10-11.

Gilsdorf found not simply an escape, but a readily available alternative to the “unpredictable” and “arbitrary” reality that was his daily life.

Historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith wrote that the primary function of religious rituals are to provide their practitioners with “a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension with the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled course of things.”¹⁶ In other words, religious rituals serve as a means of acting out a desired alternate reality, one which does not exist but is seen as being highly preferable to the one which does. Such alternate realities initially take the form of myths which scholar Robert A. Segal describes as stories that are “held [onto] tenaciously by adherents” – they consume them, occupy much of their time with them, and are often willing to fight for, in certain cases, even die for them – because they believe that the act of knowing such stories “accomplishes something significant” in their lives and possesses the potential to also transform the lives of others.¹⁷

But such an alternate reality cannot stay a mere myth and instead must be given life via actions — in the case of religion, rituals performed by people. For Smith, such performances transform myths into what religious studies scholar Adam Seligman calls “subjunctive ‘as-if’ worlds,” which become real for their practitioners and in turn work to relieve the type of existential tension which is a natural byproduct of living in what one perceives to be a seemingly unordered, confusing, and ultimately unfulfilling reality. It is this process then, of turning myths into reality via actions, what I have come to understand as religion and how I define the term for the purposes of my study.

¹⁶ J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 63.

¹⁷ Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 4-6.

It is my contention that just as religions accomplish this feat of for their adherents via myths and rituals so do fandoms accomplish the same feat for their fans via myths and acts of play. But before proceeding any further into our analysis we need to first clarify some terms. Specifically what it is we mean when we speak about “fans” and “fandoms”?

2.2 What it means to be a “Fan”

In our modern media saturated culture many people claim to be “fans” of many different things. Sports, novels, celebrities, video games, chain restaurants, hit TV shows for adults, popular music, hit TV shows for children, not-so-popular music, internet personalities on YouTube, blockbuster movies, comic books, blockbuster movies based on comic books, pets, toys, the list goes on and on. Today it often seems as if the claim to the identity of “fan” is merely shorthand for “liking” something.

However in looking at fans and fandoms as examples of recreational religious activity I want to narrow our focus and try and get back to the original meaning of the word “fan,” which as researcher Victoria Nelson explains was originally a piece of religious nomenclature denoting someone exhibiting an overzealous sense of devotion. “*Fan*,” Nelson writes, “is the short form of *fanatic*” a word which in turn is derived from the “Latin *fanaticus*, ‘temple attendant,’ from *fanus*, ‘temple.’ In late antiquity, the Romans condescendingly applied *fanaticus* (in its sense of going a bit overboard in religious observance) to members of marginal and orgiastic sects” while “for Christians, it was a synonym for pagan. In English the word is used as early as the seventeenth century in reference to religious zealots.”¹⁸

Nelson goes on to note how “for almost two thousand years, then, fanatic has been a word that Western mainstream religious orthodoxy applies pejoratively to members of marginal and potentially threatening religious groups” with “the first modern nonreligious usage of the short form fan” only appearing “in U.S. newspapers of the late nineteenth century in reference to sports devotees” with “the early twentieth century” finally seeing the meanings of the term “stretched to include ardent enthusiasts of the new mass entertainment

¹⁸ Victoria Nelson, *Gothicka* (Harvard University Press, 2013), 51.

genres of movies and science fiction, fantasy, and horror literature.”¹⁹ Because the topic of this exploration is the children’s fantasy series, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, we will, with one noted exception, be thinking exclusively about these historically late fans of “mass entertainment” – popular literature, film, TV, video games, etc... - while leaving the issue of sports fans, amongst others, to those with a more vested interest in those topics.

Nelson’s etymological examination of the origin of the word “fan” is useful in taking us back to the term’s original meaning of denoting those individuals whose passion for a certain subject is so great it comes to not only occupy their free time but all of their time, becoming one of the chief ways they not only define themselves but are defined by others – whether that be for good or for ill depending on the circumstances. It is also useful in drawing out the way that fans, in the religious sense of the word, have historically been viewed with suspicion as “members of marginal and potentially threatening” groups, a point we will take it up later with regards to pop-culture fans both in this section and the next one.

To further clarify this point I would like to stress that from this point on when I use the word “fan” I do not simply mean any individual who happens to partake in such things as reading fantasy literature, watching superhero movies, playing video games, collecting action figures, or even regularly enjoying children’s animated television programming like *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* or Cartoon Network’s hit series *Adventure Time* (2010 – Present), all of which have become increasingly common leisure activities amongst the general public in the past decade.²⁰ Rather I am specifically interested in those individuals who not only consume such media but are actively and willingly consumed by it in turn.

¹⁹ Ibid..

²⁰ Neda Ulaby, “An ‘Adventure’ For Kids And Maybe For Their Parents, Too,” *NPR* (17 June 2013) <http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2013/06/17/192385255/an-adventure-for-kids-and-maybe-for-their-parents-too>

Part of the reason I feel such a distinction is necessary is the fact that in recent years some commentators have used the very ubiquity of such activities combined with the increasingly perfunctory use of the term fan to call into question the utility of such labels altogether along with the larger construct of fandoms and fan cultures. A highly relevant and recent example involves another fandom I am not directly involved in: “gamers” – individuals who both play video games and consume content related to them.

In 2013 Brandon Sheffield, editor for the video game website Gamasutra.com, wrote an opinion piece in which he called for the “retirement” of the term “gamer” which Sheffield said he had come to find “regressive” and “divisive” and which he argued was no longer relevant in a society in which everyone plays video games:

Why would you ever really need to describe yourself as someone who plays games, anyway? Do you walk up to people and say ‘Yeah, I watch movies.’ Well, of course you do, everyone watches movies. If games are to become part of culture, shouldn’t it be assumed that you play games? Shouldn’t it be presumed that we all do? In first world nations, isn’t the person who doesn’t play games in the greater minority, when you factor in Facebook, Angry Birds, and the like? The folks who play these more casual games don’t consider themselves gamers, because they don’t think of playing games as a thing that defines them. They’re just casually consuming entertainment.²¹

And while the reality behind such assumptions about what constitutes normative “first world nation” behavior can be hashed out by those with more of a stake in that issue what is of interest here is how some additional commentators have made use of such claims as ammunition in an attempted to discredit the entire notion of a “gamer culture” by essentially semantically negating it. The logic being that if “gamers” are nothing more than “a dated demographic label,” and not an actual body of individuals, how then is it possible for them to have a culture? This is exactly the controversial point which columnist Leigh Alexander argues for in her angry and uncharitable 2014 article “‘Gamers’ don’t have to be

²¹ Brandon Sheffield, “Opinion: Let's retire the word 'gamer'” *Gamasutra* (15 May 2013)
http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/192107/Opinion_Lets_retire_the_word_gamer.php

your audience. ‘Gamers’ are over,” in which she attacks gamer culture as “not even [a] culture” but rather “a petri dish” composed of “young men” who “don’t know how to dress or behave” who know nothing about “human social interaction” and who occupy their time by “queuing [up] with plush mushroom hats and backpacks and jutting promo poster rolls. Queuing passionately for hours, at events around the world, to see the things that marketers want them to see. To find out whether they should buy things or not” and by later going home, getting online and “spackling over memes and in-jokes repeatedly [while] getting mad on the internet.”²²

Clearly written by someone who was once on the inside of video game fandom but has subsequently fallen out of it, Alexander’s venomous barrage against these fans and their fandom is part of a larger and more storied commentary regarding the perceived social inadequacies of fan culture all the way down to its cliché language regarding sundry stereotypes about fans of pop-culture being perpetual male losers whose over consumption of worthless materials marks them as simultaneously feminized and infantilized as well as lacking a grip on how the real world works. In the second half of this examination we will discuss such stereotypes and where they might spring from in more depth, but for now we need to consider what Sheffield and Alexander both missed in their evaluation of gamer fandom.

²² Leigh Alexander, “‘Gamers’ don’t have to be your audience. ‘Gamers’ are over” *Gamesutra* (28 Aug. 2014) http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers_dont_have_to_be_your_audience_Gamers_are_over.php. Alexander’s article resulted in a wave of subsequent pieces on the same topic from additional video game columnists and was eventually picked up by mainstream newsgroups like *The Daily Beast* (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/28/it-s-dangerous-to-go-alone-why-are-gamers-so-angry.html>) and *The Guardian* (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/01/how-to-attack-a-woman-who-works-in-video-games>) all of whom echoed her general sentiment. An interesting compilation of these articles and a summary of their content can be found at this site: <https://pixietalksgamergate.wordpress.com/gamers-are-dead-article-analysis/>. It is also generally acknowledged that Alexander’s original column was instrumental in igniting this on-line culture war which is #GamerGate (<http://www.studio360.org/story/what-is-gamergate/>).

Scheffield's original argument against the term "gamer" largely boils down to an issue of demographics. "Gamer," he contends, is no longer a relevant marker of identity in a first world society where the majority of people play video games of one stripe or another. This line of reasoning, that ubiquity equals normality, is an old polemical strategy, even amongst those who defend fandom from would-be persecutors this same argument gets trotted out as a recent editorial for the science-fiction publishing website Tor.com by internet personality Lindsay Ellis demonstrates. Ellis, writing in response to a piece by *New York Times* columnist A.O. Scott – which we will discuss later – rebuffs the allegation that video games are "products for children and shut-ins" by claiming that "everybody plays them." "Even the morally bankrupt Frank Underwood relaxes to the occasional first-person shooter in both seasons of *House of Cards*," quips Ellis.²³

However what Sheffield, Alexander, and even Ellis all miss, is that occasionally relaxing by playing a few rounds of *Halo* or *Angry Birds* does not a "gamer" make. So what does define someone as a gamer if not the act of playing video games? The answer is the intensity with which one plays. Sociologist Yoshimasa Kijima, in his ethnographic study of Japanese video game fans, defines "gamers" as those individuals who not only play video games but play them "masochistically" i.e. deriving maximum pleasure by making what should be a leisure activity actively unpleasant.²⁴ Gamers do this, Yoshimasa explains, by engaging in grueling practices such as setting time limits for themselves, not using cheat codes, performing under the pressure of being watched by their fellow fans, and, most importantly for Yoshimasa, by mastering notoriously glitchy and hard to play games. Adding

²³ Lindsay Ellis, "The Death of Adulthood in American Culture: Nerd Culture Edition" *Tor.com* (23 Sept. 2013) <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2014/09/the-death-of-adulthood-in-american-culture-nerd-culture-edition>

²⁴ Yoshimasa Kijima, "The Fighting Game Otaku Community: What Are They 'Fighting' About?" in *Fandom Unbound: Otaku Culture in a Connected World*, ed. Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, & Izumi Tsuji (Yale University Press, 2012), 252.

to Yoshimasa's observations are those of historian Michael Saler who writes that other fans also derive pleasure by thoroughly examining and scrutinizing the mythology of their favorite fictional universes with a type of rigor which one *New York Times* columnist mused should "surely qualify them for an advance degree."²⁵ All such activities which would undoubtedly take the fun out of gaming for Sheffield's more "casual" video game players, but which actually enhance the pleasure experienced by more seasoned gamers. This is the reason why the very word "casual" is often used as an insult amongst many gamers as well as some other fan communities.²⁶

In considering Yoshimasa's definition of gamers, we see that Sheffield's error was simply one of misidentification. By counting everyone who plays any kind of video game – from the person who occasionally passes the time with a round of Tetris on their phone to members of massive multiplayer online fantasy gaming communities like *Worlds of Warcraft* – Sheffield was almost inevitably bound to conclude that gamer was a meaningless term as such a wide swath of varied individuals would almost certainly have very little to nothing in common. But in following Yoshimasa's line of argumentation we see that as a group, gamers refers to a much more narrow and specific set of individuals whose "passion" for gaming leads them to not only engage in "self-punishing and exhaustive game play" but also to stand for hours in long lines for new games, as well as dress ("plush mushroom hats") and act ("getting mad on the internet") in ways which some, like Alexander, find to be socially unacceptable. Even Sheffield's argument about movie watchers falls flat when considered in the light of comedian and noted cinephile Patton Oswalt's description about how at the height of his movie "addiction" in the 1990s he would attend "all-night horror [movie]

²⁵ Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

²⁶ "Filthy Casual" *Know Your Meme* (5 April 2015) <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/filthy-casual>

marathon[s]” in which he wouldn’t allow himself to “miss the first five minutes” of any film out of fear that it wouldn’t “count” as having seen it.²⁷ Truly masochistic.

There are also parallels here between Yoshimasa’s understanding of gamers and the role of religious traditions in the lives of those who adhere to them as seen in the work of religious studies scholar Michael L. Satlow. Satlow defines a religious tradition as something – be it a set of beliefs, rituals, institutions, texts, etc... – which a given religion has inherited from a previous generation of devotees and which the current generation feels compelled to preserve regardless of “whether [they] like them or not,” since though the option to “choose and modify traditions” may exist “the option of neglecting or changing” them does not. Examples cited by Satlow include the Christian Eucharist and the Islamic practice of jihad, both of which have proven problematic in different ways for their adherents over the centuries and have often been radically reinterpreted by each successive generation of Christians and Muslims as a result, but never wholly discarded or rewritten.²⁸

Because of the feelings of compulsion which such customs engender within their adherents, Satlow argues that religious traditions should be understood as constituting a “constraining force” on the lives of those devotees who follow them. This is not to say that such traditions force religious practitioners to act against their own will since, as Satlow notes, such traditions only become “traditional” because practitioners feel that they are both “valuable” and “useful” in their capacity to serve as “resource[s] from which and around which these actors construct meanings.” Satlow’s work on religious traditions then gives us a new way of thinking about, and classifying, religious individuals by considering how such

²⁷ Arun Rath, “How 'Star Wars' Helped Patton Oswalt Beat His Movie Addiction” *NPR: All Things Considered* (4 Jan. 2015) <http://www.npr.org/2015/01/04/374183942/how-star-wars-helped-patton-oswalt-beat-his-movie-addiction>

²⁸ Michael L. Satlow, “Tradition: the power of constraint” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 134.

individuals engage with religious “traditions” in ways which are substantially more “constraining” than that of other individuals whose lack of serious investment within the religion would undoubtedly lead them to simply discard or modify such difficult aspects of their faith.²⁹ Like Satlow’s religious devotees then, Yoshimasa’s gamers are also bound to certain practices, including ones which they may not like – such as mastering glitchy games – but which they nevertheless enjoy in a masochistic sense and most importantly find useful in their ability to aid in the construction of meaning in the world around them. And just as one would not define a Christian practitioner simply as anyone who reads the Bible or an Atheist as anyone who doesn’t attend church, so too does it make little sense to define gamers as individuals who play video games. Other factors must be considered, chiefly the reasons why such practices are or are not engaged with and when they are the degree to which the practitioner engages with them.

To sum up, I propose broadening Yoshimasa’s definition to encompass not just video game fans but all fans, thereby redefining the term as one which designates those individuals who engage with media – be it games, books, films, comics, or children’s cartoons – in a masochistic manner; deriving their greatest source of pleasure from transforming what others do for fun into work, a process which paradoxically actually makes such activities more fun for said fans. It is also this passion which fuels the fires which fans use to forge their own subjunctive “as-if” worlds, a playful process which we will now explore.

²⁹ Ibid., 135.

2.3 The Playful Process of Subjunctive “As-If” World Making

In returning to our consideration of fandom as a type of recreational religious activity engaged in the process of subjunctive “as if” world making, it is first necessary to review the concepts of subjunctive world construction, as well as the associated ideas of ritual, boundary making, and play. Sociologist Peter L. Berger argued that the process of subjunctive “as if” world construction is the very foundation upon which all human culture is established. Berger cites “three moments, or steps” in the process of “world construction,” these being “externalization, objectivation, and internalization,” which he maintains are necessary in order for humankind to manufacture both a sense of self and of the world in which they occupy a place. Berger writes:

“Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity of men. Objectivation is the attainment by the products of this activity (again both physical and mental) of a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the reappropriation by men of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjunctive consciousness. It is through externalization that society is a human product. It is through objectivation that society becomes a reality *sui generis*. It is through internalization that man is a product of society.”³⁰

The subjunctive then can best be understood as an imaginary order or way of visualizing a world that does not objectively exist but that is treated “as if” it were true by those who partake in it. The act of creating subjunctive “as if” worlds is one in which people naturally engage all the time in the realms of politics, art, science, and religion. Some of these actions include the telling of stories, myths and riddles as well as the creation of visual art and less voluntary activities like dreams. In religious traditions one of the primary means

³⁰ Peter Berger, *Sacred Canopy: Element of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Random House Books, 1967), 4.

for subjunctive world creation is the performance of rituals. In all of these instances there is a component of doing, of physical action, attached to the creation of such an “as if” reality.

Returning to work of Jonathan Z. Smith, Smith notes that rituals provide their practitioners a means of acting out a desired subjunctive reality, a reality that does not exist and hangs in tension with the one that does. Smith’s emphasis on “action” and “tension” is important here. The subjunctive is not simply a mental construct, a set of myths or ideas, but is comprised of actions, in Smith’s case rituals, performed by people. For Smith such performances help make the subjunctive real for its practitioners, thereby allowing the relief of existential tension.³¹ Smith’s work on ritual has been critiqued in relation to the idea of “sincerity.”³² Simply put, the issue of sincerity challenges the performative power of ritual alone to produce “as if” worlds and suggests that a sincere belief in what is being acted out is also required. If ritual actors do not sincerely believe in what they are doing, then performing ritual actions is simply going through the motions and nothing more. Such a critique, however, misses Smith’s point, which is that ritual is indeed all about going through the motions. For Smith, it is the power of the performance itself, not the hypothetical and ultimately unquantifiable beliefs behind it, that gives ritual its significance. In fact, Smith actually instructs students of ritual theory to assume that the practitioners in question do not believe in what they are doing, even if they say differently.³³ When seen from this perspective, it becomes clear that performers of ritual need not literally believe in whatever subjunctive world they act out; rather, the power of the performance itself is sufficient to

³¹ J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 63.

³² Adam B. Seligman et al., *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 103.

³³ J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 61.

reconcile their existential tension. Ritual, however, is not the only means of creating subjunctive “as if” worlds – play can also fulfill this role.

2.4 “Play” Theory

The modern study of ludology, which is to say the study of those activities we call play, was developed by German historian Johan Huizinga in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens* in which Huizinga describes play as a fundamental building block of all human civilization appearing as an essential component of various aspects of society including politics, science, and religion. According to Huizinga, play can be understood as being composed of three related elements:

First, play is free of both moral obligations and biological needs. One does not play in order to be a good person, nor does one play in order to stay alive. In fact, unlike social morality or biological necessity, those engaged in play can always stop whatever game it is they are engaged in and choose to play a different one instead. For Huizinga play can never be the result of coercion. This is why I have adopted Price’s description of fandom as “recreational religious activity,” because I feel that the word “recreational” both captures the idea of an activity devoid of coercion but also because it invokes the idea of world “re-creation” in which participants are able to see a desired reality brought to life as articulated by religion and visual arts scholar S. Brent Plate.³⁴

Huizinga’s contention that play is devoid of moral obligations is also an important fact to remember going forward, especially in light of the challenges which have in the past been raised with regards to the claim that secular pop-culture can succeed in providing its fan followers with the same type of experiences offered to adherents of traditional religions. In an uncannily applicable denouncement to the very fandom under consideration here and arising from her 1985 book *Other Peoples’ Myths*, historian of religion Wendy Doniger

³⁴ S. Brent Plate, “Filmmaking and World Making: Re-Creating Time and Space in Myth and Film” in *Teaching Religion and Film*, ed. Gregory J. Watkins (NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 222.

O'Flaherty writes that, unlike the myths of traditional religions, the fictional worlds of “films and children’s books” represent a “degraded mythology” which cannot succeed in making their devotees into better people via moral rules and strictures.³⁵

However, as film and religion scholar John C. Lyden notes, Doniger’s argument fails since the very criteria which she cites, namely the ability of traditional religious myths to transform their followers into better people, in no way reflects the reality of the average religious devotee’s life: “Not all Christians live by the Sermon on the Mount or the Ten Commandments, just as not all fans of Star Trek follow the Prime Directive in their daily lives.”³⁶ Rather than working to make their subjects better people, Lyden contends that what both pop-culture fandoms and traditional religious communities actually do is serve as a means of identity formation in a complex, competitive, and often confusing world.

Second, play is neither politically nor economically motivated. One does not play in order to gain prestige, power, or wealth. This is similar to the first idea that play is not bound by obligations or needs. According to Huizinga “play does not make life possible but rather ‘adorns life’.”³⁷ Pointing out that people often do play for money (i.e. gambling), French sociologist Roger Caillois offers a revision to the second point of Huizinga’s definition, writing that play, rather than being disinterested in economics, is instead merely unproductive in that it fails to generate any new products but merely causes what is already present within an economic system to change hands.³⁸ This is particularly apparent within the world of fans and fandoms as described by economist Morinaga Takuro who notes that

³⁵ Wendy O’Flaherty Doniger, *Other People’s Myths: The Cave of Echoes*. (NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988), 131-32.

³⁶ John C. Lyden, “Whose Film Is It, Anyway? Canonicity and Authority in Star Wars Fandom.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Vol. 80, No. 3 (Sept. 2012): 781.

³⁷ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. (Boston: Beacon, 1950), 9.

³⁸ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*. (University of Illinois Press, 1961). 5-6.

though fans are often rabid consumers who will “pay any amount for things that they value,” these same things are often “worthless to others” who exist outside of the fandom thus severely decreasing the value of said objects to all but “a limited number of buyers.” Such habits of buying and selling in which “producers and consumers tend to be the same people” results in what Morinaga describes as a “block economy” in which “money circulates around from place to place within a narrow closed market, and no one actually makes a profit.”³⁹ This is also reason why, as a recent *New York Times* article pointed out, that cities like San Diego, which host fan mega-events like Comic-Con that annually bring in some “62,500 people” to the city over the course of five days, sees nary a dime of the money made at the show, since while fans display little hesitation to drop big money on rare and vintage comics, toys, and other Con-exclusive collectibles they are far less likely to spend that same kind of cash on such mundane things as dinner at a top-tier restaurant, instead opting for sandwiches at the nearest *Subway*.⁴⁰

Third, Huizinga describes play as “separated from everyday reality. It exists within its own subjunctive “as if” world marked off by various kinds of boundaries.”⁴¹ These boundaries are physical or metaphorical lines of demarcation that serve the dual function of both separating and connecting people. Like Smith’s notion of ritual, in the space of the subjunctive “as-if” world, boundaries work to tell practitioners which spaces are sacred and which are profane as well as serving as a way to keep the uninitiated out. This is important since as Berger notes “all socially constructed worlds are inherently precarious” due to the

³⁹ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto: An Insider’s Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 127.

⁴⁰ Michael Cieply and Brooks Barnes, “Large Crowds Spend Little at Comic-Con” *The New York Times* (27 July 2014) http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/28/business/media/large-crowds-spend-little-at-comic-con.html?hpw&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&version=HpHedThumbWell&module=well-region®ion=bottom-well&WT.nav=bottom-well&_r=1

⁴¹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. (Boston: Beacon, 1950), 10.

fact that they are “supported by human activity” and thus “constantly threatened by the human facts of self-interest and stupidity.”⁴² Because of the fragility innate in all subjunctive “as-if” worlds it becomes necessary for those who support them to establish boundaries and appoint gatekeepers so as to preserve the integrity of the constructed world. Some common spatial boundaries in the realm of religion include churches, temples, and magic circles while some common play-world boundaries include card tables, sports arenas, and game boards. But not all boundaries necessarily take spatial form, and words and symbols may also be used to create boundaries during play.

Supplementing Huizinga’s idea of play, Roger Caillois adds that all play is “governed by rules” — a point Huizinga went to great lengths to emphasize but, quizzically, failed to make an element of his stated definition.⁴³ Rules, like boundaries, serve as fundamental building blocks for any subjunctive “as if” world in that they help to establish which actions are and are not permissible and help to illuminate the meaning behind various actions. These rules often remain unquestionable, since to challenge them is to threaten the stability of the subjunctive world itself. There is no room on the soccer field for questions about whether or not kicking the ball into the net really will result in a point. The same is also true of rituals. There is no room for questions during a Catholic Mass about whether or not the host really is the body of Christ. To break these rules puts one in danger of being branded a spoilsport or an apostate.

Together, Huizinga and Caillois show us how play and religious ritual, the latter as discussed by Smith, are very much alike. Both work to construct subjunctive “as if” worlds by erecting boundaries through the establishment of rules and the performance of various

⁴² Peter Berger, *Sacred Canopy: Element of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Random House Books, 1967), 29.

⁴³ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*. (University of Illinois Press, 1961), 10

actions that bring a subjunctive world to life. From the insights gleaned from the work of Huizinga, Caillois, and Smith, we move to the understanding of play developed by British anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who understands play as a very complex type of “metastatement.” In Bateson’s own playfully dizzying formulation, play is understood as a series of seemingly contradictory actions: “These actions, in which we now engage, do not denote what would be denoted by those actions which these actions denote.”⁴⁴ The following example may help elucidate Bateson’s meaning: consider two children engaged in a pretend sword fight. Both understand what their actions denote—a real sword fight. Because it is play, however, neither boy is actually concerned about being harmed by the other. While a play stab denotes a real stab, what it does not denote is an actual injury—the very thing that an actual stabbing would denote.

As is the case with ritual, Bateson writes that the sincerity behind play is irrelevant. It does not matter if the individual engaged in play actually believes he is in a real sword fight or not. What matters are the actions he performs—thrusting, parrying, stabbing, etc.—in order to establish to all those who see him that he is indeed engaged in a sword fight. The same can be said for players engaged in fan activities. Whether or not fans believe the myths they adhere to are real is decidedly unimportant. What is important is the performance of the activities in which fans engage. For one completely immersed in play, the denotation of the actions mean very little; it is the actions themselves that take priority.

⁴⁴ Gregory Bateson, “A Theory of Play and Fantasy” in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (NY: Ballantine, 1972), 180.

2.5 Tanya Luhrmann and Sato Ikuya: Play Gets Real

In the 1980s American anthropologist Tanya M. Luhrmann conducted a now famous study of various groups of modern-day practitioners of ceremonial magic residing in southern England. The goal of Luhrmann's study was "to find out why reasonable people are drawn to the seemingly bizarre practices of magic and witchcraft."⁴⁵ Luhrmann's drew upon the work of Huizinga, Caillois and Bateson, in formulating her explanation and her analysis was subsequently published in the 1989 book *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* and has remained influential ever sense.

The ethnographic picture Luhrmann paints of her subjects is very interesting. According to Luhrmann, the typical practicing magician who she surveyed displayed no signs of mental imbalance, proved to be well educated and often worked a well-paying job in such sectors as the "computer industry" thus affording them a predominantly "middle-class" economic status. Nevertheless Luhrmann found her subjects to often be shy, socially awkward, and, at least according to Luhrmann's standards, physically unattractive. Lastly Luhrmann also noted that her subjects tended to have an inclination towards fantasy literature like "J.R.R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*, Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea Trilogy*, Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon*, Dion Fortune's *Sea Princess and Moon Magic*, and Dennis Wheatley's *The Devil Rides Out*" as well as science-fiction novels and films, and roleplaying games like *Dungeons & Dragons* or various video games of a similar nature.⁴⁶ Though Luhrmann never uses the term, the common nomenclature used to describe the kind of people conforming to her typical magician's profile would be 'geeks' or maybe even 'fans.'

⁴⁵ From the description blurb on the book's official Harvard University Press website: <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674663244>

⁴⁶ T.M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 87, 99-111.

In formulating her theory of what would lead these otherwise normal, intelligent, suburbanites to adopt the seemingly irrational practice of ceremonial magic Luhrmann argue that what such modern day magicians are actually doing when casting spells and performing elaborate coven rituals is engaging in a type of adult oriented make believe, what she terms “serious play,” no different than the type children engage in when pretending to be doctors or dinosaurs.⁴⁷ Luhrmann writes: “Magic gives magicians the opportunity to play – a serious play, but nevertheless a rule-defined separate context in which they identify with their imaginative conceptions, and act out the fantasies and visions of another world. They find their increased capacity for play a great resource, and indeed through play there are psychotherapeutic benefits from the practice.”⁴⁸

Aiding adherents in this process is what Luhrmann dubs the phenomena of “interpretive drift” in which an individual slowly shifts their way of viewing the world over time thereby allowing themselves to engage in an alternative subjunctive “as if” worldview in which the fantastic practices of witchcraft and sorcery make sense in opposition to the magician’s more mundane reality where such practices do not play a part.⁴⁹ Luhrmann suggests that in such instances practitioners of contemporary magic and witchcraft use characters like Tolkien’s fictional wizard Gandalf as a template for how to be an actual witch or wizard and that when assuming their role imagine themselves to be such a character. This kind of play, Luhrmann contends, “involves and encourages” the action of “imaginative identification in which the practitioner ‘plays at’ being a ritual magician or a witch” using “the theatrical setting and dramatic invocations” to evoke “precisely that sort of complete identification with what one imagines the magician to be. Here the role models are taken

⁴⁷ Ibid., 324-336.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 13

⁴⁹ Ibid., 336.

from fiction: the magician fantasizes about being Gandalf, not about being his coven's high priest. He obviously is not Gandalf and he knows that fire will never leap from his staff."⁵⁰

Though the description of a group's religious practices as make-believe for grownups may sound condescending to some, Luhrmann assures her readers that, at least in the case of the ceremonial magic practitioners she surveyed, all were very much aware "of the multiplicity of interpretation" generated by their practices. "Any modern magical ritual," Luhrmann writes, "can be understood by its participants as a manipulation of supra-physical force, a religious invocation of transcendent, a poetically expressive metaphor, a therapeutic encounter, a political rebellion against convention. It can be all of these or any of these, and the magician knows it." In other words the explanation that said practitioners are engaged in elaborate form of play when doing their craft is very much at the forefront of their own minds.⁵¹ Furthermore, Luhrmann contends that it is this very fact, the imaginative nature of the magician's practice, which protects them from the scorn of those who would challenge the legitimacy of their actions. As Bateson previously noted, with play the legitimacy of one's actions are irrelevant in the face of the actions themselves and by acknowledging that one's actions are playful in nature one avoids the sticky issue of ever needing to commit "oneself to their truth or falsity."⁵²

Luhrmann's theory of "serious play" finds a close analogue in Japanese sociologist Sato Ikuya's independently developed notion of "corruptive play" as articulated in his 1998 ethnographic study of Japanese *bosozoku* biker gangs. Sato's use of a more negative descriptor – that of "corruption" – stems largely from the nature of his subject matter – biker gangs who would often become involved in serious crimes – though there is a tradition in

⁵⁰ Ibid., 333.

⁵¹ Ibid., 335.

⁵² Ibid., 220.

both Huizinga and Caillois' writings about the phenomena of corruptive play as well. Like Luhrmann's English magicians, Sato's *bosozoku* were typically adolescents and young adults from well-to-do middle class families who were drawn into the world of illicit biker gangs because of the appeal which such a lifestyle seemed to suggest as depicted in movies like *Mad Max* (1979).⁵³ Just as Luhrmann's suburban magicians would look to characters like Gandalf as a template for how to dress and act when playing at the role of a wizard, so too would the *bosozoku* attempt to mimic the dress and behavior of the romantic outlaw-types seen in various biker films of which they were fans. The element of corruption comes into the picture for Sato when such playful actions as dressing like a biker or occasionally breaking the speed limit lead into more irrevocable ones such as vandalizing property, making Molotov cocktails, or even committing gang rapes or killing someone. According to Sato, the buildup to such crimes may have started out as play but once the actions are really committed the performers find themselves "at the mercy of an alternative definition of reality... entrapped... in the web of a [real] criminal underworld."⁵⁴

This in turn brings us back to subject of fans and fandom. Cultural analyst Erik Davis in his essay on *Lord of the Rings* fans notes that "avid Tolkien readers know *Lord of the Rings* the way preachers know the Bible" and as a result are just as likely to live in that subjunctive "as if" world as devout Christians are to inhabit theirs.⁵⁵ On this subject Davis is particularly fascinated with one branch of Ringers, as fans of Tolkien's epic fantasy work are sometimes called, who have devoted their time and energy to LARPing, or Live-Action Role Playing, in which members "garbed in elaborate costumes featuring latex, prosthetics, and

⁵³ Ikuya Sato, *Kamikaze Biker: Parody and Anomy in Affluent Japan* (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 77.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁵⁵ Erik Davis "Fellowship of the Ring," *Wired* 9.10 (October 2001): 1. <http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/9.10/lotr.html>

armor” journey into the forest to live out the lives of their favorite Middle-earth races.⁵⁶ LARPing is an extension of traditional tabletop roleplaying games, or RPGs, like *Dungeons & Dragons*, with such games as well as their newer online equivalents known as MMORPGs (or Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) having long been important to many fandoms in that they allow fans to engage with their chosen fictional worlds in a way that is more visceral and interactive than just reading a book or watching a TV show. Game designer Rich Redman, who works at D&D parent company Wizards of the Coast, sums it up nicely when he says; “RPGs respond to the desire of fantasy readers to continue to experience and explore those worlds. Our job is to provide the mechanism to do that.” Redman’s description of RPGs as a mechanism which allows readers to take the next step in exploring a given fantasy world is comparable to Jonathan Z. Smith’s understanding of ritual as a means for religious practitioners to act out a desired subjunctive reality.⁵⁷

Regarding Davis’ Tolkien LARPers in particular, one fan interviewed by Davis named Donald Persson discusses how his band of LARPers assumes the guise of orcs, a role “which involves... mounting raids and practicing their vocabulary words” and “sometimes stag[ing] shamanistic rituals around the fire.” “I like the orcs’ cultural way of life,” confesses Persson to Davis, “They are crude and primitive but still in some ways more advanced than us.” Persson describes the act of LARPing as incredibly immersive; “Sometimes it’s very difficult to remember it’s not really happening. It’s not dangerous in

⁵⁶ Erik Davis “Fellowship of the Ring,” *Wired* 9.10 (October 2001): 8. <http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/9.10/lotr.html>

⁵⁷ Redman’s quote is found in Erik Davis’ “Fellowship of the Ring” essay on page 3, for J.Z. Smith’s theories on ritual see *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (University of Chicago Press, 1982), 63.

any sense. People would not actually start killing one another. But you can get so deeply in character that you forget yourself.”⁵⁸

If not apparent already one should note the overt similarities which exist between Luhrmann’s magicians, Sato’s *bosozoku*, and Davis’ LARPer as all three are engaged in a form of role play in which the practitioner assumes the role of a fictional character, in two of the cases characters found in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and uses these roles to construct subjunctive “as-if” worlds for themselves, pockets of order in which they are both at peace and empowered via their esoteric knowledge of the media at hand. All of which leads us to a very important question: If you have a group of “secular” *Lord of the Rings* fans running around in the woods pretending to be orcs or wizards, and a group of “religious” ceremonial magicians also running around in the woods pretending to be wizards – what exactly is the difference? It is my contention that any such distinction is, at best, arbitrary and serves only to demarcate what some wish to privilege as “sacred” and trivialize as “secular.”

Bolstering my contentions is the recent work of religious studies scholar Joseph P. Laycock whose exploration of the “moral panic,” fermented primarily by Evangelical Christians, over fantasy role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* in the 1980s as pathways to the occult and Satanism leads Laycock to conclude that while such games do not actually cause their players to start practicing black magic, they do cause players to start thinking differently about the world around them, and like Gilsdorf, to seek meaning and comfort in such mythical realms. As a result, the subjunctive “as if” worlds of fantasy games, as well as books and films, can constitute what Laycock refers to as “rival fantasies” in that they compete with and can draw attention away from the equally imaginary worlds of

⁵⁸ Erik Davis “Fellowship of the Ring,” *Wired* 9.10 (October 2001): 8. <http://archive.wired.com/wired/archive/9.10/lotr.html>

traditional religions, such as Evangelical Christianity. It is for this reason that Evangelical Christians of the 1980s – and some still today – see pop-culture mythologies as a legitimate threat and attempt to sway the faithful away from them by branding them as tools of the devil. What is important for this work however is the way that Laycock places the worlds of traditional religion and pop-culture fantasy on equal footing, demonstrating how members of both engage in identical acts of subjunctive “as if” world making.

2.6 Why Children's Media? Transitional Objects as the Building Blocks of Myth

To return briefly to Lindsey Ellis' previously mentioned article defending fans of all stripes from the scorn of critics like A.O. Scott, it is particularly interesting to note that on the subject of video games Ellis chose to hold up as an example not a Mature-rated title, and therefore adult oriented game, like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Halo*, but the latest iteration of *Pokémon*; the once insanely popular children's game from Japan about collecting and battling pocket-sized monsters. As an incredibly lucrative multi-media franchise *Pokémon* remains popular with kids around the world today, but Ellis is quick to point out that the people she knows who are excitedly trading, battling, and giving "goofy names" to their Pokémon, are not "children and teenagers" but rather "adults." Ellis' point here is to argue that "Pokémon has transcended its original intended demographic" of children to "become a common, even (arguably) acceptable pastime for adults"⁵⁹ – an argument also made by adult fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (who get a shout-out in Ellis' article, alongside my own contingent of adult *Power Rangers* fans) about their own dearly beloved children's property.

And while the acceptability of such pastimes amongst adults will be assessed later on, what is worth highlighting here now is how common it is for adults involved in fandom to find the object of their fascination to be, as psychoanalyst Tamaki Saitō puts it, the "things that children normally graduate from in elementary or junior high school" like cartoons, comics, monster movies, superhero stories, toys, games, and so on. However, writes Saitō,

⁵⁹ Lindsay Ellis, "The Death of Adulthood in American Culture: Nerd Culture Edition" *Tor.com* (23 Sept. 2013) <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2014/09/the-death-of-adulthood-in-american-culture-nerd-culture-edition>

rather than putting away such childish things, fan's "attraction to these 'transitional objects' actually deepens beyond adolescence and into adulthood."⁶⁰

Saitō's use of the phrase 'transitional objects' is interesting here. On its own the phrase is a fairly standard piece of jargon within the field of psychoanalysis first coined by D.W. Winnicott, a British psychoanalyst and pediatrician, to refer to objects and activities used by children to cope with feelings of separation anxiety encountered at the time when the child begins the process of separating itself – physically, emotionally, and psychologically – from its mother. For Winnicott the act of play is also a transitional activity, one which provides a child with a means of transitioning from childhood into adulthood. Because of this individuals who still cling to transitional objects – like comics, cartoons, or toys – and activities – like imaginative play – beyond childhood and into adulthood are often seen as suffering from a kind of arrested development, failing as it was to make the transition from childhood into adulthood. Such claims actually ignore Winnicott's own contention that the process of transition is not limited to the arena of childhood but actually one which individuals struggle with throughout their lives since "the task of reality-acceptance is never completed" and "that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc...)." ⁶¹

Furthermore if we consider such individuals, that is to say fans, as people engaged in the project of subjunctive "as if" world construction we also find that such transitional objects and activities may in fact be key to the very process, they may in fact be the very

⁶⁰ Tamaki Saitō, "Otaku Sexuality," trans. Christopher Bolton, in *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science-Fiction from Origins to Anime*, ed. Christopher Bolton, et al. (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 226.

⁶¹ D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), 13.

blocks from which such worlds are constructed. This is the position adopted by mythographer Robert Segal who uses Winnicott's theory to argue that myths themselves should be understood as transitional objects: "Just as a child clings to a physical object – a teddy bear – to create a safe world that then enables the child to explore with confidence the outside world, so an adult clings to an internalized object – a hobby, an interest, a value, or, I suggest, a myth – that then enables the adult to deal with a much wider world. Just as the child knows that the teddy bear is not Mummy yet clings to it as if it were, so the adult recognizes that the myth is not reality yet adheres to it *as if it were*."⁶² In this way we see that the process of making sense out of the world and one's self involves a return to the very roots of imaginative life born during the time of childhood.

⁶² Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 139 - italics mine.

2.7 Concluding Thoughts

Returning briefly to Brandon Sheffield's editorial on gamers and why he finds the use of the term to be outdated, another point worth raising is that Sheffield also expresses confusion over the label of gamer because he is unsure why someone would wish "to define oneself by one's hobby." In response to such a query however one might ask why one would wish to define oneself by anything including their occupation, level of education, economic bracket, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, gender, or race, categories which have historically been just as transit and prone to dismissive or hostile attitudes as that of the label fan. Following this we should also ask the question of what exactly one should define oneself by if none of the above labels, fan included, are deemed acceptable? Following after Lyden, however, I contend that one's affiliation as a "fan" can be just as useful in cementing an individual's social identity and giving one a better understanding of how the world works, or should work, and what his or her role in it should be, as a traditional religious label like "Christian" or "Buddhist" or "Atheist" as well as labels relating to identity on the basis of one's sex, gender, or class status.

But to address Sheffield's question in a slightly different way, we might also ask why the tendency to define one's self by what fandom, or fandoms, one is affiliated with has taken prominence over more traditional labels, in particular that of religious affiliation. American historian Michael Saler, taking after German sociologist Max Weber, has argued that the tendency for people to turn to the myths of pop-culture is a byproduct of the 20th-Century becoming "disenchanted" in the wake of modern developments in science and historical criticism. Because of this new empirical way of viewing reality the world no longer holds the possibilities for mystery that it once did, while traditional religion, which once enchanted the

world, has come to be considered highly suspect, problematic, polarizing, and potentially dangerous. Nevertheless, people still need a means of making sense of both themselves and the world around them and so they turn to pop-culture media and accompanying fandoms. Think back on journalist Ethan Gilsdorf's account of how he became a fan of fantasy role-playing games because he needed a way to make sense of a world where a single mother of four could be randomly taken away from her children, but at the same time found traditional religious notions like God and an afterlife too inaccessible and credulous to be comforting. This has become even more apparent in the generations following Gilsdorf's own, as noted by media scholar Lynn Schofield Clark in her ethnographic study of the intersection of religion and pop-culture amongst Millennials. Clark writes that unlike previous generations Millennials view stories of pop-culture and traditional religion as "equally fictional" and thus occupying the same space in terms of resources for meaning making.⁶³

Because "the competing enchantments from secular mass culture are simply too pervasive, too enthralling, to ignore or reject," Saler writes, "religion now [has] to respond to the increasing attractions of secular fiction and the imaginary worlds it purveyed."⁶⁴ For Saler the biggest advantage which pop-culture media, be it *Lord of the Rings* or *My Little Pony*, presents over traditional religion is a lack of dogmatic literalism. As writer Mark Dery, in a dialogue with Robert M. Price, puts it the most attractive benefit of pop-culture mythologies is that they only ask their devotees to "believ[e] as-if rather than believing in" the myths they preach.⁶⁵ As a result, while critics like Alexander can mock fans for spending

⁶³ Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 228.

⁶⁴ Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 164.

⁶⁵ Mark Dery, "Kraken Rising: How the Cephalopod Became Our Zeitgeist Mascot" *H+ Magazine* (24 May 2010) <http://hplusmagazine.com/2010/05/24/kraken-rising-how-cephalopod-became-our-zeitgeist-mascot>

all their free time obsessing over pop-culture minutia, they at least cannot in good consciousness honestly accuse them of scientific or historically illiteracy the way they can, say, Biblical fundamentalists.

It now becomes difficult to distinguish between fandoms and traditionally recognized religious communities. Both fandoms and religious institutions help their members make sense out of their lives by building subjunctive “as if” worlds, set off by boundaries within an otherwise random and seemingly meaningless existence. Just as religious devotees perform rituals, which momentarily allow them to bring a subjunctive world to life and thereby create a system of order and inspiration, so do fans partake in modes of cultural production and consumption that work to produce worlds of fantasy within which they dwell, if even for a short while.

CHAPTER 3: AN EXAMINATION OF “BRONY” FANDOM

3.1 Birth of a Show

My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic is the fourth generation incarnation of the *My Little Pony* franchise, created by American toy and game company Hasbro Inc. in the early 1980s. Like previous installments of the franchise, *Friendship is Magic* centers around a toy line of pastel colored pony figures and various accessories with an accompanying animated series produced to help sell the toys. The *Friendship is Magic* show was developed for television by Lauren Faust, whose prior work includes serving as a director, writer, character designer, and supervising producer on the popular and critically-acclaimed Cartoon Network animated series *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998-2005) and *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends* (2004-2009); both created by her future husband Craig McCracken.⁶⁶ Faust initially approached The Hub with a pitch for an original animated superhero series for girls called “Milky Way and the Galaxy Girls” which she had been developing, but was offered the job of show-runner on the *Friendship is Magic* series instead.

A fan of the *My Little Pony* franchise Faust took the job with her mantra being to create a show “for girls” that wasn’t saccharin and simplistic but instead featured “real conflict,” “complex plots,” and even scary elements since “girls aren’t as easily frightened as everyone seems to think.”

⁶⁶Joe Strike, “Of Ponies and Bronies” *Animation World Network* (5 July 2011) <http://www.awn.com/blogs/miscweant/ponies-and-bronies>

Overall Faust wanted a show where the female characters could be portrayed as “complex... they can be brave, strong, kind and independent – but they can also be uncertain, awkward, silly, arrogant or stubborn. They shouldn’t have to succumb to pressure to be perfect.”⁶⁷

Friendship is Magic takes place in the mythical land of Equestria, where the dominate inhabitants are anthropomorphic talking ponies, and centers around the adventures of a young female unicorn named Twilight Sparkle who lives in the village of Ponyville and has been tasked with learning about “the magic of friendship” by her mentor Princess Celestia. With the help of her friends – the tomboyish pegasus Rainbow Dash, the prim and proper unicorn Rarity, industrious pony Applejack, the timid pegasus Fluttershy, and the fun loving pony Pinkie Pie – Twilight Sparkle embarks on a variety of adventures ranging from the mild-mannered, like organizing a birthday party, to the epic; such as stopping the evil chaos-dragon Discord from taking over all of Equestria.

Though Faust stepped down as show-runner at the end of the first season, citing “various circumstances with the production [which] made it increasingly impossible for me to keep up the level of personal creative involvement and control that I had at the start of the series,” she remains involved with the franchise as a Consulting Producer on the series, advising on story arcs and character development.⁶⁸ And as we will see she has also become a major advocate for the Brony fandom as well.

⁶⁷Lauren Faust, “My Little NON-Homophobic, NON-Racist, NON-Smart-Shaming Pony: A Rebuttal” *Ms. Magazine Blog* (24 Dec. 2010) <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2010/12/24/my-little-non-homophobic-non-racist-non-smart-shaming-pony-a-rebuttal/>

⁶⁸ Lauren Faust, “THANK YOU!!!” *deviantART* (8 May 2011) <http://fyre-flye.deviantart.com/journal/THANK-YOU-218911691>

3.2 Rise of a Fandom

It is undoubtedly fitting that a fandom as controversial as that of the Bronies would itself be a product of controversy.⁶⁹ On October 19th 2010, just nine days after the TV premier of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, noted animation historian Amid Amidi published an article titled “The End of the Creator-Driven Era in TV Animation” on *Cartoon Brew*, “the largest animation entertainment blog on the Internet,” for which Amidi is also editor-in-chief. In the article, Amidi herald the debut of The Hub, and its line-up of programing based on Hasbro toy properties, as the “death knell for creator-driven animation” of the last two decades and a return to the crass commercialism that defined TV animation of the 1980s. For Amidi the fact that known talents like “Lauren Faust pop up in the credits of a toy-based animated series like *My Little Pony*” just made the whole situation more depressing, declaring it “an admission of defeat for the entire movement, a white flag-waving moment for the TV animation industry.”⁷⁰

Amidi’s article and its cynical take on The Hub and Faust’s new *My Little Pony* series garnered the attention of members of the online English-language image board community 4chan.org, specifically the /co/ sub-forum dedicated to discussing cartoons and comics. In the infinitely vast world of online message boards, 4chan.org maybe the most notorious, serving as one of the internet’s main fountainheads. The birthplace of “wildly popular memes such as Lolcats” 4chan.org was also more recently the source of the unprecedented 2014 celebrity photo leak scandal in which dozens of stolen nude selfies taken by hundreds of actresses,

⁶⁹ Amid Amidi, “How Cartoon Brew Spawned Bronies” *Cartoon Brew* (16 Jan. 2012)
<http://www.cartoonbrew.com/ideas-commentary/how-cartoon-brew-spawned-bronies-55594.html>

⁷⁰ Amid Amidi, “The End of the Creator-Driven Era in TV Animation” *Cartoon Brew* (19 Oct. 2010)
<http://www.cartoonbrew.com/ideas-commentary/the-end-of-the-creator-driven-era-29614.html>

most notably *The Hunger Games* starlet Jennifer Lawrence, were released onto the internet for public viewing.⁷¹

Created in 2003 by the then 15-year-old web entrepreneur Christopher Poole, 4chan.org is modeled after the popular Japanese image board 2chan.net. Unlike many message boards which serve as places where users can engage in lengthy discussions, both 4chan.org and its Japanese precursor function with a *modus operandi* of extreme anonymity which they provide their users by deleting posts after a few hours. Today much of 4chan.org's content still revolves around Japanese pop-culture, however the site's main attraction and the source of over 30% of its internet traffic, is the infamous /b/ sub-forum, based on 2chan.net's own Nijiura sub-forum, in which users post random images in an attempt to "shock, entertain, and coax free porn from each other."⁷² Existing in a state of perpetual paradox, 4chan.org has been described by *The Wall Street Journal* as being made up of "geeky, tech-savvy guys,"⁷³ some of America's best and brightest minds, while simultaneously being dubbed by *The New York Times* one of "the darkest corners of the Web."⁷⁴

According to at least one online survey 4chan.org's users are 80% male with 73% self-identifying as heterosexual, 72% identifying as white, 44% being between the ages of 19

⁷¹ Terrence McCoy, "4chan: The 'shock post' site that hosted the private Jennifer Lawrence photos" *The Washington Post* (2 Sept. 2014) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/09/02/the-shadowy-world-of-4chan-the-shock-post-site-that-hosted-the-private-jennifer-lawrence-photos/>

⁷² Nick Douglas, "What The Hell Are 4chan, ED, Something Awful, And "b"?" *Gwaker* (18 Jan. 2008) <http://gawker.com/346385/what-the-hell-are-4chan-ed-something-awful-and-b>

⁷³ Vauhini Vara and Ann Zimmerman, "Hey, Bro, That's My Little Pony! Guys' Interest Mounts in Girly TV Show" *The Wall Street Journal* (5 Nov. 2011) <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970203707504577012141105109140>

⁷⁴ Jenna Wortham, "Founder of a Provocative Web Site Forms a New Outlet" *The New York Times* (13 March 2011) http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/14/technology/internet/14poole.html?_r=3&

and 23, and 42% identifying themselves as currently college undergraduates.⁷⁵ These figures, if true, matter when considering 4chan.org as the birthplace of the Brony phenomena since, not surprisingly, we see these statistics line up very closely with that of the data compiled by psychologists Edwards and Redden, who tell us that self-described Bronies are 86% male, 84% heterosexuals, with 62% being either college students or having completed college. And while the Bronies surveyed by Edwards and Redden ranged in age from 14 to 57 the median age is around 21.⁷⁶ Later we will consider what this data says about the Bronies as a group.

Because of Amidi's strong condemnation of *Friendship Is Magic*, and the fact that a recognizable creator like Faust was attached to it, members of 4chan.org's /co/ sub-forum began to watch the show with many quickly becoming fans. Many of the Bronies I interviewed spoke knowingly of 4chan.org with some acknowledging it as being the place where they first learned about the show. Aside from *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, the reasons my interviewees gave for frequenting 4chan.org were as diverse as the content of the site itself including info and conversations about *anime*, literature, and paranormal topics. One Brony I interviewed, Mark, a 29-year-old freelance comic book artist from Austin, Texas where he lives with his wife, noted that he occasionally visited 4chan.org since it was a good place to find "some really messed up" porn.

Brony Nanashi Tanaka was one of the original /co/ members who recalls when Amidi's article broke: "It was pretty alarmist, but it also got a lot of us going over to watch the show. We were going to make fun of it, but instead everybody got hooked. And then the

⁷⁵ Violet Blue, "Sexual Survey of 4chan Users: 6481 Bracingly Honest Responses" *Tiny Nibbles* (26 Dec. 2010) <http://www.tiny nibbles.com/blogarchives/2010/12/sexual-survey-of-4chan-users-6481-bracingly-honest-responses.html>

⁷⁶ Patrick Edwards and Marsha Redden, "BRONY STUDY (Research Project) Study Results" *Brony Study* (21 Nov. 2013) <http://www.bronystudy.com/>

first pony threads exploded.”⁷⁷ It was on 4chan.org where the term Brony/Bronies originated as a catch-all term for these adult male fans of the show. The most popular etymological explanation for the name is that it is a portmanteau of the slang term “bro,” for “brother,” and “pony.”⁷⁸ However Mike Bernstein, program director for the Brony-centric online radio channel *Everfree Radio*, maintains that the term’s true origin was a combination of the word “pony” with the “/b/,” denoting the aforementioned 4chan.org sub-forum where the Brony phenomena first began.⁷⁹

Eventually the Brony community began to migrate away from 4chan.org and establish fan-sites and online communities elsewhere on the internet. The earliest was *Ponychan*, an image board dedicated to hosting only *My Little Pony*-related media, and a deliberate takeoff on 4chan.org. One of my interviewees, Paul, a white, bespectacled, 30-year-old screenwriter with a BA in English, living alone in Atlanta, Georgia, recalled with a great deal of fondness his time on the *Ponychan* boards: “There was a little bit of a community there. It was kind of a friendly place. There were Feels-threads for people where they would talk about their problems and, you know, being unemployed and stuff. And I have a lot of good memories of talking some motivation into some people and all that and there was a little bit of a community thing to the point where I even joined the anonymous Christmas exchange... and that was pretty fun.”

Following *Ponychan* was *Equestria Daily*, created by then 23-year-old college student Shaun Scotellaro in January of 2011. *Equestria Daily* serves as a portal site for all things related to *Friendship Is Magic* including news, episode reviews, and interviews with

⁷⁷ Una LaMarche, “Pony Up Haters: How 4chan Gave Birth to the Bronies” *Beta Beat* (3 Aug. 2011) <http://betabeat.com/2011/08/pony-up-haters-how-4chan-gave-birth-to-the-bronies/>

⁷⁸ Daniel Nye Griffiths, “Colt success: My Little Pony’s reboot, Friendship is Magic” *Weird.co.uk* (15 Aug. 2011) <http://www.wired.co.uk/magazine/archive/2011/09/play/colt-success>

⁷⁹ *A Brony Tale* (Dir. Brent Hodge, 2014).

the cast and crew. Today *Equestria Daily* remains the largest and most popular Brony fansite, receiving between 175,000 to 300,000 hits daily.⁸⁰ It was also through *Equestria Daily* that Hasbro officially recognized the Brony community on May 27th 2011 when The Hub released a promotional video for the series called “Equestria Girls!” done in the style of a music video parodying pop-artist Katy Perry’s then hit song “California Girls!” The song features the lyrics; “Our Bronies, Hang out too, 'Cause they know we’re awesome fillies” accompanied by the character of Spike the Dragon shouting: “Come on, Bronies!” The exclusive online premier of the “Equestria Girls!” video was given to *Equestria Daily*, a day before the promo would air on TV. According to Shaun Scotellaro the e-mail he received from The Hub claimed that the reference to Bronies was done explicitly as a “tribute to our favorite Pony fans.” Scotellaro’s closing remarks on the original post featuring the debut of the video sums up the Brony fandom’s collective feelings of elation in reaction to this acknowledgement: “FAVORITE pony fans. Thats [sic] right guys, Hub knows about us!”⁸¹

And Hasbro certainly did sit up and take notice of the Bronies and like any good capitalist enterprise, sold them stuff. Lots of stuff. As *Forbes* contributor Daniel Nye Griffiths observed: “Hasbro... realized pretty quickly that their core avenue to profit was toy sales, and that toys are bought by people with credit cards, regardless of whether they are parents buying them for their children or ‘bronies’ buying them for themselves.”⁸² And as toy analyst Dan Silver, who runs the website TimetoPlaymag.com, has noted, adult fans with

⁸⁰ Una LaMarche, “Pony Up Haters: How 4chan Gave Birth to the Bronies” *Beta Beat* (3 Aug. 2011) <http://betabeat.com/2011/08/pony-up-haters-how-4chan-gave-birth-to-the-bronies/> and Daniel Nye Griffiths, “Colt success: My Little Pony’s reboot, Friendship is Magic” *Weird.co.uk* (15 Aug. 2011) <http://www.wired.co.uk/magazine/archive/2011/09/play/colt-success>

⁸¹ Shaun Scotellaro, “Premiere: Extended Equestria Girls” *Equestria Daily* (27 May 2011) <http://www.equestriadaily.com/2011/05/extended-equestria-girls.html>

⁸² Daniel Nye Griffiths, “Friendship is Massive - Ponies, Internet phenomena and crossover audiences” *D Nye Everything* (27 Sept. 2011) <http://www.danielnyegriffiths.org/2011/09/friendship-is-money-ponies-internet.html>

credit cards also buy far more merchandise than kid's without any income of their own: "Having the bronie fan base is a big boost to Hasbro's bottom line... These fans are collectors. They go out and buy the toys, they buy the T-shirts and they buy all the other licensed merchandise. You're talking about a \$100 million-plus brand to Hasbro."⁸³

None of which is to say that the sudden advent of the Bronies didn't catch the brass at Hasbro off guard initially. Margaret Loesch, president and chief executive of The Hub at the time of the show's debut, described the Bronies as "a real head-turner — just remarkable" while show-runner Meghan McCarthy insists that "no one saw this coming."⁸⁴ In an interview with Griffiths, Linda Steiner, the Executive Vice President at Hasbro, said she and her colleagues were completely blindsided by the series' unexpected popularity amongst adult American men:

"You develop a show to make it the best show you can, and you hope the humour will translate to a broader audience. The young men and the overall cult success has been a very unexpected, amazing bonus! We all just look at each other in the office and can't believe what is happening out there with this show. I've been in the kids business for 25 years, and I've never seen anything like this following. It is truly one of the most exciting times I can remember with a show launch."⁸⁵

At this point it is also important to draw attention to the fact that both the start and expansion of Bronie fandom was a phenomena facilitated almost entirely by the internet. In addition to getting its start on image boards like 4chan.org and fan sites like *Equestria Daily*, in my interviews with Bronies one question which I repeatedly asked all of them was how it was that they were watching the show. In every instance the answer was the same: online.

⁸³ Kai Ryssdal, "Grown men who can't wait to play with My Little Ponies" *Market Place* (29 March 2013) <http://www.marketplace.org/topics/life/grown-men-who-cant-wait-play-my-little-ponies>

⁸⁴ T.L. Stanley, "A Bronie gathering: SoCal men let their 'My Little Pony' flag fly" *Los Angeles Times* (19 April 2012) <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2012/04/bronies-let-their-my-little-pony-flag-fly.html>

⁸⁵ Daniel Nye Griffiths, "SOPA, Skyrim and My Little Pony - Infringement is Magic?" *Forbes* (19 Jan. 2012) <http://www.forbes.com/sites/danielnyegriffiths/2012/01/19/skyrim-ponies-sopa/>

Usually illegally. Bronies told me that they were either watching the show via illegal streaming sites, unlisted YouTube channels, or pirating the show via illegal downloads. This is not unique to *My Little Pony* either as this is how this generation obtains the majority of their media – many told me they don't even have cable – as evident by the casual way in which they would discuss these activities, saying things like how friends online – sometimes referred to as “dealers” – would “link” and “send” them episodes or how they preferred to view episodes in “720p” or “1080p;” slang terms for high definition video formats based on the number of horizontal lines present. And while Hasbro has largely been willing to turn a blind eye to such activities so long as the revenue from merchandise keeps flowing, others have been less appreciative.⁸⁶ Former *Star Trek* actor John de Lancie, who voices the villainous character Discord on *Friendship is Magic* and produced the 2012 documentary *Bronies*, complained that Bronies' tendency to pirate media hurt the overall profitability of his film: “The unfortunate thing about all this is we were sending it out to one of the most savvy Internet generations ever. And within a half-hour [of the film's release]... some person... started posting it on YouTube, Pirate Bay, all that... I think we've sold 4,000 copies, but we know of at least 10,000 that have been [illegally] downloaded... we're not too happy about it.”⁸⁷

The act of sharing and discussing *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* via the internet is also a key aspect of what I am calling the Brony Conversion Narrative, which most fans share. Anthropologist Peter Stromberg has examined the conversion narrative in its more familiar religious context and describes how such narratives function as a ritual activity that

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Jeff McGinnis, “New film examines the adult fans of ‘My Little Pony’” *Toledo Free Press* (12 Feb. 2013) <http://www.toledofreepress.com/2013/02/12/new-film-examines-the-adult-fans-of-%E2%80%98my-little-pony%E2%80%99/>

affects a process of self-transformation for the teller by connecting what would otherwise be their own idiosyncratic experiences with that of others in a group thereby fostering a sense of spiritual comradely. This process is facilitated via the introduction of a shared canonical vocabulary consisting of words and phrases associated with sanctioned liturgical forms which have been encoded with generally agreed upon ideological meanings that are universally understood by all in the group. In other words, the purpose of the conversion narrative is to give members of a group a set of rhetorical tools for talking about their experience of coming into the group in a way which will be deemed intelligible and appropriate by those already inside. This phenomenon also explains the uniformity of conversion narratives, even though statistically speaking it is impossible for so many people to have had identical experiences.

Amongst Bronies the standard conversion narrative consists of the following five elements:

- A) The teller is told by a friend to watch *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. An alternative version has them introduced to the show via a post about it they saw on the internet.
- B) The teller initially rejects the invitation to watch *My Little Pony*, often aggressively.
- C) Sometime later the teller agrees to view the show, often with great reservations.
- D) The teller finds themselves begrudgingly enjoying the show, often describing how they gradually became more and more obsessed with it.
- E) The teller concludes by professing his new found identity as a Brony.

In the process of my interviews with Bronies I heard many variations of this basic Brony Conversion Narrative formula and have transcribed some of them here for my reader's consideration. One of the first I heard came from John, a white, 25-year-old "filmmaker, theater technician, and part time illustrator" who I met in Chicago. John said that he was initially encouraged to watch *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* by a friend:

“When the second season was about to come out that’s when my friend was like ‘John you have to watch *My Little Pony!*’ and I was like ‘Ehhhh...okay? Ummm...sur...No.’ **laughter** And he was like ‘No you’ve got to! Trust me on this.’ ‘Okay I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, link me five episodes. Link me five episodes, I’ll watch those annd I’ll get back to yah.’ ...So he sent me the five episodes and I watched them and I was like ‘THAT SHIT IS GOOD!’ And then sat through a bunch of episodes and thought ‘This is really funny, this is really fun’ and when the second season came around we were devouring it every week. ‘New ponies!?! New Ponies come out tomorrow!’”

Another Brony I spoke with, a white, unemployed 26-years-old with a beard, glasses and wearing a bright yellow *My Little Pony* t-shirt as well as *My Little Pony* dog tags and who asked to be identified as “Clayton” related the following:

“I actually got into the whole Pony thing by mistake. When I first heard about it... I actually started out as a hater.” **laughter** “Like what’s the big deal? Why are these people so interested in it? So I checked out the first episode which was a two parter... and I got stuck from there.” **laughter** “Yeah... It was just my own curiosity. Like I heard about these grown men watching *My Little Pony*. I’ve always been into animation. And the intended audience and what actually became the audience for it, kind of threw me off, and... curiosity just got the best of me. **laughter**”

At a local Brony meet-up held in Charlotte, North Carolina I also met Alex a white, 22-years-old firefighter. Rather than being recommended the show by a friend Alex’s introduction to it occurred online:

“I was browsing the internet, looking at memes and stuff, comedy joke websites, and I started noticing more and more of these pony pictures coming up, and I found them a little humorous at first but I was skeptical. I was ‘Wait... these guys seriously watch *My Little Pony*? Really?’ But I kept on hearing more and more thunder over it until it got to a point where I was like ‘Alright, you know what, I’ll watch one episode.’ ‘Watched one episode, said that wasn’t bad, that wasn’t good... but it wasn’t bad’ and the first episode ended on a cliffhanger sooo I watched a second episode. Then I think I waited two or three days before I downloaded the whole first season and I’m like ‘Alright let’s check out the third episode’ cause I have time to kill. Then the third turned into the fourth and eventually the fifth until I literally... I watched the last eight episodes in a nonstop stretch.”

In all these instances the Bronies in question – none of whom know each other – told nearly identical stories in which they repeatedly emphasized themes of resistance and

reluctance to watching *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* followed by eventually succumbing to the show's charms, usually signaled by marathoning multiple episodes. Such an emphasis seems to exist so as to accentuate the idea that none of these men were of a disposition that would have otherwise lead them too un-reflexively watch a show that was originally targeted at elementary school aged girls. Other reasons for such emphasis may have to do with various cultural stigmas which exist about individuals who partake in such entertainment. Paul, the aforementioned 30-year-old Brony living in Atlanta, told me that at one point he had as many as three friends all pressuring him to watch the show, "You have to watch My Little Pony!", to whom he would angrily respond: "What?!? No! No! Fucking ponies?!?" As we talked Paul admitted that his resistance to watching *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* was "a similar situation" to how there was a time in his life when he was resistant to *anime* as well as a result of the stigma surrounding it and those who watched it being "basement dwellers who sit around looking at *hentai* [pornographic anime]." However the same friends who were now trying to get him to watch *My Little Pony* eventually showed him some *anime* and it "blew his mind" turning him into a fan.

In fact, Paul told me that he finally ended up watching *My Little Pony* after a friend tricked him into it, telling him that they were going to be watching the *anime* series *Gurren Lagann* but instead putting on an episode of *My Little Pony*. After it was over Paul says that he reluctantly admitted to having enjoying the episode with it being the character of Fluttershy that ultimately won him over. Since then Paul has even written a 2,000 word fan-fiction titled "An Intimate Conversation with Fluttershy" (it's non-sexual, despite the title) about the character which he posted on the *Ponychan* boards. As a screenwriter by trade, Paul says he considered the story "practice" as he was already writing a story about "a very

reserved, kind-of-like good Christian girl whose confronted with this really creepy guy, and how she being a very, you know uh... non-confrontational person, deals with it. So writing about Fluttershy was kind-of-like practice for writing about this kind of character anyway.” Today Paul is secure in his love of both *anime* and *My Little Pony* and doesn’t worry about any social stigma surrounding such interests. Plus any accusation that Paul lives in a basement would be ill-founded since as he dryly told me “my place doesn’t even have a basement.”

Of course, not all Bronie’s conversion narratives conform to this model. One 19-year-old African-American Brony that I interviewed, who asked to be identified as “José,” told me a very different story about how he got into the fandom:

“So um... how I got into the fandom? **rhetorical** I accidentally came to a meeting. One of my friends invited me to go just like hang out at his house, AND it turned out to be a block party with a bunch of Bronies.” **laughter** “I didn’t even know what it was. I had just seen this crazy stuff on the internet... I didn’t actually end up watching the show until about three meet-ups later.”

As José’s account demonstrates the actual avenues into the Brony fandom are varied with José’s introduction being almost the complete opposite of the common narrative which places the fan’s reluctant introduction to the show first and their subsequent inclusion in the fandom second. However in the case of José, he was actually introduced to the fandom first, as a result of being invited to a party, and only came to watch the show later on after forming friendships within the group. It is also important to note that José’s account lacks the elements of resistance common to most Brony Conversion Narratives, all of which serves as an indication that such stories are in fact a socially constructed template adopted and perpetuated subconsciously by the fandom, rather than being totally authentic accounts of how these individuals actually became Bronies.

3.3 Bronies as “Reluctant Insiders”

Let us return now to the previously mentioned statistical findings of psychologists Edwards and Redden regarding the makeup of the Brony fandom. While the general public seems to assume that groups like Bronies must be made up of societal outsiders, an assumption the mainstream media tends to help support in their coverage of the fandom, Edwards and Redden’s acknowledge that their own findings “debunk the myths about Bronies” being “30-year old unemployed men who live in their parent’s basement and watch cartoons all day.”⁸⁸ Far from being outsiders, Bronies are in actuality the most inclusive of insiders boasting the highly privileged status of being white, heterosexual, middle-class adult males; most of whom are college educated. Taking these facts into consideration I am moved to adopt the insights of scholar Lawrence Eng who has argued that such fans be understood not as outsiders but as “reluctant insiders”⁸⁹ who despite being “part of the majority, mainstream, and middle class” paradoxically “feel alienated by their very inclusion in that larger group.” Eng has observed that one way “reluctant insiders” attempt to remove themselves from the mainstream – to push themselves to the margins of society – is by engaging in the consumption and appropriation of “unanticipated media and technology to actively become a minority” – a description which certainly fits the Bronies.⁹⁰

Eng’s findings also jive well with those of sociologist Amy C. Wilkin’s who has argued that youth subcultures such as Goths and “Wannabes” – white teenagers and young

⁸⁸ *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (Dir. Laurent Malaquaid, 2012).

⁸⁹ Lawrence Eng, “Otak-who? Technoculture, youth, consumption, and resistance. American representations of a Japanese youth subculture.” (Spring, 2002) *Lawrence Eng’s Anime Fandom Research* (Last Updated: 16 June 2012) <http://cjas.org/~leng/otaku.pdf>

⁹⁰ Matt Alt, “An Interview with Patrick W. Galbraith on Otaku Culture – Part One.” *Neojaponisme*. (22 May 2012) <http://neojaponisme.com/2012/05/22/an-interview-with-patrick-w-galbraith-on-otaku-culture-part-one/>

adults who adopt the dress, behavior, and speech patterns of ethnic minorities such as blacks and Hispanics – exist exactly because straight, white middle-class kids find being straight, white and middle-class so boring and wish to stand out by adopting practices which exist in opposition to the perceived norms.⁹¹

It is worth taking an additional moment to consider Eng and Wilkin's observations, which while I believe are correct, are phrased in such a way as to seemingly suggest a level of agency which I don't believe is intended by either scholar. In both Eng and Wilkin's case the argument is not that such "reluctant insiders" intentionally engage in such practices as the consumption and appropriation of unconventional media and dress simply as a means of getting attention but rather that such nonconformist practices are essentially a byproduct of such individual's privileged status within society. Readers should also recall the work of scholars Tanya Luhmann and Sato Ikuya discussed earlier and how their subjects living in the UK and Japan also conformed to this privileged model of affluent, well educated, middle class society.

With regards to the Brony fandom in particular, think back on the absolutely critical role that access to the internet played in the formation and perpetuation of this group. And not just access to the internet itself, but more specifically access to high speed internet, made available at home to users who possess a certain degree of technological prowess and the amount of free time needed to spend hours pursuing online message boards and torrent sites; all of which is needed if one wishes to successfully navigate the tricky world of illegal media piracy and doesn't even begin to take into account the amount of free time and disposable income needed on top of that to actually watch the show, return to those same online

⁹¹ Amy C. Wilkins, *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: The Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 87.

message boards and discuss it, purchase memorabilia, and write fan-fiction or create fan-art. The fact is that such fannish activities are only a reality for certain members of society who possess the privileged commodities of free time and regular income; commodities which are generally only available in our society to white, middle-class, heterosexual, adult men.

Lastly such observations, at least on my end, are also not intended as a judgment upon this faction of society since I myself fall into this group. It is such a status that has allowed me to also become a fan of “unanticipated media” in the form of Japanese *tokusatsu*, much of which is obtained in exactly the same way that Bronies obtain their show, and why I can tell you that at no point do I ever recall sitting down at my computer and thinking ‘Well I’m bored with being white and straight... guess I’ll watch some weird decidedly un-mainstream Japanese children’s shows to make myself more interesting!’ Rather it was simply a result of my privileged position within society that I was able to form and later pursue such interests. It is that same privileged position which has also allowed me to pursue my academic interests in the social sciences as well, including the work you are now reading.

3.4 Straight from the Horse's Mouth: My Little Pony and Edification

One of the most common reasons cited by Bronies for their enjoyment *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* is its positive outlook devoid of cynicism.⁹² Ted Anderson, an English major, former NPR intern, and self-professed Brony, described the show in an on-air interview as "...authentic. It's sincere. It is exactly what it appears to be... This is a show where, really, they want to teach us good lessons about friendship and how to treat each other right and, you know, how to help every pony get along."⁹³ Journalist Jessica Goodman notes that some credit this emphasis on authenticity and sincerity within Brony fandom "to the New Sincerity movement, which refers to music, film, literature and fandoms people gravitate toward without postmodern irony or amplified hipster-dom."⁹⁴

This emphasis on a lack of cynicism and a positive message has become the key component in psychologists Patrick Edwards and Marsha Redden's attempt to formulate a theory to explain the Brony fandom. Redden in particular has likened Bronies to "hippies" who in the 1960s espoused messages of peace, love, and understanding in the wake of the Vietnam War. Redden contends that for Bronies, *Friendship is Magic* "serves a guidance function because cartoons are little parables" and that Edwards and herself "have begun to call this the WWPD factor or What Would A Pony Do?"⁹⁵ Like hippies, Redden suggests that Bronies actively embrace and espouse the virtues of love and tolerance, as taught in the

⁹² T.L. Stanley, "A Brony gathering: SoCal men let their 'My Little Pony' flag fly" *Los Angeles Times* (19 April 2012) <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2012/04/bronies-let-their-my-little-pony-flag-fly.html>

⁹³ "Interview with a Brony" *NPR* (25 Jun. 2011) <http://www.npr.org/2011/06/25/137406751/interview-with-a-bronie>

⁹⁴ Jessica Goodman, "Bronies: The Colorful Side of Millennial Escapism" *Mashable* (01 May 2013) <http://mashable.com/2013/05/01/bronies-hey-ocean/>

⁹⁵ *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (Dir. Laurent Malaquaid, 2012).

show, and are themselves an oppositional response to 9/11 and the ongoing American War on Terror.⁹⁶

As a result of the way that Edwards and Redden have imbedded themselves within the Brony fandom via convention appearances and guest spots on fan produced documentaries, it is not at all surprising that some Bronies have recently begun echoing their theories, as seen in a May 1st, 2013 article on the website *Mashable* which featured quotes from two Bronies in conjunction with Edward and Redden's own comments. One, "Charles Sporn, a 21-year-old student at City College... postulated [that] one could easily see the entire bronny phenomenon as a backlash against the fear that was so deeply instilled in the generation who were unlucky enough to have 9/11 bisect their young lives." Another 22-year-old Brony was quoted as saying: "Our generation has a lot to deal with in life. We've had to deal with the cruddy-ness of progress, the changing economy [and] a gutter of pop cultural gross-ness. It's post-9/11. Everyone's been diagnosed with chronic depression, ADD, an eating disorder. We like to pick up and go to a different world."⁹⁷

Despite such comments I nevertheless disagree with Edwards and Redden's theory for two reasons, the first being that the supposition that Bronies actually look to the *Friendship is Magic* show for moral guidance and moreover actually live by the morals taught in the show is problematic on a theoretical basis. As film and religion scholar John C. Lyden has pointed out "there is really no reason to assume that those who utilize the stories of popular cultural texts are any less or more likely to be 'responsible' to the values within them than are 'traditional' religious believers. Not all Christians live by the Sermon on the

⁹⁶ Hilary Stohs-Krause, "'Brony' fandom carves out space for young men to enjoy friendship ... and cartoon ponies" *net: Nebraska's NPR & PBS Stations* (14, May 2013) <http://netnebraska.org/article/news/brony-fandom-carves-out-space-young-men-enjoy-friendship-and-cartoon-ponies>

⁹⁷ Jessica Goodman, "Bronies: The Colorful Side of Millennial Escapism" *Mashable* (01 May 2013) <http://mashable.com/2013/05/01/bronies-hey-ocean/>

Mount or the Ten Commandments, just as not all fans of *Star Trek* follow the Prime Directive in their daily lives.”⁹⁸ Following after Lyden I really see no reason to assume that all, or even most, Bronies actually live their lives by the virtues taught in *Friendship is Magic* or even seriously consider looking to the show as a source of edification.

In the course of my interviews I spoke to several Bronies who actually found the idea that some adult fans might be looking to the show for life lessons laughable. John, the Brony I met in Chicago, commented: “I find it a little silly whenever you have the super-fans who say ‘It has great life-lessons and blah, blah, blah...’ And I’m like ‘At your age you should have learned these already.’ *laughs* I mean... they’re great for the kids, but you should already know this.” When I asked John if he felt he had learned anything from watching the show he gave a heavy sigh and after a few moments replied: “I don’t know if I’ve learned much of anything,” before quickly and sarcastically adding in, “*The Magic of Friendship?*”

Conversely some of the Bronies I spoke with did emphasize the edifying elements of the show as a favorite aspect, while at the same time specifying that they saw them as being there for the kids watching, not themselves. Jerry, a 26-year-old, unemployed Asian-American male Brony with glasses, long black hair, an Associate’s Degree and living in Charlotte, North Carolina, made an impassioned speech to me about how important it was that kids today have television shows like *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* to learn life-lessons from especially when contrasted with other animated alternatives:

Jerry: “I think it’s generally a good show, it has a good theme, and it has a good message for kids, and, like, based off of other programs that are currently on air, kids really need a good message.”

Me: “You feel it has a good message for kids?”

⁹⁸ John C. Lyden, “Whose Film Is It, Anyway? Canonicity and Authority in Star Wars Fandom.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (Sept. 2012): 781.

Jerry: “Yeah absolutely. It has a lot of good messages that I think most kids aren’t getting these day because of other television. I mean look at what they have to look up to! What is this? They have some show called ‘Uncle Grandpa’! I mean WHAT’S THE POINT OF THAT!”

When one of Jerry’s friends pointed out that the crude comedy show that is Cartoon Network’s *Uncle Grandpa* (2013-Present) is “kind of like a [modern day] *Ren & Stimpy*” – in fact the show actually features character designs by *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991-1993) creator John Kricfalusi – Jerry angrily replies: “YEAH! We don’t need a new *Ren & Stimpy!*”

Even those Bronies I spoke to who did profess to look to the show for guidance often had trouble following through, even with members of the fandom itself. A particular example springs to mind involving Alex, the 22-year-old Brony from North Carolina who I spoke to at a local Brony meet-up. While standing outside talking, Alex began to wax on about how prior to today he’d never met any of the people attending the meet-up in real life, only online: “But you see one of things I love about this fandom is... The lesson of the show is ‘Friendship is Magic.’ Right? You got to go up to people and treat them like they’re your friends, treat them like you want to be treated.” As Alex was saying this something behind me suddenly caught his eye causing him to let out an audible exclamation of “JESUS!” Turning around I saw that another adult male fan had just arrived, this one dressed in a long star bedecked robe and pointy wizard’s hat as worn by the pony Trixie on the show. Picking back up where he had left off Alan attempted to continue about the importance of friendship and acceptance, but was clearly distracted by the fan in the costume: “Uh... I don’t know any of these people but is that going to stop me from being friends with them? No.... Oh that guy’s got a Trixie outfit. Uh....” Then leaning over and whispering to me, despite us both being out of ear shot of any of the other attendees, Alex says: “I’m not sure if this is one of

the questions but I always find it a little weird when people like, kind of, dress up. It's okay to say that you like the show but when you become the character, that's a kind of a borderline kind of thing."

In addition to comments like these other Bronies I spoke to expressed a great deal reservation with regards to the fandom as a whole precisely because they found their fellow fans to often be rude or unkind as oppose to loving and accepting. Mark, the aforementioned Austin based comic-book artist – a profession which gives him occasion to visit many fan oriented conventions – noted his experiences at Brony conventions had often not been the most pleasant as a result of "the unfortunate fact that the fandom does tend to attract, these certain kind of people who, you know, don't have a terribly robust set of social skills." Mark recalled a particular incident at one convention, the Brony Fan Fair, at which he and his wife were "almost trampled by a group of Bronies who were um... just running around. They were doing some sort of a scavenger hunt or something and we were almost bowled over by them." Paul, the 30-year-old Brony from Atlanta, likewise complained a lot about other fans displaying attitudes of "entitlement and shit" saying: "For a while [the fandom] used to be super friendly, and there was this solidarity where 'The World is Against Us,' but eventually that solidarity morphed into this sort of entitlement where 'The World is Against Us' when the world really stopped caring after a while. There are guys who will say 'I don't think they're making the show for us anymore, I feel like they're making it for little kids' and I'm like 'NO SHIT! That's who it's always been made for. You were a secondary market!' You know?"

Still more fans showed a general lack of interest in the particulars of the show itself, commenting that they were in the fandom for the fan produced content rather than anything

official. Bill, a 22-year-old high school graduate who works at a “help-desk,” told me: “Mostly I just like the fandom. The material they make, the stories they make, etc... I look at the fan-art, listen to the music, that sort of thing.” When I asked him what he thinks of the *Friendship is Magic* show itself he replied: “I think it’s just alright. Sometimes I think it’s kind of uh... what do you call it, stretched out. I mean it’s a good show, but it doesn’t really need this much enthusiasm,” a point he emphasized by gesturing to the other Bronies around him.

The second reason that I find Edwards and Redden’s theory regarding the Bronies not entirely convincing is that they have deliberately chosen to overlook what I will contend is a major aspect of the fandom specifically relating to the aforementioned unofficial fan produced content. But before we get to that we will need to consider how the media has reacted to the Brony fandom, both positively and negatively.

3.5 Bronies in the Media: Positive and Negative

Following hot on the hooves of Hasbor's official acknowledgment of the Brony fandom, media interest in the group spiked with the majority of the coverage over the past four years being overwhelmingly positive, with different outlets repeatedly citing the Brony fandom as a real-life example of feminism and gender equality in action. Leading the charge was *Wired* which published a June 9th, 2011 article titled "My Little Pony Corrals Unlikely Fanboys Known as 'Bronies'." The article featured interviews with several Bronies as well as creator Lauren Faust who commented that she feels "proud" that her show has adult male fans who are "open-minded and cool enough and secure in their masculinity enough to embrace it and love it and go online and talk about how much they love it." The author of the article concurred with Faust's sentiments declaring that the Bronies were a sign that future generations of men were "bucking the gender socialization of things considered to be 'for girls' or 'for boys'" and concluded that "despite a tacit understanding that some people might be surprised by their choice of entertainment, most Bronies show little to no compunction about their fandom" and that "they shouldn't have to."⁹⁹ The article was re-blogged by both *Neatorama*¹⁰⁰ and *The Huffington Post*¹⁰¹ in apparent affirmation of its overall take on the phenomena.

Following this was a July 12th episode of the *Slate* internet video series "Is That a Thing?" on Bronies. Once more the Bronies were congratulated for their "progressive gender

⁹⁹ Angela Watercutter, "My Little Pony Corrals Unlikely Fanboys Known as 'Bronies'" *Wired* (9 June 2011) <http://www.wired.com/underwire/2011/06/bronies-my-little-ponys/>

¹⁰⁰ John Farrier, "Bronies: Adult Men Who Like to Watch My Little Pony" *Neatorama* (11 June 2011) <http://www.neatorama.com/2011/06/11/bronies-adult-men-who-like-to-watch-my-little-pony/>

¹⁰¹ Christine Friar, "'My Little Wu-Tang' Blends Ponies and Hip Hop (VIDEO)" *The Huffington Post* (26 June 2011) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/06/24/my-little-wu-tang_n_884181.html

politics” with the host concluding that “There’s no point heeing and hawing about some guys liking a cartoon” and that she herself “sometimes like things that aren’t exactly girly.”¹⁰²

A July 13th article on the website *Parenting* titled “What’s the deal with ‘bronies’?” echoed these sentiments with their author, a father, writing; “I have two boys, so I often find myself watching shows about ninjas and samurais... But if I had girls, I’d have no problem getting down on the ground and neh-ing like Secretariat as I make Twilight and Applejack gallop across the floor. But I’d have no problem doing this with my boys either.” The author goes on to say that it is crucial for “today’s parents” to make “an effort to make our kids feel normal no matter what they are into. A dump truck can be for Lily. An Easy-Bake oven can be for Carl.”¹⁰³

The next month on August 1st, Bronies received an unexpected bit of exposure when comedian Stephen Colbert, host of the popular Comedy Central show *The Colbert Report* gave a shout-out to “...all my bronies that may be watching.”¹⁰⁴ In response to Colbert’s shout-out Faust posted on her *DeviantArt* journal: “Holy guacamole, Bronies. Stephen Colbert just gave you all a shout out. I’m seriously impressed. You guys are an Internet force to be reckoned with. Just wow.”¹⁰⁵

On August 4th the popular women’s news site *Jezebel* featured the article “The Unlikely Origins Of The Brony, Or Bros Who Like 'My Little Pony'.” Again the Bronies were praised for casting off gender stereotypes and the author of the article stated that she

¹⁰² Taylor Orci, “Men and Their Little Ponies” *Slate* (12 July 2011) http://www.slate.com/articles/video/slate_v/2011/07/men_and_their_little_ponies.html

¹⁰³ Shawn Bean, “What’s the deal with ‘bronies’?” *Parenting* (13 July 2011) <http://www.parenting.com/blogs/pop-culture/shawn-parenting/whats-deal-bronies>

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Colbert, “‘Three Billy Goats Gruff’ Budget Negotiations” *The Colbert Report* (01 Aug. 2011) <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/393609/august-01-2011/the-kind-of-deal-democrats-hate>

¹⁰⁵ Lauren Rae Orsini, “Bronies build a magical place of their own” *Daily Dork* (5 Aug. 2011) <http://www.dailydot.com/culture/bronies-my-little-pony-stephen-colbert/>

hoped that network “executives are taking note” that “the key to a successful children’s program isn’t churning out increasingly stereotyped shows in which girls pretend to be princesses and frolic with woodland creatures while boys fight and play with cars (or fight with robots that turn into cars). Men aren’t allergic to everything aimed at women, and with interesting characters and plots (and a dose of ‘80s nostalgia) people of all ages, and genders, are likely to become fans.”¹⁰⁶

Even after several months of coverage some were still skeptical. A November 4th article from *New York Magazine* titled “4Chan-Based ‘Bronies’ Continue Their Media Takeover” questioned the sincerity of the Bronies and asked if the movement wasn’t simply these “young men’s first attempts at playing with irony.” However it also acknowledged that if indeed sincere the fan base certainly raised “interesting questions at play about gender and sexuality.”¹⁰⁷

Several more articles on the Brony fandom appeared in the spring of 2012, coinciding with the show’s second season finale, including an April 19th one from the *L.A. Times* titled “A Brony gathering: SoCal men let their ‘My Little Pony’ flag fly” which praised the adult male fans of the show for casting off “those tired stereotypes of what boys should or shouldn’t like.”¹⁰⁸

A second *Wired* article, appearing on May 25th, was openly apologetic in nature, stepping up to defend the Brony fandom from would-be detractors. Simply titled “In Defense of Bronies” the article congratulated Bronies for being “secure in their masculinity” while

¹⁰⁶ Margaret Hartmann, “The Unlikely Origins Of The Brony, Or Bros Who Like ‘My Little Pony’” *Jezebel* (4 Aug. 2011) <http://jezebel.com/5827591/the-unlikely-origins-of-the-brony-or-dudes-who-like-my-little-pony>

¹⁰⁷ Joe Coscarelli, “4Chan-Based ‘Bronies’ Continue Their Media Takeover” *New York Magazine* (4 Sept. 2011) http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2011/11/4chan-based_bronies_continue_t.html

¹⁰⁸ T.L. Stanley, “A Brony gathering: SoCal men let their ‘My Little Pony’ flag fly” *Los Angeles Times* (19 April 2012) <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2012/04/bronies-let-their-my-little-pony-flag-fly.html>

bemoaning the fact that the rest of society was not as advance: “We’ve finally gotten to a point in our culture where we think sporty, tough girls are cool, and yet boys are so limited!”¹⁰⁹

This was followed by a June 6th episode of the PBS web series the *Idea Channel* on “The Bronies Phenomenon” in which host Mike Rugnetta namedrops gender and sexuality theorists John Stuart Mills and Judith Butler in an attempt to give academic credence to the notion that Bronies are “performing outside of their gender roles” and thus “challenge our perception of what [entertainment] preferences are acceptable in men and what shows are ‘girly.’”¹¹⁰

On October 1st *The Guardian* triumphantly declared “Adult male *My Little Pony* fans? Bronies are true rebels” praising “the fact that any man gave *My Little Pony* a try is the most important point here. Having interests that go against what men are supposed to embrace is the sneakiest kind of rebellion. Pony on.”¹¹¹

More recently a July 31st 2013 article by the *TV Guide* also offered up a length apologetic argument for Brony fandom. Titled “Give Bronies a Break! In Defense of Adult *My Little Pony* Fans” the article summarizes everything positive the media has been saying about Bronies for the past three years: “The fandom is groundbreaking in its approach to gender commentary... a group of men [who] feel comfortable becoming a fan of something made for little girls shows that gender norms and the lines between pink and blue are starting

¹⁰⁹ Rebecca Angel, “In Defense of Bronies” *Wired* (27 May, 2012)
<http://www.wired.com/geekmom/2012/05/in-defense-of-bronies/>

¹¹⁰ Mike Rugnetta, “IDEA CHANNEL: The Bronies Phenomenon” *PBS arts* (6 June, 2012)
<http://www.pbs.org/arts/gallery/idea-channel-s1e8-bronies/idea-channel-s1e7-bronies/>

¹¹¹ Rebecca Angel, “Adult male *My Little Pony* fans? Bronies are true rebels” *The Guardian* (1 Oct. 2012)
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/oct/01/my-little-pony-bronies-rebels?newsfeed=true>

to break down” and that hopefully “the idealism of bronies will shift the tide toward a more gender-equal media world.”¹¹²

Though largely positive a few vocal media outlets have chosen to make the Brony fandom a source of ridicule and derision. For example, the June 14th 2011 episode of the late-night *Fox News* show *Red Eye w/Greg Gutfeld* covered the Brony fandom, using the original *Wired* article as its basis, with the various pundits on the show displaying mixed reactions to the story. When asked “how much shame” Bronies should feel about their hobby one commentator responded “zero” the same amount he feels when “watching Japanimation.” Another however called the fandom “incredibly stupid.” The rest mostly just lobbied jokes about how being a Brony was only slightly better than being “a terrorist” and that Bronies were almost certainly drug users.¹¹³

Not long after this on June 18th, the NPR comedy news-quiz show *Wait Wait... Don't Tell Me!* covered Bronies in a segment playing the fandom for laughs, saying that fans loved the show “for its excellent animation and subtle references to that other hallmark of high school celibacy, ‘Dungeons and Dragons.’” Though *Equestria Daily* founder Shaun Scotellaro was invited on to say a few words about the fandom the second he went off the air one of the commentators quickly quipped that Scotellaro was surely living in “his mom’s basement,” a comment that host Peter Sagal agreed with.¹¹⁴ Around this same time *Fox News* aired another segment on Bronies featuring an interview with St. Louis based talk-show host Dave Glover on “disturbing new trends.” Glover brought up Bronies who he characterized

¹¹² Sadie Gennis, “Give Bronies a Break! In Defense of Adult My Little Pony Fans” *TV Guide* (31 Jul 2013) <http://www.tvguide.com/News/Bronies-My-Little-Pony-Friendship-Magic-1068692.aspx>

¹¹³ “RedEye on 'Bronies'” YouTube (17 Jun 2011) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fi27530dDCc>

¹¹⁴ “Bluff The Listener” *NPR* (18 Jun. 2011) <http://www.npr.org/2011/06/18/137261565/bluff-the-listener>

as: “Grown men who file for disability and stay home from work to watch ponies because they’re obsessed with it.”¹¹⁵

An October 2nd episode of the popular tabloid talk-show *The Jerry Springer Show* featured a segment on “Outrageous Guilty Pleasures” opening with two guests claiming to be Bronies, however the legitimacy of these guests has been heavily questioned with many suspecting they were actually actors and the episode was staged.¹¹⁶ Similarly renowned shock-jock Howard Stern has sent correspondences to the New York City based Brony fan convention BroNYCon in both 2012 and 2013 to collect interviews with attendees. While the content of these interviews will be discussed later on, what matters right now is the general mocking attitude which Stern and company adopted when speaking about Bronies and fans in general. “It’s a bleak life,” opined Stern, “You know how Comic-Con is sort of for losers, let’s be honest. Comic-Con people are winners, compared to BroNYCon.”¹¹⁷

Others have responded to the Brony fandom in an even more hostile manner such as one commentator on the right wing online news station *JP Media* who warned that Bronies were a portent of the apocalypse¹¹⁸ or a writer on the parenting website *MOMfia Inc.* who, in a rebuttal to the original *Wired* article on Bronies, decried the fandom as being only “a step away from some kind of child molestation.”¹¹⁹ However such hyperbolic accusations have rightly failed to gain much traction.

¹¹⁵ “FOX Attacks Bronies” *YouTube* (17 Jun. 2011) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqEDIFfy4Yg>

¹¹⁶ Lauren Rae Orsini, “Jerry Springer interviews bronies about ‘Outrageous Guilty Pleasures’” *The Daily Dot* (2 Oct. 2012) <http://www.dailydot.com/news/jerry-springer-my-little-pony-bronies/>

¹¹⁷ Adam Wenger, “Bronies: Why It’s Totally Okay for a 20-Something Dude to Love ‘My Little Pony’” *Zimbo* (24 Aug. 2012) <http://www.zimbio.com/TV+News/articles/OonIKQ2bNCo/Bronies+Totally+Okay+20+Something+Dude+Love>

¹¹⁸ JP Media, “My Little Brony: Grown Men Are Embracing the ‘My Little Pony’ Lifestyle” *JP Media* (3 May 2012) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwcJorJp_Aw

¹¹⁹ “Bronies: Adult Men Who Like My Little Pony and Why It Disturbs me” *MOMfia Inc.* (15 Jun. 2011) <http://sdmomfia.com/2011/06/bronies-adult-men-who-like-my-little-pony/>

One of the most widely cited and republished attacks on Brony fandom appeared on April 25th 2012 as an op-ed piece on the conservative news media site *Big Hollywood*. In the article, titled “Terrifying New Trend: Grown Men Who Dig 'My Little Pony',” writer Kurt Schlichter condemns Bronies as “pathetic sissies [who] giggle like school girls over magic unicorns that spray rainbows from their horns” as well as “pathetic weirdos,” “fem-boys,” “perma-virgins,” and “losers [who] want to waste their lives lingering in a childhood fugue state.” Schlichter then goes on to contrast Bronies with “real men” serving in the armed forces and concludes by suggesting that if these “nerds” need “a fictional character” to learn “key life lessons” from that they should at least pick one who exemplifies “the attributes commonly associated with ‘manhood’” such as *The Godfather*’s Don Corleone or *Star Trek*’s Captain Kirk, who teaches “that violence is an important option for defeating evil, that individual dignity is worth fighting for, and that scoring with green alien chicks is awesome.”¹²⁰ Whatever one may think of Schlichter’s vitriolic write-off of Brony fandom what is most interesting here is how its cliché language regarding sundry stereotypes about fans of pop-culture being perpetual losers fits into a larger and more storied commentary regarding the perceived social inadequacies of fan culture.

This was an issue 20-years-ago when media studies Prof. Henry Jenkins wrote his landmark study on fandom, *Textual Poachers*, in which he describes a December 22nd, 1986 issue of *Newsweek* magazine and its coverage of a small *Star Trek* fan convention, held in Houston, Texas. Jenkins describes how the *Newsweek* article characterized fans as “brainless consumers who... devote their lives to the cultivation of worthless knowledge; place inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material; are social misfits... feminized and/or

¹²⁰ Kurt Schlichter, “Terrifying New Trend: Grown Men Who Dig 'My Little Pony'” *Big Hollywood* (25 Apr 2012) <http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Hollywood/2012/04/25/my-little-pony>

desexualized through their intimate engagement with mass culture; are infantile, emotionally and intellectually” and finally “are unable to separate fantasy from reality.”¹²¹

In what I’m sure will surprise some readers, given the alleged societal takeover by so-called “Geek Culture” in the last decade, this kind of rhetoric about fans hasn’t gone away and it continues to be a relevant issue as a few recent examples may serve to demonstrate. Last summer, on June 5th, 2014, *Slate* magazine ran an article by literary critic Ruth Graham which was simply and effectively titled “Against YA,” underscored by the slightly-too-long-to-be-a-sub-header of: “Read whatever you want. But you should feel embarrassed when what you’re reading was written for children.”¹²² The article appeared on the same weekend as the opening of the highly anticipated film *The Fault in Our Stars*, based upon the best-selling Young Adult (aka YA) novel of the same name by author John Green. In the two page piece, Graham proceeds to shame not only the adult fans of Green but also the readers of such popular fantasy and sci-fi series as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and the *Divergent* series amongst others with her principal accusation being essentially a toned down version of Schlichter’s charge that adults who enjoy such literature are ‘wasting their lives lingering in a childhood fugue state:’ “There’s a special reward in that feeling of stretching yourself beyond the YA mark, akin to the excitement of graduating out of the kiddie pool and the rest of the padded trappings of childhood: It’s the thrill of growing up.”¹²³

Hiding just beneath Graham’s accusation of infantilism – and we might want to add feminization as well since perhaps not coincidentally most of the titles she singles out happen to be primarily marketed at teen girls – is the apparent fear that the rise in popularity of such

¹²¹ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (NY: Routledge; 2nd Ed. 2012), 10-11

¹²² Ruth Graham, “Against YA” *The Slate Book Review* (5 June 2014), 1. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2014/06/against_ya_adults_should_be_embarrassed_to_read_children_s_books.html

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 2.

literature is a harbinger of societal collapse in which the borders separating childhood from adulthood breakdown: “It’s not simply that YA readers are asked to immerse themselves in a character’s emotional life... but that they are asked to abandon the mature insights into that perspective that they (supposedly) have acquired as adults.”¹²⁴ Graham even manages to squeeze in the not-at-all-subtle observation that while YA books “are written for 12- to 17-year-olds” they are generally “bought by people older than 18” and that in our current cultural climate the “definition of ‘young adult’ now stretches practically to age 30, which may have something to do with this whole phenomenon.”¹²⁵

Not even four months down the road, what Graham couldn’t quite bring herself to declare was subsequently emblazoned across the headlines of the September 11th issue of *The New York Times Magazine* which herald: “The Death of Adulthood in American Culture.” Picking up where Graham had left off – she is referenced explicitly – film critic A.O. Scott, “bemoaning the general immaturity of contemporary culture,” writes “that nobody knows how to be a grown-up anymore. Adulthood as we have known it has become conceptually untenable.” Scott goes on to say:

“Y.A. fiction is the least of it. It is now possible to conceive of adulthood as the state of being forever young. Childhood, once a condition of limited autonomy and deferred pleasure (‘wait until you’re older’), is now a zone of perpetual freedom and delight. Grown people feel no compulsion to put away childish things: We can live with our parents, go to summer camp, play dodge ball, collect dolls and action figures and watch cartoons to our hearts’ content. These symptoms of arrested development will also be signs that we are freer, more honest and happier than the uptight fools who let go of such pastimes.”¹²⁶

Some readers may be inclined to imagine that Graham and Scott’s ire is primarily directed at adults obsessed with the media of adolescents and children and that perhaps they

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1

¹²⁶ A.O. Scott, “The Death of Adulthood in American Culture” *The New York Times Magazine* (11 Sept. 2014) http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/magazine/the-death-of-adulthood-in-american-culture.html?_r=2

would not be so upset if their peers were geeking out over something a little bit more adult, say, AMC's hit TV crime-drama *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). But as a third and final example, and the one which comes closest to matching the tone of Schlichter, demonstrates that is not the case.

Towards the end of October 2014, US retailer Toys R Us made the controversial decision to pull a line of action-figures based around the TV series *Breaking Bad* from its shelves – specifically from the shelves of “the adult action figure section” of its stores – after a Florida mom complained that the toys were inappropriate and launched an online petition against them which managed to garner some 8,000 signatures.¹²⁷ In response to this *The Guardian* ran an October 22nd editorial by writer Rupert Myers titled “The ban on *Breaking Bad* figurines reveals just how infantilised we are.”¹²⁸ In the piece Myers says that the recent kerfuffle over the action-figures “should be a wake-up call to the creeping infantilisation of our modern culture.” “These toys... aren't being bought by children in the traditional sense of the word” writes Myers with growing alarm, “They're being purchased by adults who like to play with their own toys.” Like Schlichter, Myers goes on to describe such individuals as both “adult-children” and “man-children” who “aren't ‘children at heart’ in the Robin Williams, see-joy-everywhere sense of the word” but rather “‘children’ in the shutting themselves in a room and playing with plastic dolls as part of a fantasy life sense of the word.” More specifically Myers imagines that room must be their “parents’ spare room.”

What proves the most inscrutable part of the whole scene for Myers is that “these adults... seem proud of their toy fascination,” a fact which he finds unacceptable,

¹²⁷ Associated Press, “Breaking Bad dolls withdrawn from sale” *The Guardian* (21 Oct. 2014) <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/oct/22/breaking-bad-dolls-withdrawn>

¹²⁸ Rupert Myers, “The ban on Breaking Bad figurines reveals just how infantilised we are” *The Guardian* (22 Oct. 2014) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/22/banned-breaking-bad-figurines-how-infantilised-are-we>

necessitating him to “imagine” a more preferable counter-scenario in which such individuals creep in shame “into a Toys R Us to purchase an articulated plastic doll of [their] fictional hero.” Lastly Myers, like Schlichter, ends by pointing out the irony, which only he can see, in a culture which “celebrates alpha male archetypes of the old school [such as *Breaking Bad*’s own fictional drug kingpin Walter White] and yet” produces “too many fans” who are “the antithesis of their hero’s qualities.”

In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins, drawing on the insights of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, argues that such criticism is an attempt by self-appointed cultural guardians – usually under the guise of the critic – to sure up “bourgeois tastes” which serve the interests of the “dominate cultural hierarchies” and help reinforce accompanying class distinctions. For individuals with such an agenda the fan proves a persistent nuisance – Scott, in particular, complains about “the unassailable ascendancy of the fan” which he contends “has made children of us all”¹²⁹ – since, Jenkin argues, “fan culture muddies those boundaries, treating popular texts as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation as canonical texts. Reading practices (close scrutiny, elaborate exegesis, repeated and prolonged rereading, etc.) acceptable in confronting a work of ‘serious merit’ seem perversely misapplied to the more ‘disposable’ texts of mass culture. Fans speak of ‘artist’ where others can see only commercial hacks, of transcendent meaning where other find only banalities, of ‘quality and innovation’ where others see only formula and convention.”¹³⁰ In many ways Jenkins’ observations here recall those of religious studies scholar Joseph P. Laycock discussed in the first half of this piece. Laycock contended that fan cultures create “rival fantasies” which compete for the time and attention of devotees who might otherwise be

¹²⁹ A.O. Scott, “The Death of Adulthood in American Culture” *The New York Times Magazine* (11 Sept. 2014) http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/14/magazine/the-death-of-adulthood-in-american-culture.html?_r=2

¹³⁰ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (NY: Routledge; 2nd Ed. 2012), 17.

drawn to the mainstream and acceptable avenues of Evangelical Christianity. In this same way, Jenkins proposes that fandoms challenge the status quo of the dominate aesthetic culture by demonstrating that one can engage with popular and mass-produced media just as richly as one engages with the texts of so-called high culture.

However the reason why such articles are worth pointing out here is that even though none of them even allude to Bronies they nevertheless could all very well be about them in their repeated concern and condemnation of adult fans partaking in what the authors deem to be the unsophisticated, hackneyed media and past times of children. The fact that such articles even appeared in publications as prestigious as *Slate*, *New York Times Magazine*, and *The Guardian*, and in the year 2014, serves as a clear example of how little things have really changed with regards to mainstream society's view of fans since the days when ardent *Star Trek* devotees were told to go "Get A Life." What's more, such articles also highlight just how exceptional the media's treatment of Bronies has been – especially when one considers the previously documented fact that prior to last year both *Slate* and *The Guardian* actually ran articles praising the Brony fandom.

This then brings us back to Schlichter's article and the other negative commentary on the Brony fandom. Far from being a minority opinion, such pieces actually display the kind of response one would expect considering the generally condemnatory rhetoric so often trotted out against fans, let alone ones whose passion is for a cartoon marketed at little girls. It's really as if Schlichter simply didn't get the memo that the news media was abandoning their usual line of attack and going pro-Fanboy this time around.

What then can account for the exceptional treatment of the Bronies? What Schlichter condemns the Bronies for is the exact same thing that media outlets like *Wired*, PBS, the *L.A.*

Times, *TV Guide*, and others praise them for, namely their perceived rejection of traditional male/female gender norms. In other words both supporters and detractors of the Brony fandom are essentially making the same claim; that Bronies represent a significant change in contemporary gender politics amongst young adult males. They simply disagree as to whether this is a good or bad thing. But in the case of those largely left-leaning journalists who deem it a sign of progress, this perception of the Brony fandom has been enough to elevate these otherwise run-of-the-mill geeks head and shoulders above their equally geeky brethren to become the latest unwitting representatives of the movement for gender egalitarianism in modern society. The irony of the situation of course being that such an interpretation of the Bronies and the imagined world they live in could not be further from the truth.

3.6 Brony Masculinity and The Male Colonization of a “Girl’s Show”

The irony of the Brony phenomena and the overwhelmingly positive reception it has received from the media is that it has taken a show originally designed to shine a spotlight on the diverse ways in which young girls can express femininity and instead been colonized by adult men as a way of demonstrating an alternative means of masculinity.

This fact was recognized early on by feminist writer Emily Manuel who in an August 25th 2011 article for the *Global Comment* noted:

“...The bronies’ own behavior en masse in the fandom reinforces the same old male-center/female-margin dynamic, as does much of the media coverage. Female fans are squeezed from the frame as objects worthy of consideration of their own. Some have proposed the male-centric term “brony” be applied to all adult MLP fans, an un-reflexive marking of the male as universal. This is indicative of a broader claiming of the text as normatively the domain of men, a far from unique dynamic in fandom – just one of a million reasons why a feminist narrative like MLP:FiM is still so sorely needed by girls and women.”¹³¹

As Manuel notes, the media’s love affair with Brony fandom betrays an obvious double standard. For girls of any age to be interested in boy’s toys like *Transformers* (another Hasbor property) is neither remarkable, worthy of repeated coverage and defense, nor a sign of the progressive redefining of traditional gender roles.¹³² This is because guys who like *My Little Pony* are special not only because they like a show targeted at children but more so because they like a show targeted at girls, who western cultural assumptions state are naturally inferior to boys in every way including their sense of taste in toys and cartoons. Thus by liking a girl’s show, Bronies are seen as rejecting their superior male status in favor of an inferior female one while girls who embrace men’s entertainment are simply showing a

¹³¹ Emily Manuel, “Welcome to the Herd: A Feminist Watches My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic” *Global Comment* (25, Aug. 2011) <http://globalcomment.com/welcome-to-the-herd-a-feminist-watches-my-little-pony-friendship-is-magic/>

¹³² That is until VERY recently: Brian Truitt, “Female ‘Transformers’ come to the fore” *USAToday* (Apr. 23, 2015) <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/2015/04/23/transformers-female-characters/26236633/>

more cultivated sense of taste. This type of chauvinistic mindset has been a historic trend in western culture and as a result is mirrored by western and western-influenced “Geek Culture” going all the way back to the very first role-playing game manual ever published in 1913, by acclaimed science-fiction author H.G. Wells, which boasted the blatantly misogynistic title of *“Little Wars: a game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books.”*¹³³

As we progress we will return to this issue of latent sexism within the Brony fandom itself, but for now if we admit then that the media’s coverage of the Bronies is decidedly skewed – both by what they think they see as well as by what they don’t – then perhaps we should turn to those works produced by and for Bronies themselves and see how they wish to present themselves to the rest of the world.

¹³³ Ethan Gilsdorf, *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks*. (Gilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2009), 70

3.7 Pony Proselytization

In addition to heavy media coverage from multiple sources there have also been two feature-length documentaries produced about Bronies which have been made available to the public via limited theatrical screenings, home media, digital downloads, and streaming services like Netflix – though as noted earlier most Bronies simply chose to pirate such films. These two documentaries are *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (Dir. Laurent Malaquaid, 2012) and *A Brony Tale* (Dir. Brent Hodge, 2014). Actually the term documentary is a bit generation in both cases as the first film is more of a unique hybrid of proselytization video and product commercial, while the second plays out like a bad attempt at reality television.

In the case of the later, the primarily focus of *A Brony Tale* is that of singer and voice actress Ashleigh Ball – she’s the voice of Rainbow Dash and Applejack on *Friendship is Magic* – and the feelings of trepidation Ball experiences upon being invited to attend BronNYCon 2012 as a special guest. The main reason this makes for poor drama is quite simple. The filmmakers want us to feel as if Ball is potentially entering into a dangerous or unsavory situation by attending a Brony convention. However due to the overwhelmingly pro-Brony nature of the piece the filmmakers never manage to give their viewers any reason to believe that this is the case. As a result the scenes which pepper the first hour of the film featuring Ball staring pensively at her laptop contemplating whether or not she should reply “Yes” to her e-mail invite come across as silly and boring. The other reason is the fact that, as confirmed by several of the Bronies I interviewed, fans of the show seem to have relatively little interest in the real women behind their favorite pony characters thus making the possibility that Ball would be harassed in any serious way rather unlikely.

Much more compelling is the first documentary *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*. Professionally shot, edited, and composed on a budget just under \$350,000 which was obtained almost entirely from Bronies themselves via the crowd funding website KickStarter.¹³⁴ Though containing the obligatory disclaimer that “Neither this film, nor the views and opinions expressed in it, is approved or endorsed by, or in any way associated with Hasbro, Inc.” *Bronies* contains a generous amount of footage from the *Friendship is Magic* show as well as original animated vignettes done specifically for the documentary.¹³⁵ In addition, three of the four executive producers on *Bronies* consist of show creator Lauren Faust, *Friendship is Magic*’s star voice actress – she voices Twilight Sparkle – and self-proclaimed “Brony Queen”¹³⁶ Tara Strong, and popular guest voice actor and *Star Trek* cast alumni John de Lancie; the latter of whom conceived and organized the making of the documentary under the impetus of counteracting the “disrespectful” portrayal of Bronies by the media,¹³⁷ even though as we have seen such negative commentary is in the minority. Regardless of stated motives however one must acknowledge that in this case all these people have something to gain monetarily from the continued promotion of the *Friendship is Magic* show and the widening of its audience.

As a result it is not surprising then that the entire tone of *Bronies* is one of positive endorsement. At no point throughout the film’s nearly 90-minute runtime is the fandom, or any of the individual fans interviewed, ever cast in anything resembling a negative light,

¹³⁴ Michael Brockhoff, “BronyCon: The Documentary” *Kick Starter* (14 May 2012)

<http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/257527888/bronycon-the-documentary>

¹³⁵ Rob Bricken, “Just John DeLancie singing about the history of Bronies, that’s all” *io9* (21, Jan. 2013)

<http://io9.com/5977702/just-john-delancie-singing-about-the-history-of-bronies-thats-all>

¹³⁶ Adam Wenger, “Bronies: Why It’s Totally Okay for a 20-Something Dude to Love ‘My Little Pony’” *Zimbo* (24 Aug. 2012)

<http://www.zimbo.com/TV+News/articles/OonlKQ2bNCo/Bronies+Totally+Okay+20+Something+Dude +Love>

¹³⁷ “John De Lancie Announces Brony Documentary (Ottawa Comiccon)” YouTube (13 May 2012)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVK3jgOhFwY>

except via a few carefully selected *Fox News* clips seen at the beginning, intercut with clips of supposedly average people on the street, giving their initial reactions to a question we don't actually get to hear posed but which it seems safe to assume was something along the lines of 'What are your thoughts regarding Bronies.' Responses include comments such as "gay," "pedophile," "creeps," "twisted," and one individual who assuredly states that "there's definitely sexual deviancy involved."

The documentary opens up with a montage of roughly 10 or so adult males giving their testimonials about how they came into the fandom, all of which conform to the previously discussed Brony Conversion Narrative model. The film proper then begins with the basic narrative of *Bronies* centering around seven self-professed fans from across the United States and Europe and their respective pilgrimages to various Brony fan conventions. All of the interviewees are in their late teens or early twenties and Caucasian. Out of the seven, six are male with the sole female being the girlfriend of one of the male interviewees – perfectly conforming to Edwards and Reddens' statistical data. In each and every case we are shown how becoming a Brony has had a positive and life affirming influence on these young adult's lives.

Already alluded to are Benjamin Meyer and Nadine Neumann of Germany who fall in love over their mutual enjoyment of *My Little Pony*, as well as Lyle Gilpatrick from Maine who grows closer to his father as a result of them attending BronYCon 2012 together. There's Daniel Richards from the U.K. who overcomes Aspergers with the help of Brony fandom as well as Yoav Landau, from Israel, and Pieterjan Ruysch of the Netherlands who both use Brony fandom to further their professional careers as a composer of music and a producer of laser light shows respectfully. Lastly there is Alex Tibcken, from North Carolina,

who we are told is repeatedly harassed and threatened by local “rednecks” for being a Brony; making him something of a martyr for the cause. With these individuals as our window into the world of Brony subculture we see a fandom that not only serves as a means of camaraderie but is capable of fostering relationships between family and lovers, promising careers in the entertainment industry, and can even be therapeutic for some.

In considering such fans as those highlighted in *Bronies* let us return to Yoshimasa’s contention that fans are individuals who effectively remove the pleasure one might derive from leisure activities in order to enhance their overall pleasure in a “masochistic” fashion by partaking in much difficult activities as “beating a [video] game with one quarter.” Cultural anthropologist Patrick W. Galbraith, whose work centers around fan cultures, has elaborated upon Yoshimasa’s argument noting that the ability to perform such tasks raises one’s status as a fan within one’s own fandom; as do other similar feats such as being able to recite litanies of trivia or boasting an impressive collection of related memorabilia.¹³⁸

Bronies features interviews with a number of such fans like Alex Tibcken who speaks passionately about his collection of *My Little Pony* figures and related merchandise, proving especially proud of his custom decals of Princess Celestia and Luna which adorn the back window of his Mercedes. While amassing such a collection, especially if it consists of many rare or unique figures or custom pieces of memorabilia, even more impressive than collectors are those fans which re-appropriate and create their own custom Pony items. The documentary *Bronies* places a great deal of emphasis on such “Creative” fans even describing them as one of the three principal types of Bronies – alongside “Hipster” and “Moderate” Bronies. Of the six Bronies profiled in the documentary half of them are artists

¹³⁸ Matt Alt, “An Interview with Patrick W. Galbraith on Otaku Culture – Part One.” Neojaponisme. (22 may 2012) <http://neojaponisme.com/2012/05/22/an-interview-with-patrick-w-galbraith-on-otaku-culture-part-one/>

of one stripe or another including Israeli musician Yoav Landau and Nadine Neumann of Germany who creates her own *My Little Pony* toys to sell at conventions – official *My Little Pony* merchandise apparently being hard to come by in German. Moreover, the relationship which exists between Brony merchandise consumers and fan artists within the field of Brony fandom can best be thought of as symbiotic. Brony fan artists create both material and symbolic *capital* for themselves by making such art while consumer Bronies generate the same by consuming said art.

In addition, a survey of BroNYCon’s “notable guests” from year to year not only includes those individuals directly involved with the show such as creator Lauren Faust along with the series’ writers and voice actresses and actors, but also high profile fans such as the previously mentioned webmaster Sean Scotellaro whose contributions to the fandom have given them a minor-league celebrity status within the Brony community. One such fan-celebrity, featured in both *Bronies* and *A Brony Tale*, is Donald “Dusty” Rhoades, also known by his online alias Dustykatt, a 46-year-old man with a handlebar mustache so thick it looks like muttonchops. Rhoades is “a Harley-Davidson mechanic who was a defensive end in his college football team, a professional wrestler, a bodyguard and a medieval martial artist” as well as “the self-titled ‘Manliest Brony in the World’,” a character which he portrays in a series of YouTube videos parodying the popular “Most Interesting Man in the World” ads for Dos Equis beer. Rhoades also runs the website [manliestbrony.com](http://www.manliestbrony.com) where he holds Manly Challenges which implore his fellow fans to donate to various charities since “There’s nothing more studly, more two-fisted brawny, more macho than helping others.”¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Donald “Dusty” Rhoades, *The Manliest Website in the World* (Accessed: 11 Feb. 2015) http://www.manliestbrony.com/blog/?page_id=63

Another element which both documentaries also share are scenes highlighting the existence of Bronies serving in the U.S. Military, as if almost in refutation of Kurt Schlichter's allegation that Bronies are nothing like the "real men" of the armed forces. Quite the contrary, as one Brony serviceman actually points out in *Bronies* "the Elements of Harmony" – that is the magical source from which the show's pony protagonists draw their power – "of loyalty, kindness, generosity, magic, laughter and honesty coincide with some of the army values of loyalty, duty, respect, self-assertiveness, honesty, integrity, and personal courage."¹⁴⁰ In *A Brony Tale* the focus is on the melancholy story of Bryan Mischke, a high school dropout who served six years in the Army National Guard in Iraq – which Mischke likens to the digital wasteland of the movie *Tron*. Clearly a sensitive individual, Mischke describes being overcome with "deep depression" following the end of his tour and that it was his introduction to *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* which brought him out of it, in part by rekindling his love of drawing. "Don't underestimate the things that make you happy," says Mischke wispily, "I mean if drawing Ponies makes you happy there's no reason to feel bad about that."¹⁴¹

While *Bronies* was largely well received by the fandom, it did draw some criticism. Some disliked its blatantly self-aggrandizing portrayal of the fandom while others made accusations of sexism in its choice to focus almost exclusively on the adult male fans of the show.¹⁴² However a *Fusion.net* article on the documentary noted that many Bronies had a very specific criticism: the sidestepping of the sexual aspect of the fandom. In particular the

¹⁴⁰ *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (Dir. Laurent Malaquaid, 2012)

¹⁴¹ *A Brony Tale* (Dir. Brent Hodge, 2014).

¹⁴² Aja Romano, "Brony documentary blasted for sexism" *The Daily Dot* (5 Feb. 2013) <http://www.dailydot.com/society/bronies-documentary-sexism-my-little-pony/>

practice of “clipping” which is Brony “slang for masturbation.”¹⁴³ And need you ask, yes we are talking about masturbation to images of the show’s female pony characters.

¹⁴³ Alex Alvarez, “Film Highlights Male My Little Pony Fans, but Draws Criticism” *Fusion.net* (6 Feb. 2013) <http://fusion.net/culture/story/brony-documentary-draws-criticism-male-female-fans-7687>

3.8 Interview Interlude: My Little Pony and the “Sentai of Friendship”

As I imagine some readers may need a moment to digest that last sentence I’m going to take this opportunity for a slight, but completely relevant, detour before galloping headfirst onto the tricky terrain of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* pornographic fan-art and Brony sexuality.

What I would like to talk about now is my inaugural Brony interview, which was with John, the 25-year-old filmmaker and illustrator that I met in Chicago. While I didn’t necessarily feel an immediate sense of comradely with most of the Bronies I spoke with – outside of the shared experience of being a fan, having some overlapping interests, and being from the same demographic background – I’m happy to say that I hit it off almost immediately with John. The reason for this was simple; in addition to being a Brony, John is also major-league fan of Japanese *tokusatsu* or live-action Japanese special-effects programs – mostly made for children – which readers of the introduction may recall me confessing to be a huge fan of.

Our shared interest in *tokusatsu* came up when John attempted to recall when he had started watching *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* by placing it among other shows he and his friends were watching at the same time: “We were uh... cause I think, was that... was that the same year as *Kamen Rider W*? That wasn’t the same year as *W*? No we were watching *W* before Ponies... Fourze! Yeah it was Fouze. Cause we we’re doing... We were doing shows called *Kamen Rider Fourze: Friendship Is Magic*...” **we both laugh** “...when we would get everyone together. And so we would watch the new Ponies episode and then right after the new Fourze episode back-to-back. And so I was like ‘Oh yeah! Tonight we’re

going to watch Fourze and Ponies, it's going to be great! Friendship is Magic!" *more laughter*¹⁴⁴

The show to which John is referring to is *Kamen Rider Fourze* (2011-2012) one of the many installments in the long running children's *tokusatsu* superhero series Kamen Rider from studio Toei Co. and their partner, toy manufacture, Bandai, and a show which I can also claim to have religiously watched every episode of during its initial run. Each Kamen Rider series focuses on a motorcycle-riding superhero that dons a grasshopper-themed outfit and fights a different rubber-suit monster each week – think *Power Rangers* but in Japanese and with only one guy instead of a team. Many of the post-2000 Kamen Rider series have additional themes running throughout them with Fourze's main theme being outer space but a strong secondary one being friendship. In that series, the hero Gentaro, promises to defeat evil with the power of friendship in nearly every episode.

What initially impressed me was how little of a distinction John drew between *My Little Pony* and his other interests, interests which I also shared, such as *tokusatsu* series like *Kamen Rider* and *Super Sentai* (aka *Power Rangers*). But as I continued to talk to him I gradually came to see that any distinctions which I had made between these things were truly my own and not inherent to the shows themselves: "It's no different than sitting down and watching Kamen Rider, it's no different than sitting down and watching anime, or even *Breaking Bad* which I'm watching right now" John told me.

As we continued to talk about *My Little Pony* and our shared interest in Japanese pop-culture the conversation eventually drifted into the realm of *anime*. "It's very animesque," said John of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, "She [Lauren Faust] definitely grew up

¹⁴⁴ The stylized spelling, "Kamen Rider W," should be read as "Kamen Rider Doubles." This is both the official English language title and spelling of this series.

watching some *anime*. And she's part of that first generation of people who really grabbed onto it. Like Lauren Faust watched herself some *Sailor Moon* and that kind of stuff."

For those unfamiliar *Sailor Moon* is the hit international Japanese superhero franchise for girls about a team of superheroines who wield magical powers corresponding to the heavenly bodies in our solar system. Though it began life as a *manga* (comic-book) created by writer/artist Takeuchi Naoko, it is best known for its 1992-97 *anime* adaptation, though there was also a 2003 live-action *tokusatsu* adaptation as well. *Sailor Moon* also fits within a larger genre of Japanese superhero stories known as *Mahou Shoujo* or "Magical Girl."

When I ask John if he "feels like *Friendship is Magic* is a homage to *Sailor Moon*," he replies: "It straight up turns into a Magical Girl show and that's one of the best parts about it when it becomes a friggin Sentai...**chuckles**...The Sentai of Friendship." "If I'm not mistaken wasn't Lauren Faust originally developing something similar to a Magical Girls show?" I ask. "Galaxy Girls" says John knowingly; referring to Faust's semi-aborted superheroine project which she had originally approached Hasbro with.

By referring to *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* as "The Sentai of Friendship," John not only draws attention to the notable parallels which exist between *My Little Pony* and Japanese superhero programs like *Sailor Moon* but also the parallels which exist between girl's shows like *Sailor Moon* and boy's shows like *Super Sentai/Power Rangers*. Patrick W. Galbraith elaborates: "It is hard not to notice that *Sailor Moon* draws on cultural touch points that might be categorized as 'boy's culture,' for example a team of young people who transform into color-coded rangers to fight evil."¹⁴⁵ And as it would turn out such parallels are entirely intentional as both *Sailor Moon* and *Super Sentai/Power Rangers* have the same

¹⁴⁵ Henry Jenkins, "In Defense of Moé: An Interview with Patrick W. Galbraith (Part Six)" *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins* (06 Feb. 2015) <http://henryjenkins.org/2015/02/in-defense-of-moe-an-interview-with-patrick-w-galbraith-part-six.html>

parent companies in the form of Toei Co. and Bandai. Anne Allison, who studies Japanese pop-culture at Duke University, notes how the original *Sailor Moon manga*, as written and drawn by Takeuchi, featured only a single “klutzy female superhero” until “Bandai executives saw her comic,” bought up the rights, and had her restructure the story so as to “mimic that of the *Rangers*: a group of superheroes who morph from ordinary teenagers, fight alien enemies, and diversify by season (adding new characters, costumes, tools, and powers)” all of which can, of course, be purchased at the nearest toy store.¹⁴⁶

Considering this it’s not surprising to learn that in addition to capturing the imaginations of the elementary school age girls at whom *Sailor Moon* was marketed it also succeeded in garnering the attention of their male classmates who recognized the tropes as being imported from shows like *Kamen Rider* and *Super Sentai/Power Rangers* – as well as that of adult male fans who also enjoy such children’s programming. And while I have found no definitive evidence to support John’s supposition that *Friendship is Magic* creator Lauren Faust “watched herself some *Sailor Moon*” while formulating her *My Little Pony* reboot it’s not a hard conclusion to come to. As mentioned before, Faust previously worked on the hit Cartoon Network series *Powerpuff Girls* which was created by her future husband Craig McCracken who has never been shy about discussing both his *anime* and *tokusatsu* influences. Furthermore as Anne Allison notes *Powerpuff Girls* is essentially an American take on the Japanese Magical Girl genre, as is, apparently, Faust’s *My Little Pony* series.¹⁴⁷ Considering this and the fact that the Magical Girl genre finds its roots in superhero programs like *Super Sentai/Power Rangers* and *Kamen Rider* aimed at boys is it really any

¹⁴⁶ Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (University of California Press, 2006), 131.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 158-159.

surprise that *Friendship is Magic*, as the thematic descendant of such series, should attract a male audience as well?

On the last day of my trip to Chicago I ran back into John at Nakama Toys, which specializes in “Japanese exclusives, toys, and collectible,” where he had found a cache of *Kamen Rider Fourze* mini-figures. These figures were in blind boxes, meaning that you had to buy a box and hope that you got the figure you wanted. Buy another and hope it wasn’t the same figure you just bought. John was desperately trying to sort out which box might contain a figure of the show’s main female protagonist Yuki by checking the box’s UPC barcode against a list online using his smart phone. Blind boxes are extremely popular with fans of all stripes, with many of the Bronies I interviewed mentioning that blind box *My Little Pony* figures were amongst their favorites to collect, and just like John, many fans try to not end up purchasing duplicates by cheating and using the box’s UPC codes as a way to see inside, since even though the contents of the boxes are supposed to be unknown the manufactures have to have some way of keeping track of them; ergo a unique barcode for each item type.

John’s mad quest to find a Yuki mini-figure, who he said was his favorite character on the show, reminded me of another part of our conversation about *My Little Pony* earlier that same week when I had asked John if he had a favorite pony. “Pinky Pie is my spirit animal,” he said enthusiastically, “I call her my spirit animal because she’s just... **waves arms around in the air and makes nonsense sounds** ...just this personality of just fun, fun, fun, fun, practical joker, practical jokes, just insanity. She just lives by Loony Toon logic even when no one else does, you know, her superpower is improbability, that kind of thing...”

Like Pinky Pie, Yuki is a free-spirit. Manic even. Her dream is to become an astronaut even though her head is clearly already in the clouds. She is obsessed with the real-life Japanese satellite Hayabusa and carries around a plush toy of it which she alternately talks to and with. Between Pinky Pie and Yuki it is clear that John's affection for such characters is not limited to them being cotton candy colored ponies. In fact I suspect it has nothing to do with that at all. Rather I imagine that both Pinky Pie and Yuki embody the kind of girl that John finds attractive in both an amicable and amorous capacity.

3.9 The Sexualization of *My Little Pony*

To be fair “clogging” is mentioned in the *Bronies* documentary, but not expounded upon. At the fifty minute mark John de Lancie’s rhyming professor phony character, who narrates much of the film, reappears on screen to sing one final song about how Bronies use the show to express themselves in a myriad of different ways:

“The talent is their glory, never slowing, never stopping, from the music to the stories, and the artwork and the clogging *stops and looks embarrassed while his students stares at him awkwardly* Oh dear. But let’s steer away from that...”

This is by far one of the most interesting moments in *Bronies* as it is a classic example of using disavowal to acknowledging something by denying it.¹⁴⁸ It would have been entirely possible for *Bronies* to completely ignore the sexual aspect of the Brony fandom, which is exactly what it does for the most part and what its companion film, *A Brony Tale*, does altogether. However in this one moment, constituting a kind of premeditated Freudian slip, the makers acknowledge this part of the fandom only to brush it under the rug just as quickly, seemingly deeming it a source of embarrassment. Clearly this moment coupled with the criticism the documentary has received for not exploring the issue of “clogging” in more depth shows that the sexual dimension of Brony fandom is indeed a key aspect of the group as a whole.

This fact has been acknowledged by researchers Edwards and Redden who have confirmed that “sexual fan-fiction and fan-art are a large part of the Brony community.”¹⁴⁹ Evidence for this can be found on such websites as Rule34.paheal.net, which specifically hosts pornographic and erotic fan-art of all kinds. When I started researching the Brony fandom back in 2013, Rule34.paheal.net hosted 53,731 images tagged “My Little Pony,”

¹⁴⁸ Tamaki Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, trans. J. Keith Vincent (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 83.

¹⁴⁹ Lauren Rae Orsini, “Researchers strive to understand bronny culture” *The Daily Dot* (21 Feb. 2012) <http://www.dailydot.com/society/bronies-brony-my-little-pony-study>

with 49,419 of those images tagged as featuring characters from “Friendship is Magic.” Since then that number has increased to over 64,889 sexually explicit images with the tag “My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic.” A similar website, e621.net, surpasses Rule34.paheal.net with a total of over 82,469 images tagged “My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic.”¹⁵⁰ All numbers which I’m sure will be irrelevant by the time ink hits printed page as the amount of such work continues to grow at an astounding rate. These images depict the *Friendship Is Magic* pony characters engaged in every manner of erotic and sexual act imaginable while being depicted in a range of styles including as they appear on the show to those featuring a higher degree of anthropomorphism to ones where the characters have been reimagined as *anime*-style girls with hairstyles modeled on the pony’s manes.

Nevertheless in spite of this both Edwards and Redden have declined to explore this sexual aspect of Brony fandom claiming that it has proven “too sensitive” and that if brought up would often cause their interviewees to completely shut down on them. Thus in order to “acquire the Bronies’ trust” it became necessary to leave questions regarding “sex almost completely out,” especially questions such as “whether fans have sexual feelings toward the show’s equine characters.”¹⁵¹

In my own experience I have encountered no difficulty getting Bronies to talk about the existence of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* themed pornography or erotica within the fandom. No Brony I’ve spoken to has denied such material’s existence or knowledge of it. Some have even admitted to having created it, looked at it, and used it for its intended purpose. Many, especially those who denied partaking in it interestingly enough, were also

¹⁵⁰ It should also be made clear that unlike Rule34.paheal.net, not all the images on e621.net are explicitly pornographic or even erotic, but most are.

¹⁵¹ Lauren Rae Orsini, “Researchers strive to understand brony culture” *The Daily Dot* (21 Feb. 2012) <http://www.dailydot.com/society/bronies-brony-my-little-pony-study/>

all too eager to tell me where to find it; name dropping sites like Rule34.paheal.net and e621.net.

None of this of course is not to say that Edwards and Redden have not had a problem getting fans to talk to them about it. All told, such a scenario seems very likely considering the facts that Edwards and Redden are both much older than most Bronies – old enough to be their parents – and that one of the pair is a woman. As a result Bronies may indeed be much more reluctant to speak to them about such topics than they are to someone such as myself who is both closer to their own age, a guy, and who has interests similar to their own. The only time I encountered any problem getting Bronies to speak about such adult material was when I attended a local screening of the second *Equestria Girls* movie in an attempt to meet and interview more Bronies – I didn't actually watch the film. Predictably this event attracted a mixed crowd across both generational and gendered lines with elementary school aged girls standing alongside adult men; all trying to get into the same movie before tickets sold out. This environment proved somewhat difficult for me to navigate as an investigator since I would sometimes find myself attempting to ask Bronies about subjects such as *My Little Pony* erotic fan-art while small girls and their moms stood within ear shot, a setup which seemed to provoke trepidation in some of my subjects.

Such factors may also account for why shock jock Howard Stern seemed to have absolutely no problem getting at least a dozen different Bronies to speak very openly about “clopping” when asked by correspondences sent to both BroNYCon 2012 and 2013. In the case of Stern, who regularly deals with gonzo sexual topics and fetishes on his show, Bronies

may not only have been comfortable discussing such issues but assumed that it was expected of them.¹⁵²

However the other reason this topic may have proven problematic for Edwards and Redden is that it apparently bothers them. In an interview with *The Daily Dot*, Edwards – displaying a judgmental attitude I find frankly untenable for objective academic work – referred to the sexual aspect of Brony fandom as “the dark side” of the group.¹⁵³ Likewise Redden also downplays the issue of Brony sexuality since “every fan community” has a sexual component to it.¹⁵⁴ And while the ubiquity of fans having sexual fantasies about fictional characters is something we shall discuss later on, it is still not grounds for dismissal of the topic. If anything it should actually intensify our interest in it, especially, in this case, considering the widespread claim that Brony fandom represents a progressive shift in how young men are viewing concepts of gender and sexuality. Edwards and Redden have claimed that they will eventually get around to examining what they, again, refer to as the “seedier side of the [Brony] community” and that doing so “may alter the way [they] view the community.”¹⁵⁵ At such a time I look forward to their findings.

In addition to Edwards and Reddens, some media commentators, wishing to preserve the image of Bronies as some sort of admittedly geeky wing of the feminist movement, have attempted to assert that those who produce pornographic *My Little Pony* fan-art and get

¹⁵² “Howard Stern On Bronies. Interviews At Bronycon” *YouTube* (17 Jul. 2012) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUcjKln4zhc> and “Howard Stern’s Reaction to Brony-Con 2013” *YouTube* (14 Aug. 2013) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OoQ7PikoDA>

¹⁵³ Lauren Rae Orsini, “Researchers strive to understand brony culture” *The Daily Dot* (21 Feb. 2012) <http://www.dailydot.com/society/bronies-brony-my-little-pony-study/>

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Lauren Rae Orsini, “Brony psychology 101: What 2 researchers discovered” *The Daily Dot* (12 July 2012) <http://www.dailydot.com/society/my-little-pony-brony-study-results/>

sexual gratification from it are either a “subgroup” within the larger Brony community¹⁵⁶ or even don’t exist at all.¹⁵⁷ However numbers like those seen on sites such as Rule34.pahel.net don’t lie. When there is ten times the amount of pornographic *My Little Pony* artwork as there were attendees at BroNYCon 2012, you are not dealing with a minority phenomenon. In fact the reality of the situation is that such fan-art is so pervasive that the New York based Brony convention Ponycon recently had to implement “strict rules against” fan-artists bringing “adult content” to the show since they were billing themselves as a family friendly venue.¹⁵⁸

In the course of my research I also learned that a popular joke amongst Bronies is for fans to say that they “Watch the show for the plot” when asked what their favorite aspect of the program is. This answer is actually a double-entendre, as the term “plot” refers not only to the show’s narrative but is also the anatomical term for the rear end of a horse.¹⁵⁹ Or as one Brony at BroNYCon 2012 brazenly told an interviewer for *The Howard Stern Show*: “I watch it for the sweet pony ass.”¹⁶⁰

Mark, the 29-year-old married Brony who works in the comic book industry, was very up front with me when I asked him if he had ever partook of any erotic *My Little Pony* fan-art or fan-fiction:

¹⁵⁶ Sadie Gennis, “Give Bronies a Break! In Defense of Adult My Little Pony Fans” *TV Guide* (31 Jul 2013) <http://www.tvguide.com/News/Bronies-My-Little-Pony-Friendship-Magic-1068692.aspx> and Alexis McKinnis, “Alexis on the Sexes: I want a pony” *Vita.mn* (7 Sept. 2012) <http://web.archive.org/web/20120918155608/http://www.vita.mn/162941186.html>

¹⁵⁷ Lane Moore, “I Went to a Brony Con on Valentine’s Day and Fell in Love” *Cosmopolitan* (14 Feb 2014) <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/news/a36628/i-went-to-a-brony-con-on-valentines-day-and-fell-in-love/>

¹⁵⁸ Katie Toth, “Why Female *My Little Pony* Fans Are Exalted Among ‘Bronies’” *The Village Voice* (18 Feb. 2015) <http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2015/02/new-york-city-ponycon.php>

¹⁵⁹ “Bronyspeak” *Know Your Meme* (7 May 2014) <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/bronyspeak>

¹⁶⁰ “Howard Stern On Bronies. Interviews At Bronycon” *YouTube* (17 Jul. 2012) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUcjKln4zhc> and “Howard Stern’s Reaction to Brony-Con 2013” *YouTube* (14 Aug. 2013) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OoQ7PikoDA>

“I mean everybody, everybody watches porn, everybody reads porn. It’s not a secret. If you say you don’t then you’re either a liar or a liar... So some of the stuff I have seen and I do kind of like it. Um... there was a *dōjinshi* [a Japanese term for a fan-produced comic book, often of an erotic nature] that like a year or two ago, that had some REALLY SPECTACULAR art in it. And it is one of those things were you’ll be looking at something and you’ll kind of think to yourself ‘I don’t know if I should be turned on by this?’ Like uh... you do kind of judge yourself a little bit but it’s not, you know, but it’s... like I’ve seen some of this stuff and it’s weird but on some level I’ll think to myself ‘This is kind of hot’ but then I’ll also think ‘This is also really kinda weird!’”

When I asked another one of my interviewees, a 22-year-old, white, male Brony named Jeff who works as a waiter and “unfortunately lives at home with my mom” if he knew about *My Little Pony* erotic fan-art he told me: “I... I... I do, but I either tend to ignore or I, I’m not like ‘Oh my god, that’s nasty.’ But for me I either ignore it or... I mean every once in a while I would look at it... just one! That’s it! But I’m not a big perv of that kind of thing but uh... I just tend to let the other people enjoy what they enjoy and like when it comes to that sort of stuff.”

Back in Chicago I put the same questions to John, asking if he had ever produced and/or read any erotic *My Little Pony* fan-art or fan-fiction:

“I’ve never done any Clop-fic. There was a comic I was sent at one point, by someone who does pursue it, which was kind of adorable, I’m not going to lie. But yeah... I’ve seen some erotica. I’ve read the one or two comics... because it really was kind of adorable and the writing was really kind of adorable and it happened to be erotica. And I liked the stylization because they weren’t like ponies fucking, they were more like humans. And the art was well done, I’ll use that phrase. There was no clopping involved, but it was well rendered. But at some point... you can’t really escape some of the *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* erotica.”

That last sentiment was also echoed by Paul in Atlanta who told me: “The visual stuff you will see at some point. You’re on a forum and you’ll scroll past some stuff. So yeah I’ve seen it.” By and large however the most common comment I got from Bronies when I asked about the presence of erotic and pornographic fan-art and fan-fiction within their fandom was

some variation of the following: “I think it’s going to be the same for any fandom. There’s going to be something sexual involved.” For Bronies then, the abundance of sexually explicit material within their fandom is really just par for the course when it comes to fans and fan cultures. This fact was acknowledged by José – the 19-year-old Brony I met with the unconventional conversion narrative who works as a “ride technician” at a local amusement park – but with two added caveats: “You always have the perverted side of every fandom. But it’s really, really, really bad in this fandom. A lot of people don’t actually partake in it, but it looks really loud on the internet. It’s a really loud thing.”

So while we can’t say that all Bronies engage in the production and consumption of erotic and pornographic *My Little Pony* fan-art and fan-fiction, or engage in practices such as “clipping,” it nevertheless seems safe to posit that it is still a fairly widespread set of activities within the fandom. However despite this, or perhaps because of it, the issue of Brony sexuality has been seldom touched on except by those wishing to ridicule and belittle the fandom such as Howard Stern whose condescension laced segments on Bronies inevitably focused almost exclusively on the sexual aspect of Brony culture.

Now before anyone accuses the Bronies of being sexual deviants harboring zoophilic tendencies we should recall queer studies Prof. Keith J. Vincent’s observation that “one’s taste in *fictional* sex is not necessarily predictive of the kind of sex one actually wants to have”¹⁶¹ as well as the words of Prof. Fujimoto Yukari, who studies transgender themes in girls’ sci-fi *manga*, who adds that fiction is “not always about the representation of objects in reality, nor about compelling parties to realize their desires in reality.”¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Tamaki Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, trans. J. Keith Vincent (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xix-xx

¹⁶² Dan Kanemitsu “Bill 156 – The Nonexistent Crimes Bill (Fujimoto’s Analysis Translated)” *Dan Kanemitsu’s Paper Trail* (5 Dec. 2010) <https://dankanemitsu.wordpress.com/2010/12/05/bill-156-the-nonexistent-crimes-bill-fujimotos-analysis-translated/>

In the case of the Bronies I see little to no reason to assume that fans have any interest, sexual or otherwise, in actual animals. Part of the reason for this is due to the fact that the ponies of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* are highly stylized anthropomorphized characters who only superficially resemble actual horses. In fact, one post on *Equestria Daily* indirectly addressed this very point with webmaster Shaun Scotellaro sharing an image by a fan-artist which broke down the anatomy of a *My Little Pony* pony. In the post Scotellaro writes: “If you are like me, equine anatomy was a completely alien subject before *Friendship is Magic*; in fact, I always considered horses to be relatively ugly beasts. I still do! But these ponies sure as hell don't look like any horse I've ever seen!”¹⁶³

Some of the Bronies I spoke with also echoed Scotellaro's thoughts on this issue, such as Paul who commented: “There's something about the art style that's kind of appealing. It's cute but it's not like disgustingly cute... I told a friend's girlfriend; ‘The old ponies look creepy’ and she's like ‘No they don't. They look like ponies.’ ‘No. They're odd and I don't like it.’ And I mean I don't really care for the look of real ponies anyway. But I find them [the *Friendship is Magic* ponies] appealing because... they don't have hooves, they have these weird little stumps and these little tiny nubby noses and the big giant *anime* eyes.”

When I asked Mark what he thought the appeal of such equestrian characters might be in erotic work, given his career as an artist, he told me:

“...I can see part of the appeal because the original designs so expressive and they have this very relatable, very um... consumable quality to them. You know? Their eyes... and their color palates and the way they're designed, the shape of their hair, the way their personalities are reflected in their designs. I can see people either anthropomorphizing them or uh... contextualizing them in such a way as too become aroused by them. Cause everybody knows a Pinky Pie, everybody knows a Rarity. So

¹⁶³ Shaun Scotellaro, “Pony Body Part Chart” *Equestria Daily* (17 June 2011) <http://www.equestriadaily.com/2011/06/pony-body-part-chart.html>

uh... you know those friends and you have probably masturbated while thinking about those friends. **laughter** So, you know... they have these long legs and shapely bodies and when you put that together with those personalities you just have the perfect fodder for Rule34.”

According to Mark, the appeal behind *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* pornographic and erotic fan-art and fan-fiction has nothing to do with the characters being horses – a conclusion I happen to agree with – though obviously the equine design of the characters do bare some superficial resemblances to those of a human female, i.e. “the shape of their hair... long legs and shapely bodies.” Instead it is the personalities behind the characters which fans find so appealing and which allow them to anthropomorphize and re-contextualize the ponies into objects of erotic desire.

3.10 Of *Otaku* and Bronies

How then are we to think about the sexual aspect of Brony fandom, an element which many find particularly troublesome? I would suggest taking a cue from John and beginning by considering the common interest in Japanese pop-culture the majority of Bronies seem to have.

Eagle-eyed readers will have noted that the specter of Japan has been with us throughout this exploration of Brony fandom, its origins, its history, and its practices. From 4chan.org – which was modeled on the popular Japanese image board 2chan.net – being the birthplace of the Brony phenomena, to the way Bronies, like Mark or Paul, casually use Japanese terminology like *hentai* or *dōjinshi* to refer to erotic fan-produced *My Little Pony* comics, to John’s observations about the parallels between *My Little Pony* and Japanese superhero shows, to the fact that all the Bronies I interviewed described themselves as being big fans of *anime*, with Lindsey Ellis’ beloved Pokémon being one of the most common series named.

With regards to *anime*, all of the Bronies I spoke with proved to be very knowledgeable about the subject and would casually compare scenes from *My Little Pony* to those from *anime* series like *Dragon Ball Z* or talk about how they were surprised their weren’t more Bronies at local *anime* conventions they had attended. In fact, several of my interviewees told me that their first encounter with Brony fandom was at an *anime* convention. This included my only female Brony, Sarah, an 18-year-old, bisexual, college freshman who works at CiCi’s Pizza, who told me that she first learned about the Brony fandom at a regional North Carolina *anime* convention, Animazment, where she saw people “*cosplaying* as Ponies.” *Cosplay* is another Japanese loanword, a portmanteau of the English

words “costume” and “play,” and refers to dressing up like a character from a your favorite comic, show, or film.

Japanese pop-culture enthusiasts are often referred to as “*otaku*,” a Japanese word that, in use, can be applied generally to anyone who has an obsessive hobby or interest.¹⁶⁴ However as psychoanalyst Tamaki Saitō, who has written extensively on Japanese subcultures, explains the term *otaku* is most often “used to indicate adult fans of *anime*, but can obviously be expanded to include fans of *manga* and video games, those who collect scale model figures of characters from these media, aficionados of monster movies and other special effects genres, and so forth.”¹⁶⁵ In other words, the term *otaku* can be seen roughly as a correspondent to the English terms “geek”¹⁶⁶ or “fan”¹⁶⁷ as previously discussed and could easily accommodate Bronies as well.

Like Bronies, Saitō writes that *otaku* are mostly in their late teens or early twenties, primarily heterosexual, and attend college. In addition, like Bronies, many adult male *otaku* are active fans of what are known as *shōjo manga* and *anime* series whose target demographic is actually that of elementary school aged girls.¹⁶⁸ As already discussed many of these *shōjo* (which literally means “young girl”) titles fall into the superhero genre known as “Magical Girl” and include series like the aforementioned *Sailor Moon* as well as classics like *Magical Princess Minky Momo* (1982-1983) and *Creamy Mami, the Magic Angel* (1983-1984) as well as more contemporary offerings such as *Cardcaptor Sakura* (1998-2000) and

¹⁶⁴ Tamaki Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, trans. J. Keith Vincent (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 12

¹⁶⁵ Tamaki Saitō, “Otaku Sexuality,” trans. Christopher Bolton, in *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science-Fiction from Origins to Anime*, ed. Christopher Bolton, et al. (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 226

¹⁶⁶ Tamaki Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, trans. J. Keith Vincent (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 45

¹⁶⁷ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto: An Insider’s Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), p#

¹⁶⁸ Patrick W. Galbraith, “Otaku Sexuality in Japan” in the *Routledge Handbook of Sexuality Studies in East Asia*, ed. Mark McLelland and Vera Mackie (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 205.

Pretty Cure (2005-Present). Like the Bronies many *otaku* claim that they enjoy these ‘girl’s shows’ because they are well written with interesting plots, likeable characters, lots of action, and are well animated with superb voice acting. And today savvy *manga* and *anime* producers, just like Hasbro in the US but taking things one step further, intentionally produce ‘Magical Girl’ shows like *Magical Girl Lrical Nanoha* (2004-2005, 2007) and *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2011) expressly for the adult male fans of the genre.¹⁶⁹ And while such a pretense may lead one to believe that such series must contain more overt displays of sex and sexuality, the reality is that such series are only mildly more ‘adult’ than their elementary school counterparts, usually containing more violence rather than titillation. Nevertheless many *otaku* openly acknowledge that they think the female protagonists of these series are sexually attractive and enjoy producing, collecting, and “getting off” to explicitly *ecchi* (erotic) or *hentai* images and comics of said characters created by fans and posted online or sold at conventions like the popular Tokyo based *dōjinshi* fair Comiket; a portmanteau of the English words ‘Comic’ and ‘Market.’¹⁷⁰

Though scholars and fans alike disagree about the exact origin of the term *otaku* – which is etymologically speaking simply “a polite second-person pronoun literally meaning ‘your home’”¹⁷¹ – all acknowledge that one of the earliest and most significant uses of the term occurred within a pair of snarky and commendatory editorials penned by then 23-year-old essayist Nakamori Akio which appeared in 1983 under the title “*Otaku Research*” (*Otaku no Kenkyu*) within the pages of two issues of a short lived “weekly soft-core porno comic

¹⁶⁹ Henry Jenkins, “In Defense of Moé: An Interview with Patrick W. Galbraith (Part Four)” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins* (02 Feb. 2015) <http://henryjenkins.org/2015/02/in-defense-of-moe-an-interview-with-patrick-w-galbraith-part-four.html>

¹⁷⁰ Tamaki Saitō, “Otaku Sexuality,” trans. Christopher Bolton, in *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science-Fiction from Origins to Anime*, ed. Christopher Bolton, et al. (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 228

¹⁷¹ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Otaku Spaces* (Seattle, WA: Chin Music Press Inc., 2012), 20.

magazine called *Manga Burikko*.¹⁷² Like writer Leigh Alexander's previously discussed piece attacking "gamer" culture, Nakamori's articles are clearly written by an insider as denoted by both their language and where they were published. This fact was confirmed by *Manga Burikko* (1982-1985) editor Otsuka Eiji who oversaw the publication of Nakamori's editorials and described him as someone who "saw himself as above *otaku*" despite the fact that he too was a rabid consumer of pop-culture media including, evidently, erotic *manga*. "There was a distinction being made at the time between *otaku* and the 'new breed' (*shinjinrui*), who were fashion leaders, trendsetters, and basically the cool kids of consumer culture," comments Otsuka, "They knew about the right things – the popular and trendy things. Nakamori believed he was a representative of the 'new breed,' and so he made fun of *otaku*... [who] liked *manga* and *anime* just because they liked them, no matter how uncool they appeared."¹⁷³

In his articles, which are framed as being based on observations gathered from attending Comiket, Nakamori lashes out against *otaku* with all the sundry insults and accusations of infantilism, effeminateness, and social inadequacy previously encountered in the articles of Alexander, Schlichter, Graham, Scott, and Myers but with the added charge that *otaku* are also, to paraphrase the title of Nakamori's second and final article, perverts incapable of experiencing love like normal people:

The minute these twerps hit puberty, some of 'em are inevitably gonna turn into stone-cold pervs. But you know what? With the way they dress, the way they talk, the way they act, they don't stand a chance with a woman. See, these *otaku* are definitely lacking something in the masculine behavior department. Most of them leer over cutouts of *Minky Momo* and *Nanako* they've got stuffed into their commuter-pass holders — you could call it a 2D complex, or something — yet can't bring

¹⁷² Matt Alt, "What Kind of Otaku Are You?" *Neojaponisme*. (02 April 2008) <http://neojaponisme.com/2008/04/02/what-kind-of-otaku-are-you/>

¹⁷³ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto: An Insider's Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 41-44.

themselves to speak to an actual woman... A nude photo of a normal young woman does absolutely nothing for guys like this... There's no way the majority of these guys will ever get a woman.¹⁷⁴

Nakamori's accusations are as confused as they are rancorous. On the one hand *otaku* are losers whose inability to dress right, talk right, and act right excludes them from fulfilling that most basic mandate of hegemonic masculinity, namely "get[ting with] a woman." On the other hand, *otaku* are also sexual deviants because rather than becoming aroused by nude photos of real women, they instead choose to leer over pictures of female *anime* characters from children's cartoons (*Minky Momo*) or the works of popular erotic *manga* artist Azuma Hideo (*Nanako*). Here Nakamori's use of the phrase "2D complex" (*nijigen konpurekkusu*) is particularly telling, as it marks him as an insider amongst those he is criticizing since this phrase is one which was often bantered around in the letters-to-the-editor column of *Manga Burikko* by fans as a means of accounting for their preference for erotic *manga* over more traditional pornography.¹⁷⁵

In the end Nakamori can't quite decide what is wrong with *otaku* but seems to believe it has something to do with their inability or unwillingness to pursue sexual relationships with real women and instead favor animated representations instead. Ultimately however Nakamori didn't need to come to a definitive conclusion on what he thought was wrong with *otaku*, and even if he had it's not as if his words were destined to reach the ears of mainstream Japan anyway considering where they were published.

What would reach the ears, eyes, and very souls of the Japanese however were the horrific events which unfolded six years later when a disturbed man in his late 20s named

¹⁷⁴ Matt Alt, "Can Otaku Love Like Normal People?" *Neojaponisme*. (07 April 2008)
<http://neojaponisme.com/2008/04/07/can-otaku-love-like-normal-people/>

¹⁷⁵ Patrick W. Galbraith, "Otaku Sexuality in Japan" in the *Routledge Handbook of Sexuality Studies in East Asia*, ed. Mark McLelland and Vera Mackie (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), albraith, Otaku Sexuality, 208-209

Miyazaki Tsutomu murdered and then sexually assaulted and dismembered the corpses of four girls between the ages of four and seven. Following Miyazaki's arrest, the news media was allowed to photograph his small two-room apartment which was "stuffed with boxes stacked to the ceiling, enough to block the light from his window" as well as a "small mat where Miyazaki slept" which was "encircled by magazines, *manga*, and 5,763 videotapes"¹⁷⁶ which included a number of "*anime* and horror films."¹⁷⁷ To many, the cluttered confines of this serial killer's home looked uncannily like the so-called "pleasure rooms"¹⁷⁸ of *otaku* filled with movies, toys, games, and comics including those of an erotic nature. Jumping on this facile connection the Japanese media subsequently branded Miyazaki "The *Otaku* Killer," instantly transforming all actual *otaku* into maladjusted pedophiles and sexual predators, 'folk-devils' who could be blamed for all of contemporary Japanese societies' various ills. The word *otaku* itself for a while even became taboo, being seen as a pejorative so severe as to be forbidden from use on public television.¹⁷⁹ Perhaps one of the biggest ironies here is that Miyazaki did not even consider himself an *otaku* or even know what the word meant when asked.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore as Nakamori had previously complained, one of the most defining features of *otaku* is their lack of interest in real women of any age thus making the possibility that they would commit the kinds of heinous crimes which Miyazaki was guilty of extremely unlikely.

¹⁷⁶ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Otaku Spaces* (Seattle, WA: Chin Music Press Inc., 2012), 16.

¹⁷⁷ Patrick W. Galbraith, "Otaku Sexuality in Japan" in the *Routledge Handbook of Sexuality Studies in East Asia*, ed. Mark McLelland and Vera Mackie (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 211.

¹⁷⁸ Midori Matsui, "Beyond the Pleasure Room to a Chaotic Street," in *Little Boy: The Arts of Japan's Exploding Subculture*, ed. Takashi Murakami (Yale University Press; Bilingual edition, 2005), 210-211.

¹⁷⁹ Tamaki Saitō, "Otaku Sexuality," trans. Christopher Bolton, in *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science-Fiction from Origins to Anime*, ed. Christopher Bolton, et al. (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), ???

¹⁸⁰ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Otaku Spaces* (Seattle, WA: Chin Music Press Inc., 2012), 23.

Tamaki Saitō has been very insistent about this last point and when asked before a Japanese court in 2004 if the consumption of pornographic *manga* would lead the reader “to commit sex crimes or sexually deviant acts” responded in no uncertain terms: “I believe it is an extremely low possibility, or nonexistent... the truth is that exposure to media, such as sexual information on the Internet, pornographic *anime*, or erotic games, will rarely lead even to the sex act in actuality, much less sex crimes.”¹⁸¹ In addition to Saitō’s observations, Tim Pilcher writes that “eminent sexologists Milton Diamond and Ayako Uchiyama observed a strong link between the dramatic rise in pornographic material in Japan from 1970s onwards and a dramatic decrease in reported sexual violence.”¹⁸²

Circumstances finally began to change for *otaku* in the late-1990s and early-2000s due to several factors both at home and abroad including the growing international popularity of *anime* and *manga*. One of the biggest factors however was the commercial success of the 2004 romantic novel *Densha Otoko*, published anonymously under the name Nakano Hitori; a pseudonym “which can be roughly translated as ‘one person in a group.’”¹⁸³ The novel purports to be a transcription of an online dialogue started on the site 2chan.net and held between a self-identified 23-year-old *otaku* who goes by the screenname Densha Otoko, meaning “Train Man,” and several other posters, most of whom are also *otaku*, over the course of fifty-seven days. The subject of the conversation chiefly concerns Densha Otoko asking for romantic advice on what to do after an attractive young career woman, who he refers to by the nickname Hermès, propositions him for a date after he came to her aid while

¹⁸¹ Kirsten Cather, *The Art of Censorship in Postwar Japan* (University of Hawaii Press, 2012), 239.

¹⁸² Tim Pilcher, *Erotic Comics 2: A Graphic History from the Liberated '70s to the Internet* (Harry N. Abrams, 2009), 168. Diamond and Uchiyama’s original research can be reviewed here: <http://www.hawaii.edu/PCSS/biblio/articles/1961to1999/1999-pornography-rape-sex-crimes-japan.html>

¹⁸³ Susan J. Napier, “Where Have All the Salarymen Gone?” in *Recreating Japanese Men*, ed. by Sabine Fruhstuck and Anne Walthall (University of California Press, 2011), 159.

she was being harassed by a drunken man on a train. What terrifies Densha Otoko the most is that Hermès will reject him if she learns about his *otaku* identity and as a result much of novel focuses on Densha Otoko coming to terms with this facet of his identity, which ultimately ends up being one of his most endearing characteristics in Hermès' eyes. Like all good love stories the two characters eventually end up together.

Densha Otoko proved incredibly popular in Japan spinning off into multiple *manga*, a stage play, a 2005 theatrical film, and a 2005 live-action TV series, all of which contributed to a more positive and endearing model of *otaku* and, as scholars Alisa Freedman and Susan J. Napier have shown, successfully repositioned these once reviled men into the perfect dates for young Japanese women to bring home to their parents. The only problem with this scenario was that these men still didn't want dates with real women! As Patrick W. Galbraith notes, perhaps the only people that *Densha Otoko* wasn't popular with were *otaku* themselves who rejected its "normative message of grown up and get a date!" Some *otaku* even protested the franchise itself by planting "signs in Akihabara [a Tokyo neighborhood known internationally as an *otaku* mecca] reading 'Real *Otaku* Don't Get Hot for the Three-Dimensional' (*somo somo shinjitsu no wota wa 3D ni yokujo shimasen*)."¹⁸⁴

Throughout their entire tumultuous history then, *otaku*, like Bronies, have constantly been a source of public sexual anxiety and aspiration only on a much grander scale. As a result it is not surprising that researchers, like Saitō, who specialize in the study of *otaku* subculture, have made the subject of *otaku* sexuality key to their study of the fandom, unlike Edwards and Redden who have deliberately steered away from the issue of Brony sexuality.

¹⁸⁴ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto: An Insider's Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 19.

Drawing primarily on the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Saitō argues that because our experiences with reality are always mediated and thus inherently fictional, what makes *otaku* – and fans in general – unique from other more passive media consumers is their ability to effortlessly shift their personal orientation from one mediated reality to another, to be “multiply oriented” as Saitō calls it, thus allowing themselves to become fully invested in the alternate realities depicted in various media. Saitō is quick to stress the point that this does not mean that *otaku* – and again we can apply this more broadly to all fans – cannot distinguish between “reality” and “fantasy” but rather that they simply do not privilege the *de facto* reality of their daily lives to such an extent that it interferes with their ability to become completely immersed in a different fictional reality such as that seen in a *manga* or *anime* or even a cartoon about a magical land whose dominate inhabitants are talking pastel ponies.

Saitō’s contention that *otaku* are able to effortlessly – or at least more effortlessly than others – shift between alternate realities is similar to anthropologist Tanya LaHmann’s previously discussed theory of “interpretive drift” in which individuals slowly shift their way of viewing the world over time thereby allowing themselves to engage in an alternative subjunctive “as if” worldview in which the fantastic aspects of a given alternate reality make sense in opposition to the more mundane reality that makes up such individual’s daily lives.

Using this way of understanding fans and fandom as a base, Saitō proceeds to argue that the ability of male *otaku* to achieve sexually gratification from an animated character proves his argument that fans truly can and do become immersed in the fictional worlds they admire.¹⁸⁵ Because the animated characters seen in such works are real for the *otaku* it makes

¹⁸⁵ Tamaki Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, trans. J. Keith Vincent (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 30.

just as much sense for them to be sexually aroused by them as a non-*otaku* would be by a “real life” celebrity or porn star, the irony of which should hopefully be perfectly clear.

Moreover, as one of Saitō’s Japanese interviewees stressed that it is only “a small percentage [of *otaku* who] think it’s dirty to imagine doing those kinds of things with ‘pure, adorable, whoever-chan.’”¹⁸⁶ In other words, amongst *otaku* those who balk at the idea of creating sexually explicit fan art of popular female characters and masturbating to them are the minority within the community, rather than the other way around. I see no reason to think that this is any different within Brony culture either and using Saitō’s own criteria am willing to suggest that one could argue that the ‘true’ Bronies are the ones who do engage in “clogging,” evidence that they too have become fully immersed in the world of *My Little Pony* to such an extent that they are able to foster amorous feelings of sexual desire for the show’s female characters, regardless of the fact that they happen to be ponies.

In Japan, *otaku* who develop such feelings for fictional characters refer to this sensation as *moé* (萌え), with “*moé* culture” becoming a source of great academic interest in Japan since the early 2000s. In his book *The Moé Manifesto*, cultural anthropologist Patrick W. Galbraith provides the following definition of *moé*:

“In this contemporary usage, *moé* means an affectionate response to fictional characters. There are three things to note about this definition. First, *moé* is a response, a verb, something that is done. Second, as a response, *moé* is situated in those responding to a character, not the character itself. Third, the response is triggered by fictional characters. The characters that trigger a *moé* response, sometimes called *moé* characters (*moé kyara*), are most often from *manga*, *anime*, and games. Material representations of characters – figurines, body pillows with the character image on them – can trigger *moé*. Sounds and voices are described as *moé* when associated with characters. A human can trigger *moé* when dressed in character costume, just as an object can be anthropomorphized into a *moé* character. What is

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 35-37.

important here is that the response isn't to the material object, sound, costume or person, but rather to the character."¹⁸⁷

This last point in Galbraith's definition is worth emphasizing, as it is not the physical appearance of the character which induces the sensation of *moé* in viewers but rather the character itself. Fans are not falling in love with animation cells, plastic toys, real women in costume, or pixels on a screen but rather with the abstract character that such material represents. This is not to say, of course, that the appearance of the character has nothing to do with the attraction.

Cultural critic Azuma Hiroki, who is far more cynical about *otaku* culture than Saitō, has argued that in the postmodern era fans no longer "approach a work just as a narrative; they also break the work down and focus on its elements. These can be elements of the production such as characters and settings, or aspects of the design, or the artwork in a key frame."¹⁸⁸ Azuma calls this fixation with the elements of a work at the expense of an actual narrative the "database theory" of media consumption and argues, in an almost behaviorist mode, that fans will naturally be drawn to products which possess such elements. With regards to aspects of female character design, Azuma has identified a series of elements which he believes are most likely to elicit feelings of *moé* in viewers including: unnatural hair color, animal ears and tails, large reflective eyes, and loose fitting gloves and socks which obscure the shape of the hands and feet. As previously noted, the art style of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* is decidedly "animesque" and it is fascinating to see how many of Azuma's characteristics of the idealized female *anime* character overlap with Faust's pony designs leading one to wonder if part of the reason Bronies feel sexually drawn to these

¹⁸⁷ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto: An Insider's Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 5-7.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

equestrian characters isn't a result of them being a generation of men who were brought up ogling images of *anime* women, many of whom were not entirely human themselves.¹⁸⁹

On that note, and returning to Galbraith's definition of *moé*, we see that within *moé* culture such fictional characters don't have to be human but rather simply anthropomorphic. This fact was elaborated upon to Galbraith by *moé*-advocate Honda Toru, author of the 2007 book "*No'nai ren'ai no susume* (Recommending imaginary love)" and who himself claims to be married to a fictional character named "Kawana Misaki, a blind high-school girl from the [video] game *One: kagayaku kisetsu e* (1998)." In an interview Honda noted:

"In *moé* culture, anything can take the shape of a cute girl. Machines. Utensils. World nations. As long as it is female, and human in shape, a *moé* character does not have to be based on a human. You can get a lot of pleasure from anthropomorphizing objects into cute characters. You can't have a relationship with an object, but if it is in the shape of a girl then there are more possibilities. A cat, for example, can be represented by a cute girl with cat ears and tail. It's obvious that the cat-ear phenomena began with someone thinking 'I wonder what a cat would look like if it was a human?' Then all sorts of desires get wrapped up in that image."¹⁹⁰

The anthropomorphic cat-girls to which Honda alludes are a staple, almost a cliché, in Japanese *anime* and *manga* alongside other anthropomorphized characters, usually imagined as cute girls. Noted animation historian Fred Patten, in his illuminating essay "The Allure of Anthropomorphism in *Anime* and *Manga*," draws attention to the fact that while anthropomorphized animals are by no means unique to Japan, these characters usually show up in Western pop-culture under the guise of the "Funny Animal" – think Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny – a comedic figure whose ability to "walk and talk just like humans" makes them a source of humor rather than drama, much less eroticism, which is the norm in Japan

¹⁸⁹ Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (University Of Minnesota Press, 2009), 42-44.

¹⁹⁰ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto: An Insider's Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 121.

where this sub-genre is known as *kemono*.¹⁹¹ Patten writes that “the most striking examples to Americans of Japanese anthropomorphism, due to the lack of a Western counterpart, are the characters (usually girls) who look perfectly human except for animal ears and tails, notably those of cats, foxes, and rabbits” who “first appeared in... mid-1980s direct-to-video erotic *anime* as fantasy sex kittens and *Playboy*-type bunny-girls.”¹⁹² Later these characters were conscripted into more mainstream fantasy and sci-fi *anime*, and Patten even notes that such characters have crossed over into the ‘Magical Girl’ genre with series such *Tokyo Mew Mew* (2002-2003) which proved popular both domestically and abroad in America where it was rechristened *Mew Mew Power* (2005).¹⁹³

Patten attributes the difference between American and Japanese animation’s take on the figure of the anthropomorphic animal to each culture’s indigenous mytho-religious background. While animals and humans have traditionally been seen as two separate classes of entities in western mythology – with humans dominate and animals subordinate – the same is not true in Japan whose folklore is replete with tales of shape-shifting cats, foxes and other creatures “who took on the appearance of humans (usually attractive courtesans or peasant girls) to inveigle their way into human households... Often [giving] themselves away by leaving their animal ears and tails visible.”¹⁹⁴

Regardless of origin the predilection for erotic anthropomorphism in Japanese *manga* and *anime* goes all the way back to the medium’s founding father, Tezuka Osamu (1928-1989), as evident by the recent discovery of a stash of secret sexy mice girl drawings

¹⁹¹ Tamaki Saitō, “Otaku Sexuality,” trans. Christopher Bolton, in *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science-Fiction from Origins to Anime*, ed. Christopher Bolton, et al. (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 240

¹⁹² Fred Patten, “The Allure of Anthropomorphism in Anime and Manga” in *The Japanification of Children’s Popular Culture: From Godzilla to Miyazaki*, ed. Mark I. West (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 46.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 47-48

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

uncovered by the late “God of Manga’s” daughter early last year.¹⁹⁵ Tezuka’s artistic style was hugely influential on the world of *manga* and *anime*, including erotic and pornographic works since, as *manga* critic Itō Gō notes, “the circular lines of Tezuka’s characters had a certain eroticism to them” anyway.¹⁹⁶

Galbraith goes on to elaborate that in some cases *otaku* professing feelings of *moé* for a character will “describe such attachment in terms of ‘marriage.’” In Japan this is done by “calling a favorite character ‘my wife’ (*ore no yome*)” while amongst American *otaku* the popular phrase is the English mispronunciation of the phrase “My Wife” as “Mai Waifu” which “was first introduced to the English-speaking audiences through a scene from the popular high school *anime* series *Azumanga Daioh*, which aired in Japan from April to September 2002 and later released as a DVD set in the United States in September 2005.”¹⁹⁷

In certain extreme cases such vows to wed a fictional character can become serious with individual *otaku* actually seeking to legally marry said character, as seen in a handful of examples which have been documented by Galbraith:

On October 22, 2008, a man called Takashita Taichi set up an online petition asking the Japanese government to legally recognize marriage to fictional characters. Within a week, a thousand people had signed it. On November 22, 2009, a man calling himself Sal 9000 married a character from the game *LovePlus* (2009) in an official-looking ceremony held in Tokyo. ‘I love this character,’ the man told CNN... On March 11, 2010, a Korean man announced his marriage to the character drawn on his body pillow.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Casey Baseel, “Daughter of Osamu Tezuka, God of Manga, discovers his stash of hand-drawn sexy mouse artwork” *Rocket News 24* (29 Mar. 2014) <http://en.rocketnews24.com/2014/03/29/daughter-of-osamu-tezuka-god-of-manga-discovers-his-stash-of-hand-drawn-sexy-mouse-artwork/>

¹⁹⁶ Patrick W. Galbraith, “*Lolicon*: The Reality of ‘Virtual Child Pornography’ in Japan” *Image & Narrative* 12:1 (2011) 106.

¹⁹⁷ “Waifu” *Know Your Meme* (5 April 2015) <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/waifu>

¹⁹⁸ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto: An Insider’s Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 7

While Galbraith acknowledges that such “marriages are playful performances by *otaku* that we perhaps shouldn’t take too seriously” he stops short of wholly discounting them, as should we since, as was previously shown in the first half of this examination, play can often be a much more serious business than we initially suspect. In the case of *otaku* marrying fictional characters Galbraith, thinking alongside anthropologist Ian Condry, sees this as an attempt by *otaku* to demonstrate “their devotion to others in a political move to gain acceptance of attachment to fictional characters.”¹⁹⁹

Considering the overlap already observed as existing between *otaku* and Bronies it should not be surprising then to see that some Bronies have adopted the strategy of declaring a desire to marry the characters from *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* in an attempt to gain recognition and acknowledgement of their devotion to the show and its equine stars. On March 18th, 2013 *MTV Geek* published a story about a Brony who had written a concerned e-mail to a fellow Brony artist on the popular online gallery website *DeviantArt* asking him “to please rethink receiving erotic art of ‘Pony’ character Twilight Sparkle, because... the writer of said letter is planning to wed the fictional, four-legged creature” who he already considers his “fiancé” and who he doesn’t want to see sexually degraded on the internet.²⁰⁰ This story was subsequently picked up by other related news sites such as the *A.V. Club*,²⁰¹ the aforementioned *Jezebel*,²⁰² and even referenced in an article on Bronies written by *TV*

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 8.

²⁰⁰ Eddie Wright, “Brony Engaged to Twilight Sparkle; Pens Angry Letter To Pony Artist” *MTV Geek* (18 March 2013) <http://geek-news.mtv.com/2013/03/18/my-little-pony-twilight-sparkle-marriage/>

²⁰¹ Sean O’Neal, “The Internet finally reaches its apex as man marrying My Little Pony character writes angry email to erotic pony artist” *A.V. Club* (22 Mar. 2013) <http://www.avclub.com/article/the-internet-finally-reaches-its-apex-as-man-marry-94206>

²⁰² Anna Breslaw, “Man Engaged To My Little Pony Twilight Sparkle Defends Her Honor On The Internet” *Jezebel* (23 March 2013) <http://jezebel.com/5992074/man-engaged-to-my-little-ponys-twilight-sparkle-defends-her-honor-on-the-internet>

Guide.²⁰³ Mostly the story was played for laughs, with both *MTV Geek* and *TV Guide* suggesting that the letter might not be sincere and could have been sent “hoping it would be posted, go viral, and humiliate the entire Bronie movement.”²⁰⁴

And while such suspicions are certainly valid the writers at both sites may not have been as incredulous had they been familiar with the phenomena of *moé* marriages as documented by Galbraith or with Saitō’s study of *otaku* culture and sexuality which includes a nearly identical story to this one, only featuring a human *anime* heroine instead of a pony.²⁰⁵ Furthermore it should not be overlooked that in the case of the offended Brony, it was not that he was lobbying against the creation of pornographic material because he found the idea of having a sexual attraction to an animated pony somehow wrong, as he is clearly sexually attracted to Twilight Sparkle himself, but rather the degrading way said sex was being imagined by other fans.

Naturally there are those who are skeptical of individuals who profess feelings of *moé* for fictional characters whether they are anthropomorphized animals or the teenage heroines seen in ‘Magical Girl’ series like *Sailor Moon*. Critics like Naitō Chizuko have argued that men who produce, consume, and profess feelings for such characters are either, at best, socially deficient in their inability to “communicate with members of the opposite sex” – Nakamori Akio’s old charge – or are, at worst, closet sexual deviants – most likely Miyazaki-style pedophiles – who “project” their perverse desires “onto empty symbols” and who may

²⁰³ Sadie Gennis, “Give Bronies a Break! In Defense of Adult My Little Pony Fans” *TV Guide* (31 Jul 2013) <http://www.tvguide.com/News/Bronies-My-Little-Pony-Friendship-Magic-1068692.aspx>

²⁰⁴ Eddie Wright, “Brony Engaged to Twilight Sparkle; Pens Angry Letter To Pony Artist” *MTV Geek* (18 March 2013) <http://geek-news.mtv.com/2013/03/18/my-little-pony-twilight-sparkle-marriage/>

²⁰⁵ Tamaki Saitō, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, trans. J. Keith Vincent (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 35-37

eventually prove dangerous once such fictional images can no longer satiate them.²⁰⁶ As already noted however Saitō refutes all such claims, using his own field work to argue that what *otaku* find so sexually appealing about fictional female characters is their inherently fictional nature. In an interview with Galbraith, Saitō stated: “When I wrote my book [*Beautiful Fighting Girl*, which explains Saitō’s theory of *otaku* sexuality] in 2000, it was assumed that drawings of cute girls were a substitute for real girls. The thinking was that those who could not make it with women in reality projected their desires into fantasy. But with *otaku* that was never the case. The desire for the three-dimensional and the two-dimensional are separate.”²⁰⁷ Media and cultural studies scholar Setsu Shigematsu, thinking alongside fellow scholar Akagi Akira, agrees with Saitō, arguing that while the desire for fictional girls is indeed a “substitute,” what it is substituting is not a real girl but rather “a lack of desire for the ‘real thing’ – a lack of desire that young men are ‘naturally’ supposed to possess for real young women.”²⁰⁸

Readers are asked to recall my earlier argument that Bronies should not be labeled as closet zoophiles because the subject of their sexual fantasies are not real ponies – which they seem to have no interest in – but rather anthropomorphic stylizations of such animals, with such anthropomorphization notably increased in the context of erotic or pornographic works. In the same way Saitō contends that the admittedly offbeat desires of *otaku* cannot be adequately labeled as “perverse (*tōsaku*)” because the objects of their affection do not exist in reality but rather are fantasy characters – often super-humans or anthropomorphized

²⁰⁶ Patrick W. Galbraith, “*Lolicon*: The Reality of ‘Virtual Child Pornography’ in Japan” *Image & Narrative* 12:1 (2011) 115, Endnote #6.

²⁰⁷ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto: An Insider’s Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 179-180

²⁰⁸ Setsu Shigematsu, “Dimensions of Desire: Sex, Fantasy, and Fetish in Japanese Comics” in *Themes in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy*, ed. John A. Lent (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999) 131-132

animals/objects – incapable of existing apart from their fictionalized contexts.²⁰⁹ This line of argumentation should be considered in relation to an observation made by Galbraith with regards to the sexual appeal of *anime* characters in general whose physical appearance “does not resemble a human one, but takes on its own internal realism within *manga/anime*.”²¹⁰ Thinking in particular of the highly stylized faces of *anime* characters with their large reflective eyes, Galbraith notes: “There is no such face in the natural world. It has an appeal separate from a human face, viewers do not want this face to be real or desire a human with such a face.”²¹¹

Rather what scholars like Saitō maintain that *moé otaku* do want is “an utterly imagined space with no correspondent in the everyday world, a space of perfect fictionality” where they can live out their fantasies, including sexual ones. And since such a realm is firmly couched within the context of fiction individuals can explore what cultural anthropologist of technology Mizuko “Mimi” Ito describes as “depictions of what many people would consider ‘alternative’ forms of sexuality” that might otherwise be deemed taboo or dangerous in real life.²¹² In this way what *moé otaku* desire is “a sexuality deliberately separated from everyday life” as Saitō puts it and what sociologist Volker Grassmuck has characterized as “pure, abstract sex, the simulation of stimulation.”²¹³

²⁰⁹ Tamaki Saitō, “Otaku Sexuality,” trans. Christopher Bolton, in *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science-Fiction from Origins to Anime*, ed. Christopher Bolton, et al. (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 245

²¹⁰ Henry Jenkins, “In Defense of Moé: An Interview with Patrick W. Galbraith (Part Two)” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins* (26 Jan. 2015) <http://henryjenkins.org/2015/01/in-defense-of-moe-an-interview-with-patrick-w-galbraith-part-one.html>

²¹¹ Patrick W. Galbraith, “*Lolicon*: The Reality of ‘Virtual Child Pornography’ in Japan” *Image & Narrative* 12:1 (2011) 106.

²¹² Henry Jenkins, “Otaku Culture in a Connected World: An Interview with Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Izumi Tsuji (Part One)” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins* (17 April 2012) http://henryjenkins.org/2012/04/otaku_culture_in_a_connected_w.html#sthash.ltO6YA5n.dpuf

²¹³ Volker Grassmuck “‘I’m alone, but not lonely’: Japanese *Otaku*-kids Colonize the Realm of Information and Media: A Tale of Sex and Crime from a Faraway Place.” (Dec. 1990) <http://www.cjas.org/~leng/otaku-e.htm>

One final point worth pausing over here is why such individuals, be they *otaku* or Bronies, are more likely to turn to the worlds of comics and cartoons to find such a space when other alternatives such as fantasy novels and sci-fi films also exist. Saitō suggests the answer may lie in the aesthetic theories of avant-garde Japanese artist, art critic, pop-culture historian, and director Murakami Takashi who maintains that Japanese *anime* adheres to a style which he calls “Superflat (*sūpaafuratto*)” which, as explained by Azuma Hiroki, “indicates an imagery space without depth or thickness, where even the eye of the camera does not exist.” Saitō postulates that because this imagined space “escapes the regulation of the camera’s eye, [it] appears structureless, but in fact the control exerted by various contexts supersedes everything else and establishes an order distinct from structure” thus creating, in the process, an environment of “sexual intersubjectivity” in which the limitless “imaginative power” of “*otaku* sexuality” can assert itself.²¹⁴

Before wrapping up this section and moving on to the question of why, as oppose to how, young men pursue relationships with fictional female characters and what this means for real woman, I feel that a brief coda should be added about female *otaku*. One of the ways in which *otaku* differ from Bronies is that while Bronies are a predominately male group, *otaku* tend to be more mixed with men and women playing prominent roles in the fandom with Galbraith noting that many of the earliest *anime* fan-clubs in Japan were actually organized by women. However after Miyazaki Tsutomu was branded “The *Otaku* Killer” the image of the *otaku* as it existed in the public imagination became intrinsically male, as evident by the success of *Densha Otoko* which features multiple male *otaku* characters, including its protagonist, but no female *otaku* characters at all. Like their male counterparts,

²¹⁴ Tamaki Saitō, “*Otaku Sexuality*,” trans. Christopher Bolton, in *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science-Fiction from Origins to Anime*, ed. Christopher Bolton, et al. (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 241-245

female *otaku* also create, consume, and make use of erotic and pornographic drawings and comics, and like their male counterparts the characters in these comics are often the protagonists from various *anime* and *manga* series whose target audience is elementary school age children. However what makes these erotic works different from the ones created by male *otaku* is that the *anime* and *manga* from which these characters are drawn are from the *shōnen* genre aimed at little boys and that the sex depicted in such female *otaku* produced *dōjinshi* is, at least at first glance, homosexual, as oppose to heterosexual, in nature featuring prominently male/male couples.

In the 1980s these female *otaku* produced works of erotica were referred to as *Yaoi*, a term which feminist sci-fi critic Kotani Mari explains derives from the phrase “‘*Yama nashi, Ochi nashi, Imi nashi*’ (no climax, no conclusion, no meaning) – a self-ironic reference to the fact that these parodic works had no need of a story and consisted simply of repeated sex scenes.”²¹⁵ Mari’s contention that these works “had no need of a story” should hopefully recall Azuma’s postmodern “database theory” in which fans have abandoned narrative in favor of repeated visual tropes instead. Because of their interest in *yaoi*, female *otaku* also adopted a new title for themselves, *fujoshi*, which takes the common Japanese word “for wife or woman” and alters the first character “from ‘feminine’ to ‘depraved’ (*fuhai*), to produce a meaning something like ‘fallen woman’... an ironically self-deprecatory reference” to these women’s refusal to conform to Japanese society’s image of them “as caste beings cut off from sexual expression.” Furthermore as literary critic Nagakubo Yōko notes the male/male couples seen in such works cannot be read as either homosexual men or proxies for male/female heterosexual couples since their actions within the comics corresponds to neither sexual orientation but rather appear to “represent the sexual self-expression of

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 223

contemporary Japanese woman”²¹⁶ in a way which as Saitō previously showed could only exist in “a space of perfect fictionality.”

Such work as seen here on *otaku* culture is important because it helps to show, on the one hand, that the sexual component of Brony fandom is a normal byproduct of a group of male fans becoming heavily invested in a given fictional universe and that this aspect of the fandom need not be ignored, neglected, or shunned. However though scholars like Saitō maintain that the desire for fictional characters should not be seen as abnormal or perverse he also acknowledges that it is not natural either insofar as one is not born desiring relationships, be they amicable or erotic, with fictional characters and that such desires must instead result from “training or study” and be developed over time.²¹⁷ Or as Azuma, in a less charitable fashion, puts it:

“Many of the *otaku* today who consume adult comics and ‘girl games’ probably... simply and animalistically grew accustomed to being stimulated by perverted images. Since they were teenagers, they had been exposed to innumerable *otaku* sexual expressions: at some point, they were trained to sexually stimulate by looking at illustrations of girls, cat ears, and maid outfits. However, anyone can grasp that kind of stimulation if they are similarly trained, since it is essentially a matter of nerves.”²¹⁸

But why should one wish to cultivate such desires? The common sense answer would seem to be that such individuals are lonely and desire partners. Indeed, Edwards and Redden report that the overwhelming majority of Bronies, 96%, are single. But even if such is the case why turn to fiction? What is motivating these young men’s “lack of desire for the ‘real thing’” as Setsu Shigematsu puts it?

²¹⁶ Ibid., 224

²¹⁷ Kirsten Cather, *The Art of Censorship in Postwar Japan* (University of Hawaii Press, 2012), 239.

²¹⁸ Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (University Of Minnesota Press, 2009), 89.

3.11 Equestrian Economics

One explanation for why young men would turn to relationships with fictional women over those with real women is that they simply don't believe they can 'afford' to date real ones in the most literal sense of the term. In the late 90s/early 2000s Japan suffered a major economic downturn with the bursting of the so-called 'Bubble Economy' which had previously brought on newfound wealth and affluence for much of the population. Since that time Japan's economy has failed to recover and wages have been stagnant for nearly 20-years. Sociologist Masahiro Yamada has commented that the result of this situation has been a generation of "young people with little chance of higher pay" whose only recourse "to prevent a fall in living standards is to stay at home with their relatively affluent parents, and therefore postpone marriage."²¹⁹

In such an economy, the argument goes, many men are unable to obtain the financial status needed to successfully attract romantic partners or even "be eligible to fraternize with young women" at all.²²⁰ *Moé*-advocate Honda Toru calls this system "love capitalism (*ren'ai shihonshugi*)" and with it paints a cynical worldview which reduces "women's motives for dating and marriage... to economic ones" and suggests a scene "of commoditized romance that forces people onto expensive dates to fashionable places" which are "not only out of reach for most men, but also entirely unappealing."²²¹ It is such a worldview then which Setsu Shigematsu argues is the primary reason that "many young men" are choosing to "opt

²¹⁹ Chris Giles, et al. "Pay Pressure" *The Big Read* (18 Sept. 2014) <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/ec422956-3f22-11e4-a861-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3Sc5pqafL>

²²⁰ Setsu Shigematsu, "Dimensions of Desire: Sex, Fantasy, and Fetish in Japanese Comics" in *Themes in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy*, ed. John A. Lent (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999) 132.

²²¹ Henry Jenkins, "In Defense of *Moé*: An Interview with Patrick W. Galbraith (Part Two)" *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins* (28 Jan. 2015) <http://henryjenkins.org/2015/01/in-defense-of-moe-an-interview-with-patrick-w-galbraith-part-two.html>

out of this competition and... invest in these two-dimensional images of cuteness” instead.²²² Yamada’s observations collaborate this in a general way as he notes that young people in Japan today have learned to cope with their distressed economy by “escaping to virtual worlds of games, animation and costume play.”²²³

If a bad economy is one of the catalysts for the birth of a *moé* culture then there is no reason to believe that such phenomenon is relegated only to Japan. On that note economist Morinaga Takuro has predicted “that the pressures contributing to the [*moé*] phenomenon are shared globally, and that *moé* will become a big market in other countries too as more and more men end up on the losing side of the economy.”²²⁴ America was itself in the grips of an economic ‘Great Recession’ between December 2007 and June 2009, the summer before *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* debut, and continues to struggle to climb out of the financial pit it found itself in during those 19 months with “economic growth [now averaging] just 1 percent annually.” More to the point, “the unemployment rate for men and women 20 to 24 years old,” that is to say right around the median age of most Bronies, “is 11.4 percent, versus a low of 7.2 percent in 2007” and according to Edwards and Redden only 32% of Bronies are employed either part-time or full-time.

The result of all this, according to American economist James Pethokoukis, is a cultural climate very similar to Japan’s own in which young college educated adults find themselves “living with their parents” while working dead-end jobs as “baristas and bartenders with Bachelor’s degrees” and trying to deal with the depressing reality of it all by

²²² Setsu Shigematsu, “Dimensions of Desire: Sex, Fantasy, and Fetish in Japanese Comics” in *Themes in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy*, ed. John A. Lent (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999) 132.

²²³ Chris Giles, et al. “Pay Pressure” *The Big Read* (18 Sept. 2014) <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/ec422956-3f22-11e4-a861-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3Sc5pqafL>

²²⁴ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto: An Insider’s Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 132.

periodically escaping to worlds of fantasy. “When you’re disillusioned with the reality of your early adult life, dressing up like *Doctor Who* starts looking better and better,” muses Pethokoukis, “It’s not to say that all or even most *cosplay* aficionados are struggling to find work. It’s only to say that any rise in people fleeing reality for fantasy suggests problems with our reality.”²²⁵

For Pethokoukis, the preference of escapist media amongst American adults is simply a symptom of the economic downturn, a point which was also echoed in film critic Andrew O’Hehir’s follow-up to A.O. Scott’s “Death of Adulthood in America Culture” piece in which O’Hehir contends that if Americans are no longer able to grow up it is because they exist in an economy which simply doesn’t allow them to. “We now live in a culture (using the word in its anthropological sense) of diminished expectations and permanent underemployment, where many or most young people will never be as affluent as their parents. Lifetime job security is an antediluvian delusion, and in many metropolitan areas home ownership is out of reach for all but the rich,” writes O’Hehir, and with “those things [which had been] the essential underpinnings of classic adulthood” gone it should be no surprise to find “grownups reading *Harry Potter* books.”²²⁶

If more and more American young adults are following the trend first set-forth in Japan of “escaping to virtual worlds of games, animation and costume play” to deal with the existential uncertainties of life and love in a bad economy then it would follow that just as *anime*, *manga*, and other staples of Japanese pop-culture have migrated towards the West so would *moé*. Overwhelmed by feelings of perceived financial instability resulting in increased

²²⁵ James Pethokoukis “Why the rise of cosplay is a bad sign for the U.S. economy” *The Week* (9 Oct. 2014) <http://theweek.com/articles/443181/rise-cosplay-bad-sign-economy>

²²⁶ Andrew O’Hehir “The “death of adulthood” is really just capitalism at work” *Salon* (12 Sept. 2014) http://www.salon.com/2014/09/12/the_death_of_adulthood_is_really_just_capitalism_at_work/

trepidation in dealing with the fairer sex, it only makes sense that young men would begin turning to fictional women as “a low-cost, low-stress solution to this problem,” as Honda terms it; “It’s love on our terms... You don’t need much capital to access *moé*, and you can do it in a way that suits you.”²²⁷

And so they have.

One recent example of *moé* culture invading the US is the 2014 music video for hip-hop artist Pharrell Williams’ hit song “It Girl” which combines elements of *anime* and Japanese “‘dating simulator’ games” and was directed by a pair of Japanese pop-artists known as Fantasista Utamaro and Mr. respectably. The video was also produced by the above-mentioned Murakami Takashi via his production company Kaikai Kiki.²²⁸ Pharrell is not the first American artist to have partnered with Murakami – others include music-video and film director McG and rapper Kanye West – but what made Pharrell’s video stand out was that it was a sexually explicit love-song in which the object of Pharrell’s affection, as seen in the music video, is a young *anime* girl with the nonsensical name of “Yoshic[ch]!!” along with “several of Yoshic[ch]!!’s friends—a girl in eyeglasses; a cute girl wearing a hostile facial expression—[all of whom] represent archetypal *moé* characters.”²²⁹ The video proved controversial, with the entertainment website HitFlix.com describing the sight of Pharrell making advances on “‘Sailor Moon’-like *anime* jailbait bikini girls” as “just creepy.”²³⁰ *The New Yorker* ran a much more insightful article on the video by noted Japanese pop-culture expert Matt Alt in which Alt fends off allegations of pedophilia while

²²⁷ Patrick W. Galbraith, *Moé Manifesto: An Insider’s Look at the Worlds of Manga, Anime, and Gaming* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2014), 122.

²²⁸ Matt Alt, “Pharrell Williams’s Lolicon Video” *The New Yorker* (15 Oct. 2014) <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/pharrell-williamss-lolicon-girl>

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ Dave Lewis, “Pharrell Williams gets even weirder in creepy anime video for ‘It Girl!’” *HitFlix* (30 Sept. 2014) <http://www.hitfix.com/news/pharrell-williams-gets-even-weirder-in-creepy-anime-video-for-it-girl>

providing readers with a not entirely sympathetic crash course on Japanese *moé* culture. “For foreign viewers,” Alt writes, “the most difficult aspect of the video might be the idea that the ‘it girl’ for one of America’s most popular singers could be a cartoon child.”²³¹

In addition to Pharrell’s video I would like to contend that the Bronies are another manifestation of *moé* culture cropping up within the United States, a contention which, while arrived at independently of, is also shared by Patrick W. Galbraith.²³² If Brony fandom can be understood as an American takeoff on *moé* culture then the practices of Bronies creating, trading, and consuming *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* erotic and pornographic fan-art and fan-fiction can best be understood as a reaction to the perceived sexual cynicism of dating in a depressed economy, as explained by Honda Toru. As noted earlier Bronies often maintain that one of the most attractive aspects of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* for them is its lack of cynicism and its focus on sincerity and I see no reason why this same mindset would not extend to their views on dating and sexual relations as well.

But as Galbraith points out, the adoption of what Saitō calls “drawn sexuality” opens up its own host of problems as the men engaged in *moé* culture “still seem to maintain goals for success, namely getting paid and laid, that are recognizable to hegemonic masculinity.” Rather than abandoning these goals or reevaluating their means of obtaining them Galbraith says these men simply “want things on their terms, which can come off as somewhat entitled.”²³³ More than entitled, as art critic Shibusawa Tatsuhiko’s observed *moé* is in essence a “one-way street (*ippō tsūkō*)” in which the fictional female “most perfectly satisfies

²³¹ Matt Alt, “Pharrell Williams’s Lolicon Video” *The New Yorker* (15 Oct. 2014) <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/pharrell-williamss-lolicon-girl>

²³² Jonathan B, “The Moé Manifesto Interview with Author Patrick W. Galbraith” *Things To Do In LA* (1 July 2014) <http://www.ttdila.com/2014/07/the-moe-manifesto-interview-with-author.html>

²³³ Henry Jenkins, “In Defense of Moé: An Interview with Patrick W. Galbraith (Part Two)” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins* (28 Jan. 2015) <http://henryjenkins.org/2015/01/in-defense-of-moe-an-interview-with-patrick-w-galbraith-part-two.html>

the essential sexual urges of the male... because both socially and sexually” such a character “is utterly ignorant. And being ignorant [are] like little birds and dogs [and we might want to add ponies] – symboliz[ing] the total object, the object of play, and one that cannot express itself of its own accord.” Shibusawa’s comments also recall feminist scholar M. Gigi Durham’s observation that what a patriarchal society most desires of its women is that of “compliant, docile sexuality.”²³⁴ And what kind of woman is more docile than a fictional one? In fostering relationships with fictional characters then, Bronies are creating what Galbraith calls “a space of autonomous sexuality” which can only be maintained through the active rejection of real women, thus marking it as an inherently “sexist position.”²³⁵

As stated before the issue here was never the fact that Bronies find the pastel colored fillies of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* to be both equally inspirational and arousing. However because one cannot ignore the fact that the show in question was expressly made to entertain and empower little girls, the sexualization of it takes on a particular set of connotation, especially due to the fact that Bronies have achieved, at least amongst the liberal media, the reputation of being representatives of a progressive shift in young men’s understanding of gender politics. But as we have just demonstrated, this stance has only been made possible because its pundits have chosen, for whatever reason, to ignore and/or dismiss the sexual aspects of Brony fandom. When such aspects are taken into account however the picture changes dramatically and claims that Bronies constitute a progressive movement in gender politics crumbles. As a variation of *moé* culture, Brony fandom, rather than contributing to the redefining of gender norms and the empowerment of women, perpetuates

²³⁴ Patrick W. Galbraith, “Lolicon: The Reality of ‘Virtual Child Pornography’ in Japan” *Image & Narrative* 12:1 (2011) 116, footnote #10

²³⁵ Henry Jenkins, “In Defense of Moé: An Interview with Patrick W. Galbraith (Part Two)” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins* (28 Jan. 2015) <http://henryjenkins.org/2015/01/in-defense-of-moe-an-interview-with-patrick-w-galbraith-part-two.html>

a larger social trend in which the privileging and exalting of male fans comes at the expense of real women who are repeatedly marginalized due to their unwillingness to be passively corralled and put away to pasture.

3.12 Hyper-Masculinity and Colt-Fandom

The privileging of the male gender within fandom is a real problem as is the minimal presence of real women within the Brony community, the later more so for those journalists who wish to portray Bronies as gender egalitarian and progressive. A recent example includes a February 2015 article from *The Village Voice* by Katie Toth which details a trip to the convention Ponycon “held at St. Francis College in Brooklyn Heights.” Despite acknowledging the fact that the convention attracted some “1,600 people” over the course of three-days, and yet “only a handful of” those attendees were women, Toth still somehow manages to come away with the conclusion that those few female fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* were “exalted” members of the fandom with her primary reason apparently being that such female fan’s authenticity and reason for being at the convention were not routinely questioned by the male fans in attendance.²³⁶

Though often seen as diametrically opposed to the kind of fantasy media fandom under consideration here,²³⁷ the male dominated sphere of sports fandom offers some potential insights as to why adult female fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* so often end up sidelined by their Brony compatriots. According to sociologist Victoria K. Gosling women are often harassed and pushed to the margins of organized male sports fandom under the pretense that “women fans are... inauthentic and not dedicated enough in their support” and only attend games so as to ogle male players.²³⁸ Gosling, thinking alongside a number of other scholars, argues that this perceived desire by female sports fans to gaze lustfully after male players – regardless of if it is actually the case or not – unnerves male sports fans since

²³⁶ Katie Toth, “Why Female *My Little Pony* Fans Are Exalted Among 'Bronies'” *The Village Voice* (18 Feb. 2015) <http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2015/02/new-york-city-ponycon.php>

²³⁷ Ethan Gilsdorf, *Fantasy Freaks & Gaming Geeks*, Guilford, CT: Lyons Press (2009), 141.

²³⁸ Victorian K. Gosling, “No Girls Aloud” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World* ed. Jonathan Grey, et al. (NYU Press, 2007), 259.

it “threatens the ‘male gaze,’ as women become the observers and men the objects of the gaze.”²³⁹ As this is obviously not the case in Brony fandom, where the subject of the gaze is an all-female cast of animated ponies, the application of Gosling’s insights requires some reframing. In this case it should perhaps be asked whether the presence of real women at Brony gatherings potentially disrupts the objectifying ‘male gaze’ of the Bronies themselves when looking at the female characters present in the *Friendship is Magic* show. Likewise Gosling’s observation that many male sports fans cite a concern over female fan’s lack of authenticity and dedication to the game and the suggestion that they have ulterior motives to swoon over male players recalls similar concerns voiced within broader ‘Geek Culture’ over the existence of the so-called ‘Fake Geek Girl’ who attends conventions and other fan events – often dressed in a sexy costume – not out of a love for the material but out of a desire to be gawked at by male fans.²⁴⁰

Furthermore, notions that female fans are exalted within the Brony community become even harder to square when considering the remarks of fans like “XZen Marlow,” a 22-year-old “lady brony” who lives in New York. Marlow told Mashable.com reporter Jessica Goodman that she does not “participate in the in-person brony community in New York,” which she described as “a boys’ club... a mean one at that.”

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ The phrase “Fake Geek Girl” was first coined by *Forbes* contributor Tara Tiger Brown in her article “Dear Fake Geek Girls: Please Go Away” (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/tarabrown/2012/03/26/dear-fake-geek-girls-please-go-away/>) and later gained wider notice after *anime* archivist Joe Peacock wrote a collaborating piece for CNN’s *Geek Out* blog titled “Booth babes need not apply” (<http://geekout.blogs.cnn.com/2012/07/24/booth-babes-need-not-apply/>). Both Brown and Peacock’s pieces received swift counterpoint articles from *Forbes* contributor Daniel Nye Griffiths, “‘Fake Geek Girls’: How Geek Gatekeeping Is Bad For Business” (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/danielnyegriffiths/2012/07/26/fake-geek-girls-gamer-edition/>), and sci-fi writer John Scalzi, “Who Gets To Be a Geek? Anyone Who Wants to Be” (<http://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/07/26/who-gets-to-be-a-geek-anyone-who-wants-to-be/>). Since then the term has entered the everyday rhetoric of ‘Geek Culture’ and continues to be debated about vigorously.

Another theorist who has dealt with this issue is Joanne Hollows who has studied what she describes as the gendering of cult film fandom as intrinsically masculine.²⁴¹ As a group of fans who defy mainstream notions of what young men are supposed to enjoy Bronies have often been referred to as “cult fans,” thus making Hollows’ work more than suitable for discussing them. Furthermore Hollows speaks directly to those cult fans whose male dominated fandoms are based around material that is inherently feminine in nature such as the movies *Valley of the Dolls* (1967) and *Showgirls* (1995).

Hollows has argued that the institution of cult fandom is an intrinsically masculine one in that it is understood as existing in opposition to the mainstream, which is characterized as being synonymous with the domestic, the safe, and the superficial, all of which have historically been perceived as feminine attributes.²⁴² However scholar Susan J. Napier disagrees, contending instead that fandom, with its emphasis on collecting and consuming, is inherently feminizing for men in that it prioritizes what has traditionally been understood to be a women’s leisure activity: shopping. Napier, in particular, demonstrates how depictions of stereotypical male fans in popular multimedia franchises like the previously discussed *Densha Otoko* often portray such individuals as decidedly “feminized” in both appearance – being seen with numerous shopping bags slung around their arms – and attributes such as being “weak, [and] clumsy” – all of which is typically played for laughs.²⁴³ Galbraith likewise agrees, noting that the “discourse of infantilizing and feminizing” fans becomes especially apparently “when talking about men consuming media and material perceived to

²⁴¹ Joanna Hollows, “The Masculinity of Cult.” In *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. Mark Jancovich, et al. (UK and NY: Manchester University Press, 2003), 49

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 39

²⁴³ Susan J. Napier, “Where Have All the Salarymen Gone?” in *Recreating Japanese Men*, ed. by Sabine Fruhstuck and Anne Walthall (University of California Press, 2011), 162.

be for or targeting kids and young girls” a category that would, without question, include Bronies.²⁴⁴

If such contentions are true however it does little to invalidate Hollows’ larger thesis since her point is that as a result of such perceptions, wherever they may arise, there exists a strong desire amongst cult fans to demonstrate that they operate in opposition to the feminine, both aesthetically and with regards to “‘real’ women who are often marginalized and/or excluded from practices associated with cult fandom.”²⁴⁵ All of which leads Hollows to contend that “proper fandom [is] based on a form of homosocial bonding”²⁴⁶ an example of which can be seen by returning to Toth’s report on Ponycon in which the journalist speculates that perhaps the reason why female attendees at the convention are not harassed is that Bronies most often mistake such women as members of the show’s staff rather than fans! If true I can only see this as additional evidence that the notion of a real woman occupying the decidedly homosocial space carved out by Bronies for themselves is an utterly alien one to them.

One of the main ways Hollows says this marginalization and/or exclusion of female participants in cult fandom is accomplished is through the strong connection which has historically existed between cult fandom and graphic male oriented heterosexual pornography, which as we have already discussed is more than abundant within the Brony subculture. This relationship between cult fandom and female objectifying pornographic imagery, writes Hollows, not only reinforces the masculinity of the institution of cult fandom

²⁴⁴ Matt Alt, “An Interview with Patrick W. Galbraith on Otaku Culture – Part One.” Neojaponisme. (22 may 2012) <http://neojaponisme.com/2012/05/22/an-interview-with-patrick-w-galbraith-on-otaku-culture-part-one/>

²⁴⁵ Joanna Hollows, “The Masculinity of Cult.” In *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. Mark Jancovich, et al. (UK and NY: Manchester University Press, 2003), 39.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

by reconfirming its “illicit and ‘outlaw’ status,” both seen as fundamentally male attributes, but also “places the girl who wishes to be ‘one of the boys’ in an awkward position” thus making her less inclined to join the group.²⁴⁷

Furthermore Hollows notes that such pornography as found circulated amongst male dominated cult fandoms is often decidedly offbeat in nature. The production and consumption which ultimately serving as a means for members to display how truly masculine they are by “demonstrating how far or low you can go”²⁴⁸ with their being few routes one can go kinkier then admitting you masturbate to images of cartoon ponies from a children’s cartoon.

However if the entire point of cult fandom, as Hollows suggests, is to reinforce a masculine image amongst male members by rejecting and objectifying all things feminine, why base your fandom around feminine material to begin with, be it the movie *Showgirls* or cartoon series like *Sailor Moon* or *My Little Pony*? Hollows suggests that the answer to this is that by creating a male dominated fandom around such material, said films or shows can in effect be “redeemed by the process of reclassification.”²⁴⁹ In other words, only by becoming the focus of male attention can a girl’s show like *My Little Pony* prove that it is actually worth paying attention to at all, thus reinforcing the notions of the inherent inferiority of women and women’s entertainment and the inherent superiority and cultural dominance of men and men’s entertainment. Hollows also hits upon something else however and that is the seemingly paradoxical idea that by acting like a girl one can prove that they are truly a man.

Sociologist Amy C. Wilkins was previously discussed for her expertise on youth subcultures amongst high school and college age young adults. Amongst those subcultures

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 43

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 44.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 39

which she has looked at are Goths, those individuals often characterized by a “dark, eerie, isolationist” aesthetic and “an attitude of cultivated angst” both of which are expressed in their choice of attire and entertainment preferences.²⁵⁰ While these aspects of Goth subculture are a far cry from that of the Bronies the two groups do have certain similarities. Like the Bronies seen in the majority of media interviews, Wilkins contends that many Goths pride themselves on challenging “mainstream gender rules” and as a result view themselves as “a better kind of people – as emotionally, morally, and politically sophisticated.”²⁵¹ Also like Bronies at conventions and occasionally in public with their pastel colored pony adorned wardrobe, Wilkins documents how young Goth men often dress and act in ways which traditionally denote feminine sexuality: “Men regularly wear long skirts and makeup to the [Goth] club, and sometimes in other settings.”²⁵² In addition Goth men often exhibit “behavior outside of the normative framework for homosocial contact between adult men,” behavior which while not sexual is still, as one interviewee puts it, “pretty touchy-feely – we hug, throw our arms around each other’s shoulders, I’ve kissed a bunch of them,”²⁵³ behavior which as seen in de Lancie’s *Bronies* documentary is also characteristic of male Bronies as well.

However, as Wilkins goes on to elucidate, these “young men’s use of typically feminine accoutrements doesn’t signal a rejection of heterosexuality”²⁵⁴ but rather when placed in the context of the predominantly heterosexual arena of Goth subculture, actually serves as a means of reinforcing Goth men’s masculinity rather than invalidating it: “Thus

²⁵⁰ Amy C. Wilkins, *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: The Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 31

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 54

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 66

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 72

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 66

because the Goth scene is not a space in which gay or even bisexual men are normative, playing with bisexuality can make men seem courageous and authentic. They are willing to explore all of their desires, even if those desires are seen as less manly. The irony, of course, is that their purported courage then increases their manliness.”²⁵⁵

Like Goths, Bronies are also a hetero-normative group – 84% are self-described heterosexuals according to Edwards and Redden’s study with only 1.5% describing themselves as homosexual²⁵⁶ – and thus it seems safe to draw a parallel between the groups, postulating that in their open embracement of a girl’s show like *My Little Pony*, Bronies are also attempting to sure up their own status as manly men by showing that they aren’t afraid to act in ways that mainstream culture deems un-masculine. However as Wilkins points out the irony here is that by attempting to subvert the status quo and appear more progressive in the realm of gender politics Goths, and I argue Bronies as well, intentionally or unintentionally, actually end up reinforcing the status quo rather than truly challenging it.

Furthermore as Wilkins notes:

“The perception that Goth is gender progressive covers up enduring gender inequality in the Goth scene. The notion that transformed sexuality is inherently gender egalitarian allows participants to feel morally and politically superior to people who haven’t transformed their sexuality and allows participants to justify their own lifestyle on political and moral grounds.” As a result such “gender progressive moral identities can be... used to stifle internal or external challenges to sexism. In effect, participants can use their involvement in transformed sexual relations as evidence of their de facto egalitarianism, shielding themselves and their community from further challenges to the configuration of gendered power.”²⁵⁷

In other words, by using the external appearance of men engaged in feminine actives, such as dress and actions, as a means of claiming gender progressive and gender egalitarian

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 72

²⁵⁶ Patrick Edwards and Marsha Redden, “BRONY STUDY (Research Project) Study Results” *Brony Study* (21 Nov. 2013) <http://www.bronystudy.com/id1.html>

²⁵⁷ Amy C. Wilkins, *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: The Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 87

attitudes Goths are able to hide the fact that their community is actually no more progressive or egalitarian than the mainstream, in fact in some ways it may be even less. I contend that this is equally true of the Brony fandom as well, whose male members the media has championed as representing a gender progressive outlook when in fact such widespread, but largely unremarked upon, fan activities as the marginalization of female members and the creation of graphic heterosexual pornographic fan-art featuring the female characters of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, and the sexual gratification received from such works, actually bespeak of the exact opposite.

3.13 Conclusions

At the beginning of this essay I quoted entertainment writer Adam Wenger's August 2012 article on Bronies in which he wrote; "When it comes to superfans, few are as misunderstood as the Bronies — 'bros' who unabashedly love an animated cartoon created to entertain little girls." Over the course of this examination of Brony fandom I have endeavored to demonstrate just how right Wenger is in this observation, but for reasons that eluded even him.

In approaching the subject of fans and fan cultures from the perspective of someone involved in the field of Religious Studies, I have argued that fandoms can and do constitute a form of "recreational religious activity." Like religions, fandoms aid their members in constructing subjunctive "as-if" worlds in which they can find meaning and fulfillment in contrast to a reality which they perceive to be chaotic, unfair, and ultimately less than desirable. Fandoms presents fans with alternative visions of the world drawn from popular-culture and fans, via means of play, endeavor to transformer those visions into a reality they can inhabit and dwell in, even if only for a short time.

However as Robert M. Price notes, fandoms differs from traditionally defined religions in that they "ignore the traditional 'sacred versus profane' distinction intrinsic in classical religions" while "also lack[ing] any element of sincere belief. Their adherents are rejoicing in the spirit of the thing, celebrating what they love. But they are not necessarily trying to derive moral guidance from their religions, and they do not literally believe in the stories of their pop faiths."²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ Mark Dery, "Kraken Rising: How the Cephalopod Became Our Zeitgeist Mascot" *H+ Magazine* (24 May 2010) <http://hplusmagazine.com/2010/05/24/kraken-rising-how-cephalopod-became-our-zeitgeist-mascot>

With regards to the Bronies, my own research into this group has lead me to the conclusion that the view of the Bronies as expounded by the media and Edwards and Redden is based on an inadequate understanding of not only the Bronies specifically but fandoms in general. In arguing that Bronies are in the business of using *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* as a source of moral guidance and that Bronies' activities challenge traditional gender norms such commentators have made the mistake of looking at the content of the show which is at the heart of this fandom's devotion and using that to extrapolate said fans' motivations. However as Price points out, fans do not seek "moral guidance from... the stories of their pop faiths" in part because they do not "literally believe" in them. Instead as John C. Lyden observes fans use the myths of pop-culture to craft an identify for themselves, and taking these insights serious I have instead aimed to look at the fandom itself and in doing so to ask what kind of world it is the Bronies are seeking to create for themselves using *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* as a base.

Contrary to popular assertion then, Bronies do not represent a significant shift in young men's understanding of gender politics, what it means to be masculine, how they view women's entertainment, or even women themselves. Rather, being a Brony only serves as a means of reinforcing old pedagogies regarding the inherent superiority of men and men's tastes in entertainment, in this case in toys and cartoons, as compared to women and the tastes of women. By proclaiming to be a fan of a girl's show, Bronies aim to show how manly they really are, to demonstrate a kind of hyper-masculinity within their own subculture by showing that they can transcend the inherent inferiority of a girl's cartoon thus making it worthy of widespread media attention and coverage. And it is only by overlooking the way in which Bronies sexualize the female characters in *My Little Pony* that various Brony

apologists are able to make such claims. This act, the creation and “use” of pornographic fan-art featuring the *Friendship is Magic* characters is a complicated phenomenon since it not only demonstrates the Bronies’ own genuine immersion into the world of the show, but also serves as a means of imposing their male superiority onto a female world via sexual exploitation which in turn further alienates actual female fans who find such works objectionable.

It also appears that the media itself maybe slowly coming around to these facts as evidence by an August 1st article written last year for the Baltimore *City Paper* titled “The problem with bronies: a look at the corruption of ‘My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic’” by journalist Gianna DeCarlo. Written in response to a previous, and much more affirmative, article in the same paper covering the Baltimore based BronyCon, DeCarlo argues that her problem with Bronies “has nothing to [do with] grown men liking a children’s cartoon and everything to do with their usurping of a safe space for young girls and distorting it into a hypersexual and toxic environment” via the “unstoppable force of sexual deviancy” that is *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* erotic and pornographic fan-art. DeCarlo goes on to note that such material has become so ubiquitous that “not even a simple Google search is safe” since merely typing the name of the pony character “‘Pinkie Pie’ with SafeSearch off” will quickly bring up such fan-produced images as “Pinkie Pie in knee-high socks on a stripper pole.”²⁵⁹ DeCarlo goes on to complain about the existence of fan-created online erotic comics like “Ask Princess Molestia,” the presence of fan-artists who produce such work being on the guest/vendor list for BronyCon, and also bringing attention to the previously discussed practice of “clopping.” In the end DeCarlo’s article reaches the acerbic

²⁵⁹ Gianna DeCarlo, “The problem with bronies: a look at the corruption of ‘My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic’” *City Paper* (1 Aug. 2014) <http://www.citypaper.com/blogs/noise/bcp-the-problem-with-bronies-20140801,0,1667255.story>

and judgmental conclusion that Bronies are “nothing but bigoted rape-apologists” and that “in short, the label ‘brony’ is ruined. It’s garbage. Throw it out. Never use it again.”²⁶⁰ Suddenly we find ourselves back at the beginning of this essay with Leigh Alexander and her angry attack on Gamer fandom, leading one to the conclusion that for many fandom must either conform to socially accepted narratives of progress or be exiled and condemned in the most vicious way possible as a regressive and juvenile venture.

This essay is not an attempt to pass judgment on the Brony fandom however, or an attempt to say that Bronies are not truly transgressive. Genuinely liking a work of commercial art which was not expressly made for you is a transgressive act, as is being open about alternative forms of sexual expression such as “clopping.” However as media studies scholar Joanne Hollows reminds us “in every act of transgression there is always something, or someone, that is transgressed” and that often such acts of transgression are “only sustained by processes of ‘othering’ and it is always important to remain aware of who, and what, is being ‘othered’” often unintentionally.²⁶¹ It is in this same vein that I have argued that the rise of Brony fandom, whether knowingly or not, has contributed to the “othering” of women and women’s entertainment in society so as to further promote the masculine as normative and superior.

²⁶⁰ As if Gianna DeCarlo’s low opinion of Bronies was not evident enough, the same day her *City Paper* article was published DeCarlo posted a tweet of a “ponified” version of herself with the phrase “me writing ‘bout yr shitty n gross fandom” so as to further taunt and exacerbate the Brony community. Needless to say, none of this was well received by the Bronies themselves. Liki Weaks, “Self-proclaimed “Journalist” Gianna DeCarlo unlocks Twitter after 2 months - an overdue followup.” *Horse News*. <http://www.horse-news.net/2014/09/self-proclaimed-journalist-gianna.html>

²⁶¹Joanna Hollows, “The Masculinity of Cult.” In *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. Mark Jancovich, et al. (UK and NY: Manchester University Press, 2003), 49.

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