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Publication details:
Journal of Children and Media
v. 9
Chapter No. 2
pp. 231 - 247
1748-2798 (ISSN); 1748-2801 (ISSN)

Publication Date:
2015-03-27

Publisher DOI:
https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2015.1024002

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Published online: 27 Mar 2015.

To cite this article: Emma A. Jane (2015) “Gunter's a Woman?!”— Doing and Undoing Gender in Cartoon Network's Adventure Time, Journal of Children and Media, 9:2, 231-247, DOI: 10.1080/17482798.2015.1024002

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2015.1024002
“GUNTER’S A WOMAN?!”—DOING AND UNDOING GENDER IN CARTOON NETWORK’S ADVENTURE TIME

Emma A. Jane

Gender representation in children’s film and television entertainment has long been a source of concern for feminist scholars and media commentators. A common complaint is that many programs continue to depict oppressively narrow versions of normative femininity and masculinity which may contribute to the reproduction of real-life gender-related inequalities. There is, however, far more critique than there is focus on alternative models. This article responds by offering a textual analysis of the American cartoon series Adventure Time as an (unlikely) exemplar of a commercially successful children’s television program which depicts gender in a radically subversive and arguably liberatory manner. By identifying and unpacking the way Adventure Time moves beyond the simplistic inversion of existing gender stereotypes, my aim is to provide a concrete example of some of the ways gender can be portrayed more progressively and equitably in children’s film and television entertainment.

KEYWORDS Adventure Time; gender theory; queer theory; television; textual analysis; media studies; childhood studies; media effects; feminism; transnormativity

Introduction

A large body of scholarly literature has identified both quantitative and qualitative inequities in the depiction of gender in children’s entertainment. Studies of gender stereotypes in popular children’s film and television programs across many cultures show that female characters appear between a quarter and a half as frequently as males (depending on the country and genre of entertainment), and are often presented as hyper-attractive, hyper-sexual, thin, and/or via clichés such as “the helpless blonde or the cheeky red-head” (Götz et al., 2008. See also: Lemish, 2010, pp. 1–7; Smith & Cook, 2008). Engaging with the heated “media effects” debate that exists around the possible ramifications of these patterns on children (see: Lemish, 2010, pp. 16, 77; Livingstone, 2007; Lumby & Fine, 2006; Orenstein, 2011, p. 91) is beyond the scope of this paper. That said, my research is informed by the nuanced position that media texts are likely to have at least some influence on consumers even if this influence is complex and unpredictable (see: Blakemore, Berenbaum, & Liben, 2009, pp. 356–357; Götz, 2013, pp. 187–188). As such, this paper proceeds from the premise that it would be beneficial for children’s film and television entertainment to contain more—and also more diverse—female characters, so as to offer children “a vision of a possible more gender-equal world, a vision ripe with possibilities” (Lemish, 2010, p. xiv).
A useful question at this point is what such a film or television program might look like. The recommendations of Stacy L. Smith and Crystal Allene Cook are that entertainment executives and creators: include more females as primary characters, secondary characters, in crowds, and as narrators; provide female characters with aspirations beyond romance; and develop the inner character of female characters (2008, p. 21). The creation of female characters “as adornment, enticement, or with inclination to romance as the main or exclusive personality trait or motivator” could be replaced by “diverse, complicated females who initiate and/or actively participate in their destinies” (Smith & Cook, 2008, p. 12). Suggestions such as these are extremely helpful. They are also extremely rare. Dafna Lemish, for instance, recalls her dissatisfaction and frustration with the large number of scholarly critiques of existing gender representations, and seemingly endless calls for more equal and humane gender portrayals:

bookshelves are laden with critical analyses of gender portrayals in popular media . . . But I could hardly find an answer to the “what next” question; that is, we know what we do NOT want to see, but DO we know what we WANT to see? Does it have to be the case that academics are much better at critiquing existing images than we are at making practical recommendations for how to do things better? (2010, xiv)

This article offers one approach to responding to the “what next?” question. Rather than making abstract recommendations, however, it will engage in an ostensive exercise by focusing on a popular and influential children’s program – Adventure Time—which, as I hope to show, is already portraying gender in a subversive and liberatory fashion. This continues a casuistic approach I have used elsewhere (see: Jane, 2012, 2014) in that, rather than beginning with an abstracted definition of what “equal” or “humane” gender representations might look like, helpful progress can be made by examining exemplars of what we believe a phenomenon to be. Our conception of the phenomenon—in this case, progressive representations of gender in children’s media entertainment—can then be built up by aggregating and extrapolating from these particulars.

My primary aim in identifying, categorising, and analysing Adventure Time’s often quite radical approaches to representing gender is to provide a useful model for those scholars, activists, and entertainment producers interested in what a real world exemplar of “gender progressive” or “gender positive” children’s entertainment might look like. Adventure Time’s commercial success and international popularity make it a particularly apt example given that producers of children’s television are regarded by industry insiders as being more likely to respond to profit-driven arguments for advancing change rather than those driven by appeals to social responsibility (Lemish, 2010, pp. 172–173). The fact that Adventure Time and its multi-dimensional characters are so popular among children also disrupts the common assumption that children’s “natural” taste will draw them to “simplistic stereotypes rather than complex, rounded characters” (Davies, Buckingham, & Kelley, 2000, p. 6). Again, it is hoped these observations have the potential to pique television producers’ interest in investing in more children’s programming of this kind.

A secondary aim of this paper relates to the fact that Adventure Time has received (to the best of my knowledge) no coverage in academic work.² This is surprising given that, in addition to its unusual treatment of gender, this children’s series is extremely sophisticated—perhaps even groundbreaking—in terms of its exploration of themes as diverse as race and difference, philosophy and existentialism, ethics and morality, and power and consent. Its addressing of issues relating to mental illness, mortality, memory,
and fandom also offer a rich source of cultural diagnostics. A secondary aim of this paper, therefore, is to kick start what will hopefully be a longer and far broader scholarly conversation about the program.

The methods used for this research project have autoethnographic origins. For several years now, my daughter (currently aged 8 years) and I have watched two, 11-min episodes of Adventure Time every morning before breakfast while I drink a cup of coffee and she drinks a glass of milk. At first, we dipped in and out of episodes without regard for the continuity of the show’s seasons. In early 2013, however, I came to an astounding realization: after many years of suffering through children’s television programs my daughter loved and I loathed, I had finally discovered a television series I seemed to enjoy as much as she did. At this point, I purchased digital copies of all the available Adventure Time seasons and my daughter and I began watching chronologically from episode one of season one, downloading the final episodes of season five as they became available in Australia. We have since watched all 156 episodes of the first five series in chronological order three times over, and are currently engaged in our fourth, complete season one-to-season five cycle.

Initially, I found the surreal nature of the program—as well as its many intra-show jokes—somewhat alienating. Very quickly, however, I became intrigued and captivated by the series’ approach to gender, as well as its absurdist humor, its dark subtexts, its emotional intelligence, its posing of (often unanswerable) philosophical questions, its quirky word play, and its fluid depictions of identity. I commenced a formal research project in mid-2013, and have devoted the second and third viewing cycles of Adventure Time’s six seasons to note-taking and qualitative coding, using Stuart Hall’s work on representation (1997), and Judith Butler’s contributions to gender and queer theory (2010) as my primary theoretical lenses. I then returned to certain key episodes in order to engage in close readings. My approach is grounded in textual analysis and involves investigating and making a case for “likely interpretations” (McKee, 2005, pp. 83–117) rather than engaging in audience research. Further research using the latter to investigate both children and adults’ sense-making practices in relation to Adventure Time would be extremely useful.

Theoretically, my work is informed by the anti-essentialist position that cultural identity is continually being produced within the vectors of similarity and difference including identifications not just of gender, but of class, sexuality, age, ethnicity, nationality, politics, morality, and religion—all discursive positions which are unstable, shifting, and intersecting (Barker, 2012, p. 233). While the focus of this paper is on gender analysis (and sexual orientation read in relation to gender regulation [Butler, 2010, pp. xi–xv]), I acknowledge the limits of using gender as an exclusive category of analysis. As Butler points out, for example, the categories of gender and race “always work as background for one another, and . . . often find their most powerful articulation through one another” (2010, p. xvii). While this paper does touch on issues relating to identity projects which are not solely—or primarily—gender-related, I have kept its primary focus on gender and sexuality for the purpose of providing the most focused possible analyses of these particular elements of the program. It is obvious, however, that Adventure Time would offer a wealth of material for future scholarly work on other aspects of identity construction such as those involving race and ethnicity.

This article begins with an introduction to the basic premises of Adventure Time which—as animated entertainment—falls into a category of children’s programs that has been identified as being more problematic than live action with regards to representations
of gender (Smith & Cook, 2008, pp. 18–19). It addresses some concerns that have been raised about the program’s suitability for children, before sketching a number of key female, male, and ambiguously gendered characters. Discussion then commences about the significance of the series’ emphasis on metamorphoses (as opposed to makeovers), as well as its use of scenes involving found families, male-on-male hero crushes, and homoeroticism. These sketches reveal marked variations on stereotypical representations of gender in terms of characters’ personalities, appearances, social roles, interpersonal relationships, and identities. This leads to my overall conclusion that the series’ subversion of gender-related stereotypes is likely to be particularly effective in advancing visions of gender equity and diversity because its variations from dominant gender-related norms are not simple inversions of existing gender stereotypes but involve profoundly imaginative reinventions. It is argued that Adventure Time’s social androgyny and “transnormativity” serve as useful models not only for the depiction of gender in children’s television, but for the more general task of negotiating and disarming stereotypes via an effective “politics of representation” (Hall, 1997, p. 226)

Theoretical Fightonomics in the Land of Ooo

Adventure Time was created by the American animator, writer, and producer Pendleton Ward and began airing on Cartoon Network in the United States from 2010. It is also screened in Australia, New Zealand, India, South Africa, Southeast Asia, the UK, and Ireland. At the time of writing, it spanned 182 episodes over six series.5 The award-winning series is one of Cartoon Network’s most popular programs (Clark, 2012) and draws two to three million viewers per week (Feeney, 2013). The premiere episode of its sixth season in the United States on 14 April 2014, for instance, scored the most-watched telecast to date in that year among the 2-to-11 and the 9-to-14 demographics (Kondolojy, 2014). In addition to being popular with children, Adventure Time has a dedicated, global, adult fan base ranging from “college co-eds … to teenagers in the Middle East watching through scrambled Internet” (Feeney, 2013). The program’s appeal to both children and adults is reminiscent of that of The Simpsons, in that its characters, storylines, and dialogue work on multiple levels. A child may enjoy its slapstick humor and recurring fart jokes, for instance, while an older viewer might smile wryly at the appearance not of werewolves, but “why-wolves”—creatures “possessed by the spirit of inquiry and bloodlust” (Osborne, Yang, & Muto, 2010). Asked about this crossover appeal, Ward’s explanation is that Adventure Time’s makers primarily write the show to entertain themselves:

Sometimes I recognize a joke that reminds me of something that I would’ve busted up at as a kid. I’m happy when I see those kinds of jokes. Because the show is for kids more than anyone else, but most of the time we … are just trying to crack ourselves up and trying not to worry about much other than that. (Ward, as cited in Ewalt, 2011)

Ward’s comment about the program being driven by the senses of humor and values of its makers (as opposed to, say, network audience research) helps explain why the show is praised for being sincere and free from cynicism (Feeney, 2013). It also comports with research revealing a longstanding tendency for children to prefer watching programs that are not specifically made for them (Davies et al., 2000, p. 6).

Adventure Time is set in the post-apocalyptic Land of Ooo about a 1,000 years after a devastating global battle known as the Mushroom War. While precise details are still

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5 The series ended in 2018 after ten seasons.
emerging, this armageddon appears to have wiped out all but one human: Finn, a brave and righteous 12-year-old boy who ages over the series. Finn lives in a tree house fort with his best friend and adopted brother Jake, a magical yellow dog who talks and has the inexplicable ability to stretch his body so that it changes size, shape, and mass. The rest of the inhabitants of Ooo comprise a stunning range of mutated life forms, monsters, magical beings, and relentlessly odd princesses.

Given that *Adventure Time*’s two lead characters are male adventurers who spend at least part of their time battling villains and rescuing female royals, an unfamiliar observer could be forgiven for assuming the program simply offers more of the same in terms of representations of gender. A closer look, however, reveals that Finn and Jake are part of an expansive ensemble cast of characters who are anything but stereotypical and who populate a program which subverts many traditional gender-related paradigms. As I will show, the latter is achieved via:

- the inclusion of roughly equal numbers of female and male characters in protagonist, antagonist, and minor roles;
- the inclusion of a significant number of characters who have multiple and/or indeterminate genders;
- the use of gendered “design elements” (King, 2010) such as eyelashes and facial hair to illustrate character traits rather than as blunt, gender-signaling instruments;
- the distribution of traits such as intelligence, courage, loyalty, power lust, sentimentality, selfishness, altruism, artistic temperament, and a “gross” sense of humor equally among characters regardless of gender;
- the privileging of extended or “found” families (often including members of other species) over nuclear family arrangements;
- the deployment of characterisations and plot devices which frame gender and identity as being fluid rather than fixed; and
- the inclusion of queer and transgender sub-texts.

Given that I am offering *Adventure Time* as an exemplar of children’s television, before continuing I will briefly sketch—and partially defend—some concerns that have been raised about the series by parents and commentators in the media. In the United States, *Adventure Time* is rated TV-PG, a category which recommends parental guidance with younger viewers on account of the presence of moderate violence, sexual situations, infrequent coarse language, and/or suggestive dialogue (V-Chip: Viewing Television Responsibly). There exists, however, a relatively small sector of discourse about the program claiming that even with the recommended adult supervision, *Adventure Time* is “wildly inappropriate” for children (Rosenbaum, 2013). These protests usually center on the series’ depictions of violence, sex, and frightening situations. One objector points to the recurring themes of “post-apocalyptic death and peril”, as well as its “hauntingly arbitrary elements” and “off-color humor” (Luxton, 2013). Criticism has also been leveled at its use of “freaking” as an adjective (jilliemarie13 commenting on ncollier89, 2010), and “gateway language” such as “sucks” (*Adventure Time*, n.d.).

My conclusion after studying *Adventure Time* is that its content is in alignment with its TV-PG rating. Further, at least some of its violence, sexual references, and “off-color humor” help to support and advance its subversive representations of gender. While *Adventure Time* does contain some relatively graphic brutality, it is significant that this is an equal opportunity phenomenon. As such, the female characters’ proficiency in battle resonates
with those cultural narratives—celebrated by third-wave feminism in the early years of the twenty-first century—which depict adventurous “girl heroes” engaging in trial and combat as courageously and skillfully as their male counterparts (Hopkins, 2002, pp. 3–4). That said, as I will go on to demonstrate, Adventure Time’s representation of gender moves beyond the “girl hero” trope because its female characters’ ability to fight is portrayed as part of their complex personalities, rather than as their defining characteristic.

The violence in Adventure Time is also tempered by the characters’ equally strong interest in cultural pursuits, friendship and community bonds, as well as their deep respect for the life of the mind. Indeed, themes relating to science, philosophy, knowledge, and scholarship are recurring motifs. One episode, for example, includes a surreal university scenario in which a professor of “theoretical fightonomics” challenges his students to determine the winner in a battle between Nietzsche’s Übermensch and Mandroid. The same episode includes a science barbecue in which a visiting scholar delivers a paper about the future of cuteness (Muto, Sugar, & Leichliter, 2011b). Some critics might argue that while these references to the cerebral might provide a counterbalance to the violence, they are, in turn, offset by the program’s relentless stream of farting, burping, and bodily fluid-producing. (In the first episode of season one, for instance, the program’s lead female character, Princess Bubblegum, adds a few drops of explosive diarrhea into a “decorpsinator” serum designed to reanimate the dead.) Once again, however, it is significant that both male and female characters are depicted picking their noses, passing wind, vomiting, and so on, thus contributing to Adventure Time’s socially androgynous ambience.

Complaints that Adventure Time is inappropriately sexualized (see: multiple comments on Adventure Time, n.d.) are, by my reckoning, misguided. Sexual contact between characters in the series is limited to kissing, and is primarily viewed from the perspective of the pre-pubescent Finn whose reactions seem entirely age appropriate. Despite having a longstanding crush on Bubblegum, he is intensely ambivalent about the prospect of physical intimacy. In one, early episode, for instance, he is so revolted by the prospect of a romantic couples drive-in movie night he literally vomits during a smooching scene in the film and leaves to run with a wolf pack with his close, platonic friend, Marceline the Vampire Queen.7 Ward, however, has said he deliberately included some “romance stuff” in Adventure Time in response to what he perceives as a dearth of such material in children’s animation: “I think most children do dig on relationship stories. Boys and girls. Even if it’s mushy. It’s so easily relatable to all ages” (as cited in DeMott, 2010).

“That Would Mean that the Babylons Would Fluctuate with the Piranha-Nanosphere!”—Femininities in Adventure Time

Adventure Time’s central female protagonist is Princess “Bonnibel” Bubblegum, the ruler of the Candy Kingdom and the character with the most political power in the series. While she is attractive, Bubblegum’s defining characteristic is not her appearance but her status as a ruler, a scientist, and an inventor. Multilingual and in possession of a genius IQ and superhuman strength, she is an indefatigable defender of her kingdom—though her leadership style tends to be patronisingly paternalistic and she is known to experiment on her subjects in a morally suspect fashion. At various junctures, Bubblegum is rescued by Finn and Jake, but she returns the favor by repeatedly saving them in battles which require not just the use of her mind, but the deployment of her keen hand-to-hand combat skills.
While Bubblegum displays no contemporaneous interest in romance, there are strong hints of a previous lesbian relationship between her and Marceline the Vampire Queen. More will be said on this and other queer connections in *Adventure Time* later in this paper.

Bubblegum confounds three of the key characteristics Smith and Cook identify as problematic in relation to female protagonists in G-rated films (2008, pp. 16–18) in that: she is not valued primarily for her appearance; she does not long for one-dimensional love; and she does not have short-sighted aspirations (in fact, she has slightly creepy aspirations for immortality). Bubblegum comports with Smith and Cook’s suggestions for more gender-positive representations in that she is “active, diverse, and complex” (2008, p. 12). During a dance with a valentine-shaped suitor during a royal function, for instance, her only interest is in conversation about ancient technology—specifically, she wonders about the possibility of using a “balbalonic laser to align the hybernotalist rift in the bubaflon plasmodial formation”, and whether the “babylons would fluctuate with the piranhananosphere” (You, Jimenez, & Leichliter, 2010b).

*Adventure Time* is also home to a multitude of other unorthodox female royals. Far from the limiting stereotypes proliferating in what has been dubbed “princess culture” (Orenstein, 2011), its princesses are heterogeneous, morally ambiguous, not always likable, and sometimes physically odd or repulsive. Embryo Princess, for instance, is a purple-veined human fetus and lives in a pink amniotic sac, while Princess Princess Princess has five heads on one mutated body, Hot Dog Princess looks like a daschund and smells like old hot dog water, and Muscle Princess makes a point of wearing a bad hairdo so it does not distract from her muscles (which are larger and more well defined than most of the program’s male characters). Lumpy Space Princess, meanwhile, is a mass of purple blobs, has a conspicuously masculine voice—provided by Ward—and is often homeless. Her self-esteem and body confidence, however, are unshakeable.

In a nut shell, *Adventure Time’s* princesses present very differently to the dominant representations of female characters in children’s film and television as “impeccably beautiful” (Götz et al., 2008, p. 4), or hypersexualized via “an overemphasis on attractiveness and sexuality by way of clothing (i.e., alluring attire), and body proportions (i.e. uncharacteristically small waist, hourglass figure, thinness)” (Smith & Cook, 2008, p. 14). In fact, many of the princesses in *Adventure Time* are so physically surreal they disrupt the possibility of gendered readings altogether. Given the popularity of princess-themed entertainment and merchandise in popular children’s culture (see: Orenstein, 2011; Smith & Cook, 2008, p. 16), it is heartening that a series which contains so many unorthodox portrayals of female royals is so popular among young viewers.

“*I Am Into It! It’s, Like, Gossamer!*”—Masculinities in *Adventure Time*

*Adventure Time’s* male characters—like its female characters—differ from traditional stereotypes in many respects. Finn, the series’ main protagonist, is a hero whose multidimensionality, complexity, and frailties are a far cry from the dominant tropes associated with masculine leads. Apart from a high-pitched scream, Finn is color blind and terrified of the ocean. As with most other *Adventure Time* characters, Finn’s strong affection for and loyalty to his friends (of all genders and species) take priority over his romantic interests. That said, he spends a lot of time moping about whether various females in the kingdom are interested in him, and he sometimes feels confused and overwhelmed by the physical and emotional transformations he undergoes as puberty approaches. While Finn is
a skilled adventurer and warrior, his role as Ooo’s greatest champion also involves providing unorthodox assistance that does not comport with normative masculine stereotypes. In one episode, he willingly takes on the role of surrogate bird mother by chewing apple and vomiting it into the mouths of baby hatchlings. In another, he happily kisses a male “mega frog” in order to transform it back into a prince called Prince Huge.

Jake the dog is Finn’s loving but flawed and often misguided mentor. Aged somewhere between his late 20s and early 30s, Jake is a retired criminal and former gang member, who struggles with recklessness, inconsistency, laziness, and irresponsibility as he attempts to live up to Finn’s exacting moral standards. Yet while Jake’s emotional maturity varies, he does manage to sustain a steady—and seemingly quite adult—relationship with Lady Rainicorn, a unicorn-rainbow being who speaks (mostly untranslated) Korean and shares Jake’s love of viola. Jake is devoted to his offspring—five rainicorn–dog hybrids, though their rapid maturation and independence leave him heartbroken as he had hoped for a hands-on role as a parent. Cooking, meanwhile, borders on a spiritual obsession for Jake, and he takes enormous pride in his meticulous preparation of traditional Korean dishes such as *bibimbap* and *doenjang jjigae*. In various episodes, Jake is depicted enjoying wearing make-up, cross dressing, and/or role playing as female characters. On one occasion, he takes great pleasure in wearing the Armour of Zeldron which was designed for a female form and which sports pink horns, two blonde plaits and golden breast plates with large spaces for breasts. On another, he and Finn are bestowed with wizard cloaks which Finn observes are actually dresses. “Yeah!” Jake agrees. “And I am into it! It’s, like, gossamer!” (Youn, Browngardt, Muto, & Leichliter, 2010). These vignettes underline the way the textured nature of Jake’s character cannot easily be mapped onto the masculine stereotypes usually found in children’s media entertainment.

In the initial seasons, *Adventure Time’s* central antagonist is the Ice King—an elderly, blue-skinned man who was once a human scientist but who was transformed into a wizard by a magical crown. Many aspects of the Ice King’s appearance and personality deviate from mainstream depictions of male villains. He is a serial kidnapper of princesses but—despite a one-off fantasy about forming an elite army of wives with which to take over the world—his primary motivation is loneliness rather than malice. The Ice King spends prolonged periods in a depressed state and has a fatherly fondness for Marceline, a compulsive diary-keeping habit, and an obsession with Finn and Jake that he sublimes by writing gender-swapped fan fiction about the pair (I will have more to say on this in the next section). In yet another departure from gender-related norms, the Ice King worries about his appearance more than any other character in the program, and has multiple body image issues. Both a villainous and sympathetic character, his status shifts gradually from enemy to “frenemy” to friend. This can be viewed as yet another example of *Adventure Time’s* fluid approach to social role and identity.

**BMO, Gunter, and the Transgender Cookie**

Arguably even more progressive than *Adventure Time’s* transgressive depiction of female and male characters is its inclusion of eight recurring characters of indeterminate and/or poly gender. The most central of these is BMO, a sentient video game console and multi-tasking computer who lives with Finn and Jake, shares the domestic duties, and is a fiercely protective friend. For the most part, BMO is referred to as a “he,” however, s/he is conspicuous voiced by a Korean-accented woman, is addressed via various feminized...
terms such as “M’ Lady”, and also sings about being pregnant. BMO’s romantic interests are revealing in that they include a masculine (or at least a masculine-sounding) bubble, and—in a fantasy—a lipstick-wearing chicken called Lorraine. In short, BMO does not have a strictly assigned gender, self-identifies as both male and female, and loves other ambiguously gendered beings. Further, BMO’s blissful existence on a non-binary gender continuum is not radicalized by either her/his friends or by the filmmakers (Rugnetta, 2013). As I will go on to discuss at greater length, s/he epitomises the series’ spirit of transnormativity.

The gender of Gunter the penguin—the Ice King’s personal servant and constant companion—is similarly multivalent. While Gunter is referred to as a “he” and is voiced by a male actor, the Ice King refers to the penguin affectionately via feminized pet names. Then, in the second season, Gunter endures “the horrible miracle of birth” and produces an egg out of which hatches a glowing pink kitten. This prompts Jake to exclaim, “Gunther’s a woman?!”, and the Ice King to reply, “What? No!” The Ice King then briefly inspects Gunter’s genital region before putting her/him aside and saying to Finn and Jake: “Fuh. Anyway, get out of my house or I’ll kill you, etcetera” (Muto, Sugar, & Leichliter, 2011a). Like the rest of Ooo’s inhabitants, he has better things to think about than the biological sex and gender orientations of the creatures who share his world.

In summary, BMO and Gunter disrupt the dominant tendency for visual media “to present characters that can be assigned to one of the two gender categories—be they humans, cartoon figures, animals, or science fiction characters” (Lemish, 2010, p. 1). They are also representative of Adventure Time’s anti-essentialist sensibility, in that neither gender nor identity are presented as fixed. Additional examples include several episodes in which all the characters appear in a gender-swapped form in what turns out to be a manifestation of the Ice King’s fan fiction. There is also an episode which begins with a hostage drama involving a (male) chocolate chip cookie who desperately wants to live as a (female) princess. This aligns with ideas in gender theory that gender is not something one is born with but is something that is done or performed and is therefore in a state of flux (cf.: Butler, 2010; & Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

**Makeovers Versus Metamorphoses**

Another aspect of Adventure Time which varies markedly from much other children’s entertainment is its embracing of plot developments involving metamorphoses as opposed to makeovers. Smith and Cook, for instance, note the frequency with which female protagonists in G-rated films must undergo some sort of “overhaul of their outer shell” prior to their introduction to society: “A social presentation, particularly after an extreme makeover, encourages the gaze of other characters and viewers and can reinforce the idea that females are most important in their function as adornments” (2008, p. 17). Adventure Time differs in that almost all its characters—that is, not just its female leads—are subject to radical physical alteration on a regular basis. These transformations are not beauty-related makeovers but grotesque metamorphoses resulting from misadventure. In various episodes, Bubblegum goes green and bald, melts in toxic waste, and is possessed by a powerful undead being. Finn spends time as a giant foot, while Jake succumbs to a hideously disfiguring condition called the “lumps”, and—on another occasion—is cursed with a man–baby body.
Rather than promoting makeovers as an approved method for female characters to render themselves more beautiful and achieve upward mobility, *Adventure Time’s* take on physical change is to present grotesquely morphing bodies in a manner which—as Emily Nussbaum observes in the *New Yorker* (2014)—is suggestive of “both the horrors of adolescent bodies and postwar mutations.” These multiple metamorphoses also serve to highlight the program’s framing of identity (like its framing of gender) as being fluid and performed rather than fixed and permanent. Many episodes, for example, feature characters engaged in extended sessions of role play, such as the episode BMO spends pretending to be a hard boiled crime noir detective, and the episode Finn spends living as “Davey,” a balding, middle-aged man who is not a famous adventurer but a nobody who works regular hours in a broom store.

**Found Families, Hero Crushes, and Homoeroticism**

Ooo’s normative social unit is that of platonic friendship, with close relationships existing between characters of mixed genders, ages, ranks, and species. Nuclear family groupings are rare, and bonds between biological kin are often depicted as loving but strained. In contrast, emotional connections and living arrangements based on “families of choice” or “found” families are celebrated. While the term “found family” is being used metaphorically here, many of the domestic units in the series are based on characters literally “finding” other characters. Time and again, older or stronger beings find—and then care for, provide homes for, or permanently adopt—lost or abandoned babies, children or otherwise vulnerable members of various species. Finn was found by Jake’s mother lying in his own faeces on a leaf, while flashbacks show that the pre-evil Ice King found Marceline abandoned as a child and become her loving guardian. From a gender perspective, these aspects of *Adventure Time* are relevant because they depict both female and male characters choosing living arrangements—and roles within those living arrangements—according to individual preference rather than in accordance with stereotypical societal demands about how females and males ought to behave.

It is also relevant to note *Adventure Time’s* playfulness with regards to the deployment of gendered signifiers relating to domesticity. Cleaning, for example, occurs in several male fantasies about domestic bliss. In one episode, Jake gazes into a crystal ball and is euphoric when he glimpses a future vision of him and Finn washing dishes together in their tree fort. Similarly, when the Ice King builds a monster wife out of body parts stolen from other princesses, his priority activities as a couple include sitting down to enjoy a family meal and then—as he and his bride wash the dishes together—excited discussion about the benefits of soaking pans overnight. These visions of male characters enjoying the quotidian pleasures offered by the domestic sphere are not played for laughs but are simply presented as normal parts of the daily lives of heroes and villains.

While friendship is the primary relationship model in *Adventure Time*, the program does include a number of romantic connections which subvert those gender stereotypes associated with heteronormativity. The most obvious is the aforementioned lesbian relationship hinted at between Bubblegum and Marceline—a bond celebrated by queer activists as providing an accurate, relatable and sensitive representation of female friendship and romance, as well as an “understated, un-tokenized” representation of a homosexual partnership:
Contrary to the vast majority of television and film, the budding romance doesn’t feel like a ratings-grabbing or demographic-pleasing gesture, and it is instead given the same treatment that would automatically be given to any on-screen heterosexual relationship. (Phillips, 2013)

Part of the liberatory potential of this portrayal lies in the fact that a possible lesbian or bisexual orientation is figured as just one of many aspects of a personality, rather than as a defining characteristic.

Other dimensions of Adventure Time which unsettle heteronormativity include its depiction of “bromances” and male-on-male hero crushes, as well as a degree of homoeroticism. An example of the latter can be found in the episode in which an ostensibly male mountain forced to watch a band of hyper-masculine marauders engage in perpetual roughhousing complains that: “It’s raunchy and maddening! All those men and their disgusting, fantastic bodies!” In response, Finn and Jake persuade the marauders to give up roughhousing for petting each other (Youn, Jimenez, & Leichliter, 2010a). Jake, meanwhile, seems particularly open to various forms of intimacy with other male characters. In one episode, he confesses that he has a secret crush on an aging warrior called Billy. In another, his foot “pops” back while he is being kissed on the lips by a male character called Death. As online Adventure Time fan communities have noted, this is similar to what occurs when women are kissed “in old cinema and TV kissing” and “is meant to signify the woman’s enjoyment of the kiss” (Death in Bloom, n.d.). While it would be a stretch to describe Jake as actively bisexual, these scenes do depict a male lead who is entirely unthreatened by—and sometimes quite enjoys—having strong feelings for and engaging in physical contact with other males.

In summary, there is good evidence to support “queer” as a descriptor for Adventure Time. This is in line with Arlene Stein and Kenneth Plummer’s description of the hallmarks of queer theory as including “the problematization of sexual and gender categories, and of identities in general”, as well as “a politics of carnival, transgression and parody” (1994, p. 182). Adventure Time’s queer subtexts also support this paper’s central focus on gender, following Butler’s case that non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis because “normative sexuality fortifies normative gender” (2010, p. xi).

“Girls that Are Normal, Just Like Finn Is Normal”—Towards Transnormativity and an Effective Politics of Representation

Lemish’s lament over the dearth of practical recommendations for portraying gender in more equal and humane ways in children’s television points to a far broader problem: namely, the difficulty of disarming oppressive stereotype given that simple inversion strategies tend to preserve the unhelpful binaries that gave rise to such stereotypes in the first place. This quandary is noted by Hall in his work on representing difference and “otherness” in popular culture and the mass media (1997). Interrogating different strategies designed to intervene in the field of representation to contest “negative” images, Hall observes that presenting “positive” images does have the advantage of “righting the balance” because they invert the binary opposition, privilege the subordinate term, and sometimes read the negative as positive (1997, p. 272). That said, the problem with the “positive/negative strategy” is that the binaries remain in place and meanings continue to
be framed by them (p. 274). Further, attempting to rectify stereotyped depictions of gender in children’s entertainment via simple role reversal is likely to fail not only politically, but also artistically. A character whose defining characteristic is that they either weep or fight or make origami cranes or disco dance or possess ice ninja skills or beat box or play the flute, is unlikely to be as satisfying as a character like Finn who does all seven (as well as much else).

These sorts of dilemmas are certainly noted by Ward who observes that most female characters on children’s TV are monodimensional in that they are either “dumb or incredibly smart . . . really girly or incredibly tough” (as cited in Mumford, 2012). While Ward notes that “the easiest thing to do is the opposite: girl power, making them extremely intelligent or extremely tough”, he says his aim in Adventure Time is “to make girls that are normal, just like Finn is normal” (as cited in Anders, 2012). Ward adopts similar language when explaining that—contra the usual convention of constantly pitting male leads against each other—he wants Adventure Time to be “a show about two cool friends who could talk like normal friends do, and have normal friend conversations . . . Two buds who spend time together” (as cited in Anders, 2012).

Ward appears to be using “normal” here not in the normative sense (this is how girls and boys should be) but as a descriptor for the complex and non-stereotypical personalities of real life children (this is how girls and boys are). Thus, his low-key remarks about wanting to portray “normal” characters are extremely revealing and convey meaning on a number of levels. As we have seen, Adventure Time’s many variations on dominant, gender-related norms are presented as unexceptional within the Adventure Time universe—thereby issuing a strong invitation for viewers to also see such variations as normal. In fact, if we use Sally Hine’s definition of “transgender” as denoting “a range of gender experiences, subjectivities and presentations that fall across, between or beyond stable categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Hines, 2010, p. 1), the program could well be described as “transnormative”, in that it is normalizing the types of experiences, subjectivities, and presentations to which Hines refers.

Returning to the treatment of gender stereotypes in Adventure Time, it is important to note that while this series does contain some emotional males and bellicose females, these attributes are context-related rather than defining characteristics. As Finn puts it when Jake accuses him of being a cry baby: “I don’t even cry much. I only cry when it’s healthy, like when people die . . . If I didn’t cry when people died, I’d have a cold butt for a heart” (Ward, Muto, Allegri, & Leichliter, 2012). Similarly, while Princess Bubblegum is a skilled scientist, she is also a “goofball, and her experiments are wacky” (Ward, as cited in Anders, 2012). Gender in Adventure Time is not rendered irrelevant so much as reimagined, in that characters contemplate but are not constrained by gender. Critics may argue that the use of any stereotypical gendered signifiers (such as Finn’s preference for blue and Bubblegum’s penchant for pink) risks reinscribing these stereotypes. Yet while presenting an imaginative landscape where there are no identifiable genders or gendered signifiers may have advantages, so does constructing a world where some characters are recognisably female or male, yet whose character traits, strengths and weaknesses, and favorite pastimes are personality—rather than gender-based.

In this sense, the representation of gender in Adventure Time aligns closely with Butler’s ideas about the difficulties and dangers of pronouncing exactly what is and is not a subversive expression of gender. Butler makes a distinction between descriptive and normative accounts, arguing that the “effort to name the criterion for subversiveness will always fail, and ought to” (2010, pp. xxii–xxiii). This paradox, however, is not an excuse for
failing to question the delimiting power of normative gender presumptions altogether, but
instead offers an opportunity to understand that

what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and
revisable reality. Call it subversive or call it something else. Although this insight does not
in itself constitute a political revolution, no political revolution is possible without a radical
shift in one’s notion of the possible and the real. (Butler, 2010, p. xxiv)

As with Butler’s stated goal in Gender Trouble (2010), Adventure Time’s cast of odd and
sometimes ambiguously or multiply gendered characters (who engage in odd and
ambiguous or multiple relationships) is not a form of prescription: “subvert gender in the
way that I say, and life will be good” (Butler, 2010, p. xxii). Instead, the program opens “the
field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be
realized” (2010, p. viii).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate how Adventure Time unsettles gender
binaries, namely, through non-stereotyped, and trans- and multi-gendered characters, as
well as via cross-dressing, role play, and exaggerated displays of masculinity and femininity
as performance. This aligns with the non-essentialist position that gender identity and
sexual preference are not essential and fixed but performed and fluid. The subversion of
gender-related stereotypes in Adventure Time is likely to be particularly effective in terms of
offering more equitable and progressive visions of gender for two central reasons. First, its
richly surreal array of characters and contexts involves imaginative play with various aspects
of gender rather than a simple inversion of pre-existing stereotypes. Its action unfolds in a
fantasy dimension where the usual “laws” of gender binaries—like the usual laws of
physics—simply do not apply. Second, these characters and contexts are not radicalized or
even commented on by other characters, but are rendered entirely ordinary and
unexceptional within the Adventure Time universe.

As such, in addition to providing a corrective to current gender-related imbalances in
children’s entertainment, Adventure Time serves as an exemplar for those groups looking for
tangible examples of what “gender progressive” or “gender positive” children’s
entertainment might look like. Feminist scholars and media commentators could, for
example, cite Adventure Time’s representations of gender if they wish to follow Lemish’s
advice and move away from critique and towards conversations about the construction of
workable alternatives. Adventure Time might also be useful for activists who are lobbying
television producers, as it demonstrates that children’s television programs which
incorporate alternative representations of gender can still result in significant commercial
success. In conclusion, there is good evidence to support the contention that Adventure
Time’s portrayal of gender diversity, equality, and fluidity has the potential to normalize a
greater variety and richer number of ways of “doing” gender, both in children’s
entertainment media, as well as in lived practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to the editors of Journal of Children and Media as well as the three
anonymous reviewers who provided excellent critique alongside suggestions for the
paper’s title. Many thanks also to Nicole A Vincent for helpful input into this article and for the very timely gifting of not one but two Adventure Time tote bags.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

NOTES
1. This article relies on Stuart Hall’s definition of stereotypes as “regimes of representation” which reduce people “to a few simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (1997, p. 257).
2. The analyses of Adventure Time cited throughout this article are drawn from fan sites, blogs, and media texts, rather than scholarly literature.
3. Specifically, I tracked those characters, scenes, and plot developments that could be framed as: upholding traditional gender stereotypes; subverting traditional stereotypes; and portraying fluid depictions of gender and sexual orientation.
4. In addition to changes in points of view which offer the perspectives of marginal characters and various Others, Adventure Time contains manifest friendships, romances, and familial bonds involving characters of vastly different species. Its use of various aspects of Korean language and culture is also notable.
5. The 26 episodes from the sixth season of Adventure Time—which began screening in late 2014—are not considered in this analysis as they were not available for viewing at the time of writing.
6. A head count of the female and male characters in Adventure Time reveals that—of the eight figures classed as “main characters” by fans of the show (Characters, n.d.)—four are female (Princess Bubblegum, Lady Rainicorn, Marceline the Vampire Queen, and Lumpy Space Princess); three are male (Finn, Jake and the Ice King), and one is of indeterminate gender (BMO). A tally of the recurring and princess characters, meanwhile, shows that 45 of these are female, 55 are male, and 8 are of unknown or multiple gender/s. (This count is only of individual characters and does not include groups such as “bears”, “wolves”, etc.)
7. Finn’s attitude towards physical affection matures—as he does—over the course of the seasons.
8. These in-text hints are corroborated by various quotes from the program’s makers in media contexts (see: Dawson, 2014; Phillips, 2013).
9. The slang term “frenemy” is a portmanteau of “friend” and “enemy” and refers to an enemy masquerading as a friend, or a friend who is also a rival.
10. “Bromance” is a colloquial term used to refer to a platonic affair between two males.
11. It is revealing that Ward believes it was this aspect of the show’s premise that initially made it “a hard idea to sell” to networks (as cited in Anders, 2012).

REFERENCES


Received 24 July 2014
Final version received 18 February 2015
Accepted 20 February 2015

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