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- By [Angela Watercutter](#)
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From left: Damon Yee, Eric Black, Ohad Kanne and Robby V. play Ponyfinder, an adaptation of the popular tabletop game, Pathfinder. Ariel Zambelich/WIRED

1 / 5

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Ariel Zambelich/WIRED



Players pull from a collection of ponies to set up their Ponyfinder game. Ariel Zambelich/WIRED

1 / 5

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A sign designating the bathroom. Ariel Zambelich/WIRED

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Story cards and character pieces for the Ponyfinder game. Ariel Zambelich/WIRED


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Members of the Bronies of Northern California Meetup group watch an episode from the most recent season of the show.  Ariel Zambelich/WIRED

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From left: Damon Yee, Eric Black, Ohad Kanne and Robby V. play Ponyfinder, an adaptation of the popular tabletop game, Pathfinder.  Ariel Zambelich/WIRED

Bronies Are Redefining Fandom — And American Manhood

ADVERTISEMENT

On the internet, no one knows you're a pony. At least, they don't have to.

When the largely male, largely adult contingent of *My Little Pony Friendship Is Magic* fans now known as “bronies” emerged shortly after the show's premiere three years ago, they were a largely disorganized, largely anonymous band haunting places like [4chan's /co/ and /b/ boards](#). [They got trolled](#). A *lot*.

And to be honest, it's amazing that such a fandom even formed, let alone blossomed. When I [first wrote about bronies](#) in early 2011, most people considered them a random fad, a meme that would vanish faster than planking. But the phenomenon didn't just persist—it thrived.

Like countless other outsiders who found each other online, bronies sought each other out and created places to congregate. Now they're everywhere: Fan blogs, Tumblr, Ponychan, even the [United States military](#). A brony delegation is building *MLP* worlds in Minecraft. They host gatherings and conventions that attract thousands. And they've

used their love of the show to challenge entrenched notions about what men and boys can like and feel, even as they've reshaped the meaning of fandom.

An Unexpected Home

The reasons why people enjoy brony fandom are complex, in part because of the gender assumptions surrounding the show and its "intended" audience. The cartoon, as well as its values (caring, generosity, and kindness), is widely seen as being "for girls," so men who like it often are mocked as feminine or childish. Bronies fully realize this, which explains why fewer than half of [bronies surveyed would be comfortable admitting their broniness](#). Identity is a tricky thing, and being a grown man wearing a *My Little Pony* T-shirt can get you harassed—it's much easier to find like-minded friends on the internet. Bronies who convene online were drawn by the show, but they stayed because they'd finally found like-minded people who share the values behind it.



Ohad Kanne. Photo: Ariel Zambelich/WIRED

Take Ohad Kanne. The CEO of videogame studio [Barking Muffin Games](#), Kanne says he became "immediately hooked" after he watched the show for the first time, and from there discovered the community through memes, Twitter, and websites like [Equestria Daily](#). "I quickly realized that there was a huge community, full of creativity and potential that burst out," Kanne says. "All of a sudden people weren't afraid to show their ideas, spread their creativity, and take their talent to new places."

Kanne is part of the Meetup group Bronies of Northern California, a collection of *My Little Pony* aficionados who would likely have never met if it hadn't been for online fandom. On a recent Saturday the group met at a member's San Francisco house to play Ponyfinder — a ponified version of the role-playing game Pathfinder — and while the mood is generally jovial, Kanne has something else on his mind. In late January, [word spread](#) through the community about an [11-year-old boy named Michael Morones](#) who had attempted suicide after being bullied for being a brony. He survived, but has been hospitalized, and bronies began an [online fundraiser](#) to help his family. It's already raised more than \$20,000 and is still climbing, while the Ponyfinder game is ongoing (as of this writing, it had raised over \$72,000 from more than 2,600 donors).

The fundraiser is a way to rally support for the boy's family, but also to send an anti-bullying message. "It shows a sense of what the community really is—if you feel like you're in some sort of distress or if you have any type of issues, you always have someone to talk to," Kanne says. "The mission here is double. People are saying stop picking on him because he's a brony, but just as much—if not more—that we should stop bullying as a whole."

[BronyDoc Promo] The Story of Alex



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In the documentary *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (currently [on Netflix](#)), brony [Alex Tibcken explains how he discovered My Little Pony Friendship Is Magic](#) and how it changed him. "As soon as ponies came into my life, I was like, 'Wow, I never want the day to end,'" he recounts in the film, which was funded by a [wildly successful Kickstarter](#) and recently aired on Logo TV. Tibcken says he was essentially gay-bashed at a gas station because he had pony decals on his vintage Mercedes-Benz. At the end of the documentary, we see him at BronyCon, marveling that "four times the population of my town is in this building" and those people would have never come together were it not for the convention—and the show it celebrates.

Taken together, *My Little Pony Friendship is Magic*, the conventions it inspires, and even the documentary itself have all conspired to create a space for a new kind of fan. "We need to allow men to be gentle and to be sensitive and to care about one another and to not call them weak for caring," Lauren Faust, one of *My Little Pony*'s creators, says in the documentary. "*My Little Pony* might be opening some people's minds about what is acceptable in behavior for men and what it means to be a man and whether or not being sensitive and being caring is part of being a man."

I Love You, Man

“It emphasizes how narrow the definition of true masculinity can be that anyone who deviates from tradition in any way risks being labeled as feminine or homosexual,” [Molly Lambert notes in a particularly insightful essay](#) about the Brony documentary. “And bronies, like all of the women and queer people before them, start wondering, *What’s so bad about that?*” (For what it’s worth, [one survey](#) found 70 percent of bronies are straight, 16 percent bisexual and 3 percent gay — others identified as pansexual, asexual, or unsure.)

This is the quality that differentiates bronies from almost every other fandom: Their very existence breaks down stereotypes. Socialized gender norms (not to mention marketing) dictates that boys are supposed to like things like trucks, while [girls are supposed to like princesses and pink stuff](#). Bronies obliterate that ideal. (A recent [piece in *The American Conservative*](#) went so far as to ask, “Is this the end of American manhood?”)



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Like *X-Files* fanfic writers, bronies have made *My Little Pony Friendship is Magic* something all their own. “The way that *MLP* fandom has matured is an interesting forecast of how fandom may soon be in a competing position with the original canon,” Brad Kim, the editor at Know Your Meme, says.

But unlike [Scully and Mulder ‘shippers](#), the *MLP* fandom also has created safe spaces – online and off – in which to practice the show’s values of friendship, compassion, and harmony. This mostly happens on blogs and forums like those of Know Your Meme’s [My Little Brony](#), [Equestria Daily](#), or [MLP Forums](#). But they also happen in unexpected places like Minecraft, where you’ll find [Mine Little Crafty](#), [Brohoof](#), and [EquestriaCraft](#).

“There’s an appeal to being able to recreate in 3-D the world of the show,” James Turner, president of the charitable organization the Brony Thank You Fund, says. “And also to be able to roleplay as either an OC [original character] or show character, complete with pony avatar.”

While some of these safe havens simply recreate the show’s fictional world of Equestria, others, like My Little Minecraft, create it in a unique “fan canon” or “fanon” image. This isn’t entirely new: For years, fans of various TV shows, movies, and other bits of pop culture have taken fictional worlds and made them their own.

A Place of Our Own

This virtual homesteading in an alternate reality is a natural extension of ‘zines and Usenet groups, notes Alex Leavitt, a doctoral student at USC’s Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism who has studied online communities. “Many fans are using technological tools to augment their experiences around narratives they love,” Leavitt said. “So we witness fans using Minecraft to create fan works: a natural progression from the days of fan zines and hotel conventions. But the goal is the same: Deepening the experience around the narrative.”

In the *Bronies* documentary, Marsha Redden—one of two researchers who has [studied the Brony subculture](#) since 2011—notes that the modern condition includes “worrying about terrorism, worrying about aggression.” Having a safe place in fandom “is a flight from that, it’s a retreat to something which is happier, which stresses getting along with others.”



Image via [Tumblr](#)

Perhaps the existence of bronies proves we've evolved enough that guys can feel comfortable enough to like whatever they like, even cartoon ponies. And indeed, there are plenty of badass bronies out there. "Just because I happen to enjoy *My Little Pony Friendship is Magic* and try to live by the tenants of friendship and respect towards all people does not mean I don't still possess the ability and willpower to fire or, if necessary, step in front of a bullet," Navy Lt. Jeremy Sevey once told me in an interview.

Men like Sevey have always been there, of course, but the internet made it a lot easier for them to realize they weren't alone. Take the [Manliest Brony](#). His name is Dusty Rhoades, he's 45, and he lives in San Jose, California. He got famous thanks to [a YouTube video](#) called *MLP FIM The MANLIEST Brony in the WORLD* and now hosts the podcast "Stay Brony, My Friends." (Watch the episode below in which he interviews Brent Hodge, director of [another upcoming brony documentary](#) that's premiering at the [Tribeca Film Festival](#).) He's also a Harley-Davidson enthusiast who builds bikes and sells motorcycle parts at a shop.

Like many bronies, the thing Rhoades is most proud of is the charity work the community does: routinely raising money for things like children's groups and art school scholarships. The fandom has helped him strengthen friendships and supported him through periods of great anger or deep depression.

"Men have not had an outlet to talk about these feeling," Rhoades says. "You're supposed to be the guy who is on TV, you're supposed to be the Marlboro Man. You're supposed to be the guy from *Die Hard*, you're supposed to try and walk across glass because it's there and you're trying to save everybody," he said. "That's all well and good, but we got spoon-fed enough of that crud through the '80s and '90s that people are starting to believe that that's the way you had to be. Everybody's a person, everybody's a human being on this planet—the sooner we figure that one out, we might be a little better off."

Stay Brony My Friends, with DustyKatt - Episode...



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