

Original Finnish article published in Aamulehti Valo, 17 February 2012. Kustannus Oy Aamulehti, Tampere, Finland.

Hilkka Karvonen, text | Aleksii Poutanen, images | Tuukka Taarluoto, translation

# Friendship is Magic

**INTERNET PHENOMENON:** When big boys took to a little girls' cartoon, the result was possibly the most heart-warming fan community in the world. Valo met with a brony from Tampere and travelled to Helsinki for the pony meetup.

**Kristian Koivisto's** living room looks like the living room of any normal 21-year-old guy. The centrepiece of the room is a computer monitor, the black background constantly filling up with text. On the bookshelf, eyes are drawn to words such as *Harry Potter* and *Lost*.

But there's something peculiar adorning the top of the shelf: a small light blue and rainbow-maned My Little Pony toy. Though Koivisto, known to his friends as Metu, calls it a figure.

"Rainbow Dash was initially my favourite mainly because of her rainbow colours. They appealed to me since I'm a member of SETA [the main LGBT rights organisation in Finland]," he says.

Rainbow Dash is not just a toy, but also one of the six main characters of the animated TV show *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*. The 20 minute long episodes of the show follow the adventures of several larger-than-life pony characters in a pastel-coloured fairy tale land called Equestria. Each story also carries its own teaching.

Metu is a brony, an adult fan of the pony series.

He watched his first episode a year ago and was immediately hooked.

"For a children's show, it's very well written, animated and voiced. The music is also outstanding. The show has revolutionised the entire genre of little girls' cartoons," he enthuses.

And the content of the show is nothing to sniff at, either.

"*Friendship is Magic* teaches important values such as caring for one another, accepting those that are different and maintaining a positive attitude to life. These messages apply to adults as well," he knows.

Oh yes, Metu is hardly alone in his enthusiasm. Finland has an estimated 200 to 300 bronies,

and the phenomenon is world-wide.

The IRC chat window visible on Metu's computer monitor displays a steady flow of new messages. The pony community is heatedly discussing the recently leaked new episode and the pony meetup coming up this weekend.

"For many fans, the pony community is much more important than the show itself. The best thing about it isn't the ponies, but rather the people," Metu deposits.

**"They are** open-minded and cool enough and secure in their masculinity enough to embrace it and love it and go online and talk about how much they love it — I'm kind of proud," commented **Lauren Faust**, the creator of the *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* TV series, to Wired magazine last summer.

The pony phenomenon began in a place known for giving birth to several Internet subcultures: the imageboard 4Chan.

In the beginning, the animated children's show was supposed to be just another thing to mock for the forum goers, but soon one cynical heart after another melted in the face of these large-eyed equines. Ire was replaced by admiration.

Similarly, in Finland the admiration for ponies spread on notorious anonymous Internet forums. So in other words, the worship of cuteness and tolerance began in a place many people know as the promised land of hate.

"Anonymous online forums are filled with people who have not quite been able to meet society's expectations. Many of them become hateful and bitter, but there's also a great number of sensitive, creative and emotional people among them. These people want something more out of life than vandalising some politician's web-pages," says Metu and ponders for a moment.

"In a way, ponies are a conduit through which Internet dwellers tired of all the hatred have found each other," he summarises.

**A Saturday afternoon** at the Laajasalo youth centre in Helsinki. The door of the building, adorned with graffiti depicting the Phantom and Batman, has a note stuck to it. The note reads, in garish pink lettering, "Pony Meetup 11.2.!!!"

The door is slightly ajar and I'm a bit nervous stepping in. When the pony community heard about this outside intrusion, their reaction was not completely positive, at least looking at the messages posted on Ponilauta.fi:

"You better make damn sure to read that article before it gets published anywhere. If our reputation is ruined in the very first newspaper article, the game is over," one concerned forum

goer writes.

"I'm gonna stick an anal plug with a horse tail up my ass, don a horse mask and have a pleasant chat with the reporter on how we bronies want to legalise human-pony marriage," another one jokes.

This worry stems from the way American conservative media has reported on bronies. For example a talk show on Fox News claimed that bronies were deliberately dropping out of working life so they could spend their days watching pony pictures and videos.

**"The reporter is here,"** someone shouts at the door.

Inside, my eyes are drawn to colourful pony shirts, my ears pick up on the thumping of a dancing video game and my nose is assaulted by air made thick by the multitude of people.

I had feared that bronies would prove reluctant to give interviews, but those fears are quickly proven unfounded. After seeing a few brave souls chatting with me, suddenly everyone seems to want to get their voice heard. Many want to especially emphasise what brony culture is not:

"It's annoying when people think this is a gay thing, when when most of us are straight. The fact that you like something cute and are tolerant of homosexuality doesn't mean you're gay."

"Some even claim that we have some kind of fetish for ponies."

"And on every pony video on Youtube, there's always someone commenting that bronies are all paedophiles."

The second most popular topic is stories on how people became fans.

"A friend of mine linked me to a pony episode and said "watch it, this is really good stuff!" First I thought "what the hell, ponies? Really?" Then I watched a few episodes and found I just couldn't stop" recalls a 25-year-old guy nicknamed Yondalor.

Meanwhile a 33-year-old father, who's name tag reads "Midnight", tells me that he was watching the show with his kids when he noticed that the series was winking at adult viewers.

"There's a lot of in-jokes there that only older people would pick up on, such as references to *Benny Hill* and *I Love Lucy*," he lists.

**"Going once... going twice... and sold! Luna sold for 75 euros!"**

An auction for customised ponies is underway. Toys of characters such as Princess Luna, who are not sold in stores, go for tidy sums. On the other hand, regular mass-produced toys are in

high demand as well.

Especially around the Helsinki metropolitan area, empty store shelves reserved for collectible ponies are a frequent sight. Any time a store receives a new batch of ponies, information spreads quickly through the pony community and the new toys are snatched up in an instant.

In Eastern Finland, things are a bit easier.

“I buy up all the ponies from the Prisma supermarket in Imatra and sell them at meetups for a loss out of the goodness of my heart”, says an 18-year-old guy who reckons he's the only brony in his home town.

**The auction is over**, and all nine uniquely customised ponies have found happy new owners.

Even happier than them is a dark-haired young man dressed in black. Klonkku [Finnish for Gollum], real name **Jarmo Orasmaa**, made a profit of just under 400 euros off the auction. The Luna figure which went for a record sum was just one of the creations he auctioned off today.

Klonkku's discovery of other bronies exemplifies the mentality of the entire pony community.

“I was amused by the whole pony thing, so I went to some pony chat channel and started trolling, asking people why they were watching ponies, damn morons. But people weren't provoked and even got in on the joke. I felt like I had come home.”

He glances at the pony episode playing on the TV screen of the youth centre, but does not sit down to watch like the others.

“I'm not really that much interested in the ponies themselves. If you ask me, we might as well watch *Pikku Kakkonen* [a popular Finnish children's show aimed at preschoolers] as long as the people are like this. In here everyone can be themselves. You don't need to pretend.”

So it's not just about the ponies, but rather the people.

**\*The next pony meetups will be held in Oulu on 10 March and Jyväskylä on 12 March.**  
**[www.ponimiitti.net](http://www.ponimiitti.net)**

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### What on earth is a brony?

- The word “brony” is a combination of “bro” and “pony”, and refers to the 15-35-year-old fans of the TV series *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*.
- Produced by the toy company Hasbro, the first episode of the new generation pony series premiered on 10 October 2010. The show is not broadcast in Finland.
- The majority of bronies are male. Female fans sometimes refer to themselves as

“pegasisters”.

- Held in New York, the BroNYCon convention has had up to 700 attendees. The last two pony meetups held in Helsinki had around 100 attendees each, of which around 90 were men and around 10 women. The average age of attendees at the February meetup was 20.
- In addition to watching the show, bronies follow and maintain pony blogs and forums, create fanart, remix the show's musical numbers, customise pony figures, host pony radio shows, animate their own pony videos and write fan fiction.
- The longest piece of pony fan fiction, Fallout Equestria, is over 620,000 words long. That's longer than Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace.
- American Patrick Edwards, PhD, conducted a survey in 2011 which was answered by over 2,300 bronies. According to the results, the average age of bronies is 21, 87% of them are male and 63% have a higher education.

## Image captions:

[Pages 1 and 2, big picture]

“The pony community is a very tolerant lot. Seem like the series' teachings have hit their mark,” Kristian “Metu” Koivisto rejoices.

[Page 1, lower right]

Hanna Kataja spent the entire night before the meetup sewing her suit. “I'm into cosplay too and wanted to dress up as one of the characters.”

[Page 2, lower left]

A pony customiser whips up new colours or even sunglasses for an existing character. To bronies, ponies are collectible figures rather than toys.

[Page 2, lower right]

Elisa “Esamon” Halttu feels right at home in the male-centric brony community. “Gender isn't really an issue here.”

[page 3, middle]

Marko Lehtiälä (above) calls himself a promoter of pony music. “There's tons of remixes, ranging from heavy metal to dubstep,” he says. Jarmo “Klonkku” Orasmaa's Luna pony was auctioned for 75 euros.

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Arto “Foxofwar” Mässeli knows to appreciate the small and the beautiful.