

Pinkie,



Tailor,



Soldier,



Pie



Jack Christensen

Once upon a time, a man named Amid Amidi uploaded a blog post entitled “The End of the Creator-Driven Era in TV Animation.” In it, he bemoaned the rise of corporate-backed franchises like G. I. Joe and Strawberry Shortcake and the end of “original” animation made by “true creators” with “vision.” Quite a lot of people read it, including people who frequented a site called 4chan, which contains an area for discussing cartoons and animation called /co/.

The general consensus of the so-called /co/mrades who read the article was that while there was a grain of truth in Mr. Amidi's lament, it was also thoroughly alarmist and annoying. After whiling away an afternoon mocking him, they decided that they should watch the premiere of one of the cartoons frequently mentioned in his diatribe: *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, simply out of spite. But then something strange happened: they liked the show.

They liked. The show.

They were men between eighteen and thirty, and they liked a show featuring colorful cartoon equines having weekly adventures that taught them lessons about friendship. They still like the show. And I am one of them.

One year ago at about this time, I started to watch the show. I saw it mentioned on some news site, just an innocuous blurb. It doesn't matter now how I found out. What matters is what followed.

I sat in front of my computer. Putting away my Kindle, I logged on to YouTube and searched “my little pony friendship is magic episode 1.” I click on the first result.

The title above the video reads, “My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic Season One Episode One: Friendship is Magic Part One.” The episode opens on a book lying in a

field. The book's cover swings open to the words "Once Upon A Time." The page fills with clouds, and a regal female voice fills the air....

"Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, there were two regal sisters who ruled together, and created harmony for all the land. To do this, the eldest used her unicorn powers to raise the sun at dawn; the younger brought out the moon to begin the night. Thus, the two sisters maintained balance for the kingdom and their subjects, all the different types of ponies."

I stared, wondering if the hype surrounding the show really was just a prank for curious people like me.

"But as time went on, the younger sister became resentful. The ponies relished and played in the day her elder sister brought forth, but shunned and slept through her beautiful night. One fateful day, the younger unicorn refused to lower the moon to make way for the dawn. The elder sister tried to reason with her, but the bitterness in the young one's heart had transformed her into a wicked mare of darkness – Night Mare Moon. She vowed that she would shroud the land in eternal night."

I had to admit, it wasn't a bad setup. Worthy of any ancient myth-cycle, really. Maybe this is the real thing. I began to smile, slowly, almost cautiously.

"Reluctantly, the elder sister harnessed the most powerful magic known to ponydom: the Elements of Harmony. Using the magic of the Elements of Harmony, she defeated her younger sister, and banished her permanently in the moon. The elder sister took on responsibility for both sun and moon...."

And here we cut to a purple unicorn reading the book aloud to herself: "and harmony has been maintained in Equestria for generations since."

I was, at this point, giggling uncontrollably. Yes, it was silly. Yes, it was childish. But that is precisely the source of this program's dark power. It's so...warm and fuzzy.

It got even better. The premise of the series is that the aforementioned purple unicorn, named Twilight Sparkle, is a hard-working student learning about magic from the ruler of the kingdom, Princess Celestia. But she is so focused on her studies that she has neglected the magic of friendship. So, the Princess sends her to the small, rural village of Ponyville to study it. Whenever Twilight learns something new about friendship, she writes a letter to her mentor detailing what she learned. She makes friends with five other mares, named Rarity, Fluttershy, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie. And so she learns a new lesson every week over a twenty-two minute time slot. I can't help but smile just thinking about it. Like I said: warm and fuzzy.

In this manner, each episode lays out a moral, neatly summarized at the end when the letter is dictated. Most of them are simple nuggets of wisdom like, "Don't judge a book by its cover," or, "With teamwork, ~~people~~ ponies can accomplish anything!" But that doesn't mean they aren't true.

As is implied by the show's subtitle, *Friendship is Magic*, many of the lessons have to do with social interaction. Twilight, while book-smart, is absolutely clueless about the trials and tribulations friends might go through, making her an ideal vehicle for teaching basic ideas to young children. And while it is an unfair stereotype that I and others like me are basement-dwelling Asperger sufferers, it is true that quiet, introverted people like Twilight are far more likely to give the show a try than some idealized portrait of masculinity oozing sweat and testosterone from every pore.

Perhaps I should provide an example: in episode nine of the first season, a dangerous thunderstorm breaks out over Ponyville, and so Applejack and Rarity take shelter in Twilight's home. But it is clear right from the beginning that the two are very different ~~people~~ ponies. Rarity owns and operates a clothing store called Carousel Boutique, and she is very passionate about fashion. She has very refined tastes, high

standards, and dreams of one day marrying a handsome prince. Applejack works a family-owned farm with her older brother. She is athletic, tomboyish, and pragmatic. As the night wears on, the two become increasingly irritated with one another. Twilight is for the most part too distracted with the idea of having her very first slumber party to notice. She continually consults a book called *Slumber 101: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Slumber Parties but Were Afraid to Ask* in an attempt to make her party “officially” fun. It is, if you’ll pardon the expression, “adorkable.” But when the storm blows a tree into Twilight’s home, the two put aside their differences to save the day.

It took me a few days to watch the entirety of the first season, but I did it. All twenty-six episodes. I had to. It was a compulsion. Little did I know that this was just the beginning of a long-term obsession.

I had to tell someone. I had to spread the word.

The day after I finished the first season, I approached a friend, who shall remain nameless as per his wishes. We were in Intro to Video in the computer lab. I asked him to watch the first video.

“Are you sure about this bro?”

“Bro, I’m sure.”

With bated breath I waited as the video loaded and the book appeared on the screen.

“Now,” I whispered, “check this out.”

Ultimately, my friend was not as pulled in by the series as I was. And my obsession remained, but it turned out that I had caught up with the series just as the first season had ended. A second was to be released in the fall of 2011, but what was I to do during those four months until then? How was I to get my fix?

I had no cause for alarm. I soon discovered that there *were* others like me. Lots of others. Not only that, but we had a name. We were called “bronies,” a combination of “bro” and “pony,” which, as it turns out, has become a gender-neutral term: there are women among us as well. There isn’t quite as much of a stigma surrounding the idea of watching it for them, but they *are* adults and this *is* a show viewed mainly by children. I think there’s a reason there aren’t as many of them as male fans, but I’ll get to that later.

Since the show's inception, entire websites had sprung up solely about the colorful equines. People spend their time drawing the ponies, writing stories about them, even writing *music* about them. The amount of fan-made material on the internet is astounding. There are so many of us, and so many sub-communities based on art, analysis, etc., that I would not even call us a fan-base; “sub-culture” is more accurate. One can drown oneself in ponies. Ponychan.net, EquestriaDaily.com, FiMFiction.net, ponibooru.413chan.net; the list is endless.

And on all of them, someone will start an argument over which pony is best. I never would have guessed that one day I'd be defending myself as to why I preferred Fluttershy to Rainbow Dash.

“Bro, Fluttershy is so frigging sweet I took one look at her and got diabetes.”

“Oh, yeah? Can she break the sound barrier? Besides, Dash's dress at the ball was WAY prettier.”

“You're deluding yourself. How could RD possibly be prettier? Fluttershy was the one who became a world-famous fashion model in episode twenty-one WITHOUT EVEN TRYING.”

“Fluttershy is afraid of her own shadow.”

“Rainbow Dash has such a fragile ego that she signed autographs to get publicity WHILE OTHER PONIES' LIVES WERE IN DANGER SHE IS A MONSTER AND I HATE HER AND ALSO YOU A LITTLE BIT GRRRR.”

But those arguments are few and far between. If ponies have taught us anything, it's that the only way to win an argument on the internet is to not have one. It shouldn't surprise anyone that we are often mocked and ridiculed for our hobby. I can't tell you how many times some anonymous belligerent has accused me of being an emotionally stunted man-child online, or that I must be gay, or even accused me of being a pervert who either has some bizarre sexual attraction to the ponies or the little girls whom the show was originally made for. I've had numerous, even less sophisticated insults thrown my way: autist, ponyfag, and, my personal favorite, “horse-f***er.” But we have taken a rather Gandhi-esque approach to such insults. After all, when someone is just trying to get a rise out of you, it's best to just ignore them or, better yet, respond civilly and cheerfully. There's an old (well, not that old) saying I'm quite fond of: even if you win an argument on the internet, you've still lost, because you just wasted precious minutes of your life arguing on the internet.

But as accepting as the community is, it rarely helps the lone adult who finds him or herself just starting out. Often all a person needs are his own doubts and fears to have a difficult time on the path to “joining the herd,” as some of my brethren call it. This *is* My Little Pony we're talking about here. Males are almost always resistant to the idea of even considering watching it. And if they do, they feel embarrassed about it. There is a need to loudly denounce cute and colorful things as much as possible.

“♪My Little Pony, My Little Pony, aaahhhhaaahhhhaaahhhaaa--♪”

“Hey Joe, whatcha singing?”

“Uh, err, nothing, I wasn’t singing, ‘cause, uh, singing is for women and gays FOOTBALL BOOBS GRRRR.”

“...Are you feeling okay, Joe?”

It shouldn’t really come as a surprise that most males who watch the show don’t suddenly lose all vestiges of masculinity or heterosexuality. If a cartoon could do that, someone would have weaponized it by now.

I think the primary reason that the show has spread amongst men, more so than women, is that most fans feel a sense of liberation. It has taken something like this to allow men an environment where it’s okay to enjoy things that are sweet and pure and innocent. I’m not fond of making broad statements about society at large, but if I had to characterize my era, I would call it cynical, mostly with regard to art. It seems like every creative endeavor of this day and age has be “dark,” or “gritty,” or “edgy.” Nothing can be genuinely colorful or cheerful, especially if men are expected to consume it. Some men want action and scantily clad women (if they’re the low-brow type), and some want snarky, subversive, mean-spirited criticisms of anything and everything around them (if they’re the high-brow type). None of them want sunshine or rainbows. That would make them “immature.” That would make them *weak*.

For so long children’s entertainment has been regarded as something for failed creators who can’t make anything good enough for “mature” audiences, and so it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Poor writers, poor producers, poor actors and animators have made poor art. And now, suddenly, like a beacon of purity, here comes a show that is simultaneously bright, innocent, optimistic, and well made. That’s all it took.

In closing, I’d like to leave you with a quotation of C. S. Lewis:

“Critics who treat 'adult' as a term of approval, instead of as a merely descriptive term, cannot be adult themselves. To be concerned about being grown up, to admire the grown up because it is grown up, to blush at the suspicion of being childish; these things are the marks of childhood and adolescence. And in childhood and adolescence they are, in moderation, healthy symptoms. Young things ought to want to grow. But to carry on into middle life or even into early manhood this concern about being adult is a mark of really arrested development. When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up.”