

“Little girls and the things that they love”:

***My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, Audience, Identity, and the Privilege of Contemporary Fan Culture**

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Abstract: The recent generation of *My Little Pony* has received popular and academic attention due to its visible following of young male enthusiasts. This article explores the so-called Brony phenomenon in terms of gender and age, cult spectator practices, fandom, masculinities, and the kinds of participatory culture with which the new series is associated. Despite the apparent transgression of men enjoying a television show clearly coded as being for young girls, the article argues that Brony practices reproduce many male-centered aspects of fan media consumption in a manner that recuperates the femininity of the brand according to masculine values and cultures. The femininity of the thirty-year-old series is placed in historical and theoretical context, illustrating parallels between current and earlier incarnations of the franchise and its continuities with other women-centered popular media. Particularly significant here is the program’s emphasis on female friendship. Yet such “gynocentric” qualities and the series’ affinity with young viewers might have been eroded in recent episodes. This is partly through the incorporation of more masculine genres, but also in the increasing address of the show to its online fandom, an audience employing channels of expression from which young people are effectively excluded. These developments function to marginalize the series’ core audience—“little girls”—in a process of appropriation and redefinition that ultimately serves the interests of a more visible and powerful demographic.

Keywords: Brony, fandom, male privilege, *My Little Pony*

Introduction

At the 2012 BronyCon, a convention for adult and adolescent male fans of the animated series *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* (*MLPFIM*, syndicated, 2010–), showrunner Lauren Faust addressed a cheering crowd in a heartfelt expression of gratitude. As she accepted a framed image of herself, depicted as a redheaded pony, a visibly moved Faust said to her fans, “Thank you for showing the world that little girls and the things they love are important.” Faust’s statement, which is featured in the documentary *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (dir. Laurent Malaquais, US, 2012), has significant political resonance, suggesting the struggle for ownership over popular culture and the power dynamics inherent in practices of taste-making and consumption. Furthermore, it represents an explicit statement of authorial intent concerning the series’ primary audience: little girls. The reason for Faust’s public declaration, the necessity for claiming the series as part of the

culture of young women, as well as the existence of the documentary in which it appears, needs to be understood in the context of the emergence of a newly visible fan subculture. The thirty-year-old franchise's 2010 relaunch with *MLPFIM*, the fourth generation of the Hasbro toy line, received more attention than usual due in part to the high number of adult and adolescent male fans of the new television series. The phenomenon of the "Brony," the popular term given to "young adult men who declare their sincere love for [*MLPFIM*] and identification with its almost entirely female cast of characters," has been subject to significant debate, much of which has been somewhat derogatory toward male fans.¹ Venetia Laura Delano Robertson, in one of several academic papers on the subject, observes the hostile responses that the Brony fandom has attracted, underpinned by the belief that there is "something sick, wrong, or 'creepy' about the way that Bronies subvert expectations surrounding gender, age, and the consumption of media." Bronies are considered at best "silly" or "facetious" and at worst "pathological."² Responding to this negative attention, blogger Jed A. Blue defends the fandom from accusations of sexual perversity and arrested development. In a similar manner as the aforementioned documentary, Blue points to the creativity and friendliness of the fan community.³ Other media commentaries also offer positive perspectives on this fandom in which Bronies are seen as representing "a move toward a more progressive understanding of gender and a dissolution of gendered taste hierarchies."⁴

In a piece exploring the blurred boundaries of authorship and legitimacy reflected in the fandom of *MLPFIM*, Derek Johnson emphasizes the extent to which the Brony is a product of discourse. The author suggests that a degree of mythologizing surrounds both the narrative in which the series' audience is positioned and the meanings that it is made to bear. Popular lore on websites and journalistic publications tends to obscure the "complex motivations, social networks, and patterns of interaction" through which the fan phenomenon

emerged.⁵ Nevertheless, as Johnson argues, the ways in which the Brony is imagined provide insights into issues of fandom, audience, animation, and participatory culture. A recent episode of *Bob's Burgers* (Fox, 2011–), an animated series about a working-class family of five running a fast food restaurant, serves as an example of how the discourses surrounding *MLPFIM* fans have been taken up in popular culture more broadly. In “The Equestronauts,” the oldest daughter, Tina, an adolescent fan of an animated show about superhero horses, visits a local convention with her mother and siblings.⁶ Once there, she is surprised to discover that the majority of convention-goers are adult men dressed in horse costumes who are referred to as “Equesticles,” from whom she initially feels alienated. The highest-ranking member of the clique subsequently tricks Tina into trading her beloved childhood toy, an extremely rare and highly sought-after collectable, for a newer model. The episode is a largely affectionate parody of Brony culture, likely aware of its audience’s sympathy for adult viewers of animated television shows. It nevertheless reflects on the unequal power relations inherent in the adult male appropriation of a series intended for a marginalized and much-maligned younger female audience. While Faust’s comments praise the Brony community for legitimating the tastes of its core audience—girls—this latter example is more critical of the phenomena. It depicts an adult male exploiting his cultural and economic capital to trick a young girl, whose legitimate fandom includes extensive knowledge of the franchise, the production of zombie-crossover fiction, complex fan theories, and a nostalgic childhood relation with *The Equestronauts* series. After learning about the Equesticle-dominated convention from a customer, Tina’s father, Bob, exclaims, “Oh god, poor Tina.” The customer responds, “I know, right? Why do men have to ruin everything?” “I don’t know,” Bob replies, resignedly, “but we kind’a do.”

At this point, it is appropriate to announce my own investment in the *My Little Pony* franchise. I enjoy the television series and have purchased various official and unofficial

items of *MLPFIM* clothing that display my affection for the show. I own several show-accurate toy ponies and have attended conventions dedicated to its fandom. In subjecting the Brony to analysis, I am not reiterating what fan studies scholar Matt Hills identifies as “the ideology of the nonplaced, free-floating academic who is assumed to stand outside social affiliations and contexts . . . representing a near mystical tertium.” Rather, I adopt “a reflexive approach to [my own] aesthetic judgements as hermeneutic constructions of self-identity.”⁷ This involves taking a critical perspective on the pleasures I get from the series as well as acknowledging the yet-to-be-resolved tensions between my role as a fan and my position as an academic publishing scholarly papers on this subject. It also entails a skepticism concerning the celebratory argument that the Brony phenomenon constitutes a radical transformation of masculinity, alongside a rejection of claims that Bronies are creepy, immature, or sexually perverse. In many ways, the practices of male *MLPFIM* fandom reproduce tropes of traditional masculinity, expressing privilege and entitlement in claiming a culture so clearly coded as not one’s own. While Faust emphasizes Bronies’ validation of girls’ media, I must admit to appreciating the alternative image of the Equesticles offered in *Bob’s Burgers*, a group that alienates a young woman from her own fandom, takes something that she loves, and gives little of value in return. Moreover, as *MLPFIM*, no longer under Faust’s stewardship, increasingly acknowledges and accommodates its adult audience, I suspect, along with Bob and his customer, that men may be spoiling something that would have been better left alone.

***MLPFIM*, Cult Fandom, and Brony Heterodox Heteromasculinities**

Adult fandom of *My Little Pony* is nothing new. The series has a long-running, largely female following consisting of those who have grown up with the franchise, run and attended regular conventions and events, and produced art and craft works inspired by the brand. The presence of the series throughout the decades and across different regions attests to its popularity

among scores of young children who have owned the toys, worn *My Little Pony*-themed clothing, watched related screen material, discussed the franchise with their peers, and used *My Little Pony* as the basis for their own creativity. What distinguishes and defines the Brony phenomenon is the fan base's masculinity, its age, and its visibility. Claire Burdfield, drawing on audience studies, defines the male followers of *MLPFIM* as an "accidental audience," a viewership that represents "not a part of the *predicted audience* and differs significantly from them demographically."⁸ While such audiences may have existed before and involved isolated adult enjoyment of media aimed at children, Burdfield emphasizes that new media technologies and fan practices now allow such audiences to be visible to the culture industries. There is little indication that the initial production of the show intended to attract adult male attention. In this respect, *MLPFIM* represents a cult television show, although the application of this term requires some qualification. Cult television, as discussed by Catherine Johnson, has recently become associated with style-driven "quality" media that is marketed to niche audiences and is designed to attract loyal viewers characterized by their cultural and economic capital.⁹ There is a degree of intentionality behind the dedicated following generated by programs like *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–91), *The X Files* (Fox, 1993–2002; 2016–), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB, 1997–2001; UPN, 2001–3), and *Lost* (ABC, 2004–10) that is at odds with *MLPFIM*'s accidental audience. The "cult" of *MLPFIM* more resembles the practices circulating cult cinema, films that are enthusiastically embraced by subcultural audiences in a manner that was not intended or predicted by their producers, which to many outsiders represents a level of adoration at odds with the qualities of the films themselves. Indeed, the Brony phenomenon, I argue, can be understood as a reaction to the increased mainstreaming of television fantasy, previously associated with marginal tastes, and television networks' active construction of fan audiences through such broadcasting strategies.

Situating *MLPFIM* fandom in relation to cult film consumption helps contextualize the gender dimensions of Brony activities. As numerous academics have noted, fan practices, as applied to cult cinema, frequently resonate with traditional masculine cultures. Joanne Hollows observes the degree to which midnight movie screenings' associations with porn cinemas and nocturnal journeys to seedy city districts, both actual and mythologized, privilege the male cinemagoer.¹⁰ Cult video retailers and mail-order distributors work to counter the feminizing associations of television as a domestic medium through their dark aesthetics, fringe urban locations, and continued proximity to soft- and hardcore pornography. Many of these observations seem inappropriate for considering a show like *MLPFIM* that is so clearly coded as feminine in its characters, narrative, and aesthetic. Yet Hollows's assessment avoids focusing on the content of cult films (many of which can be considered textually transgressive) in favor of the "discursive surround" of such cinema and practices of cult film fandom and fan scholarship. For Hollows, these fan activities "privilege masculine competencies and dispositions."¹¹ Male fan revulsion at feminine cultural texts and practices within cult film-going are explored in I. Q. Hunter's painfully frank and self-reflexive account of his own responses to the film *Mamma Mia!* (dir. Phyllida Lloyd, US, 2008). As a self-confessed "cinophile," "academic," "middle-aged straight white man," and "fan-boy" whose cult tastes come in the form of traditional fare like *A Clockwork Orange* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, US and UK, 1971) and *Fight Club* (dir. David Fincher, US, 1999), Hunter writes of his own "basic and discreditable repulsion—a male dismissal of something made for and by women and loved by teenage girls, their mothers and grandmothers," an "instinctive loathing" that "smacked of knee-jerk sexism and ageism, an offhand refusal not only of misconceived chick flicks but of women's taste itself."¹² Blue's chapter dedicated to experiences of women within the contemporary *My Little Pony* fan community indicates such a cult film fan disposition to be present even within Brony subcultures. While many women

consider this fan community to be safe and welcoming, others describe its online environment as prohibitively male-centered and hostile toward female fandoms. The contribution of women is frequently overlooked, underrepresented, or assumed to be the work of men, with female fans' input restricted to cosplay and voice acting. Notably, one respondent to Blue's survey of female fans describes the dismissive comments she received concerning her preference for early generations of *My Little Pony*, being told: "Go back to the 80s dolls and brush their hair."¹³ Such remarks suggest open hostility toward earlier, more toy-centered versions of the franchise and its associations with young girls' bedroom culture.

Countering assumptions that *MLPFIM* appreciation represents a radical transformative experience for male fans, Mikko Hautakangas argues that the subculture serves to rework masculinity, not to discard it. In other words, for Hautakangas, "one becomes a Brony, *despite* the fact that it is a deviation from the gender norms," rather than as a means of challenging them.¹⁴ Johnson argues along similar lines that this fan phenomenon reproduces a range of adult heteromale discourses. Like Hautakangas, Johnson highlights how the emphasis on *MLPFIM* fans as adult, male, and straight functions to eclipse women, children, and queer audiences, while the focus on fans' online production further serves to assimilate participatory activities surrounding the "hyper-feminized" franchise into "dominant spheres of masculinized value and legitimacy."¹⁵ Resonating with Hollows's point concerning the masculinity of cult film-going academics, as well as that of cult film audiences, Bethan Jones points out that while male *MLPFIM* fans have been subject to significant attention, there is practically no academic writing on female audiences or on the pre-Brony franchise itself.¹⁶ Nevertheless, there continues to be an active fandom for the series that has been hosting and attending conventions for over a decade, one that is largely female-driven. This thirty-year-old community is notably more focused on the franchise's

history and its material culture—including toys and merchandise as well as fan-produced works—and it is often connected with childhood biographies. While the visibility of *MLPFIM* has redefined *My Little Pony* as a television-based entity, previously the franchise had a relatively slight screen presence. As Christopher Bell details, following a theatrical feature film and two television series in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, there had been little *My Little Pony* media until the 2010 reboot.¹⁷ True to the roots of the series in children's toys, the original female fandom remains largely centered on collecting, restoring, and customizing ponies and on craft-based fan culture. While such activities are not absent from Brony fandom, male fans tend to place emphasis more on the production of screen culture, animation, and music, circulated virtually via the Internet. Much of this recontextualizes *MLPFIM* characters within more adult or masculine-coded genres and media, such as horror, science fiction, and war films, TV programs, and video games. Indeed, Bell cites one fan who defensively presents a case for the fandom's independence, suggesting it is possible to enjoy *My Little Pony* participatory culture without necessarily watching the series at all.¹⁸ Consequently, as Johnson argues, Brony fandom functions not so much to celebrate the show's perceived femininity and juvenility as to recuperate the series in accordance with traditionally masculine formations of art and culture.¹⁹

In this respect, the Brony represents an example of “heterodox hetero-masculinities,” a term introduced by Chris Beasley and used to suggest “that which is at variance with, or that which differs or departs from the accepted, the standard, the status quo, the orthodox, without necessarily being its opposite.” Heterodoxy implies a shift from normativity without necessarily representing a model that is contrary, transgressive, or even profoundly different.²⁰ Consistent with Beasley's intervention, Bronies frequently protest that their viewing preference is not indicative of queer sexual identities, nor does it compromise their relation to traditional masculinity. Enjoying television material intended for young girls

might represent a form of nonconforming heteromascularity based on the genuine appreciation of a show narratively and aesthetically determined as feminine. Such actions contrast with the subordination of women and female cultures that performances of traditional masculinities entail. The extent of the challenge posed by the Brony fandom, and the degree to which its associated structures and practices recuperate and reinforce established masculine identities, is, however, a matter of some debate. There are notable precedents where men have appropriated traditionally women-centered activities, such as cooking, transforming them in a manner that marginalizes and alienates female producers and consumers. Bronies' activities are not entirely at odds with other forms of male spectatorship such as animation connoisseurship. Blue considers the significance of *anime* among self-identified Bronies, especially *shoujo*, a genre that features female central characters and emphasizes personal relationships and emotional growth. The popularization of such shows, Blue argues, has primed male audiences for watching cartoons containing a combination of cuteness and action that are aimed at girls.²¹ In contrast, Robertson, who makes some significant points concerning the presence of anthropomorphic animals in geek subculture, is more critical of this connection. Robertson suggests that the childlike feminine associations of *MLPFIM*'s Japanese-inspired aesthetics, and the protectiveness these qualities are seen to evoke in male fans, reveals "an important gendered duality in the relationship of Brony to pony, a power imbalance inherent in the *kawaii* [cute] nature of the fillies and the paternal attitudes of the fans."²² Moreover, the appropriation of a show clearly designed for another significantly subordinated audience represents a privileged act very much associated with those who can claim a dominant identity. The heterodox paradigm is therefore useful in describing seemingly queer activities—Brony fan practices and community building—that simultaneously appear devoid of radicalism. Consequently, this phenomenon's political ramifications are "decidedly less than 'straight' forward."²³

Friendship Is Magic

The controversy concerning Bronies' enjoyment of *MLPFIM* is founded on the series' status as part of women's and, specifically, girls' culture. As Robertson makes clear, throughout its incarnations *My Little Pony* has "always, unmistakably, targeted the juvenile female market."²⁴ Johnson likewise observes the extent to which the series has been discursively "overdetermined by its . . . gendered excesses."²⁵ Putting such claims in historical perspective, Ellen Seiter discusses the earlier *My Little Pony* series, *My Little Pony 'n Friends* (syndicated, 1986–87), which she considers to be "unmistakably coded as feminine."²⁶ In many respects, the franchise draws on the qualities that Annette Kuhn identifies in cultures surrounding the soap opera, melodrama, and women's picture. Associating a genre, mode, or cycle with female consumers, tastes, or sensibilities is clearly problematic, as indicated in Kuhn's employment of scare quotes when using the descriptor "'gynocentric'" to express antipathy toward media marketed at, but also genuinely enjoyed by, female audiences. The questions of whether such viewers are simply addressed or actively constructed by these texts, and whether the images of femininity they depict are conducive to a feminist agenda, are central for Kuhn. The author critiques psychoanalytically informed theories of spectatorship, claiming they have a tendency to produce a universal and ahistorical model of media consumers. Instead, she argues for the importance of situating texts and their modes of consumption in social, historical, and institutional contexts.²⁷ *My Little Pony* is a franchise that undoubtedly bears textual and cultural connections with the screen media Kuhn considers in its focus on female characters, its reproduction of certain stereotypes of femininity, and its marketing to young women. In the context of media for children, Seiter makes an argument for the progressive nature of the earlier series, *My Little Pony 'n Friends*. Comparing the criticism *My Little Pony* faces to attacks on other kinds of women's culture that are described as "dopey," "contrived," and "schmaltzy," Seiter emphasizes that the franchise's historical

significance lies in its challenge to dominant institutions of children's screen entertainment whereby young girls are expected to identify with male characters and masculine narratives.²⁸ In this respect, *My Little Pony* is positive in its gynocentricity. As Seiter elaborates, "*My Little Pony* plays its childlike and female orientation totally straight: no attempt is made to appeal to a broader audience."²⁹

There are many notable narrative and thematic continuities between *My Little Pony 'n Friends* and *MLPFIM*, and episodes of the recent series parallel the female-centered nature of the original. For instance, in "Magical Mystery Cure," the characters are placed "in altered states induced by changes in body chemistry" when a spell causes them to exchange identities.³⁰ "A Canterlot Wedding: Part 2" culminates in a battle with a changeling army assuming the uncanny appearance of the six main characters, representing the "substitution of a mechanical double," a theme humorously revisited in "Too Many Pinkie Pies."³¹ In "Dragonshty", the ponies are motivated to act as a team by "the threat of toxicity and the turning of a homeland into a wasteland" when a sleeping dragon pollutes the sky with smoke.³² In Ponyville, rainbows are manufactured in the sky city of Cloudsdale, constituting the depiction of "natural forces in the form of the industrial factory," while seasonal changes in weather are the consequence of coordinated pony intervention in "Winter Wrap Up" and "Fall Weather Friends."³³ There are countless musical numbers in which characters express their emotions in the manner of the Disney or Hollywood musical. Villainous characters such as Nightmare Moon, Discord, and Starlight Glimmer are shamed into "admitting error and showing remorse," resulting in "rehabilitation, reform, and reintegration into a community."³⁴ "Putting Your Hoof Down" follows the plot of an earlier episode detailed by Seiter, in which wounded feelings leave a character vulnerable to manipulation, as Fluttershy, who is tired of being taken advantage of, enrolls in a life coach's self-help scheme only to find herself becoming rude and aggressive toward her friends.³⁵ In contrast to the dismissive perspective

of Tom Engelhardt, whose attack on the franchise is considered exemplary of certain male critics' hostility toward feminine children's products, Seiter asserts that such shows have complicated narratives with many plot twists and a degree of openness which are only evident with focused viewing.³⁶ This complex storytelling continues in the franchise's current incarnation, as seen in the two-part episode opening *MLPFIM*'s third season that involves a lost city, an enslaved citizenship suffering post-traumatic anxiety, a ritualistic state fair, and a magical heart in a plot too convoluted to summarize here.

Throughout a program spanning over a hundred episodes, some parallels with the 1980s series Seiter analyses are inevitable. However, in some important respects *MLPFIM* differs significantly from other screen media from the *My Little Pony* franchise. In an extremely brief analysis of the *My Little Pony* series drawing on the work of Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, Dan Fleming discusses the story line of a 1989 *My Little Pony* comic book, describing the characters as "feminized, stay-at-homes who are not out there competing in the world."³⁷ The passive, domesticated femininity evoked in this assessment cannot be seen in *MLPFIM*, where all six main characters are engaged in valued employment and social roles outside the home. In fact, Bell cites showrunner Faust's claimed intentions to produce *MLPFIM* as a cartoon for girls with conflict, complex narratives, and characters who represent the range of young women's personalities.³⁸ Along similar lines, Robertson argues that the main ponies in *MLPFIM* go beyond uniform, one-dimensional stereotypes, including an occasionally manic high achiever, a painfully shy introvert, and a brash athlete. Such depth and diversity is cited by many male fans as the reason for their enjoyment of the show and their fondness for particular characters.³⁹

A fundamental aspect of *MLPFIM* that secures its status as women's culture is its emphasis on a "loyal community of females" constituted by the main six ponies: Twilight Sparkle, Apple Jack, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, and Rainbow Dash.⁴⁰ As Robertson notes,

despite comic or self-reflexive elements, the program's drama remains focused around "the ups and downs of friendship and the development of personal identity."⁴¹ In this respect, the gynocentric genre that *MLPFIM* most closely resembles is that of the "female friendship film." As detailed by Yvonne Tasker, such texts focus on female bonding, support, and companionship, contrasting with mainstream cinema in which female friendship is often marginalized, isolated, or presented as competitive.⁴³ This cycle draws on many of the female-centered genres cited by Kuhn, which Seiter sees as influencing *My Little Pony 'n Friends*. Karen Hollinger charts the history of female friendship films, originating in the melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s, and defined by their appeal to a female audience, focus on female characters, and engagement with issues of interest to women. *MLPFIM* exemplifies this genre insofar as it similarly depicts "not only sympathetic heroines, but ones who have been created by female producers, directors, screenwriters, and stars to serve as role models, validating the self-worth of the female spectator who identifies with them. The heroines of female friendship films also provide images of alternative lifestyles for women based on meaningful social relationships with other women. In so doing, they avoid advocating the submissive behavior that so often characterizes filmic portrayals of women's relationships with men."⁴⁴

Evident in the very title of *MLPFIM*, an emphasis on female friendship constitutes a recurring theme throughout the series. The message of many episodes relates to friendship, the source of which the bookish Twilight Sparkle is tasked with investigating. Many *MLPFIM* episodes' closing messages, presented in the form of letters to Twilight's mentor Princess Celestia, incorporate such themes. These include asserting the importance of asking for help from your friends ("Applebuck Season"), the value of trusting your friends ("Party of One"), how good friends can make even the worst of situations fun ("Best Night Ever"), how friendship can be difficult but is worth fighting for ("The Return of Harmony: Part Two"), the

redemptive power of friendship (“Keep Calm and Flutter On”), the important things friends can teach you about friendship (“Magical Mystery Cure”), and how mutual friendship can bond even the most dissimilar of individuals (“Maud Pie”).⁴⁵ The show conforms to Kuhn’s definition of women’s media in its “construction of narratives motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point-of-view.”⁴⁶ Moreover, in many respects *MLPFIM* goes against the conservative tendency of the female friendship films that Hollinger and others detail, challenging the dominance of heterosexual love, male control of public places, and women’s restriction to the maternal, the domestic, and the private.⁴⁷

The Dual Audience

Animation’s history also reveals that adult appreciation of cartoons, both theatrical and televisual, is nothing new. The form has always enjoyed an audience of mixed ages, and although cartoons are disproportionately more visible in histories of children’s cinema, it is only in the television age that animation became seen as inappropriate for adult viewers. Paul Wells describes Warner Bros. output as “adult cartoons” that contained sexual innuendo, social satire, and irony in deliberate contrast with Disney’s more reassuring content.⁴⁸ At the same time, Walt Disney is repeatedly quoted as contending that his films were not intended as entertainment only for children, preferring a more ambiguous and inclusive appeal to “the child in all of us.”⁴⁹ Examining theater bills of the studio era, Eric Smoodin observes that animated shorts were incorporated into around half of the programs surveyed, suggesting that the cartoon, alongside newsreels, live-action shorts, and feature films, contributed to the diverse range of popular screen entertainment exhibited to the mass movie audiences of this period.⁵⁰ The integration of theatrical animated shorts into the flow of screen entertainment programs appears to have continued in the early television era. Jason Mittell notes that throughout this period, made-for-television animation attracted high percentages of older viewers, with critics praising such shows for their wit and satire. The initial broadcast of *The*

Flintstones (ABC, 1960–66) reflects the perceived appeal of animation to adult audiences. The show's sitcom structure, satirical content, evening broadcast slot, and tobacco industry sponsorship indicates that this was not a children's show. It is only following the failure of a wave of animated prime-time shows that the genre became relegated to the Saturday morning slot identified as children's viewing time.⁵¹

Definitions of television animation as mostly for children have eroded in recent years, although Lynn Spigel writes of the extensive confusion of distinctions between adults and children even in postwar US television.⁵² Changes in broadcasting undermined the association of cartoons with children, most prominently with the emergence of television channels such as Nickelodeon, Boomerang, and the Cartoon Network seemingly catering exclusively for child audiences around the clock. Marsha Kinder explores the early days of Nickelodeon as emblematic of a "transgenerational address" within 1990s US culture. Despite being promoted as "the children's network," the channel's schedule featured reruns of 1950s and 1960s television aimed at both a new generation of young viewers and nostalgic baby boomers. Moreover, many of the same shows were featured in multiple slots, with programs such as *The Ren and Stimpy Show* (Nickelodeon, 1991–95) being broadcast on the Saturday night prime-time slot as well as during traditional children's viewing hours.⁵³ Karen Lury writes of ways in which cable, satellite, and digital television broadcasting systems, changes in scheduling practices, and the emergence of channel branding served to erode separations between children's television and adult or teen viewing.⁵⁴ An increasingly international media market has also facilitated the expansion of theatrical animation, which is easier to dub than live action films, relies heavily on visual elements, and can be designed to minimize culturally specific features. Cartoons' appeal to broader demographics is facilitated by greater fluidity in television availability with the advent of on-demand TV, the DVD box set, digital downloading, and television delivery websites. The presence of early episodes of

MLPFIM on YouTube had a significant role in extending the show's accessibility to an adult fandom, enabling adult viewers to watch episodes repeatedly for free and distribute links on the Internet without having to subscribe to Hasbro's Hub Network.

Many television critics and historians have considered the intergenerational appeal of animated shorts and shows. Television historian Jeremy G. Butler sees a "double discourse" at work in early animated feature films originally shown in theaters and later broadcast on television, arguing that such texts are "encoded with an adult discourse that even contemporary children could not have decoded."⁵⁵ Mittell discusses early Hanna-Barbera cartoons as courting an intergenerational audiences proposing that adults were reportedly attracted to the sharp dialogue while the "moppet" market responded to the visuals and sound effects.⁵⁶ A similar "bimodal address" in *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989–) is considered by Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison in the introduction to their edited collection on prime-time animation.⁵⁷ However, such speculation concerning the extent to which textual allusions exclude demographics founded upon assumptions about viewers' cultural capital is highly problematic. *MLPFIM*'s textual references to *The Benny Hill Show* (BBC, 1955–91) in "The Ticket Master," *The Big Lebowski* (dir. Joel and Ethan Coen, US, 1998) in "The Cutie Pox," and *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–57) in "The Last Roundup," or *MLPFIM* episode titles that riff on media texts like romantic comedy cinema ("Sleepless in Ponyville," "Made in Manehattan") and a retro video game ("Castle Mane-ia") may be understood as drawing on adult culture.⁵⁸ But irrespective of their titles, young people may well be familiar with the tropes these episodes mobilize. Equally, it would be an act of adult privilege to assume that pastiches of the *Star Wars* franchise (1977–) in "The Return of Harmony: Part 2," *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (dir. Steven Spielberg, US, 1981) in "Read It and Weep," and *King Kong* (dir. Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, US, 1933) in "Secret of My Excess" necessarily go over the heads of young viewers.⁵⁹ Rebecca Farley critiques the concept of "double coding"

in academic and industrial discussions of animation that separate layers of meaning into juvenile visuals and adult sound track. Such a distinction, Farley argues, naturalizes associations between taste and age, privileging adult viewing habits while positioning children's preferences as somehow deficient. This serves to maintain a binary distinction that ignores the indistinct line between adult and child and the broad variety of viewing practices within and across both audiences.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, a shift might be observed in the formation of *MLPFIM*. As its unexpected audience became increasingly visible to show producers, the series began incorporating not only adult, but also male, fans in its audience address. For example, Bell observes the explicit "shout-out" to Bronies in the trailer for *Equestria Girls* (dir. Jayson Thiessen, US, 2013), which depicts animated human versions of the *MLPFIM* characters.⁶¹ Billboard advertisements for *MLPFIM* referencing *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper, US, 1982) and *Bridesmaids* (dir. Paul Feig, US, 2011), Robertson notes, draw on movies outside of children's official culture.⁶² In addition to such promotional paratexts, the series can be seen to incorporate less female-centered genres and include more horror, mystery, and action adventure-based episodes as the seasons have progressed. "It's About Time" introduces science fiction themes, as Twilight Sparkle is confronted by a seemingly battle-scarred version of herself warning of a great danger approaching Ponyville.⁶³ "MMMystery on the Friendship Express" is a whodunit set on a train, which includes film pastiches referencing silent movies, James Bond, and Asian action cinema.⁶⁴ In "Power Ponies," the characters are transported into a comic book, where they assume the personae of various Marvel-themed superheroes; and in "Bats!" Fluttershy is accidentally transformed into a vampire-pony hybrid.⁶⁵ Seiter asserts that the distinction between boys' and girls' cartoon culture is the evasion of physical conflict,⁶⁶ yet this can be observed in *MLPFIM* episodes in which villains have been defeated through violence. Most notable in this respect is the season four

finale featuring a lone battle between a superpowered Twilight Sparkle and an equally powerful centaur.⁶⁷ Although the episode ends in an affirmation of pony friendship, it features a lengthy scene reminiscent of American superhero or Japanese *anime* sequence, which is significantly removed from the tradition of collective action and emotional engagement associated with the defeat of previous villains in *MLPFIM*. The increase in action-oriented narratives results in the mobilization of more male-centered genres, compromising the series' association with traditional modes of femininity.

At the same time, identifying these genres as masculine is as fraught as determining the relationship of “gynocentric” media to women audiences. From the outset, *MLPFIM* sought to negotiate such gendered associations and redefine the nature of animation for young girls.⁶⁸ Certainly such genre play can be observed in early episodes, before the formation of the Brony discourse. More evident of the impact of adult men on the series is the increased incorporation of fan-favored characters, the most notable being the pony referred to by Bronies as “Derpy Hooves.” As Bell relates, Hooves was originally a background figure, distinguished by an animation error in her eyes, who was adopted by the Brony fandom and elevated to the status of a celebrity mascot. Independent of the program's producers, the pony was given a name, an occupation, and a family, and she became the focus of much fan art and fiction. A significant moment occurred in the opening of the season two episode “The Last Roundup,” in which the pegasus was not only given a lengthy stretch of dialogue but also referred to by her fan-conferred moniker. The show's one-hundredth episode, “Slice of Life,” was almost entirely dedicated to characters favored within the fandom, including a revised Derpy Hooves, a DJ, a cellist, and a pony based on Dr. Who, officially endorsing many speculative relationships within fan culture.⁶⁹ Bell argues in a slightly hyperbolic manner: “Fans have certainly influenced the production of popular culture. However, in the annals of fan-creation history, there is little indication that fan producers have ever incorporated fan

work into a canonical property the size and fiscal scope of *My Little Pony*. . . . *MLPFIM* stands alone in this new frontier of fan-producer interaction.”⁷⁰

Dear Princess Celestia

It would be a mistake to assume references to online *My Little Pony* fandoms are not recognized by children and do not form part of the pleasures for younger audiences of *MLPFIM*. Nevertheless, narratives of fan empowerment inevitably privilege those with the time, technology, and (sub)cultural capital to become visible to show producers. The two websites cited as places where the Brony fandom achieved coherence are fanfic.net and deviantART.com. The latter was also a space where Faust communicated with the program’s fans, which in turn impacted the series’ development.⁷¹ Both sites officially prohibit the core demographic of six- to twelve-year-olds that the Hub channel caters to and the audience of three- to six-year-olds who watch *MLPFIM* from creating online accounts.⁷² Similarly, the 4Chan discussion board in which the Brony phenomenon first emerged, a forum originally established for the discussion of manga and *anime*, is characterized by Robertson as notorious for its “brutally sardonic, lawless and tenacious community.”⁷³ As Bell describes, a significant means by which the series’ fandom asserted its presence was through a particularly aggressive bombardment of other subforums with *My Little Pony*-related material.⁷⁴ While this action has been often mythologized as a form of antiauthoritarian rebellion against comment moderation, it can be understood as a particularly entitled form of masculine response to a perceived attack on the freedom of expression within an online environment dominated by adult men. The language of memes through which *MLPFIM* fans communicated is associated with this mature site. Certain meme creation involves transforming the meaning of a screenshot from a film or television show through the addition of a pidgin English caption in an explicit act of cultural appropriation, and memes often gain resonance through the juxtaposition of text and context. One of the most famous memes

associated with the Brony fandom features the text “I’m Gonna Tolerate & Love The SHIT Outta You” overlaying a picture of Twilight Sparkle looking grumpy, demonstrating the not-uncommon incorporation of adult language into these fans’ communicative practices.⁷⁵ A similar sense of privilege, appropriation, and entitlement can be interpreted in the ableist naming of the character “Derpy Hooves,” and certain fans’ outraged response to Hasbro’s subsequent revision of the character after the name was identified as derogatory toward people with disabilities.⁷⁶ Bell’s argument that Derpy Hooves became a representative of fans themselves suggests a particularly entitled claiming of *MLPFIM* as the property of the Brony community to the exclusion of others who might have a greater right to ownership of the franchise or criticism of its content.⁷⁷ Recent work on fandom increasingly complicates the image of the fan as a rebellious figure and outsider, recognizing the various kinds of capital that many devoted audiences hold and the ways in which such consumers have become valuable commodities for television producers who actively court and facilitate fan activity. The Brony phenomenon conforms to the less celebratory perspective considered by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, which sees fans “not as a counterforce to existing social hierarchies and structures” but rather “as agents of maintaining social and cultural systems of classification.”⁷⁸ Johnson situates *MLPFIM* in terms of academic discussions of “produsage,” co-creativity, intercreativity, spreadable media, and remix culture, while qualifying the suggestion that “‘everypony’ has become an author” by emphasizing the traditional privileges and power relationships with which such forms are complicit.⁷⁹ One wonders exactly what young *MLPFIM* viewers, officially excluded from core practices of participatory culture and the cultural capital of the Brony fandom, made of the hundredth episode of the show and the characters it contained. To my knowledge, nopony seems particularly interested in finding out.

Notes

¹ Mikko Hautakangas, “It’s OK to Be Joyful? *My Little Pony* and Brony Masculinity,” *Journal of Popular Television* 3, no. 1 (2015): 112.

² Venetia Laura Delano Robertson, “Of Ponies and Men: *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* and the Brony Fandom,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (2014): 27.

³ Jed A. Blue, *My Little Po-mo: Unauthorized Critical Essays on “My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic” Season One* (Los Angeles: Eohippus Press, 2013).

⁴ Derek Johnson, “Participation Is Magic: Collaboration, Authorial Legitimacy, and the Audience Function,” in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 142.

⁵ Johnson, “Participation Is Magic,” 139.

⁶ “The Equestranauts,” season 4, episode 17 of *Bob’s Burgers*, writ. Dan Mintz, dir. Tyree Dillihay, prod. Loren Bouchard and Jim Dauterive, Fox, 13 April 2014.

⁷ Matt Hills, “Media Academics as Media Audiences: Aesthetic Judgements in Media and Cultural Studies,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (London: New York University Press, 2007), 45.

⁸ Claire Burdfield, “Finding Bronies—The Accidental Audience of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*,” *Journal of Popular Television* 3, no. 1 (2015): 128.

⁹ Catherine Johnson, *Telefantasy* (London: British Film Institute, 2005).

¹⁰ Joanne Hollows, “The Masculinity of Cult,” in *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste*, ed. Mark Jancovich et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 35–53.

- ¹¹ Hollows, "Masculinity of Cult," 39.
- ¹² I. Q. Hunter, "My, My, How Did I Resist You?," in "*Mamma Mia!*" *The Movie: Exploring a Cultural Phenomenon*, ed. Louise FitzGerald and Melanie Williams (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 146, 150.
- ¹³ Blue, *My Little Po-mo*, 190–91.
- ¹⁴ Hautakangas, "It's OK to Be Joyful?," 115.
- ¹⁵ Johnson, "Participation Is Magic," 144.
- ¹⁶ Bethan Jones, "My Little Pony, Tolerance Is Magic: Gender Policing and Brony Anti-Fandom," *Journal of Popular Television* 3, no. 1 (2015): 123.
- ¹⁷ Christopher Bell, "The Ballad of Derpy Hooves—Transgressive Fandom in *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*," *Humanities Directory* 1, no. 1 (2013): 6.
- ¹⁸ Bell, "Ballad of Derpy Hooves," 10.
- ¹⁹ Johnson, "Participation Is Magic," 152.
- ²⁰ Chris Beasley, "Introduction to Special Issue of *Men and Masculinities*: Heterodox Heteromascuinites," *Men and Masculinities* 18, no. 2 (2015): 135–36.
- ²¹ Blue, *My Little Po-mo*, 54–56.
- ²² Robertson, "Of Ponies and Men," 29.
- ²³ Beasley, "Introduction," 139.
- ²⁴ Robertson, "Of Ponies and Men," 25.
- ²⁵ Johnson, "Participation Is Magic," 136.
- ²⁶ Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 145.

²⁷ Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres," *Screen* 25, no. 1 (1984): 18–28.

²⁸ Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 151.

²⁹ Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 157.

³⁰ Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 159. "Magical Mystery Cure," season 3, episode 13 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. M. A. Larson, dir. James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall and Devon Cody, Hub Network, 16 February 2013.

³¹ Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 159. "A Canterlot Wedding, Part 2," season 2, episode 26 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Meghan McCarthy, dir. James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 21 April 2012. "Too Many Pinkie Pies," season 3, episode 3 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Dave Polsky, dir. James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall and Devon Cody, Hub Network, 17 November 2012.

³² Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 159. "Dragonshy," season 1, episode 7 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Meghan McCarthy, dir. Jayson Thiessen and James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 26 November 2010.

³³ Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 159. "Winter Wrap Up," season 1, episode 11 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Cindy Morrow, dir. Jayson Thiessen and James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 24 December 2010. "Fall Weather Friends," season 1, episode 13 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Amy Keating Rogers, dir. Jayson Thiessen and James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 28 January 2011.

³⁴ Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 161.

³⁵ Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 164. "Putting Your Hoof Down," season 2, episode 19 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Charlotte Fullerton and Merriwether Williams, dir. James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 3 March 2012.

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³⁷ Dan Fleming, *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 185. See also Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (New York: International General, 1975).

³⁸ Bell, “Ballad of Derpy Hooves,” 7.

³⁹ Robertson, “Of Ponies and Men,” 30–31.

⁴⁰ Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 168.

⁴¹ Robertson, “Of Ponies and Men,” 30.

⁴² Kuhn, “Women’s Genres,” 18.

⁴³ Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁴⁴ Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 4.

⁴⁵ “Applebuck Season,” season 1, episode 4 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Amy Keating Rogers, dir. Jayson Thiessen and James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 5 November 2010. “Party of One,” season 1, episode 25 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Meghan McCarthy, dir. Jayson Thiessen and James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 29 April 2011. “Best Night Ever,” season 1, episode 26 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Amy Keating Rogers, dir. Jayson Thiessen and James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 6 May 2011. “The Return of Harmony: Part Two,” season 2, episode 2 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. M. A. Larson, dir.

Jayson Thiessen, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 24 September 2011. “Keep Calm and Flutter On,” season 3, episode 10 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Teddy Antonio and Dave Polsky, dir. James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall and Devon Cody, Hub Network, 19 January 2013. “Maud Pie,” season 4, episode 18 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Noelle Benvenuti, dir. Jayson Thiessen and Jim Miller, prod. Sarah Wall and Devon Cody, Hub Network, 15 March 2014.

⁴⁶ Kuhn, “Women’s Genres,” 18.

⁴⁷ Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 25.

⁴⁸ Paul Wells, *Animation and America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 50.

⁴⁹ Dave Smith, comp., *The Quotable Walt Disney* (New York: Disney Editions, 2001), 128.

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⁵⁴ Karen Lury, “A Time and Place for Everything: Children’s Channels,” in *Small Screens: Television for Children*, ed. David Buckingham (London: Leicester University Press, 2002), 15–37.

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⁵⁶ Mittell, “Great Saturday Morning Exile,” 42–43.

⁵⁷ Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, “Prime Time Animation – an Overview,” in Stabile and Harrison, *Prime Time Animation*, 9.

⁵⁸ “The Ticket Master,” season 1, episode 3 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Amy Keating Rogers and Lauren Faust, dir. Jayson Thiessen and James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 29 October 2010. “The Cutie Pox,” season 2, episode 6 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Amy Keating Rogers, dir. James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 12 November 2011. “The Last Roundup,” season 2, episode 14 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Amy Keating Rogers, dir. James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 21 January 2012. “Sleepless in Ponyville,” season 3, episode 6 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Corey Powell, dir. James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall and Devon Cody, Hub Network, 8 December 2012. “Made in Manehattan,” season 5, episode 16 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Noelle Benvenuti, dir. Denny Lu, prod. Devon Cody, Hub Network, 26 September 2015. “Castle Mane-ia,” season 4, episode 3 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Josh Haber, dir. Jayson Thiessen and Jim Miller, prod. Sarah Wall and Devon Cody, Hub Network, 30 November 2013.

⁵⁹ “Read It and Weep,” season 2, episode 16 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Cindy Morrow, dir. James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 4 February 2012.

“Secret of My Excess,” season 2, episode 10 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. M.A. Larson, dir. James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 10 December 2011.

⁶⁰ Rebecca Farley, “From Fred and Wilma to Ren and Stimpy: What Makes a Cartoon ‘Prime Time’?,” in Stabile and Harrison, *Prime Time Animation*, 151–52.

⁶¹ Bell, “Ballad of Derpy Hooves,” 13.

⁶² Robertson, “Of Ponies and Men,” 30.

⁶³ “It’s About Time,” season 2, episode 20 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. M. A. Larson, dir. James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 10 March 2012.

⁶⁴ “MMMystery on the Friendship Express,” season 2, episode 24 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Amy Keating Rogers, dir. James Wootton, prod. Sarah Wall, Hub Network, 7 April 2012.

⁶⁵ “Power Ponies,” season 4, episode 6 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Meghan McCarthy, Charlotte Fullerton, and Betsy McGowen, dir. Jayson Thiessen and Jim Miller, prod. Sarah Wall and Devon Cody, Hub Network, 21 December 2013. “Bats!” season 4, episode 7 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Merriwether Williams, dir. Jayson Thiessen and Jim Miller, prod. Sarah Wall and Devon Cody, Hub Network, 28 December 2013.

⁶⁶ Seiter, *Sold Separately*, 161.

⁶⁷ “Twilight’s Kingdom: Part 2,” season 4, episode 26 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. Meghan McCarthy, dir. Jayson Thiessen and Jim Miller, prod. Sarah Wall and Devon Cody, Network, 10 May 2014.

⁶⁸ Johnson, “Participation Is Magic,” 128.

⁶⁹ “Slice of Life,” season 5, episode 9 of *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*, writ. M. A. Larson, dir. Jim Miller, prod. Devon Cody, Hub Network, 13 June 2015.

⁷⁰ Bell, “Ballad of Derpy Hooves,” 12.

⁷¹ Bell, “Ballad of Derpy Hooves,” 6. Johnson, “Participation Is Magic,” 151.

⁷² Johnson, “Participation Is Magic,” 147.

⁷³ Robertson, “Of Ponies and Men,” 26.

⁷⁴ Bell, “Ballad of Derpy Hooves,” 7.

⁷⁵ Johnson, “Participation Is Magic,” 141.

⁷⁶ Johnson, “Participation Is Magic,” 143.

⁷⁷ Bell, “Ballad of Derpy Hooves,” 18.

⁷⁸ Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington, “Introduction: Why Study Fans?,” in Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, *Fandom*, 6.

⁷⁹ Johnson, “Participation Is Magic,” 142.

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