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## Rise of the Bronies

The male fanbase for "My Little Pony" caught even the show's creators off-guard. Is this the end of American manhood?

By KELLEY VLAHOS • January 3, 2014

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At Bronycon2013 Ty Konzak/Flickr

At the outset they seem like typical fanboys: they congregate on fandom websites, dissect their favorite episodes with the exacting precision of a surgeon's scalpel, and live for the convention crawls—after which they post photographs of themselves with BNFs (Big Name Fans), an arm slung over the other's shoulder in subculture bliss.

But then come the [avatars](#), and they are not only blindingly cute but pastel, with glitter and stars, and they have names like Rainbow Dash, Twilight Sparkle, and Pinkie Pie.

They are "Bronies," and if you're like many of us—late to the party—it's time to get up to speed. This is probably the first American online fandom on record in which gender roles are so flipped as to completely befuddle even normally open-minded folk.

The object of their intense enthusiasm doesn't wield a light saber, or an ax, or an M-4 combat rifle, though some of them send shock waves and love power though horns in their foreheads. No, this is not your standard sci-fi bromance, this is about man seeking pony, *My Little Pony*, a show designed for elementary school girls and featured on cable cartoon network [The Hub](#).

"It's kind of my generation in a way, we are lot more open to this stuff," says Shaun Scotellaro, a 25-year-old college graduate who quit his day job to run [EquestriaDaily.com](#), the go-to place for everything [Brony](#). The site became so big over the last two years—800,000 unique visitors a month—he was able to take home an income and hire help.

“It’s nice to have a *nice* cartoon,” he says, explaining the appeal. “90 percent of us will be playing ‘Call of Duty’ or watching ‘The Walking Dead.’ But I love Mario games versus the ‘Call of Duty’ and the dark and gritty stuff.”

But, really, grown men wearing tri-color manes down their backs? Asking for the girls’ McDonald’s Happy Meal so they can obtain AppleJack or Lilly Blossom figurine prizes? U.S. *soldiers* posting on their own Brony [Facebook](#) page?

Let’s get this out of the way first: Bronies are not gay. One might be hard-pressed, sure, when seeing college-age guys wearing pink wigs and furry faux tails walking into a convention center—as this writer saw, outside what turned out to be [BronyCon 2013](#) in Baltimore, an event that drew over 12,000 people—not to look for some LGBT connection. But the vast majority of them are indeed heterosexual, according to scientific studies of the fandom. (Yes, there are major Brony studies, but more on that later.)

When the “Brony” (bro-pony) first became an Internet meme on the geek planetoid [4Chan.org](#) after the Season 1 pilot of “My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic” in 2010, the right-wing predictably [pounced](#), suggesting all kinds of sexual deviancy. Some among the Internet [mom squad](#) reacted too, the mental juxtaposition of their six-year-olds sharing a giggly fondness for Princess Celestia—Alicorn pony and co-ruler of the kingdom of [Equestria](#)—with an equally arduous 22-year-old bearded man being too weird to take.

Brony demographics, as collected by fans and academics alike, break down as follows: more than 75 percent of the fandom [is indeed white males between the ages of 15 and 25](#), with a mean age of 20. They are straight and largely college educated. Only about 15 percent of the adult fanbase is female, sometimes referred to as “[pegasisters](#).” Most of the Bronies [don’t date](#), and have not been in a serious relationship in the past year. Pansies? No. Computer geeks? You bet.

“A lot of friends in the nerd and geek culture were linking [episodes] to me through [Steam](#),” Scotellaro says, referring to the popular online gaming platform and community. “I watched the first episode and thought it was completely awful. Horrible. I gave the second episode a shot.” He started noticing the ponies dropping sly allusions to other highlights of geek culture such as “Star Wars” and “Dr. Who,” even “The Big Lebowski,” a feature the fans absolutely love. A longtime Dungeons & Dragons player, Scotellaro says he sensed an homage when MLP introduced a manticores named Manny Roar. He was hooked.

Those references and the animation—which fans say is a sophisticated nod to Japanese anime—are top draws. “If you just stripped the ‘My Little’ off it and just called it ‘the Ponies,’ it would be even more successful,” he said. “It’s kind of like watching a Pixar movie, in that it’s got humor for adults, and morals in the stories that a kid can understand. And a lot of throwback to old movies like ‘Star Wars.’”

“My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic” developer [Lauren Faust](#) was as surprised as anyone when her ponies began developing a new super-fandom dominated by guys. A graduate of the prestigious California Institute of the Arts who formerly worked on the “Power Puff Girls” animated series, Faust, 39, has said that her feminist impulse was to create strong female roles for her ponies and to get away from cartoon girls so “homogenized with old-fashioned ‘niceness’ that they have no flaws and are unrelatable.”

In a [strongly penned defense](#) of her ponies against a charge of racism and homophobia, she describes how “this show is wonderfully free of ‘token girl’ syndrome, so there is no pressure to shove all the ideals of what we want our daughters to be into one package.” She didn’t want to avoid the conflict and complexity in friendship; above all, the pony-girls can have adventure while nurturing each other and saving the world.

“Cartoons for girls don’t have to be a puddle of smooshy, cutesy-wootsy, goody-two-shoeness,” she wrote in 2010. “Girls like stories with real conflict; girls are smart enough to understand complex plots.”

Aside from the tiny tots, though, it’s mostly men applauding Faust’s brand of *femanime*. But as she told [Wired](#) in 2011, the fact “they were open-minded and cool enough and secure in their masculinity enough to embrace it. ... I’m kind of proud.”

Faust has become a fandom celebrity, a Big Name Fan, in her own right, and helped to produce the quirky documentary, [“Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony,”](#) which was filmed with nearly \$350,000, all raised by fans through [Kickstarter.com](#) and released in early 2013. The writers of the show—now in its fourth season—are all BNFs, too, and thanks to the burgeoning social media landscape are quite accessible and reactive to the community, mostly through Twitter (co-executive producer [Meghan McCarthy](#) has over 31,875 followers as of press time) and Scotellaro’s [Equestria.com](#).

“There are show staff who Tweet during episodes and they take questions from fans,” says James Turner, a 51-year-old software engineer and self-described Brony who helped to raise \$13,000 for a “thank you” [commercial](#) from the fans to run on The Hub when they thought the show might not be coming back after Season 2. The ad, which aimed to feature the breadth of MLP fans—military folk, moms, kids, etc.—led to the establishment of the [Brony Thank You Fund](#), which has raised \$50,000 to establish a scholarship for artists at CalArts, and several thousand more for charity.

Turner is just about to launch a 2014 census, an update to the 2012 and 2013 surveys and accompanying [“State of the Herd”](#) reports. He will be collaborating this time with researchers from Salem State University in Massachusetts, and the questionnaire is being translated into several languages. Turner, who says there were 22,000 respondents in the last online survey, estimates there are over 12 million “Bronies” across the globe today.

These studies “dispel myths—that it’s all guys or all homosexuals or the [Bronies] have some strange fixation on animals,” he tells *TAC*. The last census included a Jungian personality test. Most of the Bronies ended up on the “introverted” [end of the scale](#)—not shy, says Turner, but “big into looking at systems, looking at how things work,” observing the world and rationalizing it.

And it means Bronies aren’t rigid, they’re open to new things, say psychologists Jan Griffin and Pat Edwards at the University of South Carolina Upstate, [who have done their own studies](#), along with Dr. Marsha Howes Redden (Louisiana State), and Dr. Daniel Chadborn (University of Georgia).

“Fandoms are a laboratory,” says Edwards, and they are studying this one in detail. The group has submitted papers to the winter conventions of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Southeastern Psychological Association (SEPA).

They have found, among other traits, that the Bronies can be divided into “hipster” and “secret/hidden” subgroups, the former being more likely to go to “Meet Ups” and conventions, wear flashy costumes, and talk about ponies in the workplace. It’s social. They tend to identify more, however, with their

offline “neighborhoods”—families and friends, outside the fandom.

The latter tend to hide their Bronyism, spending most of their energy talking about it online and engaging in the explosion of “deviation art,” that is, drawing and creating new art based on the original animation and posting it online. They are creative and they tend to seek emotional strength and identity from the online community.

One point of interest is how easy it has been for guys to go against gender stereotype. “I’m a two generations away and I know if I was at that age, I would probably have an interest [in MLP] but I would not allow myself to even watch them because we were so aware of stereotypes,” says Edwards, who got interested when his son, an Eagle Scout, revealed himself a Brony.

Some say it’s a trend toward “neo-sincerity,” he observes—a post-ironical appreciation for things because of their purity, even sentimentality, because it feels good. In 1993, author David Foster Wallace [described the ethos](#) in part as arising from those “who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue.” MLP provides life-lessons, humor, and great animation. So just enjoy it.

In a television environment where “[The Walking Dead](#)” generates its own, equally enthusiastic fandom, these guys are choosing sunshine and love power over dark clouds and exploding brain matter.

But why not the girls? No one seems to answer why adult women aren’t equally gaga over Equestria. Nor do they ask what pony-identity says about the state of American masculinity, or whether these twenty-something Bronies, many of whom claim to have [no interest in dating](#), are, unlike women, purposefully delaying adulthood.

Turner simply turns to the 5 percent of Bronies who say they are in the military. (Check out [FOBequestria.com](#).) “It would be hard to argue that they’re delaying their adulthood,” says Turner. Or their masculinity, for that matter.

“I think, to the contrary, their life is chock full of adulthood, and they like to escape back into something a bit more innocent occasionally.”

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