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# French the Llama, I'm a Nerdfighter!

Identity Formation and Collaboration in a YouTube Community



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This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA Social Anthropology of the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London). I have provided a CD copy of my dissertation, so that the markers may click on links if they wish to watch the videos and look at the websites that I have referenced as they read it, though this is not necessary for understanding the argument.

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# Nerdfighteria

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## **Abstract**

*This independent study project is an exploration of the YouTube community 'Nerdfighteria', as an excellent example of the social potential of YouTube more generally. I have split my research into three parts. In chapter one I analyse how concept of community works online, and specifically in Nerdfighteria. In chapter two I address the crucial role that collaboration plays in in the construction of community on YouTube. In chapter three I investigate the nature of interpersonal relationships in Nerdfighteria, with specific reference to the roles of 'nerdiness' and 'fangirling'.*

## **I. The beginning**

The video starts with scrolling text set to sentimental music. It reads: *'Two Brothers, One Video Blog. 365 Day of Textless Communication. It's a whole new kind of Brotherhood. Brotherhood 2.0'*. This is the Vlogbrothers' first YouTube video, published on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2007, in which Hank Green lays out the project that he and his brother John Green are about to embark upon:

"Hello John. By now you will have learnt that we will no longer be communicating through any textual means. No more instant messaging, no more emailing. Only video blogging. And possibly phone calls... Starting on January 1<sup>st</sup>, today, I will send you a video blog. Tomorrow you will reply to that video blog. We will continue like this until the year is up. If one of us fails to send a video blog on a weekday there will be certain punishments... Brotherhood 2.0 commences today." (VlogBrothers 2007a)

And this is exactly what they did. Each vlog (video blog)<sup>1</sup> had to be less than four minutes. Hank and John asked each other questions, set each other tasks and talked about politics, literature and their personal lives, amongst other things. The filming quality was very low and John and Hank were noticeably awkward, though less so as the year went on. The project was also made available on their website called 'Brotherhood 2.0'. In a video in February 2007, near the beginning of the project, John saw an arcade game that he thought was called 'Nerd Fighters' (it turned out to actually be called Aero Fighters) and vlogged the following:

<sup>1</sup> The vlog is a common format for YouTube videos, involving a person/people giving a monologue directly to the camera. The vlog is a very flexible, simple and communicatively effective format, which in part explains its popularity. They can be scripted or unscripted, about any topic, and can use any number of props. Burgess and Green (2009a) describe the vlog as 'an emblematic form of YouTube participation' (p. 94). In their 2007 study of the statistical makeup of all YouTube videos, the vlog 'dominated the sample', making up nearly 40% of the 'Most Discussed' category.

“Here’s my question about Nerd Fighters. Is Nerd Fighters a game about people who fight against nerds, or is it a game about nerds who fight against other people? I’ve come to believe that Nerd Fighters is a game about nerds who fight, nerds who tackle the scourge of popular people. And I’ve been thinking to myself, this would be a *great* video game.” (VlogBrothers 2007b)

Soon after, their subscribers independently adopted the label ‘Nerdfighters’. The concept of the name is fundamental to the shared identity of Nerdfighteria; it is the reappropriation of a long-standing stereotype of the American ‘high school nerd’ who likes comic books, does well academically and gets bullied by the jocks. Hank and John take pride in their ability to overcome stupidity and brutishness with their quick wittedness, intelligence and nonviolence<sup>2</sup>. They demonstrate their left-wing political stance in a number of videos and emphasise the importance of education (both formal and informal) as one of their central messages.

As 2007 came to a close, John and Hank announced that they were to continue vlogging and launched a new website, which their followers call the ‘Ning’, that featured a forum where Nerdfighters could communicate with one another<sup>3</sup>. Originally the website was moderated solely by Hank, but is now maintained by a group of volunteers known as the ‘Ningmasters’. It was at this point that the community took on a life of its own, with Nerdfighters uploading videos, having discussion threads and creating projects and groups independently of John and Hank. As one of my interviewees at the gathering I organised commented:

**L** I don’t think you have to watch specifically Hank and John’s videos to be a Nerdfighter. I don’t know. Because actually the definition of a Nerdfighter at the beginning was that you watched Hank and John’s videos and that’s the community. But I think it’s more than that now, not just their videos. I think it’s more the community and also the other YouTubers you can watch. (Appendix.1.2)

It is interesting to see that Nerdfighteria has surpassed Hank and John. This is something that John himself recently commented on:

“I like the idea of Nerdfighteria being about more than us, and I like to imagine a world where people identify as Nerdfighters, who embrace the values of Nerdfighteria, without even necessarily knowing who I am. That sounds great to me.” (Cook 2013b)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuvCb5eBbjE> In the video about the game ‘Nerd Fighters’ John goes on to explain how the ‘nerd team’ (which includes William Shakespeare, Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein and Nelson Mandela) would easily beat the ‘popular team’ (which consists of George W. Bush and Tom Brady).

<sup>3</sup> <http://nerdfighters.ning.com/>

Despite John's claim that he wants the values of Nerdfighteria, as opposed to himself as a personality, to be the driving force of the community, he and Hank continue to be an important hub around which Nerdfighters rally.

## II. Where are the VlogBrothers now?

Despite their original plan for Brotherhood 2.0 to last one year, fast forward six years and four months and the VlogBrothers are still going strong. Now they only publish videos on Mondays and Fridays on their main channel<sup>4</sup>, as opposed to every weekday. However, they have since created an unusually large number of spin-off YouTube channels, including two very popular educational channels<sup>5</sup>, a *Pride and Prejudice* modern day adaptation<sup>6</sup> and a game walkthrough channel<sup>7</sup>. Aside from the Ning, they also have a separate website for their record label DFTBA on which they sell merchandise (CD's, posters, t-shirts) and promote the bands on the labels. DFTBA is an initialism for "Don't Forget to be Awesome", their famous catchphrase and video signoff. John (*Fig. 1*) is now 35 years old and Hank (*Fig. 2*) is 32. John is also an award-winning young adult fiction writer, whose most recent book *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) sat at the number one spot in the New York Times bestseller list for seven consecutive weeks after it was published. It is based loosely on a Nerdfighter called Esther Earl who died at the age of 16 in 2010 of thyroid cancer. A large part of John's success as a writer is due to the huge support he gets from Nerdfighters, most of whom read his books avidly.

The VlogBrothers' popularity has grown exponentially since their inception. For their first one hundred videos they had fewer than two hundred subscribers (Cook 2013b). Now they have published more than one thousand videos and just last month they celebrated surpassing one million

4 <http://www.youtube.com/user/vlogbrothers> (1,098,092 subscribers as of 17/04/2013)

5 <http://www.youtube.com/crashcourse> 'Crash Course' is a weekly show in which Hank and John provide well thought out lessons in Chemistry, History, Biology, Literature and Ecology, all including excellent animation (624,584 subscribers as of 17/04/2013)

<http://www.youtube.com/scishow> 'SciShow' is a weekly science channel on which Hank explores various topics. Hank has a BA in Biochemistry and an MA in Environmental Studies (683,840 subscribers as of 17/04/2013)

6 <http://www.youtube.com/user/LizzieBennet> 'The Lizzie Bennet Diaries' (196,927 subscribers as of 17/04/2013)

7 <http://www.youtube.com/hankgames> 'Hank Plays Games' (113,639 subscribers as of 17/04/2013)

8 <http://dftba.com/> Most of the artists on the DFTBA record label are fellow YouTube stars, who publish and promote their music through their channels. Hank also makes music, which he shares regularly on the VlogBrothers channel and sells through DFTBA.

subscribers (VlogBrothers 2013b). This is nowhere near the number that the most subscribed-to vlogger<sup>9</sup> on YouTube has; ‘RayWilliamJohnson’<sup>10</sup> at 8,347,270<sup>11</sup> is the second most subscribed-to channel on the whole of YouTube, after the popular comedy sketch channel ‘Smosh’<sup>12</sup> at 9,158,227<sup>13</sup>. However, the VlogBrothers are well known for having a particularly large, active and tight-knit community amongst their subscribers, the Nerdfighters. Hank recently made a video on his second channel<sup>14</sup> in which he looked through the different designs of the VlogBrothers YouTube channel since 2007 and reflected on the community:

“Really what’s interesting is the level of engagement of Nerdfighteria. And that was very high at the beginning and has remained very high throughout the project, and that’s been what’s most interesting about it to us. And so while now we have 1,000,000 subscribers and then we had 10,000 [in 2007] it still feels like we’re doing the same thing, and we’re creating content for the same people in the same way. And that feels really good, that feels really nice, that feels right to me and I’m proud of that.” (hankschannel 2013a)

It is this relatively new phenomenon of YouTube communities that I am interested in analysing in this dissertation.

<sup>9</sup> Internet slang for ‘video blogger’.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/RayWilliamJohnson>

<sup>11</sup> Figures for RayWilliamJohnson and Smosh taken on 17/04/2013

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/smosh>

<sup>13</sup> <http://vidstatsx.com/youtube-top-100-most-subscribed-channels>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/hankschannel?feature=watch>



Fig. 1 – John in a typical recent vlog<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 2 – Hank Green in a typical recent vlog<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Br9EAmr2oNQ> John was invited to talk to President Obama in a google+ hangout ‘fireside’ talk. In this video he is asking his viewers to submit questions that they would like him to ask on their behalf (VlogBrothers 2013a). The talk with Obama can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gU09bWifFo> (Obama & Green 2013)

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gd8X7\\_tnrvY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gd8X7_tnrvY) (VlogBrothers 2012c)

# Introduction

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## **I. Why YouTube, and why now?**

This dissertation is a study of collaboration and identity in the YouTube community Nerdfighteria. YouTube is normally described as a ‘video-sharing site’. But as Lange (2007) points out, this definition fails to recognise the social dimension of the website. YouTube fits the description of a social networking site offered by Boyd and Ellison:

We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (2008: p. 213)

Surprisingly few academics have studied YouTube from a cultural perspective, and none of them (to my knowledge) have done in-depth ethnographic research on a particular YouTube community (Burgess & Green 2009a, 2009b; Lange 2007, 2009; Snickars & Vonderau 2009; Spyer 2011; Wesch 2008, 2009). I assume that this is because academia has not yet had time to catch up with this new and fast-moving phenomenon, because it is an extremely rich area for anthropological study. Wesch (2008, 2009) shows a good understanding of the potential for community and intimacy on YouTube, but his relatively recent fieldwork is already out of date.

Since 2007 the production of videos, including the VlogBrothers’, has become far more sophisticated. Correlatively the numbers of subscribers and the size of YouTube communities have flourished. Having been a YouTuber<sup>17</sup> and Nerdfighter myself since 2007, I have witnessed the rapid distillation of clear identities and styles amongst certain YouTube communities over time. This dissertation is my attempt to map some of the interesting ways in which identity and community is constructed on and through YouTube, and what makes it distinct from other types of social networking sites. I am particularly interested in the collaborative and participatory nature of YouTube.

<sup>17</sup> Internet slang for someone who is part of the wider YouTube community. Defined by subscribing to particular popular ‘YouTube Stars’, commenting on or creating videos and generally keeping abreast of what is happening within the website’s broader community.



I have chosen Nerdfighteria as my case study for two reasons. Firstly, I know a lot about it from my personal experience within the community. And secondly, Nerdfighteria has a very strong identity and flavour (many describe it as a ‘tight-knit’ community), which makes it an excellent example of the social potential of YouTube. Most people only use YouTube for video sharing across different platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, and are completely unaware of the social networking aspect of the site. For me this makes Nerdfighteria even more intriguing. How can it be that such a strong and active community could emerge through the quagmire that is YouTube?

## **II. Structure**

In chapter one I investigate the concept of ‘community’ in an online setting. I argue that it is self-identification with a community that defines much of Nerdfighteria. I also discuss the five characteristics common to online and offline communities that are identified by Baym (2010), and conclude that in the case of Nerdfighteria it is predominantly shared practices, values and identity that bind the community, as opposed to interpersonal relationships.

In chapter two I explore the importance of collaboration in Nerdfighteria, and on YouTube more generally. I look at the ‘Project for Awesome’, the annual YouTube charity project that the VlogBrothers organise, as my case study. I argue that on YouTube collaboration is one of the primary forms of community building, and has great potential for significant socio-political movements.

In the third and final chapter I explore the nature of intimacy in Nerdfighteria and the types of interpersonal connections that exist on YouTube. I discuss the deep/loose connections made on YouTube, and social media more generally (Buege 2007; Turkle 2010; Wesch 2008, 2009). I also address the role that ‘nerdiness’ and ‘fangirling’ play in Nerdfighteria.

## **II. Methodological constraints**

There are a number of barriers for the anthropologist working with online communities, and YouTube provides more than most. As Spyer (2011) points out when talking about the problems he

faced in researching the community of YouTube beauty gurus, it was near impossible to study the audience of these videos because ‘those who do not participate in the conversation [but watch the videos] leave no trace’ (p. 22). I myself watch many of the VlogBrothers’ videos and consider myself to be a Nerdfighter, but rarely comment on their videos or give any indication that I am there. For anyone looking, I would not be included in an evaluation of Nerdfighteria as a community. I have to assume that there are a fairly large proportion of people similar to me, who subscribe to the values and identity of Nerdfighteria but do not actively participate in this community.

Because of this constraint, much of my data is derived from the VlogBrothers’ videos themselves. Luckily, John and Hank often talk about their community, and most of Nerdfighteria’s values and community projects are derived directly from their videos. I also carried out a limited amount of research on the Nerdfighter forum. The majority of interactions between Nerdfighters occur here, and so it is a key site of community construction. Usefully, I discovered that a University of East-Anglia student named Matt Tidby was simultaneously carrying out fieldwork on Nerdfighteria and had received some excellent feedback on the forum as to why people participate in the community (see Appendix.2). He gave me permission to use his findings.

To supplement the research gathered online I also carried out IRL<sup>18</sup> fieldwork in the shape of a Nerdfighter gathering. I organised this gathering in the London group on the Nerdfighter forum, and eight people attended. I spoke to them for two hours about their experiences of Nerdfighteria and recorded their answers. This conversation was extremely illuminating and useful for this dissertation (see transcription of interview in Appendix.1).

<sup>18</sup> Internet slang meaning “in real life”.

# ONE Community

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In this chapter I am exploring the concept of ‘community’ in an online setting. During my research I discovered that in Nerdfighteria community is not constructed through traditional interpersonal relationships so much as through self-identification, shared practices and a shared identity.

## **I. The community concept**

So far I have freely referred to Nerdfighteria as a ‘community’. However, how best to define this seemingly benign term has been one of the most enduring problems for social scientists and anthropologists alike. Although people instinctively feel that they understand what it means, it is a heavily loaded term that provokes contradictory characterisations and therefore has been refused by many academics. This is particularly true in the case of Internet studies. As Postill argues, in the case of digital anthropology ‘progress has been hampered by an overdependence on the problematic notion of community whose paradigmatic status has yet to be questioned by Internet scholars.’ (2008: p. 413). Nonetheless, it can still be a useful category. It is important that I do not assert that Nerdfighteria is a community without making clear my own definition.

In the field of digital studies, anthropologists face the problem that ‘community’ was a term created prior to the inception of the Internet, and that as a result the term is ill equipped to describe this modern form of interaction. Renninger and Shumar (2002) argue that popular definitions of community arose out of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century sociological tradition, and that many scholars struggle to shake off these ideas when talking about the Internet. These conceptions of community include Durkheim’s mechanical to organic solidarity and the Tönniesian shift from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*, not to mention enduring theorisations from the likes of Marx and Weber. This is not to say that we should do away altogether with these famous theories and people, but rather that we need to recognise that the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Western context was radically different. These theorists were writing in response to the impacts of industrialisation and class struggle, and their work was thoroughly rooted in the geographic, for example the mass migration from countryside to city.

But what are the problematic ideas from this period that have endured? Renninger and Shumar highlight the emphasis on ‘family, kin, shared values, and greater intimacy’ as the desired hallmarks of “traditional communities” (p. 5). And of course this intimacy is founded on physical interaction and geographic proximity. Many scholars have used this sort of rhetoric to argue that the Internet is insufficient in providing meaningful relationships, and cannot be the basis of ‘real’ communities. On the other hand, some have heralded the Internet as being ‘the high-tech social form that can return us to so-called traditional values and intimate personal relationships’ (Ibid.). Both of these types of arguments rely heavily on traditional conceptions of community, which Renninger and Shumar argue should be replaced by new definitions shaped by ethnographic research of computer-mediated communication (Ibid.).

Evidently, there is little agreement on the issue of what the Internet has to offer us in terms of relationships and community. Some, like Bakardjieva (2000), argue that the term community limits our potential to understand online relationships and should therefore be discarded:

‘...the term ‘virtual community’ is not always the most accurate way to describe people’s actual social activities online. In fact, social togetherness has many variations, not all of which live up to the value-laden name of ‘community’. This fact, however, does not undermine the idea of collective life in cyberspace. On the contrary, I call for appreciation of the different forms of engagement with other people online (virtual togetherness) that exist, and the different situated needs they serve.’ (p. 237)

‘Virtual togetherness’ is a more inclusive term. As Bakardjieva argues, it does not fall into the same traps as the ‘value-laden’ term community does. However, I would argue that it is precisely this value-laden quality of the community concept that makes it useful, because it evokes a particular *feeling* that people can relate to. Saying this, what is useful about Bakardjieva’s ‘virtual togetherness’ is its emphasis on the positive potential of the Internet to bring together geographically disparate people.

I, like Green (2010), argue that self-identifying as being part of a community makes up a large portion of the definition. She places emphasis on ‘how people define the terms they use, how they feel about the communication they experience and how emotionally invested they are in the groups concerned’. Because of this, ‘one person’s online group can be another person’s community’ (Ibid: p. 140). In this definition, ‘meaningful’ communities do exist both online and offline, because

people identify as being part of them and also because they experience the positive feelings commonly associated with them (a sense of belonging and sharing etc.). This is one part of the definition of community that I have chosen to use. It is less focused on the material makeup of a community, and more on the *experiential*, which ultimately I feel is more important. It is also a useful definition of community for studying online interaction, precisely because it does not require a material presence. When I asked people at the gathering whether they considered Nerdfighteria a community or not, the answers I received strongly supported the argument for self-identification:

**L:** Well I'd definitely consider it a community. I'm not sure why. It's just people connecting and people considering themselves a community and I think that's kind of what makes a community. You're connected to people you've never met before and you feel you're part of a group.

**S:** I would call it a community because as long as people consider it a community then I'd say it was. There's that feeling of being a group, of belonging somewhere.

**Z:** Do you think that applies even if you don't actively participate?

**S:** Yeah I think so.

**L:** I think people who are not part of it wouldn't agree, because they don't understand why you are part of it when in their eyes you only watch videos.

**S:** I think the definition of community is not very set. So if you consider yourself a part of it, you are.

**T:** Yeah, the same as what everyone else said. For me if you think it's a community then it is one. If you think it's part of your identity. (Appendix.1.8)

There was a recurring theme amongst my interviewees – that if you are not a YouTuber, or part of an online community more generally, then you 'don't understand' what it means to be (part of) one. This is a fruitful area for further study amongst digital/virtual/cyber anthropologists. What is the nature of this inexplicable 'Other' experience of being part of an online community, and why do those who are not part of one find it so difficult to understand the nature and appeal of such communities?

## **II. Shared practices, values and identity**

Using self-identification as the measure Nerdfighteria is most certainly a community, in that the people who participate in it have strong feelings of togetherness. However, it would be overly

simplistic to suggest that the only defining factor of being part of a community is thinking that you are part of it. In the case of Nerdfighteria, although John Green vehemently insists that ‘if you want to be a Nerdfighter, you are a Nerdfighter’ (Vlogbrothers 2009b), the question remains: *why* and *how* do particular people become part of with this specific group? Baym (2010) identifies five main qualities that are inherent to both online and offline communities: ‘the sense of space, shared practice, shared resources and support, shared identities, and interpersonal relationships’ (p. 75). From what I have observed during my research, a shared identity (ideology) and shared practices are particularly important in constructing the community of Nerdfighteria. On the issue of identity, John said in a recent interview ‘to me it’s a values-based identity. It’s a way of imagining the world around you. It’s a way of imagining other people’ (Cook 2013b). This sentiment was echoed by Nerdfighters on the forum, when asked what they get out of the community:

**Lnr:** ‘I get the warm fuzzy feeling that there are other people in this world who care deeply and think intelligently and imagine complexly. That feeling is sadly lacking in other some areas of life.’ (Appendix.2.2)

**Austin Guidry:** ‘We learn from John, Hank, and each other about things like Phineas Gage, Hitler and Sex, why fiction is important and how it can become real, how to "imagine people complexly" (see them how they really are), how the truth resists simplicity, and so much more. Nerdfighteria has helped me to see new dimensions and layers of the world and how to see just how big and complicated it really is. As a nerdfighter currently living in China, it's great to know that I can still participate in what goes on, even though I'm half a world away from where most nerdfighters are living.’ (Appendix.2.7)

Many Nerdfighters expressed similar outlooks in their responses; that Nerdfighteria offered them a way of thinking ‘complexly’ and the feeling that they are part of a global community of people who share their worldview.

### **III. Speech communities**

In terms of shared practices, Baym (2010) points out that ‘because language is the primary tool through which digitally mediated groups cohere,’ the concept of ‘speech communities’ has been particularly useful for the study of online groups (p. 77). Speech communities share certain patterns of language through which they can express belonging to a particular group whilst enacting

the ‘cultural ideology that underpins them’ (Ibid.). This is certainly true in the case of Nerdfighteria, which possesses a number of in-jokes and catch phrases. Hank and John even made an FAQ video in which they explained some of these phrases to new members of the community (VlogBrothers 2009b). The descriptions of these phrases are fairly extensive but important for understanding Nerdfighteria, so I will put them in the footnotes. To list a few: ‘Nerdfighter’<sup>19</sup>, ‘stuff on heads’<sup>20</sup>, “French the Llama!”<sup>21</sup>, ‘puff levels’<sup>22</sup>, ‘decepticon’<sup>23</sup>, ‘giant quid of anger’<sup>24</sup>, ‘worldsuck’<sup>25</sup> and ‘secret siblings’<sup>26</sup>. ‘DFTBA’ (Don’t Forget to be Awesome) is probably their most important and well-known phrase, and it sums up the general ideology of Nerdfighteria – emphasizing positivity, ‘nerdiness’, openness and a certain self-congratulatory vibe. As one of my interviewees at the gathering commented, “I think it’s a very open community, quick to accept new people” (Appendix.1.1). As Baym indicates, the shared language of Nerdfighteria is integral to the construction of its system of beliefs and also its intimacy. Subscribers mirror back this language in the comments section, as well as across different social media sites. If someone (whether online or offline) says “DFTBA” to someone else, it immediately evokes all that the VlogBrothers stand for, as well as being a declaration of endearment.

<sup>19</sup> John explains: “A Nerdfighter is a person who instead of being made out of bones and skin and tissue is made entirely of awesome.” (VlogBrothers 2009c).

<sup>20</sup> Hank explains: “if you put stuff on heads it makes you feel better about life” (VlogBrothers 2009c).

<sup>21</sup> An exclamation, instead of “oh my God!” for example.

<sup>22</sup> The level of puff in John’s hair that gets higher as he gets more stressed out.

<sup>23</sup> The opposite of a Nerdfighter.

<sup>24</sup> A YouTube ‘troll’. In other words, someone who purposefully posts comments on videos to provoke arguments.

<sup>25</sup> Things that are bad in the world (along the lines of poverty, war etc., but also people being cruel to one another).

<sup>26</sup> These are the people who post response videos. The idea of secret siblings is one of the ways in which John and Hank create a sense of community, welcoming contributions from their subscribers.

## TWO Collaboration

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Some have strongly juxtaposed community and collaboration in the case of digital technology (Carroli 1997; Haraway 1991; Young 1990). However, I argue that in the case of YouTube collaboration is one of the primary forms of community building, and to oppose these two concepts creates a false binary. I am using the ‘Project for Awesome’, an annual YouTube charity project that the VlogBrothers organise, as my case study.

### III. Not community, but collaboration

Carroli (1997) takes a profoundly different approach to the issue of online groups than the arguments cited in the previous chapter. She posits that the Internet is a ‘fundamentally postmodern construct’; it is a space where social interactions are founded on ‘radical encounters and collaboration’, as opposed to traditional definitions of community (p. 359). For Carroli, purging ourselves of the community concept when talking about Internet sociality has great emancipatory potential. She argues that ‘collaboration undermines normative and unitary social formations in today's virtual environments’, because collaboration, unlike community, is informed by a postmodern sense of multiplicity and fragmentation. This fragmentary nature improves the possibility of having radical encounters with the Other, unburdened by the political baggage of the offline world. She appropriates Deleuze and Guattari’s (1983) notion of ‘rhizomatics’ as a conceptual framework for understanding the ‘collaborative and generative’ possibilities of the Internet (p. 360):

‘Unlike a structure defined by a set of points and positions, with binary relation between these points and bi-univocal relations between these positions, the rhizome is made only of lines: lines of segmentation and stratification as dimensions, but also lines of flight or of deterritorialization as the maximal dimension according to which, by following it, the multiplicity changes its nature and metamorphoses.’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1983: p. 47)

The concept of the rhizome is well suited to thinking about online encounters as collaborative and generative, ‘heralding the possibility of any number of “becomings”’ (Carroli 1997: p. 360). Most importantly for Carroli, in the fragmented space of the Internet ‘consensus is impossible and



irrelevant’, and therefore collaboration allows social encounters whilst attending to diversity and difference (Ibid.).

Carroli’s vision of the liberating nature of online interactions draws upon Donna Haraway’s classic text ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ (1991), in which she argues that ‘to “press enter” is not a fatal error, but an inescapable possibility for changing maps of the world, for building new collectives’ (p. 327). Indeed, back in the early 1990’s many were optimistic about the possibilities that the Internet held for the future of society. Haraway explores the cyborg – part human, part machine – as a fluid, split subject that challenges traditional ideas of identity that rely on authenticity and fixity.

Carroli concludes, with reference to Young (1990), that by maintaining the community concept in the case of online interactions, we are corrupting an opportunity to deconstruct social boundaries. By replacing it with the idea of collaboration, we can pervert unitary formations of the social and embrace expanding fields of connectedness and social interactivity (p. 362).

Whilst I admire Carroli’s optimism regarding the Internet’s ability to release us from the shackles of Othering and forced homogeneity, I utterly disagree with her false binarisation of community/collaboration. She is right in saying that the Internet is a postmodern space. You can be in one ‘place’ in one moment and the next be immediately transported somewhere utterly different. Your cyber-identity is equally as fluid and fragmentary. You can choose your gender, age, race, sexual orientation, appearance and personality irrespective of your offline self. All of these things are important to keep in mind when addressing online sociality. However, Carroli underestimates how many people desire *authentic* connection and intimacy on the Internet. I agree with Sprondel, Breyer and Wehrle (2011) in their argument that:

Instead of affirming the separation of identity from fixed physical embodiment, as represented in the poststructuralist hope for the deconstruction of essentialism, the analyses of computer-mediated communication reveal the users’ striving for *authenticity*. In a purely text based reality, authenticity, trust and ethical responsibility are the main social currency, which is obtained by expressing a stable identity. (p. 11)

Some people may choose to reinvent themselves in their online identity, but this does not necessarily undermine the fact that many people enjoy having a community to identify with in a meaningful, enduring way.

Carroli is also wrong to argue that online communities (that encourage uniform beliefs and values) act to reinforce hegemony and subordinate difference. It is precisely through encouraging collective action based on shared principals that online communities are able to improve the overall quality of discourse and make positive changes in the world. In the case of Nerdfighteria, and YouTube more generally, collaboration is the principal way in which community is built. Combining arguments about online communities with (some of) Carroli's insights about collaboration produces a useful framework for thinking about social interaction on YouTube. The Project for Awesome is an excellent example of the possibilities for collaboration and community building on YouTube.

#### **IV. The Project for Awesome – a case study for collaboration and community creation**

The Project for Awesome (P4A) is an annual collaborative Nerdfighter project to decrease worldsuck that began in 2007 (VlogBrothers 2007c), in which for one day a year the YouTube front page is flooded with P4A videos. To do this, every Nerdfighter – and anyone else who wants to join in with the project – makes a video about a charity of their choice and uses the thumbnail that Hank and John provide for their video (e.g. *Fig. 1* and *Fig. 2*). They then 'like', comment on and subscribe to as many other P4A videos throughout the day as they can. Because the front page of YouTube is determined by whatever videos are popular (or 'trending') that day, the aim is to have the entire front page of YouTube be covered in Project for Awesome videos, which in turn gives it a much wider audience than just subscribers of the VlogBrothers. As well as flooding YouTube, participants overwhelm twitter with the hashtag #p4a. In 2009 this was so successful that the hashtag #p4a was trending above the film *Avatar*. As John pointed out, "Avatar, which cost \$250,000,000 to make was beaten by the Project for Awesome, which cost zero dollars" (VlogBrothers 2009b).



Fig. 3 – 2007 P4A thumbnail<sup>27</sup>



Fig. 4 – 2012 VlogBrothers P4A thumbnail<sup>28</sup>

Participants are also encouraged to donate money to the project, and at the end of the project the money raised is divided between the most voted-for causes at the Project for Awesome website<sup>29</sup>. The 2012 P4A raised more than \$500,000, with more than 15,000 individual donors, and thousands of participants made videos (VlogBrothers 2012b). John also pledged to donate a penny for every comment made on a P4A video, which totalled more than 700,000.

Projects like this are central to the community of Nerdfighteria on two levels. Firstly, it supports their worldview and general aim to ‘decrease worldsuck’ through raising awareness and money for what they deem to be worthy causes. Secondly, it is a highly interactive project where every member, no matter how big or small they are on YouTube (in terms of subscribers), can contribute. I found one of the comments made at the gathering on this topic was very astute:

**M:** I think it’s really important that they do this just because there’s so many people in the community that they can make such a huge difference, whereas a lot of smaller communities they can do stuff but not to the extent that everyone who’s a Nerdfighter could. (Appendix.1.10)

It is precisely the cumulative nature of this project that makes it successful. As Hank commented in the very first P4A video, “The Nerdfighters wield great power because they are many and they work together to do things” (VlogBrothers 2007c).

There was one other comment made at the gathering about the P4A that I found insightful:

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQQOeT6ld3A> (VlogBrothers 2007c)

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zac\\_QeUZbT8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zac_QeUZbT8) (VlogBrothers 2012a) Last year the VlogBrothers provided an editable thumbnail, so that people could personalise them to fit their own charities and photos.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.projectforawesome.com/>

**A:** Probably the best thing about the idea of decreasing world suck is its name, because there are so many charitable organisations out there in the world. You name it, it exists. But the thing that they [the VlogBrothers] do is they make it seem fun. You know, everyone says, “oh donate to these poor puppies who are sitting in cages” but what they say is “positive prank on someone”. You know the idea that it can be something that’s so much fun. It isn’t always about money. You know it can be and that’s great, sure. But they make it not only about that. (Appendix.1.10)

This point about the Project for Awesome being about having fun is not glib or shallow. The VlogBrothers have a way of making positive action enjoyable and exciting and I think this is one of the reasons for their success, both in encouraging participation in their projects and as YouTubers generally. Within YouTube collaboration and community work hand in hand to produce amazing examples of collective action and togetherness. The general ideology of these projects was summed up well by John in his last Brotherhood 2.0 vlog in 2007:

“Hank at the end of this year I started to think that a lot of life is about doing things that don’t suck with people who don’t suck. That’s why I enjoyed the happy dance project and the Project4Awesome so much. All these people that don’t suck came together to do something that doesn’t suck.” (Vlogbrothers 2007d)

The success of the P4A is made even more amazing by the fact that, as Burgess and Green (2009b) point out, ‘YouTube’s architecture and design invite individual participation, rather than collaborative activity’ (p. 66). What they mean by this is that YouTube is not fundamentally designed to be a social networking or collaborative site. In fact, it actively dissuades collective projects, providing ‘no built-in, routinized methods of capturing video from other users and reusing it, or of making one’s own content available for this purpose’ (Ibid.). Despite this difficulty, YouTubers find ways to collaborate with one another in novel and inventive ways, such as embedding links in their videos to other videos or channels. Another example is the trend of inviting other YouTubers to join in with a particular ‘tag’. This is when a content creator makes a video in which they complete a particular task (for example, answering certain pre-prepared questions or does a specific activity), and then tag other creators to complete the same task in their video. Recently a tag has been going around called ‘Draw my Life’<sup>30</sup>, in which YouTubers draw

<sup>30</sup> The VlogBrothers have not made a ‘Draw my Life’ video, but here’s an example from Jenna Marbles, the most subscribed-to female vlogger on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sCxzaHC30Ec> (Mourey 2013)

pictures on a whiteboard with a voiceover explaining their life stories. 'Draw my Life' is a particularly interesting example of community of YouTube, as most of them end with the creator expressing their gratitude and love for their subscribers.

These community activities and invitations to other users are good examples of the ways in which the self-constituting YouTube community introduces tactics to attempt to navigate, shape and control the otherwise vast and chaotic array of content that exists in the network. Burgess and Green note that this collective development of solutions to technological limitations demonstrates the 'strong desires of the YouTube community to embed their video practice within networks of conversation, rather than merely to "broadcast themselves"', as the tagline of YouTube invites users to do (Ibid).

## THREE

# Relationships in Nerdfighteria

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As I argued previously, Nerdfighteria as a community is constituted more through a sense of belonging, shared practices and shared identity than through one-to-one relationships. But why might this be the case? In this chapter I explore the nature of intimacy in Nerdfighteria and the types of interpersonal connections that exist on YouTube.

### I. Deep/loose connections

Although there are many Nerdfighters who do cultivate and maintain relationships through different means, such as on YouTube, the Ning, tumblr<sup>31</sup>, twitter<sup>32</sup> and IRL gatherings, Nerdfighteria is fundamentally an ideological movement based on shared values, which does not require any actual interaction to be part of. For example, I consider myself to be a Nerdfighter in that I have been watching the VlogBrothers' videos since 2007 and share many of their values and practices. However, until I began this dissertation I had not actually spoken with any other Nerdfighters (either online or offline). I posit that this is one of the ways in which YouTube communities commonly differ from IRL communities. Less emphasis is put on specific person-to-person relationships (based on geographical proximity) and more emphasis is placed on shared interests, values and practices.

This argument is in part based on the feedback I got from my research at the gathering. All but one participant strongly agreed that Nerdfighteria is a *community* to which they belong. However, it was interesting to learn that almost none of them actually had what they considered to be 'friends' within the community. For example:

**A:** Um... I don't really have any online friends.

**L:** I never really had friends online or relationships online because it's kind of hard to form them online.

<sup>31</sup> <http://effyeahnerdfighters.com/> This is just one of the *many* tumblr accounts dedicated to Nerdfighteria. There is a hyperlink to this particular tumblr on the VlogBrothers' YouTube channel, so I suppose it would be considered the 'official' Nerdfighter tumblr.

<sup>32</sup> <https://twitter.com/realjohngreen> (John's twitter: 1,471,111 followers as of 17/04/2013) and <https://twitter.com/hankgreen> (Hank's twitter: 208,614 followers as of 17/04/2013).

**S.** I think it's always difficult to really communicate with people when you don't have body language. Just talking to them typing is different entirely from talking to someone in person. (Appendix.1.9)

Wesch provides the useful framework of 'deep/loose connections' for thinking through how it can be that someone identifies so strongly as part of a community and yet has no personal relationships within that community (Buege 2007). During his research on YouTube communities he observed that individuals 'wanted to connect socially with other people and feel part of a community, but they also liked that they could disengage from those relationships and that community at any moment' (Ibid: p. 15). One participant at the gathering echoed this idea:

**L.** There are so many people online that you can just be like well this one isn't nice I'll move on. Whereas in real life if for example you go to a new school, and in a class there's like 20 people you think ok if I don't make friends here then I will be alone so I have to make them like me. (Appendix.1.9)

The ease with which connections can be created and broken, and the sheer number of people in Nerdfighteria, means that there is less at stake in each interaction. For example, the Ning alone has 89,174 members to communicate with, not to mention the multitude of other websites on which Nerdfighters interact.

In his famous online video lecture 'An anthropological introduction to YouTube' (Wesch 2008), which has to date<sup>33</sup> received almost 2,000,000 views on YouTube, Wesch posits that in an increasingly individualized world we long for community on our own terms, with no strings attached. He claims that the types of relationships that occur on YouTube are shaped by this desire for closeness but also for distance, intimacy and yet detachment. For Wesch this is not a bad thing. He is extremely positive about 'the depth of connection [people] feel and the sense of community they can experience on YouTube' (Wesch 2009: p. 27). Though he recognises that there are many who are surpassing the boundary of anonymity by going to IRL YouTube gatherings and creating one-to-one relationships online, he insists that 'the experience of profound and deep connection with relatively (or even totally) anonymous strangers viewed on the screen from a distance' remains an important aspect of intimacy on YouTube (Ibid: p. 27). The voyeurism of being a YouTuber,

watching but unseen, results in a strange sense of being both alone and anonymous, and at the same time having incredible familiarity and closeness to content creators. This is particularly the case when watching vloggers, who often share personal details of their lives with their subscribers. The regularity with which many vloggers post new videos adds to this attachment and often a situation arises where a vlogger becomes a weekly or even a daily fixture in the lives of their subscribers. I feel like I know Hank and John on a personal level. I know about their views, their beliefs, their families and their lives. This is not the same as the relationship I have to Hollywood stars. On this issue John reflects that ‘we’re all trying to figure it out, because no one’s ever had quite this kind of relationship before between creators and viewers’ (Cook 2013b). On a personal level I find myself agreeing with Wesch that YouTube provides us with meaningful connections without the pressure of IRL interaction. I have an unusual relationship to Hank and John; they sit uncertainly somewhere between friends and TV entertainers.

Sherry Turkle (2012) shares Wesch’s view that the Internet allows us to control the level of intimacy in our relationships. She claims that ‘we’re getting used to a new way of being alone together. People want to be with each other, but also elsewhere. Connected to all the different places they want to be’. She calls this the ‘Goldilocks effect’, being not too close and yet not too far from our friends, loved ones and acquaintances. But unlike Wesch she argues that this kind of social manipulation corrupts our ability to connect with others in meaningful ways. She is talking about the fact that in this new media age we are constantly only half paying attention to where we are and who we are with. The other half is stuck on our phones and iPads, on Facebook or twitter. She argues that technology appeals to us when we’re most vulnerable. That it acts as a social crutch because we are scared of ‘real’ relationships. That we want the ‘illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship’ (Ibid.). I would argue that if Turkle is judging online interaction and community by the same standards as traditional offline interaction and community then it is bound to fall short. The fact is that with new platforms for interaction come new types of relationships, and these relationships must be viewed on their own terms if we wish to understand them meaningfully.



By conservatively clinging on to her outdated conceptions of intimacy, Turkle is unable to recognise the incredible social potential of new technologies.

#### IV. Fangirling and nerdiness

Despite the fact that John insists that Nerdfighteria is about a common “way of imagining other people, more than it is about superficial shared interests” (Cook 2013b), my observations of the community suggest that it is precisely shared interests that attract many people to Nerdfighteria.

During my research the recurring theme of ‘fangirling’ came up. Fangirling is when a fan, or group of fans, openly get extremely excited and about their object of fixation<sup>34</sup>. In the case of Nerdfighteria there are certain interests that are shared amongst many members, for example Harry Potter and Doctor Who. The ability to fangirl with other Nerdfighters was one of the main types of social interaction talked about at the gathering. Here are two examples:

**M:** For me it’s a lot easier to fangirl about stuff with people. Because some of my friends don’t put up with that, like they don’t care at all. And then I can get excited about stuff with other people in the community [Nerdfighteria].

**T:** I met with some online friends recently for the first time and immediately it was really comfortable. We were fangirling about this that and the other. In real life I’m usually like the weird one in the group but with my online friends we’re all like that. (Appendix.1.6)

I found it interesting that both girls lamented their IRL friends’ unacceptance of their fangirling, in comparison to their Internet friends who shared their enthusiasm. I also found two similar and well-phrased responses on the Ning feedback:

‘Basically Nerdfighteria (the fictional space that exists on the internet) gives me a place to unashamedly geek out... I usually tone down my nerdiness around the uninitiated, not because I don't want to seem weird, but because I know that one person being REALLY enthusiastic about something and talking about NOTHING else while the other person has no interest in it can be awkward and unpleasant. In Nerdfighteria I have found people who are willing to talk about Doctor Who all day long, and who don't mind when I do too. It's my own private geek out space, and I love it!’ (Appendix.2.5)

‘I live somewhere where people generally look down on nerds and classify them as *those people who study lots and watch star trek or something*. I spend most of my life here spazzing and having feelings over TV shows, movies, videos, and comics, and only about 2 out of 10 times can I find someone IRL to relate to. Nerdfighteria gives me somewhere to let it all out with the peace of mind in knowing that people will understand me and perhaps

<sup>34</sup> The Urban Dictionary humourously defines fangirling as ‘the reaction a fangirl has to any mention or sighting of the object of her “affection”. These reactions include shortness of breath, fainting, high-pitched noises, shaking, fierce head shaking and endless blog posts: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=fangirling>

reciprocate the feelings. Becoming a nerdfighter made me feel more comfortable with myself because I knew that other people out there were as genuinely enthusiastic about stuff as I was.' (Appendix.2.6)

There is a fundamental point being made here about fitting in. Fangirling and nerdiness are both about 'being yourself' without the fear of being judged uncool. John exemplifies this in a vlog in which he describes his excitement when waiting to watch the (then) new Harry Potter film:

"The 30 minutes before the movie started was what I *love* about being a nerd, because nerds like us are allowed to be unironically enthusiastic about stuff... Nerds are allowed to love stuff, like jump up and down in the chair, can't control yourself *love it!* Hank, when people call other people nerds what they're really saying is 'you like stuff', which is not a good insult at all. Like, 'you are too enthusiastic about the miracle of human consciousness'." (VlogBrothers 2009a)

It is clear that many Nerdfighters find solace in the knowledge that they can share their nerdiness and enthusiasm. The Internet allows people to connect with others who share their worldview and interests, and many people admit to being part of Nerdfighteria in order to feel less lonely. Certainly, for lots of people the VlogBrothers' videos and Nerdfighteria are just about being entertained and having fun. But for many it is much more than that. It is about being part of something bigger than yourself, making the world a better place, and connecting with a huge group of people who share your values and interests.

This section about fangirling and nerdiness seems to contradict what I previously said about interpersonal relationships being a relatively negligible aspect of Nerdfighteria. However, although many of the participants in the gathering agreed that they could have interesting conversations about shared interests, the general opinion amongst the group was that shared interests are not enough to support a 'real' friendship, and that these online one-to-one connections were fun but relatively shallow in terms of their relationship-building potential:

**G:** I think there should be more to friendship than just shared interests. I mean you could be an acquaintance that you fangirl over Merlin, but maybe not a friend. I like to read people views on certain things. I mean I like to go on Game of Thrones forums but I wouldn't actually be like do you wanna meet up because who are they really?

**L:** At the beginning I always thought to be good friends you have to have the same interests but now I think it's more about just getting along and being able to talk to each other. You can meet people with the same interests but just not be able to talk. (Appendix.1.9)

It is more the *idea* of being part of a community that celebrates nerdiness and fangirling that many Nerdfighters find appealing, and this brings us back to the argument that it is predominantly an ideological community based on self-identification, shared values and shared practices.

# Conclusions

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What I have really been interested in exploring throughout this project is *why* people choose to participate in Nerdfighteria and what it offers them in terms of community and self-realisation. Aside from the community, shared interests and values that I have already explored, a big attraction for many Nerdfighters, not surprisingly, is Hank and John themselves. They exude self-confidence and pride in their ‘nerdiness’. They are successful, multi-talented and passionate about the collaborative potential of YouTube and their community. They have a clear message that appeals greatly to many teenagers, particularly in America, who express their feelings of loneliness and alienation prior to discovering the VlogBrothers.

## **I. Authenticity**

There has been an undercurrent throughout my fieldwork on YouTube, the Ning and at the gathering to do with authenticity. In a video just last week Hank tried to describe to viewers how to become a popular vlogger on YouTube (defined by number of subscribers and video views). He explained that a successful YouTuber’s content sits somewhere between professional TV or film projects on the one hand and on the other something that almost anyone could do if they turned on a camera and talked into it:

“There’s a space between those two things, where it feels like something anybody could do and it feels very authentic and it feels very much just like a guy with a camera. But it better than the average guy with a camera, or girl with a camera. So that space there is where the real interesting thing happens.” (hankschannel 2013b)

It is precisely this feeling of *authenticity* that people tend to find engaging on YouTube. You are entertained and informed by a VlogBrothers video, but you also feel as though you are watching something genuine and grassroots. YouTube acts as both a top-down platform for the distribution of popular culture, and also a bottom-up platform for user-generated content (Burgess & Green 2009b: p. 6). There is an increasing tension between channels that are run by professional production companies and those that are run by low-budget individuals. Many feel that the website is being contaminated with contrived efforts by big business to steal audiences from amateur content

makers. For example, the Oprah Winfrey network runs a channel called ‘soulpancake’<sup>35</sup>, which of course has massive financial backing. Wesch also emphasises the importance of authenticity for YouTubers:

Many commented that they would rather watch real people on YouTube than the commercial productions of television. They saved their harshest complaints for reality TV, which they found to be the least real because it is posing as something it is not. Ultimately, it is the ulterior motives that bother them. (Buege 2007: p. 14)

Wesch observed that some vloggers intentionally used bad quality recording and editing equipment so that they would not be accused of inauthenticity and commercialism (Ibid.). Although the VlogBrothers do use high quality cameras and making videos for YouTube is their profession, it is clear that they strive to come across as genuinely passionate about their community and video making, as opposed to being in it for the money. As John’s recently commented on the big companies coming into YouTube, “they can have the money, as long as we can have the audience” (Cook 2013b).

## **II. The end**

Ben Cook, a YouTuber who has recently risen to fame due to his fantastic documentary series ‘Becoming YouTube’ which explores different aspects of the British YouTube community through interviewing various YouTube stars<sup>36</sup>, makes the poignant observation that:

“For the time being at least, YouTube feels like our secret. We know that YouTube is a hub of raw, untethered talent. A place where we can engage and create and experiment in a way that TV, whatever that is, can only dream of.” (Cook 2012)

Despite the VlogBrothers’ relatively large audience, YouTube communities continue to be an underground phenomenon. YouTube is a place where fantastically imaginative content creators are provided with a platform that enables social networking, interaction and collaboration. Some have used these social capabilities more effectively than others. Nerdfighteria is one of the best examples

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/soulpancake>

<sup>36</sup> Cook’s documentary was recently the central focus of a Guardian article on the high quality content and underground community of YouTube: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2013/apr/07/youtube-superstars-new-generation-bloggers?INTCMP=SRCH> (Lewis 2013)

of a community that utilises the social potential of YouTube for what I would cautiously call ‘the greater good’.

There are many abundant areas for future research on YouTube. Had I more space, I would have very much liked to explore the ways in which vloggers, particularly YouTube Stars, interact and collaborate with one another in their video making. Many of the most prominent American vloggers live in Los Angeles and regularly appear in one another’s videos, thus sharing their subscribers and communities. I would also like to use an actor-network theory approach to analyse how the technical specifications of YouTube, such as the design, layout and search engine, impact upon the ways in which people connect and build community. And finally, it would be fascinating to do a comparative piece of research on how Nerdfighters communicate in different ways across different platforms. Nerdfighteria is not only constructed on YouTube, which is why I used research from the gathering and the Ning. However, the community exists on far more platforms than these three; Nerdfighters are particularly active on tumblr and twitter. In an extended ethnographic study I would analyse a fuller range of the websites through which Nerdfighteria is built, as well as a more comprehensive study of IRL gatherings. For example, in 2010 Hank and John started running an annual three-day convention called VidCon in Los Angeles. VidCon is now the largest gathering of online video viewers, creators, and industry representatives worldwide, with 7,000 attendees in 2012. It would be absolutely fascinating to attend VidCon and observe the interactions of so many different YouTube communities and content creators in one space.

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# Appendix.1

## Transcription of Nerdfighter gathering 3/10/2012

I sent out a general invitation on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2012 on the ‘London, UK Nerdfighters’ group<sup>37</sup>, which is on the general Nerdfighter forum, asking people to join me for an informal interview about their experiences within the Nerdfighter community. Eight people attended. They were all aged between 19-21, which is indicative of the general age of Nerdfighters, most being in their teens. There were two males, (D) and (R), and six females, also common within Nerdfighteria. All attendees were either at school or University, except two girls. (S) had recently moved to London from Finland to be an au pair, and (L) was a German au pair working in London. (M) and (A) were American students on their years abroad (Nerdfighteria is considerably larger in the USA than in Britain). All the attendees were also Caucasian, which I found interesting but not surprising. We talked for two hours, during which time I asked ten pre-prepared questions. (Z) is me. This is a direct transcription of the conversation.

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### 1.1

**Z:** my first question is “how did you first come across Nerdfighteria and what drew you to it? What did you like about it?” and anyone can respond! And obviously there’s no right or wrong answers. There’s no particular conclusions that I’ve made yet, I haven’t formulated a conclusion for this project so any answer is interesting.

**M:** I think I found them through tumblr, because people always make artworks of quotes from John’s books that I really love. And I didn’t know they were from John’s books until after I read them...

**Z:** are those the ones that have been made into posters recently?

**M:** yeah lots of them have been made into posters. And I think there was a link to one of their videos and then I just got hooked and watched all of them

**Z:** that’s interesting because people have such different experiences. The internet.. there’s so many different points of access for these videos. They’re all over the place. Once you start looking. Like if you have a friend in “real life” that’s such a different way to get into it than tumblr. A lot of people who are Nerdfighters probably don’t use tumblr for example.

**L:** I think tumblr’s quite strange to be honest. I don’t really understand it. I mean I have it and sometimes I spend an hour on it and then I think what did I just do?

**M:** it’s so addictive. I spend like hours on it!

**Z:** and then twitter is another way. I find that a strange access point but John had 1,200,000 followers on twitter. More than the subscribers on YouTube, a lot more, and more than the forum users. And I think wow, how did you get so many followers?

**M:** it’s the books I think.

<sup>37</sup> <http://nerdfighters.ning.com/group/londonuknerdfighters/forum/topics/london-gathering-sat-3rd-nov-please-help-an-anthropology-student>

**Z:** do you think lots of people who read the books don't know about the community?

**M:** I think because they're geared towards young adults a lot of the people my age haven't read them or haven't heard of them, even though John is a fabulous writer and you can read them as an adult. So I don't really know anybody whose read them apart from Nerdfighters...

**L:** I know that my friend who I met on Nerdfighters read the books first and she liked them so much that she researched him on the Internet and then found the videos. But there has to be some people who only read the books.

**Z:** sure yeah. And John seems to be more famous than Hank in that respect. But when you watch the videos its not clear that John is super famous and Hank's not. Anyway sorry, went off on a tangent. So you found it on tumblr, that's interesting. Did anyone else find it on tumblr?

**T:** I sort of saw it everywhere. Bit on twitter, bit on tumblr. There was this GIF thing and what does bat man and 17 sodium atoms have in common?

**G:** what do they have in common?

**T:** na na na na na na na na [people laugh]. Yeah so just like seeing bits of that I came across it

**Z:** so you saw it in different places and did you connect it up? Did you know that they were the same thing?

**T:** I don't know I just kept hearing their names on tumblr or wherever and connected the dots

**Z:** anyone else?

**S:** well I heard about it through a friend because I was here and he asked if I'd made any new friends and I was like no I haven't met anyone yet, and he said "you should check out Nerdfighters, I think you'd really like it". And I'd never heard of it but I did and now I'm here

**Z:** I think for me it seems like it's quite an accessible group. There's quite a shared feeling amongst Nerdfighter, which is a recognition that you're going to meet nice people. You know what I mean?

**L:** yeah I think it's a very open community, quick to accept new people

**Z:** yeah, not judgemental and friendly. I haven't met many Nerdfighters but it seems clear.

**L:** it's just all nice people! [laughs]

**T:** I think they don't really judge other people if they have some nerdy tendencies.

**L:** coz you're a nerd yourself! [laughs]

**T:** I don't think you have to be a nerd...

**Z:** well it's hard to define isn't it? The thing about the term "nerd" is that it's been re-appropriated by hipsters so it's actually cool to be a nerd. But that's not *really* nerdy. I don't think that's nerdy. But it's a visual thing.

**L:** I don't think hipsters are nerdy

**G:** hipsters are wannabe homeless people [laughs]

**Z:** that's a great quote

**G:** it's from 2 broke girls

**L:** yeah there are very different versions of nerdy. I mean some people see nerdy just as you're good at school, or you're nerdy because you like Star Wars or something, Harry Potter. I think there's actually a big difference between the two parts of nerdy.

**G:** I think it's getting bigger and bigger though. Like 10 years ago if you liked Star Wars you were in a really small minority but now everyone loves Harry Potter

**Z:** that's really true. It's much more acceptable. But then also I do feel that Hank and John exemplify that change from niche interest to mass interest. They have so many followers. And those people aren't just blindly following them because they love them and are in awe of them. They kind of just think "oh I like them. I could be friends with them". Or that's what I feel at least. Do you agree?

**L:** yeah

**M:** yeah

**T:** yeah

**Z:** they just seem really nice and clever and interesting. Anyway, how did you get into the thing?

**T:** um I just watch a lot of YouTube content so I heard about them through other YouTubers. And then I told him [points to brother "B"]

**Z:** which YouTubers did you watch before?

**T:** um quite a lot. A lot of unknown ones, a lot of big ones.

**Z:** I find it quite interesting how there's this whole network. You see this networks of YouTubers...

**T:** yeah, they're all friends

**Z:** yeah exactly. These people who like, do things for DFTBA records. That seems a big thing. You know Alex Carpenter [<http://www.youtube.com/user/alexandercarpenter>]?

**G:** yeah

**L:** oh Alex Carpenter, he's like... I'm never really sure if he's really...

**G:** I just loved his reading Twilight. It was hilarious.

**Z:** yeah, he's a wizard rocker, like he's the Remus Lupins. That's him basically. But also he does vlogs and stuff.

**L:** but he's not really. I'm not sure he's part of the Nerdfighter community. Like people who are really obvious like Charlie [<http://www.youtube.com/user/charlieissocoollike>] or Kristina [<http://www.youtube.com/user/italktosnakes>]. I'm not so sure about Alex Carpenter. He's kind of connected.

Z: there's a tangent. I mean part of the way I got into it was via Harry Potter. So there's this whole Harry Potter thing, the wizard rock thing. People like Kristina...

G: DJ Dobby Sox [laughs] I was like wow.

Z: I mean I'm not that into wizard rock but I went to this event in America. I was really lonely one year because all my friends had gone off to uni or whatever and I had chosen to take another gap year. So I was alone in Bristol and decided one day to go to Wrockstock, which is this weekend festival near St Louis. So I went to that and all these people were there. Like Kristina, Luke Conard [<http://www.youtube.com/user/lukeconard>], Alex Carpenter and people like Lauren Fairweather [<http://www.youtube.com/user/devilishlypure>]. You know 5 awesome girls?

L: yeah I know Kristina Horner [who was part of 5 awesome girls]. I found her through the Pottermore sorting video, and then at one point I saw she an actual connection with the whole thing.

Z: that's funny because for me she was the first person I started watching. It's quite weird that there's this one specific connection. Basically there are lots of ways that you can get involved.

L: She was in a lot of Alex's videos [<http://www.youtube.com/user/nerimon>]

Z: Alex Day? They went out didn't they?

L: yeah. I think it's a bit creepy! It's a bit like a TV show where they get together and then they get separated

Z: that's why it was weird when I went to America and saw Kristina Horner and thought, oh I know who she is. I didn't really chat to her but I felt weird about the imbalance where I knew all about her. If you met Hank and John you'd be like I know all about you. I know your kids, I know about your wife, what you've been doing. And they don't know you at all. Its weird isn't it.

## 1.2

Z: Anyway, the second question is: **Do you consider yourself to be a Nerdfighter? And what does that mean for you to define yourself in that way?"**

G: I don't see myself as a Nerdfighter because I don't know these people and I don't really watch the videos. I just like the forum and I like the fandom. My friend told me about it and you meet all these interesting people on there.

Z: what do you do on the forum? Do you mainly post or just read what other people have written?

G: read and post.

Z: I wonder how usual or unusual it is to be more involved in the forum or watching the videos. Because I think a lot of people get into it through the videos first.

G: you get the same people on the forums again and again. They send me email alerts every time someone posts something! And it's like the same people.

Z: have you made any friends?

G: not really

**Z:** I've only just joined the forum so I don't know anyone and they don't know me. I mean you do know, but they wouldn't know who I am. If I posted something they wouldn't be like "oh Zoe posted something". You know? But I guess there are lots of people on the forums who are very involved. So you don't consider yourself to be a Nerdfighter really?

**G:** I don't know. I'm not really sure what it is.

**T:** I guess that's the same with anyone. It's so broad that you can't really classify exactly what it is.

**L:** for example I don't think you have to watch specifically Hank and John's videos to be a Nerdfighter. I don't know. Because actually the definition of a Nerdfighter at the beginning was that you watched Hank and John's videos and that's the community. But I think it's more than that now, not just their videos. I think it's more the community and also the other YouTubers you can watch.

**Z:** definitely, it's massive. But there are certain points of reference aren't there? Like language things. Like certain in jokes such as "French the llama" [laughs]. I don't think I was a Nerdfighter when that started and I don't think I really get it.

**M:** it's just like an "oh my gosh!" like "French the llama!"

**L:** I think someone translated it and John was like oh that's cool that should be a thing.

**Z:** and you see how it spread out. Like on tumblr for example there's all of this llama-based artwork.

**L:** sometimes I'm talking to my friend who's also a Nerdfighter and the others just look at us like "Nerdfighter?" and we just nod [laughs]

**Z:** so do you all consider yourselves Nerdfighters? Doesn't anyone here not label themselves in that way?

**T:** I think the whole point of it is anyone can be a Nerdfighter. That's the good thing about it.

**Z:** definitely, it's a very inclusive community. I mean, I'm calling it a community. The issue of whether it's a community or not is quite a big question that I'm interested in. partly because it's hard to define what a community is and partly because people who are cynical about the internet say you can't have a community online, it's not the same. They might say well what does that really mean if you don't *know* these people.

**L:** but if you're not on the Internet you can't really understand these things. I think really the Internet is another world. For example, my mother never really was on the Internet that much but a few months ago she discovered YouTube and she's playing the violin. And she found like a YouTube video where a person explained how to play a certain piece and also gave sheet music and she was so happy about it and was like "oh YouTube is so cool! It's great!" and I thought well that's normal for me. I always find people explaining stuff to me or...

**M:** yeah one of my favourite composers does these YouTube choirs where you upload your part

**Z:** oh that's so good, I love that!

**M:** yeah it's really cool

**Z:** who's the composer?

**M:** um, I can't think of his name. He's a really huge composer for choral pieces. Eric Whitacre!  
[<http://www.youtube.com/user/ericwhitacresvrtlchr>]

**Z:** I love that. Seeing the ways that people can change things by being innovative with the Internet. I find that really amazing. Which is why Nerdfighteria is interesting, because it produces a lot of creative stuff.

### 1.3

**Z:** **So do you make a distinction between the Nerdfighter part of your life and the “normal” part, or do you see it just as a whole identity?**

**S:** for me it's my whole life because most of the things I do I would consider to be Nerdfighterish, so I don't make the distinction

**Z:** is that just hobbies or the whole way you go about living?

**S:** both really.

[Someone new turns up. We do introductions]

**Z:** How long have you been a Nerdfighter and what's your involvement with community?

**A:** since early last year and actually a couple of weeks ago I finally watched all 1000 plus videos

**Z:** woah! I certainly haven't watched all of them

**L:** at one point I tried and I just couldn't do it anymore. Now when I come across I video I haven't seen it's fine I'll just watch that one but I don't watch them in a row.

**Z:** do you consider yourself to be a Nerdfighter?

**A:** definitely. But I'm still working on reading all of his [John's] books.

**Z:** I haven't read all of them

**L:** I haven't read that one [points to 'An Abundance of Katherines' that **A** is holding]

**A:** I found it hard to find in a bookstore. You can always find 'Looking For Alaska' and 'Paper Towns'

**Z:** how did you find out about the community?

**A:** um I just found out through a friend. He mentioned it and then sent me the link and I was like "oh wow, everything you've said to me makes so much more sense now!"

### 1.4

**Z:** **How do you participate in Nerdfighteria? What do you do? Do you watch videos, post on the forum, meet up with people, read the books?**

**T:** I think I'm quite passive. I watch the videos, read the forum.

**Z:** yeah I think there's a lot of people who just absorb the videos or whatever because I think there's a feeling that unless you're going to organise gatherings you can get a lot from it without actually putting yourself out there. How about you?

**M:** well I watch the videos and read John's books and I follow both of them on tumblr.

**Z:** what kind of stuff do they post to tumblr?

**M:** um Hank has been posting a lot of artwork from things they say in their videos or John's books or lyrics. And then John doesn't really post that much

**A:** John will just re-post what other people posts. He never actually writes things!

**R:** I only really watch the videos

**A:** yeah I mostly watch the videos. I finally got round to creating a profile on the Ning [forum]. I'm still trying to figure it out though. It's really hard to post things!

**M:** yeah it is

**L:** I think it's particularly confusing that you don't get a message if someone answers when you post. You just have to go to it every day otherwise you don't know

**Z:** I get emails, but that's a bit of a hassle. You don't want a million emails. Anyway, how about you?

**L:** well I watch the videos, I read the books. Yeah I think that's pretty much all I do. I did for example put notes in books [referring to a Nerdfighter project to put nice notes in certain books that Nerdfighters tend to like, such as John's books, Harry Potter etc.]

**Z:** how do you participate?

**T:** um, mainly I just watch the videos. I'd like to read some of his books but I struggle with reading. So YouTube is my main thing.

**Z:** have you seen the forum?

**T:** yeah, I check the London group

**Z:** oh yeah obviously, that's why you're here! I knew the forum existed but I don't actually join it until a couple of months ago

**L:** I think there are many that don't actually use the forum

**M:** I saw this on Facebook

**Z:** did I put it on Facebook?!

**M:** yeah on the London Nerdfighter group

**Z:** that was such a good idea! How do you participate?



**A:** well I watch the videos. I didn't know about Nerdfighters before October, but I watched many videos and I will read some of John's books because I really like reading and I'm interested in writing as well.

**L:** Is anyone doing NaNoWriMo? [National Novel Writing Month <http://www.nanowrimo.org/>]

**G:** yeah

**L:** I actually wanted but now it's already 3 days past and I haven't started yet

**G:** it's possible

**Z:** yeah, it's possible. I tried a couple of years ago but then I had this Wrockstock thing in America half way through for a week and there was no way I could ever catch up.

**G:** it's really limited though. Like you *have* to write this many words otherwise you haven't written a novel

**Z:** does everyone know what NaNoWriMo is? It's National Novel Writing Month. It's something that John does a lot, or talks about a lot. You have to write a 50,000-word novel in the month of November. So it's like 1,700 words a day or something.

**G:** I couldn't do it at university.

**Z:** it's cool though. The point is if you want to write a novel and have an idea then you just write shit loads in November and then afterwards you can go back and edit if you want. You're not allowed to edit during November, that's one of the rules. Because I think a lot of people worry about editing and they never get anywhere. So you're doing it?

**G:** yeah. Well, I haven't started it yet.

**Z:** so that's interesting that a lot of you guys read the books, because they're not such a big thing in the videos. It seems to be more about John's thing than Hank's thing. But Hank doesn't have such a thing...

**L:** he makes music. For instance my friend listens to his music a lot, but I don't so much

**Z:** I just see it as fun music but not something you'd listen to loads

**L:** yeah. I mean I listen to it when he posts a video, but I wouldn't put it on my MP3 player

**Z:** right, exactly

**M:** oh I forgot something that I do, I'm part of the Kiva Nerdfighting group. [<http://www.kiva.org/team/Nerdfighters>]

**Z:** what's that?

**M:** Kiva is an organisation where you give micro loans to people in mainly 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries and then they pay you back

**L:** John talks about it all the time

**Z:** how's that organised?

**M:** they have different groups on Kiva and you just join the group and they have stats on how much...

**Z:** is that a website?

**M:** yeah. And Nerdfighter have loaned 1.5 million dollars or something like that. They're trying to get to 2 million by Hank's birthday I think

**Z:** that's massive, amazing. Actually that makes me think of something else. Do any of you watch their other channels? Like Crash Course or...

**A:** I love Hank Plays Games [<http://www.youtube.com/user/hankgames>]

**Z:** I think their Crash Course videos are amazing. They don't simplify things too much.

## 1.5

**Z:** **So what is it about Nerdfighteria that you like? Why do you enjoy it?**

**S:** because it's so much. It's about everything. It's not really a narrow thing.

**L:** I think also if you're a nerd and you're interested in things that your real friends aren't really interested in like you don't want to talk to your friend about Doctor Who all the time because they get very bored if you talk about it for an hour. So it's very nice that you can find someone else to talk to about it that is actually interested. Then you see that you're not *that* crazy. I mean, you're still pretty crazy but there are other people that are crazy too.

**Z:** so what shared interests? Is it the *way* you talk about it or the *things* you talk about?

**L:** I think it's the shared interests

**Z:** but part of the shared interests is just things like Doctor Who or Harry Potter, but part of them is a shared worldview. You know? What people should be like. Which is kind of different.

**M:** I like that they can be really silly and talk about random stuff but they also make really serious videos and like focus on giving to charity or talking about wars or genocide and putting that information out there for a lot of people. Especially the younger viewers who might not know about stuff that's happening in the world. I like that there's a balance of serious and silly.

**L:** and they do stuff. I often think you can really take John and Hank as role models and I think that's a very good thing. Because I like their views of the world and I like that they think about what they're going to say before they say it.

**S:** yeah, they definitely have good values.

**Z:** what do you like about it?

**T:** um, I just think it's nice to get other people's opinions on YouTube. I don't necessarily agree with everything they say.

**A:** I love how welcoming it is. Like if someone posts a really obvious song and someone doesn't know what it is, someone will come back and say "hey welcome!" and it's really friendly. It's not one particular kind of person, it's anyone who wants to be in it.

**Z:** yeah, it's much more friendly than other things on YouTube. You know, most people just get bad comments.

**L:** YouTube is very great for rude comments. Post anything and get a rude comment.

**Z:** but on the forum there doesn't seem to be any rude comments.

**L:** normally the rude comments are not on Nerdfighter videos because people know that when they post rude things on Nerdfighter videos that it gets protected on Nerdfighters. They don't want that. Nerdfighters is supposed to be a nice and open community.

**Z:** how about you?

**R:** I mean, especially if you see arguments on YouTube, like on most videos if people know you're wrong they'll insult you but I remember seeing one on one of the VlogBrothers videos and I was thinking "is this an argument?". They seemed really nice, they didn't seem angry at all.

**Z:** what do you like about it?

**G:** I mentioned shared interests

## 1.6

**Z:** **does everyone feel that they're involved in Nerdfighteria to connect with other people or more to get information?**

**T:** bit of both I think

**Z:** because I'm interested in what online interaction offers us that the offline doesn't? Obviously a lot of people would say it's easier to interact because you don't have to deal with nervousness, social awkwardness. You can just "be yourself". That's what lots of people say. Does that speak to people here?

**L:** yeah I think that's true.

**M:** yeah. For me it's a lot easier for me to like fangirl about stuff with people. Because some of my friends don't put up with that, like they don't care at all. And then I can get excited about stuff with other people in the community.

**Z:** that's interesting. It seems that a lot of people here seem to have friends in "real life" that don't share these interests. I wonder why that is.

**G:** yeah, we were the only people [referring to her and friend "T"] in the whole school I think

**L:** it's funny I think with people who are not Nerdfighters. People don't always expect me to be a nerd. For a while I'm like should I say nerdy stuff to them or will they think it's weird? And not want to be friends with me.

**Z:** I think a lot of people on the forum say that they like Nerdfighteria because they were quite lonely before. They didn't know anyone who shared these interests and talked about things in that way – really enthusiastically. And Nerdfighteria gives people an opportunity to share these things. It's quite sad in a way, because it's coming from a negative place.

**G:** my experience is quite different. I've always met people who like Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter. People who get really into it like learning Elvish and stuff.

**L:** I think that's so cool [laughs]

**Z:** apparently at Oxford University you can learn Elvish!

**L:** I would love to learn Elvish

**G:** I think it's because Tolkien went to Oxford

**M:** yeah he did

**G:** I had a friend who was really into it and she'd go to meet groups and they had names for all the different elves and orcs. Like not just the main ones but all the extras. They had fan groups dedicated to all the different ones. Peter Jackson actually makes separate identities for every one you see.

## 1.7

**Z:** **how much has Nerdfighteria changed your life?**

**G:** I don't really think that much. I just joined because there were people like me

**T:** I feel like in Hank and John's serious videos it sort of helps me. I mean I have my own opinions but I kind of like the way they express theirs so it helps me to... I dunno. There's this one video about gay people and stuff and I come from a country where to be gay is quite taboo [Croatia] and at the gay parades they chuck bombs and stuff so they actually had to cancel it.

**Z:** so does that mean that you feel like it's really important to know there are other people out there that share your views or is it more for your own views?

**T:** it's that open mindedness. It's nice to be in a community like that that promotes awesome.

**M:** um I don't know if it's really changed my life at all. I think I was kind of the same. But it has introduced me to a whole load of YouTubers like charieissocoollike and Alex Day. And people who they're connected with.

**Z:** I like that they know each other and collaborate. And it's nice when you start to recognise names, it gets less confusing. How about you?

**R:** I don't think it's really changed my life, but more become a part of it. Because I think if they changed you massively I'd be a bit hesitant. That would kind of big if it just suddenly changed me

**L:** I think it didn't really change me. But I do sometimes think, how could I be on the Internet and not know about that. There are people who are on the Internet but do not know about this area. I think it's changed a bit how I view myself. I think I'm more accepting that I'm a nerd, and that's a normal a thing and not strange.

**Z:** was that an issue before? Did you feel like the odd one out before?

**L:** not really. I mean with my friends I was always open, but this nerd part I never really brought it up for like the first 6 months. But after that I thought I can probably start being nerdy now because they won't leave.

**Z:** so you feel like in normal life people are quite put off by that or suspicious of it?

**M:** I think sometimes it can seem a little bit intense when you first meet people.

**Z:** even just with this project, I was telling the other people doing dissertations about it and they just thought it was really funny. Like, *really?* That's so niche. Because none of them are aware of it. They do Facebook or maybe twitter but they don't know about this whole section of the Internet, they're just not even aware of it. They're just like what does that even *mean?* What does that consist of to have a community online? What do you do?

**L:** it's very hard to explain

**T:** I think it's good to be proud of it. People who are your real friends won't care.

**A:** I'd say it's definitely changed me at least in some way. I'm an artist generally and it's helped me think it's OK to just start a video channel. Before I was kind of passive and now I strive to create things, really work at that. Because think about all the things that Hank does. He's a web designer, he's a graphic designer, he makes videos, and he's a musician. It just gives me the inspiration of wow, you can do a lot of things.

**Z:** actually I completely agree with you but sometimes in a really negative way it makes me feel like I'm really boring. Like I don't *do* anything. Because they make so much every week. I get that watching a lot of YouTubers. Like I want to go and do a project and go travelling!

**A:** and not to be ashamed if your one goal in the Summer is to go to VidCon [video conference organised by Hank and John<sup>38</sup>]. Oh my god, it annoys me so much – I live on the East coast and *everything* is on the West coast.

**M:** well I'm in the middle so that doesn't help at all! I wanted to go to Comic-Con so bad but that's in California.

**G:** you're nearer than us in London!

**Z:** how about you?

**S:** I wouldn't say it's changed my life but it's added to it. I'm lucky enough that my entire group of friends are nerds. But in London I don't have any friends so I'm hoping to make some!

**Z:** London I think is a hard place to move in that way. Has it changed your life??

**T:** I don't know if it's changed my life but maybe subconsciously in terms of forming opinions. I don't know, I mean I do art and all stuff that's kind of self-indulgent and I feel like YouTube kind of is as well. But I don't really know how to feel about that.

<sup>38</sup> <http://vidcon.com/>

## 1.8

**Z:** Do you consider Nerdfighteria to be a community? And if so, why?

**L:** well I'd definitely consider it a community. I'm not sure why. It's just people connecting and people considering themselves a community and I think that's kind of what makes a community. You're connected to people you've never met before and you feel you're part of a group.

**Z:** I think that's quite important, the self-definition. That's how I would define it as well.

**S:** I would call it a community because as long as people consider it a community then I'd say it was. There's that feeling of being a group, of belonging somewhere.

**Z:** do you think that applies even if you don't actively participate?

**S:** yeah I think so.

**Z:** a lot of people would disagree, you know? They'd say if you're just watching you're not part of the community

**L:** I think people who are not part of it wouldn't agree, because they don't understand why you are part of it when in their eyes you only watch videos.

**S:** I think the definition of community is not very set. So if you consider yourself a part of it, you are.

**R:** I would say it is a community. There's quite a strong mutual respect between people. I don't feel like anyone really judges each other in the same way that people would in other places.

**A:** yeah I'd definitely say we're a community. You know, 700,000 people that all share one sort of general interest. But not only that, if someone comes attacking us on the YouTube comments you get just swarms of people fighting back. It's a huge community, larger than any in a geographical location. When someone says community I usually think of something small, but not with Nerdfighteria.

**Z:** it's so big and there are different parts. For example, the people who come to the gatherings are probably very different from the people who don't. but it's hard to know.

**L:** it's very interesting meeting people. I'm sure there are loads of Nerdfighters in London, but still whenever there's a gathering there's like 10 people or something.

**Z:** it's very weird going to YouTube gatherings where the video-maker is there. You feel close to these people but when you're there in real life you just don't know what to do. There's a complete disconnection between the closeness that you feel online and the weirdness you feel in reality. Anyway, back to the question of whether it's a community or not, what do you think?

**T:** yeah the same as what everyone else said. For me if you think it's a community then it is one. If you think it's part of your identity.

**Z:** if it's part of your identity, then what part is it?

**T:** it's quite difficult to say because it's so inclusive and ambiguous what it actually is.

**A:** yeah it's not necessarily something that's changed you, it's just that now there's a label for it.

**T:** I think it's kind of similar to being like a fan of a band and talking about it with your friends.

**Z:** how about you?

**M:** yeah I'd call it a community for all of the reasons that they've said but also because people seem to feed off each other, especially with creating things. People create things around John's books and then someone else takes that and creates something new. And there's so much interaction between different people that it really encompasses the whole experience of being part of the community.

**Z:** I love that how things get recycled into different forms. You agree?

**G:** yeah I'm the last person so everything's already been said! But yeah I do think it's a community.

**M:** I think part of it is that if you want to be a Nerdfighter you can but you don't have to be. You can still watch their videos and not consider yourself a Nerdfighter so if you want to be then you are.

**T:** there are different roles in communities though. There are leaders and followers.

**Z:** I would guess that's the community is a lot more active in North America. Do you know about that?

**M:** well at my university at home they were trying to get a club together for Nerdfighteria. It didn't end up happening because it's so difficult to make a club but some people still get together and it's a big thing on college campuses. But talking to my little sister and people in high school, nobody knows about it.

**Z:** what do they do when they meet up? So they just hang out or do they do something in particular?

**M:** yeah they hang out and sometimes they do charity events. Like they did a relay for life.

**L:** I really think it's more common in America because you often read these comments like "oh I'm going to meet all my Nerdfighter friends now" or "there are 5 other Nerdfighters at my school" and we just don't have that in Germany. No one knows about it.

**Z:** I've seen that on the forum actually, people saying "it's really annoying being from Uzbekistan because there's no other Nerdfighters".

**L:** [laughs] I guess it's worse there.

## 1.9

**Z:** **do you think it's very different to have relationships online to offline? And is one better than the other?**

**A:** um I don't really have any online friends, but I'd probably say that we're bridging the gap. Like you mentioned that all the YouTubers know each other. They all started as online friends and think about how many times you see... I've seen Michael Aranda [<http://www.youtube.com/user/michaelaranda>] more in other people's videos more than in his own! So you know, it's kind of cool that they met online but now they know each other in real life.

**L:** I never really had friends online or relationships online because it's kind of hard to form them online.

**M:** I think it's easier to get down to the personal stuff earlier online and just be like take it or leave it coz like...

**Z:** you have anonymity

**M:** yeah, but like when you're meeting in person there's more of a superficial phase where you kind of try to find a common interest and then you get to the real stuff. And online it's just like straight to the real stuff.

**A:** also online you already have the things in common

**Z:** also you don't have to be scared that they'll reject you because you can just turn off the computer [laughs]

**L:** also there are so many people online that you can just be like well this one isn't nice I'll move on. Whereas in real life if for example you go to a new school, and in a class there's like 20 people you think ok if I don't make friends here then I will be alone so I have to make them like me.

**S:** I think it's always difficult to really communicate with people when you don't have body language. Just talking to them typing is different entirely from talking to someone in person.

**Z:** do you think it's less good though or just different?

**S:** it's very different. Two different things entirely. I personally would prefer talking to people in person.

**L:** I think it's also quite different how you communicate. Because for example many people you meet in real life and are not real friends but then you talk to them online and I've had people where I was actually able to talk to them really well online and talk to them for hours. And then when you actually meet them suddenly it's really weird because you have to think faster and it can be a bit weird. You feel like you know them very well and you're very good friends but then you meet them and you just feel awkward which you normally don't feel with friends.

**T:** I had a different experience. I met with some online friends recently for the first time and immediately it was really comfortable. We were fangirling about this that and the other. In real life I'm usually like the weird one in the group but with my online friends we're all like that.

**G:** as an offline friend I'm deeply offended! [laughs] I don't really make many online friends because you know I like reading their views but I don't actually want to talk to them about stuff.

**L:** I guess it's also for me the separation of being on the Internet and being social. So when I'm on the Internet I'm normally not that interested in really interacting with people. I mean I'm kind of interested if they seem interesting but when I want to meet people I meet them and when I want to be on the Internet and just have some fun I go on the Internet.

**Z:** it's interesting though because everyone here says it's a community and yet a lot of people here also say that they're not connecting one-on-one with people

**G:** I think there should be more to friendship than just shared interests. I mean you could be an acquaintance that you fangirl over Merlin, but maybe not a friend. I like to read people views on



certain things. I mean I like to go on Game of Thrones forums but I wouldn't actually be like do you wanna meet up because who are they really?

**L:** at the beginning I always thought well to be good friends you have to have the same interests but now I think it's more about just getting along and being able to talk to each other. You can meet people with the same interests but just not be able to talk.

**G:** I've never had problems with friends in that way. As in, when they're out and about they'll always send me pictures of stuff they know I'll be interested in. like they'll never discriminate against me. They know I have my quirks and everything but they won't laugh at me behind my back. But I think you've got to do that with friends. Like they'll have things that you're not interested in.

**L:** I mean us who are Nerdfighters don't necessarily have all the same interests. There might be someone who likes Doctor Who and someone who likes something else

**G:** I know Nerdfighters who like Twilight

**L:** what?! [laughs] I don't think everyone should be dissing on Twilight so much because I kind of understand that they like it so much because I also like stuff so much and I kind of don't want to make fun of someone who also likes stuff. The other Nerdfighters I've made are always making fun of Twilight but I think they're also just people who like stuff

**Z:** yeah they're still being nerdy about something

**G:** yeah but they like stuff that's misogynistic! It's not that we dislike stuff like Twilight or 50 Shades of Grey because they're badly written because I like stuff that's not always so brilliant. I mean Star Wars prequels let's not go there.

**L:** let's look at some Doctor Who episodes that are just awful. Sometimes I think why do I like this show so much?!

**G:** but I don't like things like 50 Shades of Grey or Twilight because of the messages they show.

**Z:** does anyone have anything else to say on the topic of relationships?

**G:** I have one more thing. It does affect how you see the people you meet. Once you've gone into the Nerdfighter community you find a lot of people boring.

**Z:** boring in what way?

**G:** you just meet a lot of people who haven't read a lot or seen a lot of TV or watched anything. It's like you can't really talk to them about things. I don't expect them to share my views but I expect them to have something they're passionate about. But they just talk about like the X Factor.

**Z:** there is an enthusiasm in John and Hank's videos that permeates the community.

**G:** it just seems that most people are interested in their extra-curricular stuff like football or whatever and most Nerdfighters are interested in things that you read and stuff like that.

**Z:** yeah there is a certain focus on learning in Nerdfighteria.

**L:** you get used to talking to people who have stuff to say and then like one person I met here [in London] said they were not interested in movies. And I was like what? I get how you can not be

interested in a particular movie, but how can you not be interested in movies in general? I just don't get that. On a separate note, before I started watching Hank and John's stuff I wasn't interested in YouTube and I didn't get it when people said that they spent hours on YouTube. I didn't think there would be anything interesting. But now I can spend hours on YouTube and don't understand how you couldn't.

**Z:** [laughs] how could you not spend hours on YouTube?! What do you do with your time?

## 1.10

**Z:** So my last question is for you, what does it mean to decrease world suck? For example, John and Hank do a lot of charity work. But also they want to decrease world suck by making people be nicer to each other. Is that an important aspect of the community?

**G:** well I think it's nice that they do it but it isn't what attracted me in the first place. I liked it because of the other parts of the community. Because I have other interests that focus on charity etc.

**Z:** yeah it's more like entertainment

**G:** yeah

**Z:** what do you think about decreasing world suck?

**T:** it's not going to happen

**G:** very pessimistic

**T:** it's people's attitudes. That's why I like Nerdfighters so much, because they're enthusiastic. But it's not like that in the real world

**Z:** do you think that it permeates the real world though? The message of decreasing world suck makes its way into the real world?

**T:** not really, I think it's just online. There's still people out there with no idea what it is. It doesn't affect them.

**Z:** pessimistic Nerdfighter [laughs]

**M:** I think it's really important that they do this just because there's so many people in the community that they can make such a huge difference, whereas a lot of smaller communities they can do stuff but not to the extent that everyone who's a Nerdfighter could.

**R:** I think one of the main ways to improve the world is to get rid of ignorance so they do that their videos. But the thing is with that is that the people who watch the videos are not normally the people that are a problem

**Z:** yeah that's true! Kind of preaching to the choir a bit. But what about the other things, like Kiva and Project 4 Awesome? Maybe that's the money more than their message that gets through

**M:** I think it's good for the younger viewers because if you don't grow up in a family that places values on giving back and decreasing world suck then you don't really think about it and I think that John and Hank really bring that to your attention and there's so many problems in the world that you can help with and you *can* make a difference.

**Z:** yeah it's a very proactive approach. It's makes you believe that you can do something. And they exemplify their own message. It's quite inspiring.

**A:** probably the best thing about the idea of decreasing world suck is its name, because there are so many charitable organisations out there in the world. You name it, it exists. But the thing that they do is they make it seem fun. You know, everyone says, "oh donate to these poor puppies who are sitting in cages" but what they say is "positive prank on someone". You know do something fun like Nerdfighter notes [writing nice notes to people and putting them in certain books in bookshops]. You know the idea that it can be something that's so much fun. It isn't always about money. You know it can be and that's great, sure. But they make it not only about that.

**Z:** yeah it's an ideological movement really. What do you think?

**T:** I think... well I have quite strong political views. I'm Marxist and Feminist and stuff like that. And the whole thing they do is they try and get you to think for yourself rather than being prescriptive. Like Hank was recently talking about the elections in America and trying to get people to vote, but they haven't been telling you who to vote for.

**Z:** though I can't imagine any Nerdfighters voting for Mitt Romney [laughs]

**G:** I'm a Romney fan

**L:** what?! Why?

**G:** I like his economic views

**M:** really?

**G:** I just don't like Barack Obama, that's it. I think he wasted 4 years and I think Romney will actually do something

**L:** but will he do something good?

**G:** I think he was quite good as head of Massachusetts. But I'm not that into it.

**Z:** yeah, tangential. So you think that they don't tell you what to believe, but more how to be thoughtful?

**T:** yeah, which I think is quite a shared thing on YouTube. There's a lot of political content but it's not all telling you who to believe in but it's sort of telling you the truth. You can form your own opinion.

**L:** I don't really know what to say about that. I think it's just nice that we have this slogan. Even if they don't tell you how you can decrease world suck, it tells you that you can just be nice to each other

**T:** yeah it's small things

**G:** yeah you can do it in different ways. Some people can be green; some people are interested in animal rights.

**Z:** I like that it's not about scale. You aren't made to feel guilty about not doing enough. You can small things or big things. It's quite a realistic approach to what you can do in everyday life.

## Appendix.2

Retrieved October 15<sup>th</sup> 2012

Research collected for Matt Tidby's dissertation entitled 'What do you get from being a Nerdfighter?' on the Nerdfighter forum<sup>39</sup>.

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Greetings, you lot.

PLEASE HELP ME DO GOOD LEARNING.

The title includes all the information you need before clicking on the video below:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pr7YxP2f3qA>

So, essentially, this thread is for forum members to, if they should wish, answer the questions posed in the video and debate answers with other members. I would be delighted to hear from you- the more responses, the more I have to work with, the more this semester won't be about me having minor panic attacks. Thanks, Nerdfighteria.

So, my dears, QUESTION ONE:

**What do you get from Nerdfighteria/being a Nerdfighter?**

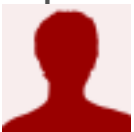
If you have any questions, please do feel free to ask.

DFTBA,

Matt x

### 2.1

#### Replies to This Discussion



[Permalink](#) Reply by [Latch33570](#) 17 hours ago

Wow you sure are a strange, but seemingly OK young man. I am disabled and have some mobility issues so I get some social interaction out of it. I find it entertaining to talk to people from all over the world directly. I don't have to rely on some article written about how people feel in other places or go to other places as a tourist. I wished more middle easterners were on this site.

[▶ Reply](#)



[Permalink](#) Reply by [Matt Tidby](#) 17 hours ago

Haha, thanks, I guess.

<sup>39</sup> <http://nerdfighters.ning.com/forum/topics/nerdfighters-needed-a-jolly-nice-youtube-y-research-thing> Matt gave me permission to use this research.

Thank you very much for your response. On your wish about more nerdfighters being from your area, is this because you'd like to meet up with people 'IRL', or simply because you'd have something else in common with other members of the online community? Cheers :)

[▶ Reply](#)

## 2.2



[Permalink](#) Reply by [Lnr](#) 15 hours ago

I get the warm fuzzy feeling that there are other people in this world who care deeply and think intelligently and imagine complexly. That feeling is sadly lacking in other some areas of life.

[▶ Reply](#)

## 2.3



[Permalink](#) Reply by [Tessa](#) 15 hours ago

I get the ever cliché feeling of belongingness. I feel like I'm apart of the big picture, and can help paint it with the people I care about. Good luck with the essay :)

[▶ Reply](#)

## 2.4

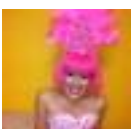


[Permalink](#) Reply by [katiedoodle](#) 13 hours ago

I feel less like an outcast in Nerdfighteria. I feel like there are other people out there in the world that share my opinions about books, philosophy, and everything else. I feel like I am not alone, although I wish more people around my area were Nerdfighters because that would make living here a bit more bearable.

[▶ Reply](#)

## 2.5



[Permalink](#) Reply by [Emily Walker](#) 12 hours ago

John Green has a quote flying round the internet: "...because nerds like us are allowed to be unironically enthusiastic about stuff... Nerds are allowed to love stuff, like jump-up-and-down-in-the-chair-can't-control-yourself love it. Hank,

when people call people nerds, mostly what they're saying is 'you like stuff.' Which is just not a good insult at all. Like, 'you are too enthusiastic about the miracle of human consciousness'." Basically Nerdfighteria (the fictional space that exists on the internet) gives me a place to unashamedly geek out. I have been a Nerd for a great many years, but always a highly social one. I usually tone down my nerdiness around the uninitiated, not because I don't want to seem weird, but because I know that one person being REALLY enthusiastic about something and talking about NOTHING else while the other person has no interest in it can be awkward and unpleasant. In Nerdfighteria I have found people who are willing to talk about Doctor Who all day long, and who don't mind when I do too. It's my own private geek out space, and I love it! Of course there's also the awesome community, and knowing that when you meet another Nerdfighter at a gathering they are 90% certain to be amazingly awesome. This takes the stress out of meeting new people :)

[▶ Reply](#)

## 2.6



[Permalink](#) Reply by [Nikita Bala](#) 10 hours ago

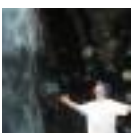
I live somewhere where people generally look down on nerds and classify them as *those people who study lots and watch star trek or something*. I spend most of my life here spazzing and having feelings over TV shows, movies, videos, and comics, and only about 2 out of 10 times can I find someone IRL to relate to.

Nerdfighteria gives me somewhere to let it all out with the peace of mind in knowing that people will understand me and perhaps reciprocate the feelings. Becoming a nerdfighter made me feel more comfortable with myself because I knew that other people out there were as genuinely enthusiastic about stuff as I was. Being a nerdfighter also gave me the courage to start my own vlog despite my nervousness of the reactions of certain people, and so far it's been pretty well received. I've realised that my passions and dreams aren't stupid and/or childish and that I matter.

And that's what I get from Nerdfighteria.

[▶ Reply](#)

## 2.7



[Permalink](#) Reply by [Austin Guidry](#) 8 hours ago

Well, I get a lot of things from Nerdfighteria, but I think the most significant thing I have gotten is the knowledge that there are more people my age like me in that we're different from other people in that we love reading, we love to learn, we are all curious about every aspect of the world around, and we can discuss controversial topics together without getting angry or becoming "a giant squid of

anger."

We learn from John, Hank, and each other about things like Phineas Gage, Hitler and Sex, why fiction is important and how it can become real, how to "imagine people complexly" (see them how they really are), how the truth resists simplicity, and so much more. Nerdfighteria has helped me to see new dimensions and layers of the world and how to see just how big and complicated it really is. As a nerdfighter currently living in China, it's great to know that I can still participate in what goes on, even though I'm half a world away from where most nerdfighters are living.

I'm not a "nerd" in the classical sense, but I definitely identify with the community and am proud to be a part of it. People here can be who they really are - they can love Star Trek, Harry Potter, Llamas, Literature, Science, History, or anything else....and guess what?? That's okay - nobody judges anyone. It seems to me that nerdfighteria can easily come together, united under one "nerd flag" or something like that, and get things done, such as through Kiva, This Star Won't Go Out, or anything like that. It's a sign that, as divided as the world is, some people can still get together - no matter what race, sexual orientation, country, zodiac sign, whatever.....it's all okay. We're here for reasons bigger than ourselves.

 Reply