

The Renaissance of Ponies

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If time machines existed (we sure take a long time to invent them, don't we?) and I could travel back a year and a half through time to ask my past self what the word "pony" meant to me, I would probably have said something vague along the lines of "small horse" or "that which all girls stereotypically want". About a year ago, I would probably have said "that which half the internet is talking about". Finally, my present self would give the answer "happiness".

Let's travel back in time again to my childhood. There was occasionally a show on TV called "My Little Pony" (back then translated as "Min lilla ponny"). I've only got vague memories, but what I remember is that it was an incredibly boring and "girly" show where various talking horses in all the colors of the rainbow acted sappy and nothing ever happened. I could never stand watching that garbage and always switched to another channel or did something else. In later years, I learned that the show was actually a glorified ad to make girls buy (read: wish for) their toys. "My Little Pony" wasn't just the name of a TV show (or rather two as there was another – apparently less brain dead – show before my time) but primarily an entire brand of toy ponies from Hasbro. Even if I had known about that, I wouldn't have cared. I mean, who would ever want something that dorky? (This is what they in English call "foreshadowing".)

We'll take a trip forwards in time to about a year ago. It all started with a group of people at an online forum I'm part of began changing their avatars and post layouts to various pony related pictures and that various references and quotes of unknown origin began popping up. However, as it didn't mean anything to me, my brain filtered it away and I didn't reflect on it at all. My actual introduction to – whatever it was – didn't occur until a bit later. A webcomic I frequently read began referring to "something". I wouldn't have had any idea what though, if it wasn't for the web comic artist always adding comments after each comic. There, he mentioned a new TV show: "My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic". The name itself sounded discouraging to say the least. More girly garbage and other cutesy-wootsy things, right? However, he explained that the show was surprisingly good in his opinion, had received critical acclaim and wasn't as stupid as one might think. I doubted it, but got somewhat curious as time went on and he constantly made more references. I also began realizing that this might be what people kept referring to on the forum.

A close friend to me who I know over the internet eventually began talking about this TV show. I assumed he wasn't serious. After all, he and his friends had (for ironic reasons) created a small Hanna Montana fanclub. I also started to become aware of references to the show at other places on the internet. Was what was going on? Why are they all talking about this? Is it some new stupid fad that the entire internet caught on to? After all, that happens all the time.

During this previous summer, I finally gave up. And by "I", I mean my mental barriers. I downloaded the 26 episodes that had been made up to that point. I might as well see what the heck everyone was talking about. I double clicked on the first part of the show's two-part pilot.

"Once upon a time in the magical land of Equestria..." - "This'll suuuuuuuuck."

The episode opens by establishing the fundamental mythology of the world where the show takes place: Two sisters – one controlling the moon and one controlling the sun – found themselves at odds with each other. The moon sister became evil and imprisoned in the moon using the "elements of harmony". Okay, it's not exactly painful – I've seen worse – but this'll probably sting a lot.

The title song plays. Even though I almost never saw the older (crappy) show as a kid, I

immediately recognized that the first notes of the song are directly taken from there, as a tribute to the predecessor. "This'll suuuuuuuuck." Luckily, the rest of the song is original but overly cheesy.

The episode continues by introducing Twilight Sparkle, a unicorn who, as she's an asocial study horse <<the Swedish term for "egghead">> (no pun intended) spends all her time reading and studying. Over the course of the episode, she meets five other ponies – Applejack, a hard-working apple farmer – Rainbow Dash, a competitive and self-centered pegasus – Rarity, a fashion-fixated designer – Fluttershy, a shy animal lover and Pinkie Pie who's as hyper social as she is hyperactive. All five show an interest in getting to know Twilight and become friends, which she initially has absolutely no interest in, but at the end of the second part of the episode realizes the value of and primarily how friendship – in this world literally – is pure magic, hence the name of the show itself. As a summary, it sounds like stupid preaching, but it was actually wrapped pretty well.

I don't quite know why, but I continued on to the next episode. And the next. And the next. I didn't understand why, but I wanted to see more episodes. Could it be that I began recognizing myself a bit in Twilight, an asocial shut-in who spends too much time with intellectual activities? Could her development as a person to accepting and realizing what friendship has to offer have made me admit to myself that I have my own inner and repressed desire for social interaction? Can I also see myself in Fluttershy's inability to function in and outright fear of social situations? Do I come off as as arrogant as Rainbow Dash? Am I not inside as chaotic, hyper energetic and humorous as Pinkie Pie? Can a TV show for kids about talking ponies really have made me reflect over myself as a person and perhaps even act as a role model for a personal evolution? What *is* this?

Aside from the fact that most characters are girls and ponies, it actually hasn't been as terrible as I expected, even slightly funny in places, at least if you look at it from a child's point of view. The characters are lovable and realistic, completely unlike the personality-lacking and completely interchangeable "characters" from the earlier shows. The animation is impressive, especially because it's done through Flash animation, something I myself have experience with and have tried mastering. I normally hate musical numbers in cartoons, but here, there are countless well-made, catchy and memorable songs that only increase in quality as the show goes on, especially during its second season. There are even some jokes and references to more adult things like movies, likely to make it more endurable for parents who are "forced" to watch TV with their kids. The fact that there are also a huge amount of wonderfully quotable lines is also a major bonus. Sure, there are some aspects or episodes that feel a bit too cutsey and childish, but you get used to it and with time, it even becomes a bit charming.

The episodes feel really well-made and – after the two-part pilot – is a mix of adventures and analyses of the different characters' relations with each other, which also results in actual character development. That's actually surprising; a TV show made for little girls that have characters with such a three-dimensional personality that they can actually develop over time. Someone actually put effort into this, unlike most kids shows of today. (However, this makes it even more tragic if one takes a look at the Swedish dub, which appeared to have a budget of 50 cents. So-so voices, full of stupid and inconsistent translation mistakes, awful lyrics, and so on. They managed to completely undermine the quality of the English original, which I luckily watched first.)

"26 episodes. Done." My first impression of them all perhaps wasn't as positive as I've made it out to be. Originally I thought it was "okay, with some aspects I liked". Over the following month, the opinion began to grow within me. I returned to the episodes to watch them again. And again. In the end, I was impatiently waiting for the second season of the show (and I'm currently doing the same for the third). One reason for this was my discovery of the culture that had started to grow around the show. Adult men and women who were fans of the show had begun forming communities online – and created the term *brony* to refer to an adult fan – and began generating heaps of original

material with the TV show as a basis. Covers of the songs, drawings and paintings of the characters and locations (of every type of quality from crap to worthy of museums), fanfiction about primary, secondary and original characters, comics, animations, intellectual discussions about this fantasy world (including an analysis and speculation about how the genetics behind the three races of ponies in the show might work and another one about the possible differences in health problems between the three races as a result of their different life styles and abilities), and so on. The amount of fan generated material is incredible and there are several websites dedicated to this.

In my experience, all sufficiently large groups of fans of works of fiction tend to create their own so-called *fanon*, i.e. collectively accepted secondary facts about the work, created by the fans themselves to interpolate and extrapolate the official information supplied in the work itself. This is in large amounts in the brony community. What's perhaps the most important example – so important that it has become a symbol for the community itself – is the pony Derpy Hooves, originally a nameless background character from the first episode that – likely due to a mistake – was cross-eyed in one scene. She quickly became popular and named by the fans and based on essentially no information at all from the show, her personality, behavior, job and fixation with muffins was extrapolated. From the point of view of the fans, Derpy became the seventh main character of the show, despite the fact that she – to this date – has only interacted with the main characters twice (of which once was indirectly) and has otherwise been relegated to the background. The community's ability and will to – in such a fashion – make a chicken (or rather, pony) out of a feather <<Swedish counterpart to mountain out of a molehill>> is fascinating and one of the reasons why I love it so much; so much energy, passion and will to expand this universe established by the show is inspiring. Two other examples of the same phenomenon is DJ Pon3 who was on-screen for a total of 5 seconds in the first season (without any dialog) and Doctor Whooves who for some reason is interpreted as the pony incarnation of the Doctor from the science fiction series Doctor Who, which also illustrates that there's a lot of wonderful nerdiness in among the fans, even though many aren't necessarily nerds. In other words, I love it.

For me, this whole thing creates a symbiosis. The popularity made me watch the episodes, which made me discover the fan community, which increased my interest for the show, which in turn made me even more interested in the community, and so on in a positive spiral. I can definitely say that my initial cynicism and doubt about the show was completely unfair and unjustified. I've heard the same thing countless times by people who – after watching the series – joins the community and apologizes for ever doubting and sometimes even making fun of the fans. These people are always welcomed with open arms and, according to tradition, offered a cider. This is one of many examples of how warm and kind the My Little Pony community tends to be, something which gives me some light hope for humanity considering that the rest of the internet is full of hatred and malice, especially directed towards the fans of the show. A lot of people criticize us (and yes, I definitely classify myself as part of the community) for various reasons. Common hateful comments include that adult males who like the show must be feminine, homosexual, sexually attracted to ponies or pedophiles. (Don't ask me what the heck that last thing has to do with anything.)

The public's perception, both online and in articles on the subject by uninitiated people, seems to be that if you watch a show for girls, you either have to be unmasculine or be sexually motivated; either way, we're clearly a bunch of weirdos to mock and stay away from. This creates a tragic stigmatization and an incredibly skewed and unfair stereotype of bronies.

We happen to genuinely love a show for girls. Can't you just let us do so? If the argument is that everything made for girls is sappy feminine crap, this is the wrong show to attack. In my opinion, My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic is the ultimate argument against that claim.

The Applejack toy standing next to me agrees.