Of ponies and men: *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and the Brony fandom

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Abstract
The newest incarnation of the My Little Pony franchise, the children's cartoon program *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* has attracted a sizeable viewership among an unexpected demographic: adolescent men. This article looks at this group, known as Bronies, and assesses how the geek subculture that this fandom exists within frames the fan's understanding of the show, its pony protagonists, and their own self-reflection. Focusing on the role of anthropomorphic animals, this discussion will explicate how normative notions of gender, attitude and behavior are challenged by interaction with this text. This study aims to highlight the significance of fictional animals as tools for personal meaning-making.

Keywords
anthropomorphic animals, Brony, fandom, geeks, identity, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*

Animals have long played a part in the delineation of human identity. Whether totemic or tutelary, symbolizing the purity or the ferocity of nature, our non-human companions have provided a vast array of metaphors for us to deploy in our story-telling and meaning-making. Traditionally, animals have been mediated through anthropomorphism: the attribution of human personality traits to non-human subjects. Anthropomorphism is highly visible in the media, and especially children's media, the My Little Pony cartoon *Friendship is Magic* being one of a plethora of modern children's entertainment products that feature anthropomorphic animals. The swelling adult fandom that has developed in response to the show suggests that it is not only children who are affected by the embedded messages in this program. Calling themselves 'Bronies,' these adult and predominantly male viewers of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (known as *MLP:FiM* or *FiM*

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in the fandom) have created a substantial interactive fanbase online and offline. In his book *The Animated Bestiary* Paul Wells (2009: 81) describes anthropomorphic animal animations as conduits for 'historicized, ideologically charged meanings', and this article endeavors to explore some of the meanings vested in *FiM* by Bronies by assessing the construction of 'geek' identity and masculinity within this fan community. In doing so, a contribution, albeit small and specific, will be made to the perennial self-reflexive question posed by Steve Baker (2001: 6): 'why is it that our ideas of the animal – perhaps more than any other set of ideas – are the ones which enable us to frame and express ideas about *human* identity?'

With the imagery of talking animals ubiquitous in societies East to West it is evident that humans utilize anthropomorphism to translate complex ideas about politics, society, and personhood. From Aesop's fables to Attenborough documentaries, animals have been consistently cast in didactic roles for family-friendly consumption. Recently, scholars have dedicated much attention to the corollary between consuming anthropomorphic animal narratives and personal meaning-making (Mitchell et al., 1992; Rothfels, 2002). While valuable work has been done on the way children respond to the anthropomorphization of animals in juvenile media (Anderson and Henderson, 2005; Cosslett, 2006), less attention has been paid to the impact of such texts on adult responders, and yet anthropomorphic animals clearly have an enduring effect on this demographic. When it comes to understanding the relationship between men and ponies in the Brony fandom, it will be seen that there is not a basic division of human and animal, nor the paradigmatic application of animal as metaphor or metonymy (Baker, 2001: 84–6) but a nuanced, subtle and at times subliminal conversation informed by the media-saturated 'geek' subculture.

This article looks at the majority of Bronies, those who identify as adolescent, male 'geeks' from western countries (*State of the Herd Report*, 2012). Geeks are typically characterized as enthusiasts of board games, videogames, the genres of science fiction and fantasy, cartoons, comics, *anime, manga*, computer programming, and the internet in general (McArthur, 2009: 62). 'Geek subculture' is practically synonymous with 'internet culture', a phrase that adds the social and creative elements of the web like forums, blogs, chat, online comics, and mash-ups on YouTube to the geek community. Lori Kendall outlines the pervasive archetype of the geek or 'nerd' as 'asocial and incompletely adult … sartorial disregard, bad hygiene and lack of social skills … a category of human partitioned off from the rest of humanity' (1999: 263). Kendall (1999: 264) adds that this identity is fraught with both notions of hyper-masculinity and subordinate masculinity. The former can be seen in the competitive nature of gaming, the privileging of knowledge and technical skill, and the tradition of 'trolling': harassing or teasing newcomers or non-conformists, while the latter is evident in the idea that geeks have no sexual prowess, are socially awkward, and physically weak. These are stereotypes that geeks intentionally and sardonically employ and play with, for example, perpetuating internet memes such as the 'socially awkward penguin' and 'forever alone guy'.[1]

Of course it would be overly simplistic to suggest that geek identity is a wholly accurate picture of the individuals who engage in this subculture; much of being a geek is as performative and manufactured as any other lifestyle. It will be demonstrated, however,

that the Brony community, through their consumption of 'girly' anthropomorphic animal media, engage in a playful re/construction of the largely masculine category of the geek. A brief discussion of anthropomorphic animals in geek subculture will provide some context, and a synopsis of the show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and basic explanation of its appeal will situate the discussion. The theoretical framework of anthropomorphic animals as conduits for meaning will then be analyzed to show that the candy-colored ponies of *FiM* are complex subcultural symbols, used by fans to explore concepts of identity, sincerity, and authenticity.

Anthropomorphic animals and their (sub)cultural significance

The anthropomorphic animal has long functioned as a useful metaphor for the human condition, allowing us to see a reflection of ourselves and yet place a convenient distance between us and the mirror by virtue of our fundamental human/animal difference. Simply put, animals are, as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963: 89) famously stated 'good to think' and so they are 'good to think about what it is to be properly human' (Franklin, 1999: 9). Paul Wells has analyzed animal animation through the lens of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's 'becoming-animal' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) to destabilize the categories of animal subject and human respondent. Wells describes this medium as 'a form that drew readily of the mythic, surreal, and sometime brutal excursions of the fairytale and animal literature to facilitate fluid, unusual, complex narratives that represented the new psychology of the modern age' (2009: 65). Indeed, anthropomorphic animals carry with them such a rich symbolic tradition that their meaning is, at all times, multi-layered.

One reason that children and adults alike adore anthropomorphic animals is that they typically feature in 'crossover' genres: texts, from fables to 3D films, that intentionally appeal to a broad age range. The comic, as a case in point, has had a long-running association with anthropomorphic animals since the earliest newspaper funnies. Adult graphic narratives, such as the sexually charged adventures of Robert Crumb's *Fritz the Cat* (1965–72), Reed Waller and Kate Worley's *'Omaha' the Cat Dancer* (1978–95) or Art Spiegelman's somber Holocaust analogy *Maus* (1972–91) have shown that anthropomorphic animals also have their place in tales with decidedly mature themes. Consequently, a space has opened up in subcultural circles (Furry Fandom being a pertinent example) for adults to create, collect, and appreciate anthropomorphic animal dramas; narratives that may have descended from the family-friendly 'funny animal', but which have been reinvented in gritty, drug-fuelled, and sexually explicit animalian underworlds.

Animation too has long been involved in the telling of animal tales, from the classic antics of Felix the Cat, Mickey Mouse, and Bugs Bunny, to the computer-generated adventures of zoo escapees or all-animal martial arts troupes in the latest DreamWorks venture. There is no doubt that Disney's iconic critters in particular have persistently held a place in the hearts of many adults. However, consuming fictional animals is a process not strictly related to visual or textual media. Animal toys, perhaps better understood as animal brands, are hugely popular with individuals of varied age all over the world. The silent but salient figure of Japanese company Sanrio's Hello Kitty is a

recognizable example of an anthropomorphic animal commodity, available for purchase in all corners of the globe. In Japan the kind of adorable anthropomorphic animal characters we regularly see marketed to children in the West are found on traffic signs, in instruction manuals, on food packaging, in advertising, and myriad other mundane manifestations. Brian McVeigh (1996) argues that these mascots embody the essential qualities of cuteness or *kawaii*, and by invoking affection are able to exert authority. Laura Miller (2010: 79–80) expands on the effects of this imagery:

> human-like animals not only attract the viewer to hold or caress them, but also reveal a wish to insert distance between us and some troubling aspects of human behavior…. [Z]oomorphic images deflect our focus away from age, gender and ethnicity, inviting us to see ourselves in them.

According to Sōichi Masubuchi (quoted in Yano, 2004: 57) the Japanese concept of *kawaii* is typically characterized by smallness, juvenility, innocence, and dependency, as well as physical components such as roundness, pastel shades, and animal qualities like ears and tails. In the cross-cultural exchange between Japan and North America, concepts of cute have been in translation for decades, and so a Japanese aesthetic is currently in vogue in the western world. While 'cute' may not culturally translate the same between the East and West, the visual signifiers are shared, illustrated by the fact that talking animals, often wide-eyed and 'funny', human-like but not quite human, are paragons of cuteness in the children's entertainment products of English-speaking countries.

So far, this discussion has looked at the broad cultural conceptions of anthropomorphic animals in mainstream entertainment media. Turning now to what Hiroki Azuma (2009) calls the 'subcultural database',[2] the ways in which anthropomorphic animals function as symbols in the geek community will be extrapolated. The narratives, correspondences, characters, and meanings that make up the subcultural database have been adopted from a variety of sources. For example, the notion that animal qualities are synonymous with cuteness is reinforced in *manga* and *anime* with *nekomimi* or 'catgirl' characters, juvenile girls depicted with feline cat ears and/or tails in an overt invocation of *kawaii* (Sharp, 2011). Anthropomorphic animal features, hence, carry subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995) due to their significance in subcultural media like comics or cartoons.

The currency held by anthropomorphic animals in the geek subculture is demonstrated by the viral spread of LOLcats.[3] LOLcats, for the uninitiated, are macro images comprising photos of domestic cats with an added caption in a kind of pidgin English, the cant designed to intimate an endearing sense of immaturity and helplessness, evoking the signifiers of *kawaii.* These captions, whether dialogic or expository, anthropomorphize the cats by giving them human emotions and motivations (Leigh, 2009: 137). LOLcats originated on the hugely influential imageboard 4chan, which is, not so incidentally, where the Brony fandom was also conceived. 4chan has an established tradition of Caturday, a weekly slot for sharing cat pictures (Brophy-Warren, 2008), as do many other social news websites integral to internet/geek culture.

LOLcats, one of the biggest memes to come out of 4chan, provide a germane example of how animal imagery is habitually used online.[4] This trend began ironically, when the image of a sweet little kitten posted to a thread filled with pornographic photographs,

gruesome content, and derisive conversation could achieve surprising shock value. This oxymoronic coupling of obscenity with cute may be the key to the popularity of animal images on the web, which are antithetical to the near overwhelming amount of sarcasm, mockery, and other antisocial attitudes present in many internet communities. This pattern of blurring irony and sincerity, the result being 'neo-sincerity,' is one we see played out in the consumption of *FiM* by adults. As one Brony confirms: '*My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* is a tonic in these somber times, an antidote to bad news and pessimism and gloom' (comments on Strike, 2011).

My Little Pony: the franchise, the *Friendship*

Since 1981, the American manufacturing giant Hasbro has been producing a line of plastic ponies that have evolved today into one of the most recognizable brands of toy animals. Originally called My Pretty Pony, these miniature steeds have been released and distributed internationally under the name My Little Pony from 1983 onwards, prompting several animated specials, three animated television series, and a copious amount of merchandise including bedding, clothing, stationery, and household products. The toys come in three main styles, Earth, Pegasus, and Unicorn, and in a number of personalities, each distinguished by the color of their coats, manes and tails, and their 'cutie mark', a unique birth-mark like picture displayed on their rear flank. Almost all the pony personalities developed by Hasbro have been female and their names (for example, 'Starlight', 'Peachy Pie', 'Gem Blossom') and color palettes (ranging from pastel to neon, but very rarely including grey, black, red or brown) bear the quintessential hallmarks of femininity. My Little Pony products have always, unmistakably, targeted the juvenile female market.

The ponies have been released in four distinct generations (Hayes, 2007, 2008, 2009). The style of animation changed noticeably over the years, and in 2009 the ponies were redesigned significantly to have more exaggerated heads, disproportionately slim legs, and wider eyes, drawing on a Japanese cartoon aesthetic. In 2010, the My Little Pony brand was reinvented yet again with Generation Four (G4). This most recent generation is based around Lauren Faust's reimagining of the My Little Pony television series with her own version, *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*.

FiM is screened alongside other recent animated remakes of classic 1980s children's commodities like *Strawberry Shortcake* and *G.I. Joe* on the children's channel Hub, co-owned by Hasbro. Hasbro have also turned their nostalgic products into blockbuster films (such as Michael Bay's rehashing of the Transformers franchise), and yet none of these adaptations have received the kind of elated response that Bronies have given to *FiM*. Faust, who has worked in creative roles on other successful children's cartoons, like *Powerpuff Girls* and *Foster's Home for Imaginary Friends*, rebooted the My Little Pony franchise with her lively adaptation, which has currently seen three seasons of 22-minute episodes, a flurry of associated merchandise, and a booming adult fanbase. Interestingly, many Bronies claim to be unfamiliar with previous My Little Pony incarnations and some even show disdain for the earlier versions, which suggests that nostalgia is not much of a factor in their dedication to *FiM*.

Friendship is Magic is set in the town of Ponyville in the land of Equestria, ruled over by the majestic 'allicorn' (a hybrid unicorn/pegasus) sisters Princess Celestia and Princess Luna. Attention to detail makes the fantastical land of Equestria immersive. Over time the audience attains a hyperdiegetic understanding of the pony world: we know that it includes geographical regions (for example, Manehattan, Fillydelphia, Cloudsdale) and has a founding history replete with ancestral myths. When the ponies need to use technology it often comes in an old-fashioned form: transport is provided by steam trains and ornate hot air balloons, photographs are taken with antique view cameras on tripods, writing is done with quills. Language is altered to create an equine vocabulary: the ponies use terms like 'everypony' instead of 'everyone' and 'hoofmade' instead of 'handmade'. Equestria seems to be a gyno-centric world, with very few male inhabitants. It is certainly pony-centric, as other animals, such as pets, pests, and native creatures, are all subsidiary to the horses, even those that appear intelligent and speak in English. The metanarrative of *FiM* is made all the more complete due to the total absence of humans. Unlike former animated versions of My Little Pony, humans are not acknowledged in *FiM*, which allows for the uninterrupted anthropomorphization of the ponies. Their daily lives, thoughts, hopes, and dreams are, more or less, human, but with no humans to be compared to, this appears perfectly natural.

The plot revolves around six characters, known in the fandom as the 'mane six.' Twilight Sparkle, an erudite unicorn dedicated to the study of magic, and her accomplice, a baby dragon named Spike, are the central characters in the first episode as they move to Ponyville from Canterlot. We soon discover that Twilight and her new filly friends represent the legendary Elements of Harmony, a powerful source of friendship magic that enables them to combat evil forces. Apple Jack, an earth pony, is a reliable and capable apple farmer with a Southern twang who represents the element of Honesty. Rainbow Dash, a feisty and competitive tomboy pegasus represents the element of Loyalty. Unicorn Rarity is an elegant fashionista, symbolizing the element of Generosity with her need to create and beautify. Fluttershy, a pegasus who is painfully timid yet endlessly compassionate, embodies the Element of Kindness. Pinkie Pie, ebullient, ditsy, and obsessed with throwing parties, personifies the Element of Laughter. Together with Twilight, who stands for the Element of Magic, these ponies use their special virtues to maintain harmony in Equestria by strengthening their friendship, overcoming daily challenges, and occasionally fighting off misguided monsters and villains.

Welcome to the herd: *Friendship is Magic* and the Brony community

Soon after *FiM* was first screened on Hub in 2010, it became a topic of conversation on the Comics & Cartoons (known as /co/) discussion board of 4chan, one of the internet's most notorious imageboards. It was here that *FiM*'s adult fanbase was born. 4chan is perhaps an unlikely juggernaut; it was founded by then-teenager Christopher Poole in 2003 as a place for English-speakers to talk about *manga* and *anime*. Since then, this website has become known for the brutally sardonic, lawless and tenacious community it has fostered, described by one visitor as 'a message-board whose lunatic, juvenile community is at once brilliant, ridiculous and alarming' (Michaels, 2008). 4chan is

noteworthy as a generator for memes (like LOLcats) and a hub for internet culture in general, therefore when *FiM* was brought to the attention of /co/ it was fed right into the bloodstream of the geek community. Between October 2010 when the show first aired and February 2011, the pony-related threads on /co/ went from around 200 daily posts to over 6000 a day (/co/ Pony Posts break the 6000 mark, 2011), causing the board's moderators to threaten to ban any users who posted pony images. Subsequently, a Ponychan board was founded, followed by a number of social networking and information sites for *FiM* fans such as Equestria Daily, Everypony's Network, Canterlot Community, and Brony Haven. The adult fans of *FiM* would come to call their collective 'the Herd,' a name that indicates the sense of solidarity that is so important to this fandom.

Since its conception, the Brony fandom has become infamous in the media and online for its prolific-ness. Praised by writers for *Wired* for 'bucking gender socialization' (Watercutter, 2011) and denigrated on Fox talk shows as a 'disturbing trend',[5] the Brony fandom has received a mixed response from critics. Even Adult Swim, a subsidiary channel of the Cartoon Network that screens mature cartoons for an adult audience, lists Bronies in a recent advertisement as one of a 'list of creepy weird things that scare us', along with Furries and 'the word "moist"'.[6] Inherent in these hostile reactions is an assumption that there is something sick, wrong, or 'creepy' about the way that Bronies subvert expectations surrounding gender, age, and the consumption of media.

There are many cartoons that draw viewership from a crossover audience. Some, like *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park*, despite their immature veneer, intentionally appeal to mature responders in their sexual, social, and political commentary.[7] Programs like *Spongebob Squarepants* and *The Powerpuff Girls* have enjoyed popularity with an adolescent demographic due to their quirky humor and unique graphic design. As one such fan of *SpongeBob* noted, 'the show is very hip in the way it is presented. There is irony and parody. It's very edgy. Because of the multilayered appeal … the audience is so diverse and captivated' (quoted in Rice, 2009: 1105).

However, *men* enjoying and relating to a show aimed at *girls*, as is the case with Bronies, has been presented by some parties as at best silly and perhaps even facetious, and at worst pathological. Eager to redress this imbalance, Angela Watercutter (2011) argues that '*My Little Pony* seems like an unlikely object of fanboy love', but 'their love of the show is internet neo-sincerity at its best'. 'New-' or 'neo-sincerity' is 'a dialectical move', as Warren Buckland explains; 'new sincerity incorporates postmodern irony and cynicism' (2012: 2). This paradoxical ethos flourishes in the geek subculture because, as Kendall has argued, irony affords young men a strategic device to express their heteronormative masculinity while retaining deniability: it provides an avenue for criticism veiled in a jocular tone (2008: 126). For example, the Herd invented the term 'Brony' by combining 'bro' (short for 'brother' in the amicable sense) with 'pony.'[8] The definition of a 'bro' from the internet's own Urban Dictionary is a derogatory description of an 'alpha male idiot'.[9] Combining this nomenclature with the effeminate realm of toy ponies contrasts the hyper-masculine with the 'girly' in an intentionally ironic way. The word, the identity, and the subculture of 'Brony' employs both irony and sincerity, making it a notable example of how neo-sincerity effects a sense of authenticity through play.

Fandoms are, as Henry Jenkins (1992: 3) asserts, 'participatory cultures' that are 'insistent on making meaning from materials others have characterized as trivial and

worthless'. Accordingly, Bronies tend to express their love of *FiM* by engaging actively with the text through geeky avenues. They design macro images (usually a screenshot of a pony, with a humorous caption), make fan art, write fan fiction, create their own Flash animations featuring the characters, and mash-up clips from the show with musical overlays (known as a PMV or 'Pony Music Video') or dialogue from videogames and cult films, even developing a 2D pony-themed combat computer game *Fighting is Magic*. Pony avatars are commonly adopted for social networking, and a range of both official and unofficial merchandise can be purchased and collected. Discussions and reviews ritually follow episodes after they are aired weekly. Bronies also participate in *FiM* fandom offline, with a presence at animation conventions, and gatherings of their own such as BroNYCon, held annually in New York. They have invented a lexicon of pony-related terms called 'Brony-speak,' for example, using 'pony' in place of 'person' as they do on the show, making catchphrases from the lines of dialogue, and inventing neologisms like 'bro-hoof,' the Brony equivalent of a congratulatory fist bump or high five. Taking the moral of the show to heart, the motto of the fandom is 'love and tolerance', touted to neutralize the negativity of detractors with a message of overpowering positivity.

Bronies tend to repeat a similar story of conversion: after watching one episode out of skeptical curiosity, they realize they are, to their surprise, hooked on *FiM*. As computer programmer Luke Allen recounts: 'First we can't believe this show is so good, then we can't believe we've become fans for life ... then we can't believe our friends haven't seen it yet, then we can't believe they're becoming Bronies too' (quoted in Watercutter, 2011). However, Bronies are not a homogeneous lot. In a survey completed by over 1000 Bronies, 87% of respondents identified as male, 53% were under the age of 20, with 41% between 20 and 30 years old; the majority hailed from the North America, with others from Europe, the UK and Australia (Edwards and Redden, n.d.). These statistics were confirmed by surveys performed by Bronies themselves, such as the *State of the Herd Report* (2012), collated from over 9000 submissions.

There are plenty of reasons to watch FiM, but many Bronies praise the show as a powerful affirmative force. One Brony testified (What draws YOU to FiM?, 2011):

> Over the past few months of watching this show, I swear my life has significantly improved and I've become more happy with things. It's a show that's made me forget my hardships in life and to embrace the friendships I have now.

Another stated (quoted in Watercutter, 2011):

> As a person with Asperger syndrome, I learned more about theory of mind, friendships and social interactions from this season than I had in the previous 31 years of life.

Others claimed that watching *FiM* helped them deal with clinical depression, social isolation and crippling anxiety issues (Harmon, 2011). Motivations can be complex, but the show has three basic drawcards for Bronies: the look, the humor, and the plot and character development. The Brony community itself is a crucial part of the attraction, as emphasized by this admission (comments to Watercutter, 2011, emphasis in the original):

> The technical aspects really are superb, yes.… I also cherish the innocence and good heart of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic.* The show *radiates* joy so much that I can't help but smile continuously while watching it.… All of that is amplified by the **ridiculously awesome** community. I love you Bronies!

The look

Lauren Faust has emphasized that *FiM* was about 'making quality entertainment for girls' by avoiding the conventional aesthetic which she describes as 'overly bright, garish, oversaturated and plagued with waaaaaaay too much pink' (Exclusive Season 1 retrospective interview with Lauren Faust, 2011). *FiM* is animated using Flash and employs bright block colors, thick outlines, and static backgrounds. As part of the ongoing cultural transmission between Japan and the West, we can see the influence of *manga* and *anime* in the show's art direction. The 2D quality of the animation makes subliminal reference to postmodern Japanese artist Takashi Murakami's 'superflat' movement, and the character design has clear *kawaii* elements. The G4 ponies' exaggerated head-to-body ratio and huge glossy eyes with dilated pupils mirror the ultra-infantile style of *chibi* ('super-deformed') or *moe* (young girl) characters.[11] Realism shines through in the attention to motion and the cleverly rendered facial expressions of the ponies, giving them a broad range of movements and emotions. These technical and artistic aspects are instantly noticeable and ingratiating to anyone involved in the geek subculture, where Flash animations and Japanese popular culture hold significant subcultural capital (Kendall, 2008; Paolilli et al., 2011).[12]

The aesthetics of the ponies are not only meaningful as subcultural signposts but also in the poignant effect their design has on adult viewers. Stephen Jay Gould commented in 1979 that the design of the iconic Mickey Mouse has been neotenized over time, making him increasingly cute and endearing. Gould argued that this demonstrated the biological principle that 'the abstract features of human childhood elicit powerful emotional responses in us, even when they occur in other animals' (1980: 104). As per Gould's theory, the babyish appearance of the *FiM* ponies can inspire an emotional attachment in viewers. Despite the fact that the mane six are approximately adolescent in age, their large heads and eyes, small jaws, and bulging craniums give them a distinctly juvenile look. Jeremy Duffy, who styles himself as the 'Geek Professor', claims that the 'protective instinct' is a major motivator for Bronies: 'Small, cute, cuddly, vulnerable. These are adjectives that describe each of the characters in the show at one point or another and they are also adjectives that trigger an instinctive adoration and protective response in males' (Duffy, 2012). Duffy's comment, though somewhat simplistic, reveals an important gendered duality in the relationship of Brony to pony, a power imbalance inherent in the *kawaii* nature of the fillies and the paternal attitudes of the fans.

The humor

Originally aimed at entertaining parents as well as children (Exclusive Season 1 retrospective interview with Lauren Faust, 2011), *FiM* prompts laughs through its clever use of bricolage, employing references from science fiction, fantasy, and popular culture.

This meta-humor has become particularly evident in the second season, suggesting a tailoring to the geek demographic. As one commentator notes, the list of monsters the ponies encounter (including hydras, dragons, gryphons and manticores) 'reads as a page ripped from the *Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manual*' (Morgan, 2011). The two-part opening episodes of season two introduced the chimerical villain Discord, voiced by John de Lancie, famous for his depiction of the equally sardonic and mischievous character Q from *Star Trek*. Discord unleashes chaos in Ponyville, including downpours of chocolate rain (a reference to a viral YouTube video 'Chocolate Rain' by Tay Zonday, popularized by 4chan). After the mane six use the Elements of Harmony to defeat Discord they receive honors from Princess Celestia in a scene that directly mimics the final sequence from *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Pony versions of the characters Donny, Walter and The Dude from the cult film *The Big Lebowski* all make cameo appearances. Further nods to their adult viewers can be seen in *FiM's* advertisements: one of their billboards sends up the 1982 film *Poltergeist*, another, the R-rated 2011 comedy *Bridesmaids*. All of these in-jokes contribute to *FiM*'s level of 'geek cred'.

The plot and characters

FiM is funny while remaining drama-oriented, with the plot focusing on the ups and downs of friendship and the development of personal identity. Bronies have heaped praise on *FiM* for the conceptually rich characters, construed by the clever scripts, skilled voice actors, and emotive animation. The show investigates the depths of the mane six by demonstrating their weaknesses as well as celebrating their strengths, allowing them to become more than just simplistic female archetypes. For example, Twilight Sparkle, frequently described in the fandom as 'adorkable,' struggles with being a high achiever. In a desperate attempt to complete her studies on time in *Lesson Zero*, Twilight spirals into a manic episode complete with bouts of irrational behavior, teeth grinding, and facial tics. Fluttershy, considered the cutest of the ponies, is incredibly timid and has low self-esteem. Many episodes showcase her debilitating anxiety, and how, though it negatively effects her social interactions, she is aided by the support of her close friends. Rainbow Dash, a brash pegasus, is yet again very complex: her supposedly blasé attitude masks her ultra-competitive drive, which can either lead to zealousness or a shattered ego.

The detail with which the ponies' personalities are divulged has led Bronies to identify with specific characters. One fan states: 'I've practically fallen in love with Twilight… While it's to a lesser extent, she's socially awkward as well and to see her grow and make friends, it makes me happy' (What draws YOU to FiM?, 2012). Others appreciate the frank depiction of Fluttershy's anxieties, Rainbow's competitiveness, or Pinkie's zany sense of humor, seeing something of their selves in these characters, despite the difference of sex and species. The relatable protagonists clearly contribute to *FiM*'s broad appeal: 'It presents characters with real and unique personalities, and it confronts real conflict and real consequence, while remaining light-hearted and fun. It isn't for girls or children, it's for everyone' (Miller, 2011). Certainly, many of the adult male geeks who watch it find that *FiM* speaks to them in a meaningful way and promotes the idea of authenticity. The neo-sincerity of the Brony community is evidence for a drive towards

the reification of an authentic and reflexive selfhood, articulated through the discourse and behaviors native to the geek subculture.

What of ponies?

While an interesting dialogue on masculinity, community, and geek identity is evidently emerging from the Brony fandom, analyzing the significance of this group as one centered on anthropomorphic animal media is a more subtle task. Acknowledgment of the dynamic between the anthropomorphization of horses in *FiM* and the emotional response elicited from adult viewers is scarce in the Brony community. Nonetheless, the Brony phenomenon represents a fascinating nexus point between the consumption of animals in mainstream media, the subcultural significance of anthropomorphization, and the brokering of authentic human identity in response to this stimulus. After considering Bronies, their attachment to *FiM*, and the fandom in its context, some conclusions about the significance of ponies in this story can be drawn.

Digging into the subcultural database, we have seen that this generation of ponies embody the aesthetic of Japanese popular culture, which carries its own charisma and capital. Their *kawaii* qualities place the ponies at an ideal, if not uncanny, juncture between *moe*, vulnerable, cute little girls, and non-human animals, making their anthropomorphization an important part of their appeal. This is of particular significance in one aspect of the Brony fandom that has gone unspoken of in this article, and that is the erotic facet of the subculture.

Cartoonists like Crumb, Worley, and Waller and groups like the Furry Fandom have done much to further the sexualization of anthropomorphic animals, evidence of which is easily found online. Subsequently, in combination with their *kawaii* characteristics, the anthropomorphic animals of *FiM* have inherited various gendered, sexual, and submissive associations. 'Shipping' (imagined romantic entanglements between characters) and 'clop-fic' (erotic narratives) are two common genres in the fan fiction of the Brony community. When it comes to the latter, which is always explicit and occasionally violent, sadistic, and featuring non-consensual sex, it could be argued that this would be more suppressed by the community if the characters at hand were seen as cute, vulnerable, *human* females, instead of ponies. Instead, such stories are made readily available by the most popular of Brony websites like Equestria Daily. While fan-made erotic art and fiction starring under-age characters is in no way uncommon on the internet (and these forms in fact proliferate on sites like 4chan), the Brony community is arguably absolved of criticisms about immorality or obscenity by virtue of this species difference. However, this species difference is again compromised by the anthropomorphism of the animals.

Fundamentally, *FiM* and its fandom are anthropocentric in their outlook. While the ponies are integral to the Bronies' emotional investment in the show, this relationship says little about the relationship of humans to horses, except perhaps the obvious problems with the dichotomy of horses for boys, ponies for girls. It is more an affinity between humans and human-like animals, not non-human animals, that the Brony fandom represents. Many Bronies have confirmed that they are not 'horse people', for example, one says, 'I honestly never liked horses or ponies, and I still don't. These ponies don't really look like their real counterparts at all, which is probably why I like the show so much'(Do

you like equines IRL?, 2011). A more derisive comment about horses was heartily commended by numerous Bronies (Do you even like real-life ponies and horses?, 2011):

> I used to work with horses, and I fucking hate them. They stink and they literally shit every second of every day… I adore *MLP* with all my heart, but every once in a while I can't help but imagine the ponies just shitting everywhere and Equestria just being this filthy stinking cesspool…

Although the show stars horses and employs horse-related paraphernalia to create an immersive environment, it does not aim to be a true representation of the horse experience, and nor do its fans want it that way.

The personification of the ponies in *FiM* allows viewers to identify with their flaws, strengths, challenges, and achievements. Their anthropomorphization enables much of the humor to work, the look to achieve its high level of cuteness, and the fantasy land to be conceptualized effectively without the interruption of human characters and the explicit social hierarchy that would ensue. When asked whether they would like the show if it featured humans instead of ponies, many fans answered in the negative. One respondent succinctly summed up the feedback: 'Ponies are cute as hell, humans are boring and rubbish' (Would you watch FiM if it wasn't ponies?, 2011). Adrian Franklin has proposed that a general sense of dualistic misanthropy that sees humans as bad and treacherous and animals as peaceful and good has been generated by the pro-animal pathos of films like *Bambi* (1999: 54–5). This sentiment is echoed here, although it is ostensibly the lived experience of the respondents, rather than the romanticization of man as predator/animal as prey, that drives a wedge between the worlds of human and animal. Yet, what Franklin shrewdly points out is that any such division casts animals not as true animals at all, but interprets 'animals as better sorts of people than people' (1999: 55).

The ponies, and the mane six especially, are the 'people' of the My Little Pony universe, but it is likely that the degree of separation created by the fact that they are not 'human people,' but what Miller (2010: 79) calls 'human-like animals' bestows upon them a certain otherness. These non-human but human-like animals strike the perfect balance: they are not mundane, but they are also not realistic. Instead they are funny, fantastic, and yet, for the fans, relatable to. Miller (2010: 79) states that therianthropic, quasi-human figures release us from our 'webs of association,' our human confines, and enable a self-reflexive experience free from the strictures of gender, age, race, and, presumably, species. In summary, as anthropomorphic animals, the ponies provide both escapism from, and a reflection of, the humanity of the viewer.

But what does the consumption of ponies say about the men who love them? The geek subculture that harbors Brony fandom exhibits certain heteronormative attitudes. Perhaps, after decades of disenfranchisement, of being subject to stereotyping and disparagement at the bottom of the social pecking order, geeks see a need for the promotion of a formidable, irreverent, and essentialist masculine identity. Yet, as Ron Eglash says, the geek community mediates personal identities 'in ways that both maintain normative boundaries of power and offer sites for intervention' (2002: 49). To draw on Eglash's point, through the tropes of irony, pastiche, and remixing elements from the subcultural

database, geeks have subverted their typical 'white, male nerd' image. From the creation of the sardonic neologism 'Brony' to the conspicuous consumption of My Little Pony merchandise, the flamboyant display of pony-related avatars, images, and emoticons on social networks, and the espousal of the principles of love and tolerance, the Brony community has embraced an identity that transgresses the stereotypical cynicism, hegemonic masculinity, and belligerence that tends to represent internet interactions. It can be seen that the ethos of neo-sincerity, the responding to cynicism with both irony and candor, orients Bronies and enables them to engage with this text as a form of personal meaning-making.

Bronies have expressly stated that *FiM* brings to its male audience a much needed opportunity to lose themselves in a de-masculinized fantasy world (Strike, 2011):

> *FiM* has appeal to adult males for many reasons, but one I think is inescapable: this series has an unapologetic, infectious joy to it that reaches all audiences while condescending to none. In Western society, men are allowed only emotions of competition, aggression, and dominance; anything else is mocked as weak or effeminate. Joy, however, should NOT be linked to gender; it is a human right. *MLP: FIM* is a show which allows men to experience the simple-but-profound emotion of joy in a world that actively tries to deny them this feeling.

Indeed, *FiM* has proved to be a powerful force in overturning normative expectations of what certain markets want to see in their entertainment. The makers of *FiM* have been wise to respond positively to their unexpected fanbase by considering this demographic in their advertising, allowing fans to upload episodes to YouTube without enforcing copyright limitations, and even engaging directly with Bronies through extensive interviews. With such a supportive response from the creative team, coupled with the encouraging and highly participatory fan community, it is not surprising that Bronies feel compelled to express their personal feelings about *FiM* so freely.

To bring together the effect of ponies on men and ideas of human identity, it is worth refuting some blanket statements heaped on animal-centered media. It has already been said the ponies of *FiM* do not represent real ponies, and so their construction and consumption do not reveal anything particularly deep about human understandings of equine nature. However, this is not to say, as John Simons does, that the role of the animal is 'irrelevant'. Simons feels that animal fables have 'little to offer and can teach us nothing about the deeper relationships between the human and the non-human' (2002: 119). Yet, as we have seen from the analytical minds of other scholars, as soon as animals become mediated through anthropomorphism, they take on an extensive range of meanings for their human creators and responders. Indeed, representing animals is a process intrinsically connected to representing humans. When these animals are human-like, the symbolism is all the more rich and relationships between the human and the non-human become very revealing. As such, Bronies, adolescent men, and denizens of the geek subculture have found in multi-colored, feminine, non-human characters an opportunity to explore notions of gender, human-ness, community, joy, love, tolerance, and authenticity, a practice that both reinforces and deconstructs stereotypical ideas surrounding, geeks, men, and ponies.

Conclusions

FiM is just one of many children's products avidly followed by an adult audience, but the Brony fandom in its abundance, activity, and (neo-)sincere community is a notable phenomenon. It is unlikely that *FiM* would have achieved the heights of fandom that it has seen in the Brony community were it not such a 'perfect storm' (Watercutter, 2011) of stylish animation and geeky wit, which create a dialogue between creators and viewers. The ponies themselves invoke archetypal qualities that have vested meanings in subcultural circles. Their *kawaii* design, for example, conjures notions of dependency, femininity, gentleness, and, essentially, cuteness that inspires a sense of protectiveness and endearment. Finally, Bronies, through their identification with the ponies of *FiM* and their sentimental engagement with the show and with each other, have found a way to subvert negative and normative aspects of the geek stereotype and embrace an identity that celebrates joy, tolerance, and love.

This article posits that the anthropomorphic animals at the center of this medium are more responsible for this popularity boom than even Bronies themselves may realize. Chuck Jones, one the trail-blazing animators for Warner Bros., succinctly summarizes the appeal of anthropomorphic animal characters when he says 'it is easier to humanize animals than it is to humanize humans. We are far too close to other human beings; we are surrounded by human beings; we are subconsciously and consciously critical of other human beings' (1999: 227). For Bronies, the ponies of *FiM* in their quasi-humanized configuration, provide both liberation from and insight into the nature of being human and human identity. It is surely significant that an avenue for personal meaning-making has presented itself in the form of a whimsical pony-themed cartoon aimed at the junior female market.

This researcher has found that the most liberated, honest and self-reflexive admissions by Bronies about *FiM* are offered as comments on articles or opinion pieces about the program, rather than solicited from forum conversations. This is, in itself, testament to the enthusiastic and genuine attachment that Bronies have to *FiM* and their active participation in the fandom. Bronies may have been drawn to *FiM* for its technical and aesthetic features, its wit, and the enjoyable plot and characters, but the canny combination of its subcultural qualities and the value of non-human but human-like role models or avatars speaks intimately to a group of individuals typically bound up in anonymous internet networks. The ponies provide an avenue for authentic self-expression and reification within the bosom of a community that supports and shares these goals. Bronies are not just among fellow fans, men, and geeks, but individuals turning to anthropomorphic animal media to seek an authentic experience of selfhood.

Notes

1. See entries on the meme database Know Your Meme: http://knowyourmeme.com/
2. Azuma introduces this term in his discussion of *otaku*, that is Japanese geeks or geeks with a specialized interest in Japanese subcultural media. However, his term extends just as well to western geeks.
3. LOL is an acronym for 'laugh out loud'. See: http://icanhascheezburger.com/

4. Similar macros that use animal images to impart either serious or satirical advice, broadly categorized as 'Advice Animals', are also hugely popular.
5. See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fqEDIFfy4Yg
6. See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsaNf32pKx4
7. Scholars have shrewdly analyzed the relevant gender politics within and surrounding these much-loved cartoons. For example, see Judith Kegan Gardiner (2005).
8. While 'pegasisters' is sometimes used for female fans of *FiM*, 'Brony' can refer to either a male or female fan.
9. See: http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bro
10. See: http://broniepologist.deviantart.com/#/d4f95jq
11. *Chibi*, often translated as 'super-deformed', is a Japanese style of drawing that depicts the character as dwarfish, with diminutive, pudgy limbs and a comically oversized head. *Moe* is a stylistic genre of 'little girl' comics or cartoons.
12. Kendall has argued for an interesting correlation between amateur Flash animations and the exploration of identity in geek culture, arguing that this medium effects multi-layered messages and interpretations that enable a renegotiation of masculinity. This suggests that Flash animations are not just a medium of choice among geeks for technical reasons, but also because of this pertinent homosocial purpose.

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