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### Title

THE INTERSECTION OF TECHNOLOGY, FANDOM, AND AMERICAN GIRL DOLLS: AN ANALYSIS OF "AGTUBE"

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THE INTERSECTION OF TECHNOLOGY, FANDOM, AND AMERICAN GIRL DOLLS: AN  
ANALYSIS OF "AGTUBE"

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## ABSTRACT

This project takes a critical look at online fandom communities and the individuals that inhabit them, specifically taking a look at the American Girl doll online community on YouTube, also known by its inhabitants as “AGTube”. This community, primarily composed of young girls making YouTube videos with their American Girl dolls, is an example of how fandom coincides with artistic creation. Thus, this research goes into depth on the intersection of fandom and art, and what it means for the individuals, in this case young people, who inhabit these types of fandoms. My research will chronicle the existence of this community, going back to the origins of the American Girl company, to the height of the community’s online presence, in addition to providing a textual analysis of the content created. By documenting each point in this fandom’s history, as well as the creative projects produced by the community, this project seeks to critically understand where, how, and why the fandom originated. This essay will be compiling prior groundwork on American Girl and fandom in general, including works by Mark Duffett and Emilie Zaslow, combining them into an analysis of a community that has, up until now, been overlooked.

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## INTRODUCTION

On June 10th, 2006, a YouTube video was posted by creator vdag94. Merely 21 seconds long, the video features three American Girl dolls walking on screen, each one greeting the audience. The video itself, a stop motion animated short, is of poor quality at best, with a low resolution, shaky camera shots, and bad lighting. Nonetheless, “My dolls say hi with sound” was the origin of an online community that would continue to thrive for years to come.

American Girl, founded under the name Pleasant Company in 1986, is one of the most popular dolls for young girls on the market, and has been for many years, competing with many of the other popular doll lines (Zaslow, 10). 36 million dolls have been sold over the company’s nearly forty year existence, with its popularity being second only to Barbie at one point (Lim, 2023; Duffey Story, 3). American Girl was brought about with the mission to “empower the next generation of girls through inclusive stories, products, and shared experiences.” (“Our Story”) While the company’s founder, Pleasant Rowland, always made it clear that the company’s mission was to empower young girls, she likely could not have predicted the ways in which the doll company would branch off and have a life of its own—especially through homemade animated videos by tween girls on the internet. Nonetheless, the American Girl YouTube community, affectionately and commonly known by frequenters of the community as “AGTube”, would gain prominence, and become a significant part of American Girl’s story.

Deeper than its prevalence in American Girl’s story, an argument can be made that there is a deeper cultural significance to this community. Simply taking “AGTube” at face value, assuming that it is an internet anomaly of the interests of tween girls overlooks considerable subtext having to do with digital “fandom”-type communities, and adolescent experiences on the

internet. Studying AGTube gives us, as scholars, a new perspective on how and why online communities are formed, upheld, and ultimately fall apart. It gives us new insight into tween and teen usage of the internet. Most of all, inspecting the existence of this online community allows us to better understand internet culture and different types of fandom communities.

This project intends to create a fundamental understanding of AGTube by tracing the history of this slightly obscured online community in a way that has yet to be done previously. Through this analysis, the following paper will originate and unpack a new type of online subculture, while also inspecting adolescent internet usage.

## **METHODS**

Jessica E. Johnston, author of “The Doll "InbeTween": Online Doll Videos and the Intertextuality of Tween Girl Culture”, another work inspecting AGTube, devised a research system for inspecting the community that I will be using as the basis for my analysis. She explains how she inspected a small but varying sample of AGTube creators, then categorizing the videos by the types of content produced, and identifying common themes to then analyze (Johnston, 61-62). While Johnston’s work seeks to analyze AGTube through a different critical lens than I intend to, I find that this system of data collection and analysis is useful for my own research purposes.

As my research centers around an online community and the content created from said community, it is to be conducted through data collection. Since my research content can all be found through YouTube, a free online video sharing site, I have used online searching operators to compile my research together. My data collection process has consisted of the compilation of twenty of the most popular AGTube videos of each year, each placed into a YouTube playlist for easy access. From here, my methods for research consist of synthesizing my findings and

conducting an in-depth review of what I have found. I will be gathering the recurring variables of my data via patterns I have observed, and from there conducting a textual analysis into these variables, of which I plan to explore through a cultural studies and fan studies lens.

### **A JOURNEY THROUGH HISTORY: AMERICAN GIRL'S ORIGINS**

Before we can begin to uncover AGTube, we must first uncover American Girl's history as a company. As previously mentioned, American Girl was founded by Pleasant Rowland in 1986, under the name Pleasant Company (Zaslow, 27). Rowland, a school teacher and educator, found a lack in the doll market, finding the only two options of dolls for young girls to either be baby dolls or Barbies, thus signaling one of two directions a young girl could go down (Zaslow, 29). Explaining her thought process, Rowland has said, "Here I was, in a generation of women at the forefront of redefining women's roles, and yet our daughters were playing with dolls that celebrated being a teen queen or a mommy." (Zaslow, 29-30) This, combined with a particularly inspiring trip to Colonial Williamsburg, led her to the creation of Pleasant Company.

Pleasant Company, which would later be renamed to American Girl, is a toy brand that manufactures 18" vinyl dolls. With styleable hair, glass eyes, and cloth bodies, the dolls were perfectly created to appeal to the hearts of children. The dolls' initial age demographic of seven to twelve year olds has since risen slightly to ages eight and up, though it retains its "tween", or "pre-teen" age range (Zaslow, 30; "Our Story"). American Girl has always come with a hefty price tag, known for being high quality and thus, costly. The initial 1980s prices were \$82 per doll, though the price has since risen to upwards of \$115 per doll, not including clothing, accessories, books, and more (Zaslow, 36).

From the beginning, Rowland's intentions with Pleasant Company were clear. Rowland "... dreamed of a doll that could teach American history, moral and ethical values, and



independence.” (Zaslow, 30) The dolls were a tool of empowerment for girls, as well as educational beacons of what it meant to be a girl then and now.

While American Girl’s doll offerings eventually expanded, creating everything from contemporary dolls to baby dolls, the company’s initial focus was on their “Historical” collection. This collection featured dolls of various historical backgrounds, from decades going back to the foundation of the United States, all with the intention of teaching young girls about American history—hence the company’s namesake.

The company began with three dolls on their roster, Kirsten, whose historical time period was 1854, Molly, whose period was 1944, and Samantha, coming from 1904 (Zaslow, 36). Later on, the company would slowly add more historical dolls, including Indigenous Kaya, from 1764, Addy, who dealt with enslavement, from 1864, and Kit, living through the Great Depression in 1934. Eventually the company would even give some historical dolls “Best Friend” dolls, who would tie into the main dolls’ stories and have small collections of their own (Solly, 2021).

Each doll was accompanied by a series of books, intended to give more historical background to each character. These books often follow prevailing structural themes and topics, including stories about going to school, celebrating birthdays, and facing bravery (Zaslow, 37). The dolls’ collections contained various clothing and accessories that corresponded with their stories, ranging from Felicity’s “Colonial Tea Set”, to Julie’s “Car Wash Set”, each carefully created to make the stories that girls read come alive, and, of course, to market more products towards young children.

These characters and the dolls that represented them were intended to be of the age of the girls that the company targeted, ranging from eight to ten years old. That said, each character dealt with the struggles that were commonly faced in the era they came from, and the company

did not shy away from featuring heavy topics, including enslavement, child labor, war, and disease. Each of these topics were intended to teach girls of the complications of American history in a way that is understandable and accessible for a young audience.

Eventually the company would expand its doll range, creating a contemporary doll line, known at its creation as the “American Girl of Today” line, though renamed multiple times into the Just Like You, My American Girl, Truly Me, and Create Your Own lines (for continuity purposes, I will henceforth be referring to the dolls as Create Your Own dolls to avoid confusion) (“A Girl’s Window Into History”). Continuing with the historical theme, the slogan used for these dolls upon their release was “She’s just like you, You’re a part of history too!” (“A Girl’s Window Into History”) In 2001 the Girl of the Year, or GOTY, dolls were introduced, where a limited edition doll was introduced each year (“Our Story”). Other lines apart of American Girl included the Bitty Baby and Bitty Twins dolls, geared to younger children, the short lived Girls of Many Lands and Hopscotch Hill dolls, and newer collections such as World By Us, Contemporary dolls, and Wellie Wishers (Zaslow, 228; “AGPT: History of AG”; et al.)

The company also made an effort to focus not only on the dolls, but the girls themselves. Thus, came the introduction of the “American Girl Library”, which included many nonfiction books that were not geared to a specific doll or story (Zaslow, 141). These books, ranging from cookbooks and quiz books to “A Smart Girl’s Guide” advice books were reflective of the “girl-centric” part of the brand, as opposed to the “doll-centric” focus of much of the company. Many of the topics covered by the company’s nonfiction collection were replicated by the company’s magazine, in publication from 1992 to 2019 (Contributors to American Girl Wiki).

American Girl’s online presence did not begin with AGTube, but instead with the short lived “American Girl Club” in the mid-2000s, in which girls could pay for a yearly membership

that would allow girls to play online games, interact with other girls, and have access to exclusive products (Contributors to American Girl Wiki). A few years later American Girl, like many toy companies of the time, ventured into the world of browser games with the introduction of Innerstar University, or Innerstar U. This massively multiplayer online game, or MMO, allowed for girls, with the purchase of a Create Your Own doll, to play on the “Innerstar University” game as a character that resembled their doll (Contributors to American Girl Wiki). With tie-ins to books and other American Girl accessories, Innerstar U was, in many ways, a follow-up to American Girl Club. While both the American Girl Club and Innerstar U’s existence were short-lived within the company’s history, both set the scene for American Girl’s online presence.

In 1998, the same year the company was bought by Mattel, American Girl took a leap from being a brand that sells their products only through mail order, catalog form to going a brick and mortar route, with the introduction of “The American Girl Place” in Chicago—the first of what would eventually become twelve stores around the country, with a few even venturing out the borders into Canada, Mexico, and Dubai (Zaslow, 40, 50; “Mattel Inc”, et al.) The stores offered many activities other than the standard doll purchasing experience, including a cafe, personal shopper, “Doll Hair Salon”, “Doll Hospital”, as well as a since-closed live theater and photo studio.

This only scratches the surface of the many avenues of which American Girl has pursued, from a Bath and Body Works care brand to Williams-Sonoma cooking accessories. That said, all of the company’s ventures, even going beyond the doll-centric focus, made American Girl into more than just a doll brand, but instead an experience made just for girls, contributing to the overwhelming success of the company at large.

## DEFINING A DIGITAL CREATIVE COMMUNITY

To begin, we must define crucial analytical concepts that will be used to conduct our analysis. Although the concept seems odd or unconventional, American Girl internet communities were certainly not few and far between, with other American Girl online communities existing elsewhere on the internet. Another popular American Girl themed online community was AGIG, also known as American Girl Instagram. This community, often working in tandem with AGTube, had many similarities with its YouTube counterpart, the only difference being the site in which the content was posted, and the format of the content itself, with Instagram being a primarily photo sharing platform. On the newer side, there is also an American Girl TikTok community, which has been known to feature some former AGTube creators who are still active in the doll themed social media world. This community, though arguably much smaller than AGTube ever was, has seen some growth in recent years. With all of this in mind, we can see how a digital community has formed around a seemingly uncommon, or at least unusual interest. Likewise, we can see how this community has prevailed and continuously appeared on different social platforms. Much of the ways in which this community has forged itself together is similar to another common internet phenomenon—the fandom.

Defined as a subculture of individuals who share common interests—often in movies, television shows, or music—the concept of a fandom is nearly inescapable when inspecting internet culture. As fan studies scholar Mark Duffett states, “Fans find their identities wrapped up with the pleasures connected to popular culture. They inhabit social roles marked out as fandom.” (17) That said, there are key differences that set apart what we are examining from the concept of a fandom. Though the two are certainly similar, those few differences are what I believe set apart a fandom from what I am currently designating a digital creative community.

A digital creative community is a community forged by similar interests in a particular object of pop culture, similar to a fandom. The key difference in this is that a fandom is a fan of something that is premade, such as a TV show, movie or artist. A digital creative community—henceforth referred to as a “DCC”—is forged together not *only* by being a fan, but by a community of creation. A DCC is a community that comes together with one common interest: the act of creation. This creation could come in the form of an object of interest, such as American Girl dolls, or a type of creation, such as fanfiction writing. Nonetheless, the community is bonded over creating works, sharing them with one another, and collaborating with each other. As such, each of the previously mentioned American Girl communities: AGTube, AGIG, and AGTok, are all DCCs, and additionally fall into the broader scope of what I am designating AGDCC or American Girl Digital Creative Community.

### **DOLLS IN THE SPOTLIGHT: AN INTRODUCTION TO “AGTUBE”**

Published on June 10th, 2006, a little over a year after YouTube’s own establishment, vdag94’s “My dolls say hi with sound” pioneers many of the community’s most common formats and themes. The video, which is the earliest accessible American Girl doll video posted on YouTube, features three dolls, each one saying hi to the audience before walking out of the frame. Though the video is choppy, and not to the standards of current online video expectations, the effort put into the video is evident nonetheless. As each doll walks into frame footsteps can be heard, a small detail that showcases the inherent detail-oriented nature of these videos. While the video’s plot at hand is simple and not expertly crafted, careful thought is put into each frame.

Additionally, the video pioneers arguably the most popular format of AGTube video, stop motion animation. While there were multiple common video formats in the AGTube community, stop motion is the one the community tended to gravitate to. This type of animation, which

allows a physical object to be photographed as it is moved slightly frame by frame, creating a sense of movement when edited together, was perfectly suited for working with toys, and more specifically dolls such as American Girl, with their posable limbs that allow for easy movement. Thus began the advent of AGSM, also known as “American Girl Stop Motion”. While it is unclear by who or when the term “AGSM” was first coined, arguably the term has existed as long as AGTube itself has, as YouTube creator Cherished Playtime’s video “Susie's Work Out (AGSM)”, posted weeks after vdag94’s video, features the term. These videos, featuring anything from long and complicated storylines to short videos of a doll simply saying “Hi”, were time consuming, the process of making a stop motion lending itself to a long, oftentimes tedious process. This process, however, led to content that was inherently detail oriented, undoubtedly a reason as to why this type of content was one of the most popular in the community.

Though AGSMs gained the most popularity, other types of videos were frequently found in the community as well. Other common video formats included AGMV, referring to “American Girl Music Video”, or AGPS, also known as “American Girl Photoshoot”. Mini series, skits, hauls, do-it-yourself (or DIY) crafts, doll room tours, or even full narrative “movies” found a lot of popularity on the platform. Doll customizations, where a creator would fully customize a doll, changing their hair wig, eyes, or even creating a “boy doll” were also of large popularity in the community. “Live” videos, or those that were not animated, were just as common as AGSMs, and often took many forms, such as the previously mentioned doll customizations or even mini series. Many of the community’s videos referenced popular YouTube videos of the time, with the key difference of being made with American Girl dolls. From challenges paralleling the popular YouTube challenges of the time, to the popularity of DIY videos, nearly every type of trendy video was, at some point, made with dolls.

While there were many videos such as hauls and doll customizations, of which feature the creator talking directly to their audience from a first person point of view, much of the content produced on AGTube was fictionalized. American Girl was a brand founded upon storytelling, featuring dolls with books and long stories to accompany them. In addition, the way in which children tend to play with toys—by creating stories and enacting them—supports this concept. As Ageliki Nicolopoulou states, “This insight has perhaps been formulated most vividly by Paley (1990), who has consistently argued that “play...[is] story in action, just as storytelling is play put into narrative form” (p. 4) and that children’s “fantasy play and storytelling are never far apart” (p. 8).” (249) This makes it seem to be a given that AGTube was full of fictionalized, imaginative stories. That said, though American Girl was known primarily for their historical dolls and stories, AGTube’s videos did not frequently feature historical stories. Instead, the videos, more often than not, featured modern storylines that were relatable to the kids who made them. Some were more comedic and featured relatable problems teens go through, like first dates or getting up to go to school, and some dealt with serious topics, such as bullying and suicide. Several even featured supernatural or magical storylines. Nonetheless, no matter the storyline, the characters were always overwhelmingly teen and adolescent centered, reflecting the main community that created these videos to begin with.

Similarly to entertainment made for television networks, AGTube videos with fictionalized stories can fall into two broad categories, episodic and serialized content. Episodic content has storylines that are contained to the episode at hand, and often have plots that are more in the realm of comedy. Serialized content has storylines that progress throughout episodes, and often feature plots grounded in drama. As Joseph Learoyd states in his article on episodic vs. serialized formats in animation, “Episodic formats tend to present isolated

adventures...Serialized animations tend to have overarching plot lines, multiple threads and a building situation over the course of a number of episodes.” (2019) These formats, while both helpful for categorizing television content, can also be applied to AGTube content. Much of AGTube’s fictionalized content, which will be further delved into later, can be categorized by episodic and serialized content, with there being an abundance of each category.

It is here that I find it important to make the distinction of what categorizes an AGTube video, to lay a foundation for the later analysis. When one searches through YouTube archives for “American Girl Doll”, many videos appear, however not all of them are what I would deem an AGTube video. For example, one of the first videos to appear when “American Girl Doll” is searched is creator CookieSwirlC’s “American Girl Back To School Science & Clothing Haul - Cookie Swirl C Doll Video”. This video, though a video about and including American Girl dolls, is not an AGTube video. This is the result of a couple of factors, the first and most evident being that CookieSwirlC does not make videos exclusively about American Girl dolls. In fact, most of the creator’s videos are about toys, though American Girl is a small subsection of those videos. Additionally, CookieSwirlC’s content is made for a different audience than AGTube videos are. AGTube videos are known to have complex and slightly more mature storylines, sometimes something akin to those found in a teen drama, thus the audience skews to a tween and teenage demographic. CookieSwirlC’s content is made for an undoubtedly young audience, presumably those of elementary age, something one can garner from the channel’s focus on common kids interests, such as toys and specific video games. Finally, CookieSwirlC’s content does not interact with any other AGTube content. Traits and characteristics of AGTube content will be discussed further later on, until then we can say that CookieSwirlC’s content does possess the characteristics of an AGTube video, nor does it in any way reference any other AGTube



content. Thus, despite their prevalence when researching American Girl doll YouTube videos, creators that fall into similar categories as CookieSwirlC will be excluded from the analysis.

Other videos that appear when researching American Girl's YouTube presence include videos by American Girl themselves, which, while to be referenced in this upcoming analysis, are not AGTube videos. Once again, these videos often do not meet much of the criteria for AGTube characteristics, and though they reference AGTube's existence in vague ways, they are not a part of the "in group" of the community. Videos that fall into line of home videos of parents recording their children playing with or unboxing dolls, a type of video particularly prevalent in earlier YouTube days, will also not be included, as these videos are not made for the entertainment or analysis by a public audience as they are made for the sake of personal remembrance.

It is hard to gauge exactly who AGTube's audience was, as the statistics of specific videos are not available to anyone except for those creators. Additionally, most videos no longer have an accessible comment section due to COPPA laws—to be touched on later. That said, we can argue that, based on the demographics of those who created AGTube videos, the primary audience consisted of tween and teenage girls. This demographic is largely in line with American Girl's audience, though admittedly a bit older than their target demographic. That said, not every creator on AGTube was within this age range, as showcased by creators such as "starryeyeschick" or "stephenswoodadancer". Some of these adult creators began in the community as children, growing up with and in the community. Others have only experienced the community as an adult. No matter the outcome, these creators, while adults, interact with a company whose target audience is that of the tween, thus much of the content they and others make is overwhelmingly geared to that audience.

## THE ERAS OF AGTUBE

AGTube, having been around for nearly two decades at this point, has a couple of crucial historical periods we can point out and define. These periods, though known by the community at large, are not clearly defined, with many individuals having slightly differing answers to what would be considered each period.

“History of AGTube” on the Wikia website’s dedicated AGTube page details the various eras of AGTube, which separates the community’s history into six distinct categories. From the standpoint of my analysis, the community can be split up into four categories, most of which are similar to “History of AGTube”’s timeline, but with a few key differences that I feel the article has overlooked, and will be detailed to follow.

To begin, it is generally agreed upon, there is a “Old AGTube” and “New AGTube”. Inside each of these two broad distinctions lies a few more defining period points, which when combined give us a full history of this community. That said, most individuals within the community agree—there is a distinct difference between what AGTube once was to what it has become. Whether or not this is nostalgia speaking, or based on concrete differences between a change in content over the years will be discussed later.

Starting with the period I call the “Origins and Foundations” of AGTube, a period lasting from 2006 to roughly 2010 (it should be noted that these timelines are relatively loosely defined). This era, coinciding with the early days of YouTube, is defined by its foundation of the community. At this point, the community was small, and making and uploading online videos, in general, was still a new concept. As a result, videos were often of lower quality and production value, and were often, simply, kids making silly videos with their toys. The most common video types during this era were live videos, often titled something along the lines of “Fun stuff to

make for your AG doll” or “Fun hairstyles for your AG doll”. Other commonplace video formats include slideshows, along with a few stopmotions, and previously mentioned AGMVs.

The most popular creators of this era included those such as “xmollygirlx”, “Stephenswoodadancer”, “Starryeyeschick”, and “unodosginger”. According to “History of AGTube”, “Many AGTubers consider xmollygirlx as the first AGTuber, as she was most likely the first popular AGTuber.” (Contributors to AGTube) As previously mentioned, the first known AGTuber is not definitively known, as previous videos might have been deleted or privated in the 18 years since they have been uploaded. That said, with the information we have now, we can garner that the previously mentioned vdag94 was one of, if not the first AGTuber, both of this era and in the community as a whole.

Following the “Origins and Foundations” era, is what is widely known as “The Golden Era” of AGTube. This era, lasting roughly from 2011 to 2015, saw a significant change in the community. Over the course of these years the community grew to vast numbers, garnering a large following and number of creators. Referencing the previously mentioned “Old” and “New” AGTube, this is often the era that individuals are referring to when alluding to “Old AGTube”. This era, often romanticized by individuals in the AGTube community now, is the era when many of the classic AGTubers got their start, and the community was booming. In 2014, the community garnered 33 million views, a number that seemingly grew with each progressing year (BBC Trending).

With an increase in numbers, as well as a progression of technology with the more widespread adoption of smartphones and smartphone cameras, production quality of AGTube videos began to increase. Though the videos were still made largely by young people, with increased access to technological advancements, the videos began to be of increasingly good

quality. In turn, with this increasing quality came greater recognition for the community. “AGSM - The secret world of animated doll videos on YouTube”, showcases the community broadly, though it makes specific mention of AGSM videos. The video, done by BBC news, showcases some of the popular AGTubers of the time, including an interview with at one point the most popular creator on the platform—AGsmiless.

This era showcased the diversity of the AGTube community’s content, as arguably every type of video content found some sort of popularity within the era. That said, the form of content the community was always best known for, stop motion, had grown significantly since the days of vdag94’s shaky stop motion shots. As previously mentioned, the continuing growth of the community’s technological resources made for better video quality. Additionally, as the community became more comfortable with stop motion, as a medium, the videos naturally improved in quality. Tutorials and “AGSM Tips” videos were made, allowing for the medium to become more widely accessible. Soon short AGSMs, ranging from two to seven minutes, became AGSM movies, ranging from fifteen to forty-five minutes.

In addition to the popularity of AGSMs, mini series’ were also of incredible popularity. Mini series were more often than not in a “live” format, not stop motion animated, but instead filmed through the creator pointing the camera at the doll and moving and speaking for said doll while recording. These series varied widely, though running themes in each one tended to be those of adolescence and teenage problems—as those were the topics relatable to the audience. Series would range from the previously mentioned episodic, to serialized storylines. Those with serialized storylines often featured stories with supernatural, science fiction, or magical themes, though some were based in modern settings with grounded, realistic problems. Serialized shows had dramatic themes, with long character and story arcs, and often very complex storylines that

would require watching multiple “seasons” of the show. Popular examples of serialized AGTube series include those by the previously mentioned AGsmiless, such as “Aspen Heights” and “The Realm of Arragara”, the former of which was perhaps the most popular of AGTube series.

Creator girloftheyearstudios also created many series, and while AGsmiless’s series were more on the supernatural and magical side, girloftheyearstudios’s shows were slightly more grounded in reality, while retaining their serialized quality. These series included those such as “Music in Me” and “Star Quality”. The episodic series were often more comedic, and featured simple storylines. These series, such as AGsmiless’s “19 Dolls and Counting”, or Anttonina’s “Logan and Stephanie” series, were short and comedic.

This era’s popular creators, many of which I have already mentioned, are known as some of the classics of the platform. These include the previously mentioned AGsmiless and girloftheyearstudios, as well as 4happyhippos, and basilmentos, each known most notably for their stop motion videos.

The next era, ranging from 2015 to 2019 is what I am labeling the “Commercialized” era of AGTube. This era, though it has some slight overlap with the previous era, can, in my opinion, be more clearly defined than any previous era, as it coincides with American Girl’s own entry to AGTube.

American Girl, seeing the growing popularity of AGTube, began to capitalize on the community’s existence. Thus came the introduction of Z Yang, the first in a new line of contemporary dolls, and notably based around AGTube’s presence. Z was a modern day doll who made videos of her own, boasting American Girl toy sets revolving around filmmaking. Additionally, Z had minisodes uploaded to American Girl’s own YouTube channel. These minisodes were stop motion animated, something that American Girl would utilize for their

video promotions for years to come. The introduction of Z showcased AGTube's undeniable popularity, as the brand itself noted the popularity of the community and used their resources to not only comment on it, but capitalize on it.

This newfound recognition from American Girl coincided with the slow, but eventual downfall of AGTube. Arguably in the early years of this era the community was still thriving, specifically from 2015 to 2016. However, as the years went on, the community's presence began to falter. Slowly, each of the most popular creators of the "Golden Age" era began to leave the platform, often citing logical explanations, such as growing up and losing interest or time for the hobby. While there were still a handful of popular creators, such as "mixiepixie7" and "InfinityAGStudios, each citing a couple thousand views on their most popular videos of the time, the videos and creators began to wane.

Towards this era is perhaps the true downfall of the community, at no fault of itself. In 2019, YouTube rolled out new regulations in alignment with the COPPA Act, an act enforced by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission regarding the privacy and safety of children on the internet (Cobb, 2021). This act enforces requirements on online website providers to protect the personal information of children under thirteen, prohibiting these children's data ("Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule"). In alignment with the FTC's enforcement and settlement, YouTube created a new type of content, known as "made for kids" (Cobb, 2021). Content that falls into the made for kids category loses some privileges, for example no longer offering personalized advertisement, therefore decreasing ad revenue for creators who make content for children, and losing other YouTube features such as commenting, adding videos to playlists, and video notifications (Cobb, 2021). While YouTube enforces creators to designate whether content is made for kids or a wider audience, for some content, specifically videos that have already been

uploaded, YouTube's algorithms can designate videos as made for kids if they feature children themselves, or kid centric content, such as American Girl dolls (Cobb, 2021).

This is where AGTube content is most impacted by COPPA laws. Many AGTube videos have since been classified as “made for kids”, thus removing features such as commenting and monetization. For obvious reasons, this impacts the community, as it removes a method of communication amongst creators and their audiences with the removal of comment sections. Additionally, while most AGTube creators were likely not receiving ad revenue for their content, those that were—the biggest names on the platform—were hit by the enactment of COPPA. Creators such as mixiepixie7, who at the time had been in the community for ten years, had to shift their audience to new platforms such as Patreon in order to avoid COPPA regulations and continue receiving financial support to continue making their content (mixiepixie7). This even impacts our analysis, as many of the comment sections of old AGTube videos have since been removed, especially on older videos from the community's “Origins and Foundations” era, with YouTube channels that are no longer active and do not have an individual managing the account to turn the videos off of the made for kids feature.

This era is also arguably when the presence of “New AGTube” became prevalent. Prior to this era was, of course, The Golden Era, which, as commonly seen as the peak of AGTube's online presence, is going to undoubtedly have a tint of nostalgia when looking back on it. That said, with the changes happening to the community during this era, from COPPA to American Girl's own entrance to the platform, it is easy to see why this era is considered the beginning of AGTube's downfall. While the era certainly has its merits, and AGTube was certainly not “dead” during the era as many claimed it to be at the time, with many creators still posting frequent

content, the community was going through an undeniable change, which would impact it for years to come.

The most recent era of AGTube, lasting from 2020 to the present is what I designate the “Slow Rebirth”, and this era sees indisputable change from the early eras of the community. While there are plenty of individuals that believe AGTube has “died”, with many videos claiming its death ranging from seven years ago to as little as one year ago, I would argue that the community has simply evolved. AGTube, as we knew it in the previous eras, especially and most notably the Golden Era is gone. Of course this does not mean that the types of videos made during this era, from the AGSM, to series, are no longer made, as this is certainly not the case. However, the culture of the community has changed significantly, arguably most of this change having to do with cultural shifts. For example, outside of AGTube, the culture of online videos and online content creation has changed. YouTube is no longer the primary or only form of online video sharing as it once was, as TikTok now reigns supreme in the realm of social media, and just online video creation. With it, of course, has come other social media apps implementing online video sharing into their platforms. While these online video sharing platforms are notably centered around short form content, their popularity, and alongside it the cultural reliance on short form content has overtaken the online video market. Focusing back on YouTube, the website itself has changed. The videos that used to garner thousands of views are no longer popular, and thus are getting made less and less.

Stop motion videos are perhaps one of the best examples of this phenomenon. It is generally known that YouTube favors long form content, thus explaining the popularity of the video essay, and other forms of longer content in recent years (Nguyen, 2022). With this in mind, we can think back to the stop motion videos of AGTube’s past. While some stop motions, such



as the previously mentioned movies, could be between 15 and 45 minutes long, these were considered rare, and the format of these videos were not popularized until later in AGTube's history, specifically towards the end of the Golden Era and the beginning of the Commercialization Era. The most common type of stop motion were the short form ones, the ones between two and seven minutes. These videos, though they are short, take a long time to make. The nature of stop motion does not lend itself to short production times, as it is an integrally tedious process, with each frame being taken before it can be strung together in succession, often leading to hundreds, if not thousands, of still images that must be edited together. As a result, the videos are simply not suited for modern algorithms where longer videos made in relatively short periods of time are the key to success.

As a result of all of this, AGTube has shifted with the times, being the only way for the community to grow and not fade into oblivion. Instead of short animated skits it is more common to find full video essays on YouTube now (Nguyen, 2021). Creators such as “digital postcards” and “Darling Dollz” are known for their long video essays and opinion videos, inspecting AGTube trends or American Girl company updates. These videos are suited to fit the platform now, as they are long and can be made relatively quickly enough to keep up with the algorithm. Likewise, these videos have grown with their audience. Many of the individuals that watch these videos are former AGTube community members, of whom have grown up and perhaps want a more nuanced look into American Girl.

AGTube also changed significantly post-COPPA. The community seemed to split into two distinct parts, one of which being the American Girl content made directly for children that COPPA has enforced. Many of these videos are made by American Girl themselves or more popular AGTubers such as “AGOverSeasFan”. These often have more of the fictionalized

storylines that AGTube was previously known for, though they are notably much more geared towards younger kids. Common themes and characters in them include popular properties such as Disney Princesses or Spiderman, and these types of content more closely align with the previously mentioned “CookieSwirlC” content. Perhaps most notably of this content, it is, for the most part, not made by the kids themselves. This is a characteristic to be further discussed later on, however this is arguably a defining trait of AGTube—videos made for kids, *by* kids. This signals a change that the “Commercialization” era brought forth, as with the commercialization of AGTube came the community becoming less and less about being a creative outlet and safe community for children, and instead becoming yet another avenue for brands, such as American Girl themselves, to market towards children. I would argue that these videos are not AGTube videos, nonetheless their presence showcases the shift in the community post-COPPA.

There then lies the other videos that were created as a result of the split; these videos made for an older audience, likely more so geared to the older AGTubers that have been on the platform for a long time and remain in the community. These include the previously mentioned video essays by creators such as Darling Dollz, whose content is broadly about dolls instead of solely centered on American Girl, but nonetheless covers many American Girl related topics, often from a collector-based point of view. The middle of this content split, where the previous content AGTube was known for would lie, falls somewhere in the in-betweens of the site. As a result, this content is hard to find, and often does not see the same popularity that it once did.

The history of AGTube is, overall, complicated. Nonetheless, from the community’s long existence, we can understand how communities can form around common interests. Likewise, we can understand how commercialization, changes in regulations, and more can impact a community, and even lead to its downfall.

## OVERARCHING THEMES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF AGTUBE

Going back to my methods, I sought to categorize and characterize the most popular AGTube content by year, and from there conduct my analysis onto the community's history, formation, and general existence. Throughout this analysis I have found key traits that are common across many types of AGTube content, including a focus on adolescent narratives, creativity and the act of repurposing, the promotion of some, if not all, of American Girl's core ideals, and finally, perhaps what makes AGTube the community that it is, a community made for and by adolescents.

To begin with, American Girl has always been geared towards the preadolescent, or preteen experience. Geared to an audience of eight and up, with doll characters between the ages of nine and ten years old, the preteen girl has always been the target audience and subject for American Girl. This explains one of the core foundations of AGTube, or really any type of American Girl centered content, that of the importance of adolescent narratives. AGTube storylines differed widely in their subject, genre, and even form. However, one of the prevailing characteristics of any AGTube video was a relatability to its audience. This relatability, of course, was forged through the use of storylines relatable to the average teen or preteen. The dolls in these videos, while occasionally "played" characters younger or older than the age the dolls themselves are supposed to be, were more often than not, adolescent and preadolescent characters. With this in mind, we can see how these characters were a creation of adolescent experiences, by adolescents themselves, as opposed to American Girl's own stories, of which were adolescent stories, though written by adults. Jessica E. Johnston notes this as a paratext, or intertextual readings between American Girl's own text and brand created media, and the audience that consumes it. As she states, "These fan-generated videos can be understood as

paratexts of the American Girl brand, introducing new narrative elements and expanding on American Girl's tween material culture to include other identities and experiences.” (60) Nonetheless, as a result of its prevalence in AGTube content, the focus on adolescent narratives have an undoubtable significance in regards to the characteristics of AGTube content.

Another trait of AGTube content, one that is shared not only by AGTube, but arguably by DCCs at large, includes the act of repurposing. Arguably, this is what AGTube is, as the community repurposes American Girl dolls and American Girl narratives to create something new and tell modern stories. The creators of AGTube videos are not inherently using American Girl dolls as they are made to be used. American Girl, as a company, was not created with the intention of being a tool used by girls to create stop motion videos to be posted on the internet, and though this act can be categorized as play, closer to the intended use of American Girl, it is safe to assume that this was not what Pleasant Rowland expected would come out of her small doll company. As a result, a fundamental characteristic of AGTube is the act of repurposing the dolls, and reshaping their use, and thus, their meaning.

Despite reshaping American Girl dolls from their intended purpose, AGTube also promotes many of the ideals of American Girl, as a company. The company's core value of “Bringing out the joy of girlhood...Through adventurous stories and imaginative play, we give girls the chance to discover who they are—and who they're meant to be.” is largely prevalent in AGTube (“Our Story”). Themes of adventurous stories and imaginative play are characteristics present in the large majority of AGTube content, especially fictionalized content. Additionally, the idea of giving girls the chance to discover who they are and who they are meant to be is perhaps one of the biggest reasons behind the community's existence, even if those participating in the community are not at a place to realize this yet. Dolls, and the act of playing with them in

general gives kids the opportunity to discover themselves, and doing so through the production of content on AGTube supports this, in addition to creating the support of a community.

Finally, what I would argue is the core of AGTube, is the previously mentioned characteristic of the content created being made for, and by its target audience. This is what sets AGTube, as a community, apart from other forms of content created for young people, whether that be traditional content such as movies and television shows, or internet content such as YouTube videos. Overwhelmingly, content created for young people has been made primarily by adults, as adults have the power, tools, and resources to do so. However, AGTube is different, as the content created is largely created by young people, thus giving these young people a new sense of agency in the media they consume. They can create storylines that are relatable, or that they perhaps would like to see in traditional content, something that is harder to accomplish for traditional media made by adults that may be out of touch. Additionally, AGTube offers a community of the same age demographic, offering people to connect with through the stories that these creators choose to tell. As such, this characteristic of the content made for and by adolescents, is key to AGTube's success and prevalence with its audience.

### **DECIPHERING THE WHY BEHIND AGTUBE**

While it should be noted that American Girl is far from the only toy company that garnered an online community of children making online video content, as other communities such as "LPS Tube", known for making videos with Littlest Pet Shop toys, and "Brick Tube", known for Lego videos, existed and were highly prevalent around the same time as AGTube's initial popularity. All of these communities are prime examples of DCCs, and these communities all saw huge success, some even having recent upticks in popularity as former child audiences reminisce on the content created in these DCCs. Still, it leads one to wonder why this type of

community was so prevalent in online spaces, and why was the American Girl one in particular so popular?

We can break this down into a couple of key explanations. To begin, we have the explanations regarding why online communities, and fandoms form. If we take a look at the formation of online communities through the lens of the uses and gratifications theory then the reasoning behind the community's existence becomes clear, as does the reasoning behind the existence of most online communities. Uses and gratifications theory "...posits that users will intentionally seek specific types of media to satisfy specific needs [37, 58]. Under this theory, users may engage in different online communities for different reasons." (Hwang and Foote, 462:3) Uses and gratifications theorizes that users, or audience members, will seek out pieces of media that will meet the gratifications, or satisfaction, that they need. This audience-centered media theory has a couple core assumptions that must be made for the theory to be assumed to work. These assumptions include that the audience's media use is aimed at a goal, that they are aware of said goal, that only audience members themselves can quantify the gratification received from a piece of media, that pieces of media compete with one another to be "chosen", so to speak, by the audience, and most importantly, that audiences play an active role in the content they consume (Katz, et al, 510-511). Under these assumptions, researchers have devised a list of gratifications that an audience seeks from the media they consume. These gratifications may vary depending on who you ask, though as Reinhard & Dervin state, there are four basic categories that are generally agreed upon, these including entertainment, integration and social interaction, personal identity and information (11). These four categories are fairly self-explanatory, entertainment including relaxation and escapism, integration and social interaction including connection and creating a sense of belonging, personal identity consisting

of the formation of one's values, and information consisting of searching and learning new information.

Understanding uses & gratifications theory, we can now begin to understand some of the basic causes behind AGTube's existence. The most obvious of these is that of entertainment. Entertainment is arguably the most common reasoning behind why any type of content is consumed, as if the content is not at least somewhat entertaining, it is unlikely, or rare, that any of the other gratifications will be strong enough to keep a viewer engaged. Other core gratifications found within AGTube spaces include integration and social interaction, which is arguably at the core of the community. Inherently, the community is a social group, as content is made to be distributed to an audience on YouTube. This audience then interacts with the content, perhaps even coming back multiple times on multiple videos and cementing themselves as a regular audience member and consumer of this content, thus creating a sense of connection, community, and belonging. This sense of community is also at the core of AGTube, being that it is an online community where others can interact. Thus, this content is sought out for the sense of belonging it brings to its viewers and creators. Personal identity and information are slightly harder to define in the community's motivations behind existence, though they are still definitely present. Personal identity can be found through the identity created by the content creators of AGTube, whether that be in their channel username that they are known by, or by the content they consume. Likewise, for the broader community of AGTube, every member, be it a content creator or audience member or both, has a personal created identity as a fan of American Girl dolls. The characteristics that symbolize American Girl, as a company, are symbolic of the girls that play with them and make videos with them. Finally, the information gratification is best seen

through the search for American Girl related information—information often found in the video essays found in the later eras of the community’s existence.

These motives behind AGTube’s existence give us a good understanding of the basic reasoning behind the community’s creation. However, I believe if we look deeper we can garner more information specific to AGTube, as well as possibly other online toy communities such as those previously mentioned, which can give us an even better motive to the DCC. To begin, as previously mentioned AGTube’s demographic is mostly that of “tweenage” individuals. While it is hard to gather the specific demographic of AGTube videos, as that is information difficult to capture by anyone but the uploaders of those specific videos, if the individuals making the content are anything to go off of, it can be assumed that the target audience of AGTube videos are those in between the ages of nine and seventeen, roughly. With this knowledge comes reasons behind AGTube’s existence that revolve around the demographic of the community. For example, AGTube provides young individuals an online environment that is safe, and relatively kid-friendly. Some pieces of AGTube content can handle mature themes, such as some of the previously mentioned AGTube drama series, but despite this, the content is without fail, expressed through a safe medium—with American Girl dolls. As such, there is something to be said about the importance of AGTube providing a community that is mostly consisting of fellow young people to create content suitable to this audience, and do so while providing a safe online environment. Hana Machackova states, “This [online communities] can be very beneficial: children can find a safe group, which helps them self-disclose, build a positive self-image, consider different opinions and attitudes, and offer a much needed sense of belonging.” (69-70). Touching on some of my previously mentioned points, Machackova showcases some the importance of children finding safe communities, even bringing up other important adolescent



milestones such as building positive self-image and considering other viewpoints than their own. As Machackova later goes on to explain, “Early adolescence is thus a stage in which “outside” social influences can shape the ongoing changes in children’s personalities. Different social groups present early adolescents with examples of different types of behaviors, introduce them to opinions and attitudes which can differ from those socialized in the family, and offer them an opportunity to gain a sense of belonging.” (68) A strong argument could be made that any sense of community is important for an adolescent’s wellbeing, and in a community as innocuous as AGTube, it is no surprise why the community grew a following amongst young audiences. The community provided a safe space for young people to explore and begin to define themselves, as well as created a positive environment to grow up in.

In addition to the previously mentioned reasons behind the existence of this DCC, the community also provided an introduction to creative hobbies and skills that might not otherwise be explored. Many individuals growing up in the community would later go on to work, or aspire to work in the entertainment industry. Former creators such as “Rockstar13Studios” and “Anttonina” have since disclosed that they went to film school, or now work in the film and entertainment industry. While it is impossible to know whether this occupational interest was encouraged or informed by the community without asking the individuals directly, it is not a far reach to assume that some correlation between the two led these creators to where they are now.

Finally, AGTube is symbolic of a transitional stage. As previously mentioned, the community is heavily associated with a teen and tween age range. Most creators fall into this age demographic, and even those that do not are still in direct conversation with this adolescent age, as American Girl is geared towards that audience. This demographic, in itself, is a transitional stage. As Casey, Duhoux, and Cohen state, “Adolescence is a transitional period from childhood

to adulthood, with an onset that includes pubertal maturation and an offset that is marked by independence from the parent.” (749) This transition is known to be hard for many individuals, with the newfound changes in one’s life to often be disorienting and difficult. Thus, AGTube, and even American Girl in general, provides a sense of a transition between childhood and adulthood. The community engages with adolescence in a particularly interesting way. By creating mature, teen centered storylines with toys and playthings made for children the community is inadvertently in conversation on the tie between childishness and maturity—in conversation with the complicated nature of growing up. The community’s audience in itself is rather complicated. The storylines may sometimes be too mature for children, but they are told with dolls—told through a medium easily digestible and understandable to children. This, I would argue, is the core of AGTube, this constant tie between childhood and adulthood, naivety and maturity—adolescence.

## **CONCLUSION**

“A toy fan, in the truest sense, is not only a collector of objects either, but a creative player of materials and storyworlds, and a fan of anyone who dreams them up.” (Sandvoss et al., 103)

A nine year old girl sits behind a computer screen in 2012. Looking for some entertainment on a hot summer day, she is led to YouTube. It is here that she stumbles upon a community forged of people not unlike herself, young, creative individuals who have created a community through a shared common interest—American Girl dolls. For this nine year old girl, this community, which she would spend the next four years apart of, would end up being integral to her development. The community would foster her creativity, and help her develop relationships with people around the world. While eventually she would grow up and her interest

in American Girl would wane, the creativity she cultivated, interests she gained, and skills she learned would lead her onto her future career path, and eventually take her full circle, as she writes this capstone now.

As previously mentioned, AGTube was a primarily adolescent centered community, and as many know, adolescence is a crucial time in one's life, where you are fundamentally shaped as a person, with many of your interests, values, and characteristics beginning to emerge. AGTube, providing a safe community for adolescents to explore new creative endeavors, while connecting with people from around the world, gave me, as well as many others a place to grow, and, aligned with American Girl's own mission and values, a place to discover ourselves and who we are meant to be.

It is because of this, as well the impact this small community had on internet culture, that I found it significant to research and analyze this community, thus not letting it fall into oblivion or be forgotten. Likewise, as we see how this community continues to evolve, I hope that this analysis provides its audience with the tools to continue looking analytically at American Girl dolls, online creative communities, and, of course, AGTube.

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