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Don't Forget To Be Awesome: AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF NERDFIGHTERIA



by **Brianna Castellini**

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I have never been considered “popular” by any definition, nor have been the type of person to be comfortable around, well, other people. Thankfully, having literally grown up with the Internet, I was not entirely alone, and had a social outlet in some form or other. Even social psychology would agree that I had a legitimate support system, because a group is merely “a collection of people who are perceived to be bonded together in a coherent unit to some degree.” [1] But even I, so comfortable on the Internet from such a young age, couldn’t have predicted the importance of a particular online community in my personal life. The community to which I’m specifically referring is that of Nerdfighteria, or the social group that arose from fans of the popular YouTube “vlogging” duo, brothers Hank and John Green.

Though they were only a few years apart, Hank and John didn’t have much in common, but when “video blogging,” or “vlogging” became popular on YouTube, they decided it might be interesting to give this new style of communication—and their waning relationship—a chance. And so started Brotherhood 2.0, a vlogging project the brothers used to keep in touch and get to know each other better. They signed up on YouTube under the channel name “Vlog-Brothers” and agreed that for the entire year of 2007 they would not exchange any textual communication; everything they had to say to each other had to be said during their videos, which they took turns posting every weekday. At first, it was just for fun, for the two grown brothers to reconnect via a growing internet trend. But as the year went on, the brothers created something completely unintentional that has been going strong for the past seven years: a community known as Nerdfighteria.

The term “nerdfighter” originated while Hank and John were still doing Brotherhood 2.0 (after 2007 they ceased with daily uploads, but continue to post on a regular weekly schedule), as a name for the people who considered themselves fans of the original video project. Urban Dictionary defines them as, “People who instead of being made up of cells and organs and stuff are actually made out of awesome.” I became a nerdfighter in late 2008, during my

junior year of high school, and have been proud to contribute and participate in the community ever since. The greatest part about being a nerdfighter isn't knowing that there are other fans of the Vlogbrothers out there, but knowing what those other fans can do, when they come together, under the responsible leadership of John and Hank. Today, we're going to look at a variety of nerdfighter contributions to society, from the charity event Project for Awesome and the Emmy-winning web series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, to the sex positive YouTube channel *Sexplanations* and the international nerdfighter collaboration channel *TheseFolk*, among many other examples.

A Brief History

Ten years ago, neither John nor Hank would have been able to predict their future job as vloggers, partially because YouTube didn't exist ten years ago, and partially because they both already had careers. John Green, the elder sibling, is a *New York Times* bestselling young adult novelist, whose latest work *The Fault in Our Stars* and his 2008 novel *Paper Towns* are currently being adapted into film. In total, he has written four novels himself and collaborated on several others. In addition, John "was [the] 2006 recipient of the Michael L. Printz Award, a 2009 Edgar Award winner, and has twice been a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize." [2] He graduated from Kenyon College with a double-degree in English Literature and Religious Studies.

Hank, full name William, was definitely a more traditional "nerd" at a much younger age. He has a bachelor's degree in biochemistry and a masters in environmental studies, and his first career was running the website *EcoGeek* straight out of graduate school. "Within a year, *EcoGeek* was my full time job. There were plenty of other people who were excited about how technology could positively impact the environment." [3]

Education, Charity, and Jane Austen

As the nerdfighter community began with "a new kind of brotherhood," it makes sense to start our journey into "Nerdfighteria" by examining the projects spearheaded by John and Hank themselves to fully understand what a wide net this community has cast. A good first example would be *Crash Course*, an educational YouTube channel starring both brothers "consisting of five video series: Literature, World History, US History, Biology and Ecology." [4] Since that article was published, they've added series about English literature, chemistry, and psychology. The channel was started with help from YouTube, who back in late 2011 funded 100 new channels to create original programming that could, in theory, rival television. According to the *USA Today* in 2011,

YouTube is shelling out \$100 million to producers, according to people familiar with the matter, who spoke on condition of anonymity. The money is an advance on advertising money the videos will bring in, and Google will recoup its portion first before splitting the proceeds. [5]

Today, three years since the channel's launch, the brothers have over 1.4 million subscribers and 79 million video views. [6] Plus, their videos have been used in classrooms across the world. For a channel focusing on education with an average video length of ten minutes, that's pretty impressive.

Staying with the online video theme for a moment, we can move to what, in my opinion, is the most significant contribution of the nerdfighter community: the Project for Awesome. Green and Green write,

The very first Project for Awesome was organized in 2007, and has been held annually on December 17-18 every year since. During Project for Awesome, thousands of people post videos about and advocating for charities that decrease the overall level of world suck. As a community, we promote these videos and raise money for the charities. [7]

In 2013, for example, nerdfighters raised over \$800,000 for charity in 48 hours, which was split amongst the top-voted charities promoted by community videos.

The day before the 2013 event, John Green, in a brief phone interview with The Indianapolis Star, said, "This is my favorite two days of the year because it's when I'm reminded of how great the community that's built up around our videos is." [8]

In 2013, the top-voted charities included: The Harry Potter Alliance, a charity often working closely with the nerdfighter community; This Star Won't Go Out, a charity started by the parents of a teenage nerdfighter, who passed away from cancer in 2010; Save the Children; The Office of Letters and Light; To Write Love On Her Arms; and water.org, among several others. [9] During 2012, I made a Project for Awesome video about The Office of Letters and Light, the nonprofit that runs National Novel Writing Month, an event that tasks authors with writing an entire novel within the span of a single month, which I have participated in twice. I wrote my senior thesis novel during "NaNoWriMo," and wanted to give back, even though my own bank account wasn't sufficient for donations. 2012 was also the first year the "OLL" charity won a portion of donations, which I would like to think is related, in some part, to my efforts.

Before 2012, John and Hank would collect the donations during the Project for Awesome, through sites like Indiegogo, and donate directly from their own bank accounts. However, since 2012, all donations go to the brothers' 501(c)3 nonprofit: The Foundation to Decrease World Suck. The foundation "is 100% volunteer operated and exists solely for the purpose of raising funds to be donated to other non-profit organizations. The majority of fundraising is through and during the annual Project for Awesome." Having a nonprofit has made the Project for Awesome run much more smoothly, and also allows all donations made during that event to be tax deductible. These donations would not be possible without the engagement and dedication of the nerdfighter community.

Before we more deeply explore the community itself and the YouTube channels that have sprung from the Vlogbrothers' influence, I would be remiss to ignore mentioning The Lizzie Bennet Diaries. The Jane Austen Society of North America explains this project best,

One of the latest adaptations of this story is the Emmy Award-winning YouTube Series The Lizzie Bennet Diaries, produced by Hank Green and Bernie Su, which has become a social media phenomenon as it uses transmedia storytelling by presenting a modernized adaptation of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice through several YouTube channels as well as Twitter and Tumblr accounts (and even Pinterest and Lookbook accounts). [10]

The idea came from Hank and his wife Kathrine's obsession with Austen's original novel, and also his extensive understanding of video-blogging and social media platforms, both of which were essential to telling the story. The characters in Lizzie's main video blog all had their own Twitter and Facebook accounts and would interact with one another as the story required, as well as with fans. For instance, an important milestone was Darcy following Lizzie on Twitter, right as the video blog showed them starting to get along. Though one could still easily follow the story if he or she only watched the videos, the multimedia elements served to deepen the immersion into Lizzie's world. I could go on to discuss how wildly popular and critically acclaimed the series was, but the Emmy (for Original Interactive Program) speaks for itself.

The Community at Large

Now that we understand the incredible influence of John and Hank, we have to discuss how that influence has translated to the nerdfighter community, through looking at various related YouTube channels such as TheseFolk and

Sexplanations, and various inspired projects like the novel “This Star Won’t Go Out”.

First, related YouTube channels. Though the Vlogbrothers certainly weren’t the first to post jump-cut video blogs, they are arguably the most influential. A myriad of similar “collaborations” sprung from Brotherhood 2.0, beginning with the similarly yearlong projects like FiveAwesomeGirls and, later, FiveAwesomeGuys. Many of the individual members of those collab channels, short for collaborative channels or channels where multiple individuals post content, went on to become YouTube celebrities in their own rights, like Kristina Horner, who has produced and acted in a YouTube dystopian web series and holds over 120,000 subscribers, and Charlie McDonnell, a music, short film, and vlogging sensation with over 2.2 million subscribers.

And then there’s TheseFolk, a collaboration channel of like-minded nerdfighters who met on an online forum in early 2011. Myself and thirteen other people started talking and decided to embark on a pair of sister collab channels, “TheseFolk” and “ThoseFolk.” Seven members each, one video a day. I was chosen as the Sunday video-poster for TheseFolk, and so began one of the most interesting two and a half years of my Internet life.

Our sister channel ThoseFolk stopped posting consistently by the first summer, a mere four months after we began, but TheseFolk was still going strong. We had some lineup changes, going through three different “Mondays” and two “Fridays,” but eventually we settled on seven consistent, passionate nerdfighters.

Each week we decided on a theme for our videos. At first, it was things like all answering the same questions to get to know each other a bit, but from there it descended into everything from “lip-sync week” to “make up your own exercise routine,” the latter of which I used to film a Harry Potter-themed exercise regiment, using inside jokes from the novels to design different workouts.

Our long-distance friendships occasionally coalesced into real-life meet ups. First, our Monday and Saturday posters, both from the midwest, met up within the first couple months of our channel. The year after that, RJ, our Welsh Friday, and Laia, our Spanish Wednesday, met up while the Barcelona native was traveling in the UK. And during the summer of 2013, I visited Spain with my travel writing class and spent a day in Barcelona with Laia, seeing her city through her eyes.

After about a year and a half of posting impressively regularly, members started missing uploads on a more consistent basis. At the beginning of the project, we were mostly kids, with no real responsibilities, but by the end many of us were in serious relationships, entering or leaving college, and getting full-time jobs. It no longer made sense to stick to regular uploads, so on

October 28th, 2013, I uploaded the final video to our channel, entitled “Goodbye, TheseFolk,” and we put the project to rest. However, though the channel itself has been retired, our friendships have not, and, to this day, we all stay in touch via Facebook and via our own personal YouTube channels, where many of us still post videos. I essentially grew up with TheseFolk, and to a more general degree, Nerdfighteria. Though I may not have initially sought out this group for self-knowledge as many do, I almost accidentally learned the type of person I wanted to and could be. [11]

Some of these inspired channels aren’t meant to pay homage to the Vlogbrothers’ style, however, and instead were simply made possible by the support and encouragement from the brothers and the community. One such channel would be Sexplanations, a sex-positive video series hosted by clinical sexologist Dr. Lindsey Doe. Dr. Doe posts one to two videos a week, sometimes answering community questions about sex, relationships, and sexuality, and sometimes discussing a broader topic relating to those themes. The goal of Sexplanation is “to give the universe comprehensive sex education in an engaging fashion. We invest in this goal with many hours, skills, and kreplits—organizing knowledge of sexuality and making it beautifully accessible through YouTube.” [12]

The channel has been active less than a year at the time of writing this article, but has already accrued over 95,000 subscribers and many dedicated followers. Dr. Doe’s open, frank discussion of sexuality is welcoming for many people, who would otherwise be too embarrassed to discuss these issues with friends or family. Personally, it has been a great comfort for me to have easy access to these videos, considering the largely underwhelming nature of my own sex education in my public middle and high schools.

The final community project I want to discuss in relationship with Nerdfighteria is the novel “This Star Won’t Go Out: The Life and Words of Esther Grace Earl.” Esther Earl was a dedicated teenage member of the nerdfighter community, who passed away from thyroid cancer in 2010. She and John became friends in 2009, after they met at a Harry Potter convention, where Hank, a singer-songwriter, in addition to a science geek, was performing. Earl was a fan of John’s books and helped other online friends maintain one of the largest nerdfighter fan websites. She was also the inspiration for John’s protagonist in his novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, a young adult love story about teens with cancer.

According to her parents, Earl had wanted to be a published author since she was in third grade. [13] Unfortunately, her battle with cancer got in the way. After she died, her father collected her writings and diary entries, intending to print a few copies for friends and family. He sent it to John, who sent it to his editor, seeing the potential. From there, the small idea grew into a

431 page book, complete with diary entries, emails, and blogs by Earl, with an introduction penned by John, all exploring a young woman's battle with cancer and how the internet comforted her in her darkest hours. "The Internet is what you make of it," John said. "It can be used for distraction and dishonesty. Or you can choose to use it to extend and enrich our friendships and conversations, the way Esther did." The book was published in late January 2014, just four years after the primary author passed away. Earl also inspired a charity, *This Star Won't Go Out*, run by her parents for families with children living through cancer, which has given away more than \$130,000 dollars since its inception and is also a consistent beneficiary of the Project for Awesome funds. [14]

I didn't know Esther, but a few weeks before she died I had subscribed to her YouTube channel, endeared to her perky attitude. Though I only got to see a few uploads before she passed away, her positivity through the most unfair of circumstances continues to inspire both myself and nerdfighters like me.

Feminist Analysis

Now that we fully understand the complexity and breadth of this community, we unfortunately have to look to a less fun facet of it: the recent sexual abuse scandal. Over the course of late 2013 and early 2014, several 20-something male YouTubers popular in Nerdfighteria were outed as sexually and emotionally abusive, [15] necessitating a response from John and Hank, as well as their DFTBA Records business partner, Alan Lastufka. It would have been easy, in this situation, for any of these adult men to support their long-time male friends from the community, especially, when the cases brought against them cited abuses from several years ago. It would have also been easy to downplay the seriousness of the accusations, since several didn't use the word "rape" or imply it, speaking more about non-penetrative abuse. Finally, it would have been incredibly easy to use slut shaming rhetoric to blame the young women victims for not being safe. However, in keeping with the pattern of remembering to be awesome, the community leaders stuck to progressive, third-wave-feminist rhetoric to discuss the issue.

First, some context for third-wave, also called sex-positive, feminism. "It might seem intuitively that the pro-sex position tends to encourage us to stake our political project on the liberatory value of sex per se, whereas the radical feminist position reads 'sexual freedom' as freedom from oppressive sexual relations." [16] Sex-positive feminism is the reclaiming of female sexuality, forcing it away from alignment with the opinions and perceptions of the patriarchy and, most unfortunately, of other women and feminists. Third-wave feminist rhetoric, then, can be defined as rhetoric that accepts sex, heterosexual

or otherwise, for procreation or otherwise, but rejects abuses of it.

However, sometimes the definition of “sexual abuse” gets murky, leading otherwise third-wave feminists to slut shame women into blaming themselves for their “alleged” abuses, and to feel bad about how much sex they’re having. Reynold and Ringrose observe, “Often a thinly veiled attack at the attractive ‘assets’ of the girl or women in question, slut shaming is of course a deeply classed discourse, whereby associating ‘sluts’ with ‘prostitutes’ and ‘whores’ her sexual value is to be diminished and kept in check.” [17] Essentially, even third-wavers can fall into the trap of defining sex as bad, if it doesn’t happen the way that a particular third-wave feminist believes sexual relations should happen. So when approaching situations of sexual abuse, it’s important to keep rhetoric sex-positive, without trying to pigeonhole what types of sex we’re being positive about, and the Green brothers, as well as Lastufka, have absolutely done that.

“I won’t comment on the specifics of this relationship because that isn’t my place.” Hank wrote on his Tumblr, when the first of many male nerdfighters, in this particular case musician Tom Milsom, was revealed to have engaged in a sexual relationship with an underage fan. “But the mere fact that [the sexual relationship] existed infuriates me...sexual relationships need to be equitable and they can’t be when people are in dramatically different life stages or when one person enters the relationship as a fan of another.” [18]

Notice how Hank doesn’t say that the underage fan should have known better, or that they shouldn’t have been having sex at such a young age in the first place. Instead, he ignores the issue of sex entirely, and instead focuses on the context of the sex, which was a much older person taking advantage of a fan of his work, a person, whom he had intrinsic (being older) and extrinsic (being a musical idol of hers) control over. The fan was not shamed for having sex, but the abuser was.

John’s response was much shorter than Hank’s, as he mostly mirrored his brother’s words, but it was just as important, as he’s also a community leader.

I’ve written and deleted thousands of words about this today, and I’m grateful to Hank for saying most of what I wanted to say. Consenting adults: Go forth and do all the things! But the abuse of power we seem to see regularly in these manipulative fan/creator relationships is reprehensible and unacceptable. [19]

Once gain, having a sexual relationship is not shameful, according to John, but manipulating someone into a relationship, especially when that someone is a younger fan, absolutely is.

Finally, we can look at Lastufka's response, another nerdfighter community leader, and how it continued the trend of not shaming the girl. In fact, Lastufka was the first to acknowledge his previous friendship with Milsom in his statement:

I am making no attempt to hide the fact Tom and I were once friends. He spent a weekend at my house, we worked on numerous songs and other musical projects together back in 2009. But hearing about some of the things he's done, and was doing back then, has hurt, and I no longer wish to make another dollar off his fame or name. [20]

The latter sentence of this response referred to Lastufka taking Milsom's CDs and merchandise off of the DFTBA records website. Once again, an adult-male, in a position of power in this community did not try to excuse the actions of his former friend, did not shame the teenaged girl for being sexually active, and did not decry the act of sex as a whole.

As a final thought, Hank had this to say about the whole troubling situation:

My only consolation is that I honestly believe these issues are coming to light in this community not because they are more common, but because we are more empowered to speak out and not hide from or cover them up. And that's excellent, because you cannot fix a problem if you do not face a problem.

Conclusion

I don't know why I didn't become a part of the nerdfighter community earlier. It wasn't for a lack of web access or time spent online. I, actually, don't even remember how I finally came to stumble upon this pot o' gold at the end of the cat-GIFs-and-porn rainbow that is the Internet. All I know is: I'm glad I did. Since becoming acquainted with this community, I attended VidCon, an in-person, three-day conference that the Vlogbrothers organize each year (since 2010) for content creators and industry professionals to discuss online video, where I met both Hank and John. I have made a Project for Awesome video in support of my favorite literary non-profit, donated to the Foundation to Decrease World Suck, bought nerdfighter teeshirts, started a nerdfighter collab channel with people from all around the world, and began my final semester in college. I have loved, lost, traveled around the world, started calling myself a feminist, and read a lot of books, many of them written by John Green. Above all, though, I have continued to deepen my involvement in and appreciation

for one of the most massive, impressive, and giving communities on the Internet.

Interested in becoming a nerdfighter? Then you are one. Welcome friend, and DFTBA (Don't Forget To Be Awesome).

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