James Bond, Peter Pan, and A Sticky Night of Love: Irony and Masculinities in Amateur Animated Videos

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This paper analyzes a genre of videos created and distributed online mostly by young men. These videos use a variety of playful and decontextualized images to present messages about masculinities. They both celebrate and denigrate some hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculine identities, while specifically making fun of homosexual males. As in previous studies of adolescent male discourse, the creators of these videos rely on irony and humor to distance themselves from potential claims of heterosexism and sexism. The particular fractured and frenetic style of the videos, and the ability to juxtapose conflicting images, make this somewhat easier to accomplish than it would be through text alone. The videos thus provide a safety net of deniability, allowing their creators to present multiple conflicting identities, while leaving the status quo intact.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, irony, videos, homophobia, animutation

Although YouTube currently dominates online video hosting, for several years numerous smaller sites have fostered the creation of new genres of multi-media production. Sites such as newgrounds.com and albinoblacksheep.com provide forums in which people post, discuss, and rate videos. In the process, these sites provide homes for subcultures that have formed around particular video styles.

Besides providing entertainment, online videos constitute a form of interpersonal communication. Video creators often respond to previous videos, or include elements with explicit messages for particular audiences. Some such sequences of videos form ongoing conversations (Kendall, 2007). Videos also provide a medium for performance of and communication about identity.

For the groups of (mostly) young men who create videos using Flash animation software, videos provide several advantages in discussions of identity. The multi-media

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format allows for complex juxtapositions of contradictory elements and ambiguous references. Video identity presentations can be playful, ambiguous, and ironic, allowing a high degree of deniability. This can be particularly important for young men navigating the treacherous path between adherence to heteronormative masculinity and potentially stigmatizing expressions of homophobia and sexism.

Research on Irony and Masculinities

Recent research describes the discursive strategies of adolescent boys for negotiating the presentation of masculine identities (Korobov, 2004, 2005; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003; Speer & Potter, 2000; Wetherell & Edley, 1999). In group talk and interviews with researchers, adolescent boys employ self-contradictory narratives to deal with the conflicting requirements of a supposedly naturally emergent masculine self. “[A]dolescent boys often do their masculinity by drawing on homophobic, sexist, and heterosexist banter while at the same time safeguarding their positions with disclaimers and softeners to suggest more egalitarian, liberal, or sensitive portrayals of themselves” (Korobov, 2004, p. 179).

Among the resources available to young men for identity performance are references drawn from media. Analyses of media specifically targeted toward young men expose some of the contradictions in modern media representations of masculinities. In particular, media in consumerist society must deal with the conflict between the passivity of consumption and the demands for action of hegemonic masculinity. Benwell’s (2007) analysis of new men’s magazines found that “because of the connotations of passivity associated with conspicuous consumption, particularly of beauty or grooming products traditionally associated with a feminine realm, selling such products to men becomes a troubled proposition that has to be tactfully negotiated by the text’s producers” (p. 546). Gardiner (2000) found similar contradictions in television aimed at men: “Men’s masculinity, especially the masculinity of young men, appears reshaped in contemporary representations in the directions of increased passivity, self-indulgence, and sexual objectification and also in resistance to these traits” (pp. 255-256).

Irony provides a method for dealing with these contradictions, and researchers have found irony to be a key component in media targeted toward young men (Benwell, 2004, 2007; Gardiner, 2000, 2005; Ott, 2003).

Media provide entertainment, but also fodder for discussion. In her research on Irish adolescent boys, Ging (2005) found “discussions about media texts functioned as an important way of policing and, to a lesser extent, negotiating and challenging the acceptable boundaries of masculinity” (p. 43). While consumers of ironic discourse may not “seem to see its operation” (Benwell, 2007, p. 544), they nevertheless themselves employ irony in their discussions of media. Benwell found, for instance, that in discussing “new lad” magazines in the U.K., young men used irony “to uphold the arguably sexist values of the magazine, whilst — through its humour — making these values more palatable” (p. 545).
For young men steeped in media references, irony becomes a key strategic device in the expression of masculinity. “Over the course of adolescence, young men may increasingly learn to manage masculine norms by ironizing them, which entails neither attending nor disputing them in direct or obvious ways” (Korobov, 2005, p. 242). This works because irony allows for the communication of multiple contradictory messages. “[I]rony does not cancel out the indirectly negated message or necessarily implicate the opposite meaning of the negated message.... Rather, ironic statements keep both the explicit and the implicated messages in play” (Korobov, 2005, p. 242). This allows for the communication of conflicting meanings, and provides a fallback position should one or another message offend an audience. “[I]rony may be instrumental in allowing males to infuse a certain amount of deniability into their masculine positions, deniability that allows them to indirectly articulate one type of masculine position while at the same time partly denying or disclaiming personal ownership of it” (Korobov, 2005, p. 227).

This deniability is important for young men faced with contradictory expectations regarding masculine identities. On the one hand, the expectations of hegemonic masculinity—toughness, aggressiveness, emotional control—remain important. On the other hand, explicit expressions of homophobia or sexism are sanctioned. “Irony enables men strategically to distance themselves from misogyny, homophobia and traditional tough guy ideals, while simultaneously providing an outlet for just such fantasies” (Segal, 2001, p. 246). Irony thus “plays a hugely important role ... to confirm normative values” (Benwell, 2004, p. 7).

Previous research has examined media targeted toward men, men’s reaction to media, and men’s discussions amongst themselves and with researchers about masculinity. With the increasing availability of software tools for media production as well as online venues for media distribution, more and more media consumers are becoming media producers as well. The blurring line between production and consumption of media, documented by researchers of fan cultures (Jenkins 1992, 2006), provides new venues for the presentation of and communication about identity. The “animutation” video subculture displays a particularly postmodern approach to media consumption and production, and to identity display.

Animutation

Neil Cicierega coined the term “animutation” in 2001. Then a 14-year-old boy, home-schooled in the U.S., he created several videos using Flash software (created by Macromedia and now owned by Adobe) and posted them online. His particular style of video proved immensely popular and sparked several imitators who originally termed their videos “fanimutations” in homage to Cicierega. Creators of animutations now comprise a fairly well-bounded and active online subculture. Several of them participate on and post videos to video hosting sites such as albinoblacksheep.com and newgrounds.com. In 2005, they created a website devoted to the creation and appreciation of animutations, www.animutationportal.com.

In a long-standing Animutation Portal forum thread, participants discuss animutation’s distinguishing features and debate its necessary elements. One participant even
created a scale, often cited by other participants, with which to rank how closely a video adheres to the animation style. Both through these discussions and through relatively consistent adherence to agreed-upon conventions in the videos themselves, animation has emerged as a well-defined and consistent genre.

Animations take the form of music videos, usually playing one song all the way through, accompanied by images and text. Most animationers are from English-speaking countries. (The largest groups appear to be from the U.S. and Canada, but one particularly well-known member is from New Zealand.) However, they usually select songs in a language other than English. An important animation practice consists of creating sound-alike English “fake lyrics” (which they also call “mondegrens,” although mondegren has a slightly different meaning elsewhere). These are then displayed on screen in time to the music. Other important elements of animations include cut-and-paste style animation created from existing images gleaned from online sources. Many of these images are of semi-famous figures in popular culture, or of characters from children’s television programs.

For this analysis, I focus on videos selected from a set of 29 animations listed on the Animation Portal wiki as “Must-see Animation” (Category: Must-see_Ani-mutation). Through a process of voting and discussion, animationers have selected these as representing the best and most exemplary videos of the animation genre. Separate wiki entries for each video provide lists of characters and information concerning the intertextual references, identifying numerous computer games and children’s television shows as the source for characters, images, and inserted bits of text. These videos represent the work of 16 individuals, most of them men currently in their 20s. The video release dates range from spring of 2001 to spring of 2007, so many of the videos were created when these men were in their teens.

Influences on the style of animations include a variety of previous media, including music videos, video games, and Terry Gillam’s animations for Monty Python’s Flying Circus. The crude cut-and-paste animation style also bears some resemblance to the television show South Park. The style itself sets some of the tone for animations. As Gardiner (2005) notes about South Park,

the very crudity of its animated images is also part of its underlying ideology, of a masculinism that wants to retain the world just as it is, unjust as it is, as the playground of powerful, male-bonded, American white

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1 Animationers identify themselves and know each other by online pseudonyms. In order to determine identity information concerning these participants, I consulted various online sources, including personal webpages, multiple online forums relating to animated video production, mainstream media articles about some of the more well-known animationers, etc. I am relatively confident that none of the 16 are female (and have been able to find only one woman creator of animations). I am confident that I’ve identified the names and gender of 10 of the 16, and the ages of 9; at least three of the remaining six have identified themselves as male in online forum posts.
boys who never need grow up and who can continue to enjoy the world’s pleasures and treasures without taking responsibility for them. (p. 61)

The practice of using songs in languages other than English, accompanied by nonsensical mistranslated English lyrics continues the irreverent and ironic tone. Among other things, the mistranslations suggest irreverence for other cultures (Kendall, 2006). Like the use of altered images of celebrities and pop culture characters, this practice also decontextualizes previous meanings. Images and sounds are taken out of their original contexts and given new meaning through playful juxtapositions.

Most animutations avoid a straightforward narrative structure, further enhancing their decontextualized, ironic tone. The animutation subculture also expects and promotes an interactive viewing style. While animutation fans, many of whom also create videos, likely view the videos “straight through” on occasion, the creators provide tools for other styles of consumption. Many animutators program in stop and play buttons for viewer use. Some videos include text flashing by so quickly that it can only be read using these buttons. Animutators also include “secret” content within their videos. Like the “easter eggs” in computer games and other programs, these reveal additional content to the viewer who knows where and when to click.

Entries for various videos on the Animutation Portal wiki provide details concerning these hidden features. For instance, the wiki entry for James Bond, by Dwedit (Dan Weiss), includes the following instruction: “When you get to the end of the animutation, instead of clicking on Hello Kitty, click the Play button to see some surprises. What you see depends on how many times you’ve clicked Play.” Similarly, the wiki entry for A Sticky Night of Love, by Kelenar (Jed Stevens), states that, “If you enter the ‘Iraq, you wrote on me’ scene frame by frame, the jumping Gendo Ikari is not jump in the wave order.” Written well after these videos were released online, these wiki entries provide clues for those who have not discovered these features on their own.

To a certain extent, animutators present their creations as objects to take apart and tinker with. They know that many members of their intended audience also create videos. Many leave their videos “unlocked” so that others can open them using the Flash program and see how they were created. Animutators liberally borrow images and techniques from each other.

These practices demonstrate the expectation that the consumption of these videos will not necessarily occur in a linear fashion, and indeed some of the video content remains inaccessible in a straightforward viewing. Animutationers bring to their video skills and expectations from their experience with other computer media, especially computer games. Their inclusion of these features in their videos also reveals the assumption that their audience has similar skills and experience. They blur the boundaries between producers and consumers, taking pleasure in viewing not just what was made but how it was made.

When animutators discuss what qualifies a video as an animutation, they focus on aspects such as the style of animation, type of music, and inclusion of appropriate recurring characters. They do not identify particular themes or plots considered to be
necessary or appropriate for the genre. Yet the thematic material included in animuta-
tions remains remarkably consistent across the genre.

The most common recurring theme in animutations concerns the culture and prac-
tice of animutation itself. Most of the videos include references to other animuations in
the form of quotes, images, sounds, and plot elements. These references sometimes
take the form of homage, especially to Neil Cicierega’s early animutations. They also
demonstrate knowledge of and membership in the animutation subculture.

While many animutations have so much diverse thematic material that no consist-
tent message emerges, several topics occur frequently enough to constitute defining characteristics of the genre. These include discussions of masculinity, critiques of con-
sumerism, and homophobic references. These themes are consistent with previous re-
search on young men’s discourse. Surprisingly, however, few animutations include
female characters or references to women, derogatory or otherwise.

In order to consider these themes more closely, I describe several animuation
videos in greater depth. I have selected these videos not as average animutations, nor
because they treat these themes in a typical way. Rather, these videos, all favorites of
the animutationers themselves, provide particularly clear examples of themes that ap-
ppear in more fractured or fleeting ways in other animutations.

**Colin Mochrie vs. James Bond**

More than any other element, images of Colin Mochrie define the animutation
genre. In discussions conducted on the Animation Portal regarding whether various
videos qualify as animutations, the inclusion of Colin Mochrie serves as a significant
genre marker. For instance, one participant comments about a video that it “has a lot
[sic] of animutation elements, but it doesn’t have Colin Mochrie in it.” Another part-
cipant, discussing a different video, indicates that it “is definitely an animutation.
Colin Mochrie and mondegreens. Enough said.” On the Recurring Animutation Char-
acters page from the Animation Portal wiki, Colin Mochrie stands out, appearing in
a record 200 videos.² (The next most popular character, Mario from the Mario Bros.
video games, appears in 102.) More importantly, some of the most famous and most
highly-regarded animutations include Mochrie as a primary character.

The selection of Colin Mochrie as the quintessential animutation character defines
the ironic representation of masculinities within animutations. Mochrie is a Canadian
comedian best known for his appearances on the U.S. comedy improv show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* and, more recently, in advertisements as the Nabisco “snack fairy.”

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² This number likely grossly understates the number of videos in which Mochrie actually
appears. The wiki depends on volunteer labor for updating. Nearly every animutation I have seen
includes an image of Colin Mochrie somewhere, and there are more than 200 animutations on
the Animation Portal alone, with some of the more famous animutations only available on
other sites, especially Newgrounds.
Whose Line Is It Anyway? usually features four male comics (with occasional appearances by a single female comic) in addition to Drew Carey, the host. The humor relies heavily on snickering double entendres, especially regarding homosexuality. Mochrie often plays female or effeminate roles. Thus Mochrie already functions in animutations as a kind of “gay joke” prior to any scripting or manipulation of his image.

Some animutations use irony to play off of this image through featuring Mochrie in macho roles. For instance, the Colin Mochrie vs. Jesus H. Christ trilogy by TmsT (Andrew Kepple), provides an unusually epic narrative, featuring Colin Mochrie as the hero. The trilogy, created in 2003, references arguments within the animutation community about whether all animutations other than Cicierega’s own should be called fanimations, or whether all such videos now constitute a genre that can be termed animation. TmsT includes characters from both animutations (Cicierega’s videos) and fanimations (animation-style videos that add characters not found in Cicierega’s videos). Through various additional textual references, images, and plot points, TmsT references nearly every video then existing within the genre.

In the first installment, French Erotic Film, Mochrie locks himself in his dressing-room “claiming that he will never star in another Fanimation EVER AGAIN!” Other characters attempt to talk him into continuing to appear, and eventually “combine their powers” to summon a plastic action figure of Jesus H. Christ. Jesus H. Christ does Mortal Kombat-style battle with Mochrie, causing him to have a seizure and agree to continue appearing in fanimations. (Animutators make frequent jokes about the “seizure-inducing” quality of their videos, which often include bright flashing backgrounds and quickly moving images.)

In the second video, Plan 9 From Underpants, Mochrie, fallen on hard times, is rescued by a quartet of space leprechauns dressed in underwear with four-leaf clovers on the front (a reference both to the underpants gnomes of South Park and to the Japanese group Happatari, who appear in concert wearing only underwear with leaves attached in front). Armed with instructions on how to defeat Jesus H. Christ, they direct Mochrie in a “cheezy musical training sequence,” until he acquires a muscular physique. He then defeats various characters from previous fanimations in more Mortal Kombat-style battles.

Colin Mochrie vs. Jesus H. Christ: Finale presents the final battle “between animation and fanimation” in “JHC’s kingdom of animutopia.” Killed by Jesus H. Christ, Mochrie descends to a sort of limbo, where he is confronted by images of his appearances in dozens of animutations. Thus fortified, he resurrects as a muscular god-like being, bringing an end to “animupartheid,” uniting animutations and fanimations.

In this video trilogy, the standard narrative of a degraded hero who overcomes adversity to emerge triumphant takes on ironic meaning with Mochrie in the central role. Knowledge of Mochrie’s gently comic self-effacing demeanor plays against the aggressive, muscular stereotype associated with that role. TmsT makes this irony even more clear through the over-the-top depiction of Mochrie as a flaming-haired god. This mocks both the hegemonic masculine image and the type of man, like Mochrie, who cannot fulfill it.
In this regard, one battle in the final video bears noting. The final champion pitted against Mochrie prior to his fight with Jesus H. Christ is an image of the “Star Wars Kid.” This image stands out in the video as one of the few characters not borrowed from other animation videos. In 2002, a 15-year-old Quebeccois named Ghyslain Raza used the video studio at his school to tape himself in an impromptu routine. Inspired by the Star Wars film series, he engaged in a mock light saber fight for the camera, using a pole as a prop. Fellow students at his school digitized the video and posted it to the Internet, where it quickly gained notoriety and became a target for derision.

The Star Wars Kid represents a potent fear for young male online participants. Pale, overweight, and a science fiction fan, engaged in an embarrassing fan-related activity, he fits the stereotype of the nerd. Like the animators, he created a video. But his video became popular for all the wrong reasons. When Mochrie sacks the Star Wars Kid out of the stadium in Colin Mochrie vs. Jesus H. Christ: Finale, the scene provides a symbolic purge of the potential stigma attached to the activities of converting online and creating amateur digital media productions.

While Mochrie becomes macho in TmsT’s trilogy, more masculine figures are generally feminized in animutations. Cicierega in particular includes several images in his videos of wrestlers and other masculine men in dresses. Macho characters are rare, however. Most of the frequently recurring characters, especially those featured in prominent roles, are either characters from children’s television (Pikachu, Spongebob Squarepants, Jay Jay the Jet Plane), video game characters (Mario, Sonic the Hedgehog), or men who are targets for derision for either political reasons (George W. Bush, Adolf Hitler), reasons relating to online notoriety (Matthew Lesko, Alex Chiu), or because, like Colin Mochrie, they do not fit the hegemonic masculine ideal (Pee Wee Herman, Richard Simmons). All of these characters thus relate either to Internet in-jokes or to childish or effeminate identities that must be rejected in order to comply with hegemonic masculinity.

Some representations of masculinity seem to celebrate utter nonsense, yet still retain a focus congruent with hegemonic masculinity. For instance, A Sticky Night of Love, by Kelenar (Jed Stevens), presents a particularly humorous rendition of the famous image of Adam from the ceiling of the Cistine Chapel. In Kelenar’s version, as Adam reaches up for the spark of life from God, his groin glows with heavenly light emanating from a strategically placed bottle of Grey Poupon mustard. The English lyrics (mistranslated from Japanese) displayed below this image read “Sue’s bettin’ what she’ll gnaw.” While mustard bottles constitute an unusual phallic substitute, this image retains a focus on the phallus that is congruent with hegemonic expectations regarding men’s sexuality and sense of self.

Few characters receive a straightforward non-mocking treatment. One rare exception stands out as offering an identity that avoids both the overblown posturing of machoism and the nerdy exaggerated wimpiness of comedians like Mochrie and Pee Wee Herman. In James Bond, James Bond (as represented by images of Sean Connery, Roger Moore, and Pierce Brosnan in their James Bond film roles) appears as a hero protagonist who defeats an evil mastermind. In contrast to most other images of celebrities, the images of James Bond are not manipulated to comic effect. They do not sing
in the animutation style of dropped-jaw animation, none of their limbs has been replaced with that of other characters, and they do not tumble across the screen. As in the James Bond films, Bond remains calm (and always armed) in the midst of the frenetic madness of other characters and images common to most animutations (Kendall, 2007, p. 6). This almost reverent treatment provides a rare example of a masculine identity presented without mockery. Significantly, this identity constitutes a quintessential example of the hegemonic masculine ideal.

The images of male characters in animutations both celebrate and mock hegemonic and non-hegemonic identities. The fractured narratives of animutations allow their creators to create ambiguity regarding their evaluation of various possible masculine identities. The overall humorous tone also provides deniability of particular stances regarding these identities.

Critique of Consumption

The animutation Irrational Exuberance, created in 2001 by Veloso (Greg Falcon), takes its name from a famous quote by former Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan. The opening screen displays text exhorting the viewer to “Shop Buy Acquire Consume Purchase Spend.” This sets the tone for a video full of references to products, companies, and the purported benefits of money.

In Irrational Exuberance, Veloso uses music from a song and video popular online at the time, Yatta! by the Japanese comedy group Happatai (Green Leaves). The word “yatta” (a Japanese exclamation meaning “we did it” or “I did it”) repeats throughout the song, and in Irrational Exuberance appears as the brand name on numerous familiar household products, including various food items, personal hygiene products, glue, and condoms. The video provides an ironic exaggeration of the display of products common in advertising, with the additional suggestion that all brands are the same.

Although similar advertising and product images appear relatively frequently in animutations, few provide as direct a critique of consumerism as Irrational Exuberance. However, some of the characters that occur frequently in animutations suggest a critique of media’s role in the excesses of consumerist society. Repeating characters include images of Matthew Lesko and Alex Chiu. The Animutation Portal lists numerous videos that include either Chiu (41 videos) or Lesko (65 videos), and several feature one or the other as the main character. Lesko’s fame derives from his late night television pitches for his books purportedly explaining how to get free money from the government. Chiu’s popularity as a target for derision on the Internet stems from his website touting his invention of “immortality rings.” Making fun of these pitchmen of dubious repute does not necessarily demonstrate a critique of consumerism, but it at least positions animutators as savvy and critical consumers.

Irrational Exuberance also provides a commentary on the connection between money and identity, displaying a mock contest between Dave Thomas, the actor, and Dave Thomas, the founder of the Wendy’s fast food chain. The fast food entrepreneur wins because of “Worthington’s law: more money = better than.” This “law,” which ap-
peared in an episode of the television skit program, *Mr. Show*, provides an exaggeration of the masculine ideal of economic success. Its ironic inclusion in *Irrational Exuberance* critiques that ideal without fully displacing it.

Gay Images in Animutation

Far more common than critiques of consumerism, expressions of homophobia and jokes about homosexuality abound in animutations. These jokes comprise a common theme in adolescent male discourse. Gay men serve as one of the primary foils against which to assert a heteronormative masculine identity.

*Irrational Exuberance* includes a brief image of gay male pornography, about which the creator states in text at the end of the video “I had to look at male porn to make this little film so the least you can do is display irrational exuberance.” By portraying the viewing of gay porn as an onerous task, Veloso asserts a heterosexual identity, and protects against any imputation of homosexuality that might otherwise ensue by virtue of his inclusion of gay images in the video. *Irrational Exuberance* also includes references to buttplugs (“Fun Fact: People actually use buttplugs. In real life. Honest.”) and hemorrhoids, followed immediately by a portrayal of Richard Simmons, the aerobics instructor, as a “fruit.” The mock astonishment and blatant anal humor further objectify gay men.

Some animutations include very brief scenes of gay characters or sexual activity, such as the homosexual rape at the end of allasaurus.gif (a 2007 video by Kelenar [Jed Stevens]). But few feature homosexuality as overtly as *JamezBond*, in which a major subplot includes several gay characters. *JamezBond* features a character known within the animutation subculture as “Gay Peter Pan,” represented by images taken from “The Homepage of Peter Pan, created by Randy Constan” (www.pixyland.org/peterpan). Constan has appeared in a variety of media, including guest appearances on the Conan O’Brien and Jimmy Kimmel television shows, because of his penchant for dressing as Peter Pan. Animators are aware that Constan is not gay (although Dwedit may not have known this when he created his video). The information page about him in the Animutation Portal wiki mentions his search for a girlfriend. Nevertheless, Constan’s gay presentation of self and style of dress code him as gay.

Early scenes in *JamezBond* feature Gay Peter Pan singing with Big Gay Al from *SouthPark*, and then being fired from his theater job (by Alex Chiu’s immortality-ringed hands). He later realizes he was fired “because I’m gay” and calls several other “gay” people for support. The montage of Gay Peter Pan’s phone contacts includes out celebrities like Richard Simmons and Rosie O’Donnell; victims of gay rumors, like baseball catcher Mike Piazza; and gay animated characters, including *South Park*’s Mr. Garrison, and Waylon Smithers, from *The Simpsons*. In an in-joke reminiscent of teenage boys teasing each other by calling each other gay, the montage also includes an image of Newgrounds founder Tom Fulp. The next scene shows some of these characters staging a gay rights demonstration in Washington. Like Richard Simmons, whose head flies off in *Irrational Exuberance*, Gay Peter Pan meets an untimely end in *JamezBond*, falling into a volcano for no discernible plot reason.
Animatators are aware that others may read the identities presented in their videos as relating to their own identities. For instance, in comments on the Animutation Portal about his video allosaurus.gif, Kelenar responds to a criticism regarding his inclusion of images of furries (a subculture of people who dress as anthropomorphic animals):

I came pretty darn close to not putting the furries in, lest somebody think it was some sort of attempt to hint that I was one, actually. However, I have a moral obligation to make fun of people who dress up like meercats in grass skirts.

This demonstrates that Kelenar considers himself to be making fun of the characters he includes in his animations. It also suggests that he understands how easily these images can be read as sympathetic rather than derisive. As in speech, too strong a reaction against homosexuality (and other stigmatized identities, such as furries) can be as damning as too soft a reaction.

“Chicks” and “Pron”: Female Characters in Animutations

Magazines targeted toward men feature suggestive photos of, and leering text about, women. However, most television and movie offerings aimed at young men tend to focus primarily on male characters. Gardiner (2005), for instance, in her analysis of the South Park movie, notes that “all in all, the movie virtually dispenses with women” (p. 60). A few key influences on animation, such as The Simpsons, do feature significant female characters, but most influences, such as Monty Python’s Flying Circus, video games, and action films, tend to feature women characters only on the periphery, if at all. Animations thus do not stand out as particularly unusual among media created by and for young men. However, when viewed as a form of young men’s discourse, and considering that they draw on so many sources of material from popular culture, the absence of women bears a closer look.

The heteronormative imperatives for men to distance themselves from gay male and effeminate identities, and to display sexual interest in women, make the dearth of female characters in animations somewhat surprising. Some female characters, drawn from anime and other cartoon sources, do appear, but they almost never play lead or important roles in the videos. The “Recurring Animutation Characters” page on the Animutation Portal wiki lists 20 characters. Of these, only two are female: Hello Kitty and Mink (an anime character). Mink appears in a paltry 14 videos, the least of any of the characters listed on this page. Hello Kitty appears in a more respectable 44 videos.

Irony can be a tricky verbal skill to master. Video provides enhanced capabilities for irony and, along with that, deniability. However, it can still be difficulty to manipulate potentially stigmatizing images, such as those of gay men or of women. Many animatators may not have the skill to accomplish this, or may decide that the potential pitfalls are too dangerous.
Complicity with hegemonic masculinity requires asserting heterosexuality, but demonstration of heterosexual desire risks a problematic emotional display. Hegemonic masculinity includes an expectation of detachment and emotional control. As Korobov (2005) points out, “displays of masculinity, at this age and in these types of interactive contexts, mean orienting openly and clearly to the features of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ but often in tongue-in-cheek ways that fall short of appearing shallow, sexist, ignorant, or desperate” (p. 242). Video creators who seek to include images of women face the difficulty of depicting objects of desire without seeming needy or desperate.

Further, while interest in women is expected, such interest must be accomplished without seeming oppressive or sexist. “Young men are encouraged to promote ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ while simultaneously being advised (over the course of development) to reform or abandon their oppressive habits, to be more open and tolerant, and to practice sensitivity and compassion” (Korobov, 2005, p. 243). Mockingly humorous images of women might seem cruel or sexist. While homophobia is also socially sanctioned, the stigma associated with it is less severe, explaining the presence of effeminate men and absence of women in the videos. Further, demonstrating heterosexuality makes sexism more problematic than homophobia, since sexism presumably alienates the very group in which one ought to demonstrate interest. Seriously sexy images of women also risk imputations of insensitivity, especially in the context of common societal discourse concerning the harm of such images.

These potential pitfalls make achievement of the proper tone with regard to female imagery extremely difficult to manage. The norm within the animutations subculture of an overall ironic tone complicates this further. Presenting sexualized images of women within the context of a humorous presentation risks making women the obvious focus of the joke.

Similarly, the inability to “take back” or soften messages once they are released online makes repair of untoward interpretations difficult. Attempts to control interpretation through accompanying textual introductions (such as those found on several hosting sites) or explanations (such as the exegesis found on pages in the Animation Portal wiki) can fail when the videos are distributed elsewhere and become separated from the accompanying text. Online distribution also broadens the potential audience for the videos. While the main audience may be perceived as other members of the animutation subculture (mostly young men), video creators know their videos are viewed more widely. Jokingly sexist comments that might be acceptable or at least repairable among groups of men become unacceptable in an indeterminately broad general audience.

Viewing pornography carries relatively little stigma for men. However, in keeping with the need to avoid any appearance of sexism, enjoyment of pornography must remain hidden. In addition, creating pornographic imagery, or inserting such imagery into original video productions places the creator in the role of the pornographer. That role still carries the taint of “sleaziness” and of using others for personal gain. This risks a stigmatized identity over and above its connotation of sexism. In addition, online video creators spend a significant amount of time interacting with computers. As
such, they risk appearing "nerdy," which carries with it connotations of asociality and sexual incompetence. Under those circumstances, over interest in pornographic images of women suggests a lack of experience with the "real thing."

Some of the more famous animutations, created by some of the most admired animutators, do include female characters. A closer look at how they manipulate these images demonstrates the difficulty of navigating these pitfalls.

*James Bond Gets All the Chicks*

Most female characters in animutations are childlike or non-human, and often come from children’s toys or television shows. The quintessential example of this, Hello Kitty, appears in several animutations. James Bond, in which Hello Kitty appears as the energy source in the evil villain’s reactor core, includes several female characters from Japanese anime in relatively minor roles. At the end of the video, text appears over an image of Sean Connery as James Bond that reads "And once again, James Bond gets all the chicks.” But the images surrounding Connery are nothing like the "Bond Girls” of the James Bond films. Instead, they are childlike cartoon characters, including one of the Powerpuff girls, who apparently whispers in Connery’s ear.

The ironic use of such characters in animation pokes fun at femininity, childishness, and cuteness. Their appearance in the role of Bond’s “chicks” slyly invokes more conventional images of sexy females. But the focus on these immature, only nominally human characters waylays the potential charge of sexism.

*Where Iz Teh Fr3nch Pr0n?????????????!*

One of the rare pornographic images to appear in animutations occurs near the end of Colin Mochrie *vs. Jesus H. Christ: Finale*. As a coda to the main part of the video, TmsT includes a frenetic compilation that mashes together songs and images from several animutations by other artists. Toward the end of this, a text balloon reads “WHERE IZ TEH FR3NCH PR0N????????????!!” (The misspelling for “porn” is in common usage online and inclusion of “iz,” “teh,” and multiple exclamation points followed by a 1 all reference online typos that have become Internet jokes.) The character uttering the initial demand for “fr3nch pron” is known as the avatar, or graphical identity representation, of a fellow animulator, Toxic (Mark Hughes). So the negative stigma of a desire for porn may in this case be deliberately directed toward a specific member of the group. This is followed by an image of several other characters saying, “We want Pr0n! We want Pr0n!” and then Colin Mochrie saying, “Yeah! Bring out the REAL French erotic film, TmsT! You owe it to your fans!”

These statements reference the first video in TmsT’s trilogy, “French Erotic Film,” which contains no seriously erotic images (although it does include a few suggestive visual jokes). This display at the end of the trilogy implies that animutation fans (or at least, animutation characters), annoyed at the baseless titilation, now demand the real thing. TmsT can thus claim to merely be giving the public what it wants.
In the next several images, text appears that reads, “Okay FINE. You want PrOn? I'll put some in the FINAL 2 FRAMES of this animation. So get ready on that handy PAUSE BUTTON that I'm providing you with....” Below the text, a large blue graphic appears with the standard double bars for pause and a right-pointing triangle for play. Several animutations use similar graphics, usually much smaller, to provide pause and play functionality in the middle of videos. Several frames later, the pornographic image appears for the promised two frames. In a clever bit of staging, TmsT positions the image, a line drawing of a naked woman, such that the “pause” bars cover her breasts and the “play” triangle covers her genital area.

The impossibly quick presentation (2 frames is approximately a quarter of a second) almost can’t be seen at all in normal video play and is followed by a text message that reads, “Awww, you missed it! Replay and try again!”. Part of the joke is that it would take phenomenally fast reflexes (and a very strong interest in viewing pornography) to actually make use of the provided pause button. In theory, a skilled viewer could also deconstruct the source file to recover the original image. However, the idea that anyone would do that casts the possible stigma of desperation onto the audience. The humorously “tasteful” blocking supplied by the pause and play buttons further deflects charges of sexism. These techniques all serve to playfully highlight the existing norm against including pornographic images in animmutations, and deflect any negative stigma for the creator.

*Trinity the Alien Underpants Leprechaun*

The *Colin Mochrie vs. Jesus Christ* trilogy also includes one of the few female characters with a significant role in the plot, and the only romantic female lead I have seen to date in animmutations. The character, with the face of Trinity, a character from the *Matrix* films, falls in love with Colin Mochrie. In the second video of the trilogy, *Plan 9 from Underpants*, Trinity and Colin make gooey eyes at each other when they first meet. During the “Cheesy Musical Training Sequence,” Trinity coos, “What a man! (swoon)” as Colin finally successfully lifts a heavy weight. In the final video, *Colin Mochrie vs. Jesus H. Christ: Finale*, she kicks Jesus and calls him a meanie for beating up Colin. After Colin defeats Jesus H. Christ, Colin and Trinity share a very rare animutation kiss.

Trinity thus enacts the kind of conventional romantic female lead often found in Hollywood movies. However, her appearance is far from conventional and, in fact, far from female. As one of four crew members of the Starship Underpants, she wears men’s “tighty whitey” underwear, with a large shamrock on the front. Described in the introduction as “fantastic creatures who wore naught but underpants emblazoned with a single green leaf...” these characters reference the Japanese group Happatai, whose video, *Yatta!* supplies the music for *Irrational Exuberance*. Other than the underwear and stubby legs and arms, Trinity’s body consists of a green robot-like box.

These aspects of the Trinity character play off Trinity’s identity as presented in the *Matrix* films. In those films, Trinity represents every nerd’s dream girlfriend: a smart,
beautiful hacker, she is absolutely devoted to the protagonist, Neo. Her femininity is both problematized and highlighted in the first film when Neo, on first meeting her, states that (based on knowing her hacker reputation) he thought she was a man. But in the *Colin vs. Jesus* trilogy, Trinity is hardly human, let alone female. Rather than directly satirizing women or femininity, her character more aptly satirizes the conventional Hollywood romantic subplot. Like the snickering of young boys during kissing scenes, this depiction distances the viewer from potentially feminizing and stigmatizing sentimentality.

These examples demonstrate the possibility of presenting female characters in animations while avoiding the potential negative stigmas attached to such presentations. However, they also demonstrate the skill necessary to pull such presentations off. Ultimately, the very ambiguity that makes it possible to keep various masculine identities ironically in play makes it difficult to avoid negative consequences inherent in a similar presentation of female identities. This stems in part from the fact that the sanction against sexism is greater than that against heterosexism, and in part from the difficulty in displaying an identity that is theoretically categorically different from that of the creator.

Conclusion

Young men face a difficult task in negotiating masculine identities. While certain aspects of traditional hegemonic masculinity such as sexism have fallen out of favor, others remain intact. Maintaining a balance that avoids both overt machismo and perceived wimpiness requires considerable interactional skill. As Segal (2001) puts it,

> whatever else it is, certainly hard enough to specify, “masculinity” condenses a certain engagement with power, however unrealized and largely unrealizable. But that is, of course, the problem: the source of the misery and crisis. *Men* will fail, and fail again, to measure up to its promise. Masculinity is always in crisis. (p. 239)

For a certain segment of young men, video production tools and online video forums provide new ways to deal with this crisis.

Animutations use decontextualization and irony to play with messages about identity. Statements about masculinity both celebrate and denigrate hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities, while less common inclusions specifically make fun of homosexual males. “[A]mbiguity or oscillation becomes part of the refashioning of an even more elusive ‘masculinity’, which is ideologically inscrutable” (Segal, 2001, p. 246). The irony and humor of animutations give their creators a safety net of deniability, allowing them to present multiple conflicting identities, while leaving the status quo intact.
References


