



Selected Papers of Internet Research 16:
The 16th Annual Meeting of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Phoenix, AZ, USA / 21-24 October 2015

FANBOYS, FANGIRLS, AND GEEKS PANEL

This panel examines the contentious and developing nature of fandom in 21st century media. Within the theme of this year's conference this panel will examine how fandoms reimagine their relationship to the author generated texts and towards one another as a community. Given that fandom is often viewed as a cohesive and joined community, the authors seek to understand the cracks and faults within this idealized concept. By looking at these areas the panel will examine how the view of a homogenized community of fans falls apart. The papers on the panel express a particular interest in the contentious nature of fandom infighting and its relationship to the broader media field. It covers a broad view of different fandom communities, from video games to Supernatural, and will discuss often marginalized or challenged viewpoints and engage in discussions of the relationship between fan, media, and creator.

Dating Amy Farrah Fowler: Essentializing Femininity and Othering Women in STEM

Bridget M. Blodgett
University of Baltimore

Amy Farrah Fowler is one of the standout female characters of The Big Bang Theory. Amy is a dedicated neuroscientist and is often characterized as being the female equivalent to Sheldon's presentation of male geekiness. She is an interesting character for illustrating the problems that women's representation in geek media. Amy is often portrayed as being as smart as Sheldon in an area that is just as hard a science. But when we see her as a character one of her defining traits has been her lack of female friends and the "real" experiences of womanhood.

In the discussion of why there aren't more women game designers in the #1ReasonWhy twitter discussion multiple women in technology reported that others have said they can't actually be women or are so weird their experiences are discounted. Women in STEM fields are strongly othered by the group whose interests they share and also told they can't identify or fit in with other women by those same people (Beede, 2011).

Methods

The authors collected tweets in a spreadsheet using the Twitter Archive Google Spreadsheet (TAGS) template (Hawksey, 2013). The data was collected hourly from

November 26th through November 30th. Through an analysis of dominant @replies and RTs this paper examines the theme of othered womanhood that arose within the #1ReasonWhy hashtag. The authors performed opening coding on the selected text of the collected tweets which resulted in a set of themes which emerged from the data. This coding occurs in an iterative process that is meant to capitalize on the ability to compare the data as it is collected.

Data

A conversation on the marginalization of women in the games industry was started in November of 2012 when a game designer tweeted the question, "Why are there so few lady game creators?" That tweet caught the attention of several female game designers and enthusiasts who started a hashtag to discuss the many different reasons: #1ReasonWhy. Each tweet became a testimonial, and the hashtag's contents added up to a portrait of the industry's systemic discrimination. The hashtag detailed women's experiences with sexism and obstacles that prevent women from joining game development. Tweets about the othering of women and femininity were very common within the discussion. This was observable at both the group level and at the individual level.

Many tweets shared stories about how the category of women was treated by developers within meetings, marketing, and other planning sessions by the gaming industry.

Women and the elderly are synonymous with the concept of "lowest common denominator". #1reasonwhy #respectyouraudience

It was common for women as a group to be labelled as disinterested and unskilled in playing games. Since they aren't part of the core development group their needs and interests are often ignored or seen as being a "special addition" to a game title.

These conceptualizations help to create an idea of the normal or regular community and audience for games that explicitly does not contain women. It allows for women to become a bounded and classified group, separated from the default group of players and producers.

I once watched someone play a commercially successful game that let you pick between "Female" and "Normal." #1reasonwhy

The expression of femininity is seen as being tied to other harmful cultural cues. Often expressions of femininity or feminine interests was cause for the dismissal of women as real participants within the community.

"You're pretty, so I have to remind myself that you can also be intelligent."
#1reasonwhy

For individual women, this dismissal of their group could become quite targeted and harmful to the incorporation of their voices within the community. In particular, for female developers it often lead to their voices being ignored since classification as women and their interest in games mutually exclusive categorizations.

Worked on game with other women, targeting women -- but men on team told us we didn't know what the audience really wanted. #1reasonwhy

I once had product feedback dismissed about a female-targeted game because I "wasn't a normal woman". #1reasonwhy

For a woman to fill both groups is impossible, therefore they must either not be a woman or their interest is not genuine. This places female developers and players within a paradox where they must prove themselves to be sufficiently skilled to surpass the limitations of the femininity but in doing so they invalidate their gender identity.

Because if I succeed, I'm exceptional. And if I fail, I'm proof that women shouldn't be in the industry. #1reasonwhy

Discussion

Amy consistently shows an enthusiasm for stereotypical female experiences that she never received in her early and formative years. The actions that she had instead are usually ones that could be understood as being either masculine or towards masculinized hobbies and her interest in science. This connects and reinforces a strong cultural theme that women who engage with technology and science are unfeminine. As the #1ReasonWhy comments highlighted to having interests within STEM fandoms means relinquishing the right to exist as a woman. Female fans become de-gendered so that the community can include them without experiencing the dissonance caused by the construction of these identity groups.

Within this mindset to be a woman is to engage with all the gendered trappings of the femininity. Women are not seen as having a wide range of varied interests but instead are reduced to a limited set. Media depictions of women in STEM related fields or women having STEM-related interests often help to support this mindset. The main growth arc of the character Amy Farrah Fowler is centered on her fulfilling a secret desire within her cold, logical exterior for the genuine experiences of womanhood. She is not shown as being the scientist who also likes going to dance clubs but as an outsider to this female community that must examine and plan their interactions like they would a lab study.

Amy's depiction within the show is both an accurate summary of how women with STEM interests are often viewed and treated by others (Consalvo, 2008; Nagle, 2013). She also acts as a problematic emblem for women to rally around since her development fails to heal this schism between STEM interests and femininity. Within the show Amy both represents the common problems women face and our inability to move beyond flawed classifications systems that separate the female from the scientific. As a product of culture, the character Amy Farrah Fowler helps to show that the separation of the female-coded from the technical is only natural. She acts as an example for those who wish to exclude women from gaming and software development.

References

Beede, D., Julian, T., Langdon, D., McKittrick, G., Khan, B., & Doms, M. (2011). Women in STEM: A gender gap to innovation. *Economics and Statistics Administration Issue Brief*, 04(11). http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1964782

Consalvo, M. (2008). Crunched by passion: women game developers and workplace challenges. In Y. Kafai (Ed.), *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hawksey, M. (2013). Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet TAGS v5. *CETIS MASHe*. Retrieved from <http://mashe.hawksey.info/2013/02/twitter-archive-tagsv5/>

Nagle, A. (2013). Not Quite Kicking Off Everywhere: Feminist Notes on Digital Liberation. In C. Fowley, C. English, & S. Thouësny (Eds.), *Internet Research, Theory, and Practice: Perspectives from Ireland* (157-175). Dublin, Ireland: Research Publishing.