

Queering Cartoons: Steven Universe

Peter Tedesco

Abstract: *Steven Universe* is the first show to present queer relationships, gender nonconformity, and non-binary characters as the main focus of a children's program. It presents the dense subject of identity politics in the non-threatening format of a children's cartoon. For the first time ever American society has reached a point where these topics are socially acceptable to present on a mainstream program. Research was conducted through analysis of gender roles in children's programs throughout the past thirty years in comparison of recent representation and reception of non-heteronormative characters as well as applying queer theory to the subject matter of *Steven Universe*. Findings of research show that children's programming has been evolving toward more progressive gender roles as well as non-heteronormative representation slowly. However, *Steven Universe* is the first to present a variety of queer identities so blatantly with such positive reception.

“The combination of text and image, the layering of mechanisms of identification through animal avatars, and the magical mixture of color and craziness definitely allow for cartoons to serve as attractive tools for the easy transmission of dense ideologies (175).”

-The Queer Art of Failure
Judith Halberstam

Television entertainment is arguably one of the greatest ways in which children are socialized to the world around them. Children’s programming provides an introduction to social norms as well as identities outside their immediate home life. As society progresses socially and politically, more and more identities are represented in children’s programming. Take *Dora the Explorer*, for example. The show is a staple on children’s network programming due in part to the fact that Spanish speaking populations are now a mainstream part of American culture. The same is also true for the LGBTQ+ community. In recent history, LGBTQ+ individuals have made great strides for social equality and are more present in mainstream culture than ever before. *Steven Universe* is representative of changing social attitudes toward those who do not subscribe to the hegemony of heteronormativity in the United States and has given writers space to showcase these “non-normative” identities. It is an exemplary show that both subtly and not so subtly explores identities and experiences that fall outside the heteronormative experience, while still remaining inclusive enough for a wide appeal.

In recent history programming for children has become more progressive in its representation of characters. Gender roles are no longer so rigid. A man can be sensitive and empathetic and still considered manly. As stated in *Post Princess Models of Gender: The New*

Man in Disney/Pixar, “Pixar consistently promotes a new model of masculinity, one that matures into acceptance of its more traditionally “feminine” aspects (Gillam 2).” That is to say, in order to be a hero, Mr. Incredible does not have to be a typical manly-man. In fact he is encouraged to embody traditionally “feminine” qualities. Pixar characters show progression through films so that, “they achieve (and teach) a kinder, gentler understanding of what it means to be a man (Gillam 3).” *Steven Universe* beautifully utilizes the same principles, showing young viewers that “being a man,” or plainly being any gender, is not something that needs to restrict them emotionally, psychologically, or physically.

Steven, the main character in Rebecca Sugar’s *Steven Universe*, is a prime example of how children’s programming can be used to challenge gender roles. But what are gender-roles? According to Baker and Raney, “Gender-role stereotypes are collections of gender-specific attributes or traditional norms that differentiate typical “feminine” behavior patterns from typical “masculine” behavior patterns in society (26).” Steven is a boy who uses empathy, caring and understanding to tackle his problems and only resorts to violence as a last effort. According to Steven, there is no problem that cannot be solved with love and understanding. But to say that *Steven Universe* only subverts gender roles would be a gross understatement.

Steven Universe also posits gender neutral characters, The Crystal Gems. Although they are coded as female, they explicitly and repeatedly state The Gems are sentient genderless beings from outer space. The series is a magnificent tool in inclusivity and educating children about identities that are outside a heteronormative frame. Heteronormative narratives are the most dominant story lines used in children’s literature, television shows, and pop culture in general. More often than not, non-traditional identities and relationships are misrepresented or homogenized to seem less queer. In an interview with PBS, Sugar stated, “I think that by excluding LGBT content from children’s media, a clear statement is being made that this is

something that should be ignored, and that people who are feeling this, their feelings should be ignored, they should be ignored. And I think that that is wrong (Segal 3).” Through the use of an alien species, Gems from Homeworld, Sugar is successful in making an analogy to those who do not subscribe to a masculine/feminine gender binary.

Steven Universe presents these non-traditional identities and relationships in such a way that teaches its viewers inclusivity and acceptance under the guise of a science fiction show. Creating an alternate reality where sentient crystals freely walk the Earth afford Sugar a safe space to disrupt societal norms pertaining to gender and sexuality. Furthermore, the series presents a queer romantic relationship as part of the main storyline.

Non-traditional identities and gender-role subversion are not new to children’s programming. Anyone who has seen a Bugs Bunny cartoon knows this. The wily rabbit will assume a drag persona to outwit the dumbfounded hunter or villainous cowboy. “While most cartoons reflect the standards of gender construction in American society, the Jones-Warner works demonstrate a strong critique and subversion of those norms via camp (Abel 184).” The same is true for cartoon villains. Disney antagonists are often coded as effeminate, such as Scar from *The Lion King*, Jafar from *Aladdin*, or King John in *Robin Hood*, that is to say gender-role nonconformity is something that is undesirable. Sugar presents her characters in such a way that their “non-normative” characteristics are something to be admired rather than feared or mocked.

It is in these distinctions that *Steven Universe* is unique and breathtakingly progressive. Rebecca Sugar, the show’s creator, does not use camp to subvert gender norms nor does she use gender nonconformity as a signifier of villainy, she just does it. “This is what truly sets Steven apart: Where his feminine mannerisms would relegate him as either a villain or a punchline on any other show, he’s the hero in *Steven Universe*, full stop. He’s not strong in spite

of his femininity, but because of it (Brammer 2).” Sugar is not the first to present these identities through a cartoon format, but she is the first to do it so openly and unapologetically.

In recent history animated shows like *Adventure Time* and *Avatar: Legend of Korra* have alluded to lesbian romances and were met with aggression and outrage. Disapproval of homosexual relationships in children’s media is nothing new. The book *And Tango Makes Three* (2005), now lives in infamy as, “the gay penguin book.” The story of two male penguins fostering an egg has sparked massive cultural debates and has been banned in many cases. For the first time in history, more and more children’s programs and media are representing identities and relationships outside the heteronormative frame and they are being widely accepted. The wide acceptance of *Steven Universe* is a true sign of changing social attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals and groups.

Steven and Traditional Gender Roles



(Steven)

Steven Universe is a teenage boy who’s creator describes him as, “a super - excitable, hammy kid.” He is the show’s main protagonist and hero figure, however he is the antithesis of the traditional male hero model. “The hero’s taut, heavily muscled body summarizes the genre. At once bleeding and bruised, his chiseled sinews belie the hero’s suffering by evoking a

‘hardness’ that exists beyond the physical (Heineken 1).” In contrast, Steven is pudgy (or soft), short for his age, and has an adorable upturned nose.

He uses empathy and problem solving when faced with adversity and will only resort to violence when there are no other viable options. Upon first inspection Steven is anything but a hero, in fact some might refer to him as a wimp. He openly admits when he is upset or afraid in a given situation and cries somewhat regularly. Similar to “The New Man Model” in Pixar films, Steven is representative of changing social attitudes pertaining to gender roles and relies heavily on the collective strength of his friends and family.

It is made clear from the start of the series that Steven does not exude traditional masculinity. His fashion choices are not typically masculine: sporting a pink shirt with a big star across his chest, jeans, and a pair of pink flip flops (or yellow rainboots complete with duck print depending on the weather). He is frequently shown crying and expressing his emotional needs. Breaking into song to express his feelings is a regular occurrence for the talented young ukulele player.

In the episode “Sadie’s Song (S2 E.17),” Steven’s friend Sadie is pressured into performing a song at Beach-a-Palooza by her mother. When the time comes for Sadie’s act she expresses that she does not want to go on and so, Steven takes her place. He takes to the stage in Sadie’s glam rock costume and makeup to perform for her. According to Butler, “Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect (Butler 528).” What is so remarkable about the world of *Steven Universe* is that Steven can wear a dress and makeup and not be ostracized for doing so. In fact, the way he cares for his friend makes him more endearing to audience members. Beach City residents marvel in the performance and rather than reject Steven’s behavior they embrace him.

Judith Butler, a founder of Queer Theory, summarised that all humans are gendered social subjects and therefore interpellated or called into being and expected to adhere to specific guidelines or social norms. Butler calls this “gender performativity.” In essence it is the way in which a gendered subject adheres to social norms. It is the actions that reinforce one’s gender, such as a female bodied individual who goes through the process of putting on makeup or a male bodied individual who assumes the alpha role, spending hours in the gym to appear more masculine. Performativity can also work to subvert one’s gender as well, if performed incorrectly it is considered a taboo. This is where Steven is special, he can wear a girl’s glam rock costume and openly talk about his feelings and is never considered less than a male.

Steven does not only challenge gender norms through his emotional vulnerability, aesthetic practices, and behavior. He also challenges the traditional notion of the male hero through his super powers. Unlike traditional masculine superheroes Steven is closer to the magical girl trope found in Japanese anime.

“Magical girl animation, called *mahō shōjō* and *majokko* anime in Japan, is a mainstay of television animation programming that distinctly targets female prepubescent viewers. The conventions of the magical girl genre, especially the elaborate description of metamorphosis that enables an ordinary girl to turn into a supergirl, have been widely imitated across various genres and media categories (144 Kaito).”

Steven is the offspring of a human man named Greg Universe and a very powerful Gem, Leader of The Crystal Gems, Rose Quartz. In order for Steven to be born, Rose was required to relinquish her physical form and essentially be reborn as Steven; he is regularly referred to as

Rose throughout the series by friends and foes. He sports a rose quartz gemstone embedded in his navel which is the source of his powers. Steven's abilities are typical with that of a magical girl figure. The weapon he summons from his gem is a pink shield, a defensive symbol which is classically coded as feminine. He possess the ability to change his weight to range from that of a snowflake to an anvil as well as produce a protective pink bubble that encompasses his body. Finally he possesses healing powers, a traditionally feminine characteristic. Steven's powers are defensive, nurturing, and life giving: qualities that are not routinely associated with male hero figures.

Furthermore, the series is littered with magical girl imagery. Steven's weapons, which he inherits from his mother, are all coded as feminine. The Laser Light Cannon for example, is a giant pink cannon that shoots a beam of light in the form of a pink rose. His animal companion is an over sized cuddly pink lion capable of traveling through interdimensional space. There is even a direct reference to a magical girl transformation scene in the episode, "An Indirect Kiss (S1. E24.)" in which Steven prances around a screen filled with roses, bubbles and sparkles. What makes Steven groundbreaking is his attitude toward the classically feminine items. Rather than showing disapproval toward what most would consider 'girlie' Steven shows great excitement toward his emerging powers and arsenal of floral armaments.





(Screenshots of “An Indirect Kiss” S1. E24.)

Gender Fluidity and Non-Binary Characters

Steven is not the only character who upsets the heteronormative framework of the series. Steven’s “fairy godmothers,” The Crystal Gems are sentient, genderless, magical, precious gemstones from the planet Homeworld. Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl are the followers of Steven’s mother, Rose Quartz. Thousands of years ago, Rose began a rebellion against The Diamonds, the Leaders of Homeworld on a quest to colonize Earth. With the help of The Crystal Gems, Rose was able to defeat Homeworld and successfully save the planet. Since giving up her physical form to make Steven, The Crystal Gems have lovingly taken on the task to raise him and help him as he grows into his powers.

Gems are classified by the gemstone embedded in their bodies which are comparable to the nucleus of a cell. Their physical body is really a projection of light and is essentially a hologram with mass. If their gemstone becomes cracked or compromised they risk destruction,

minor injuries cause them to revert to their crystal form for a short period to recuperate. They are inherently sexless and therefore do not fall under the gender binary, however their physical forms do present female features eliciting feminine pronouns. As Steven is half human, he is the only Gem in history to ascribe to an actual gender. There is a diverse selection of Gems, each with unique characteristics and abilities. Capable of fusing with one another to create a larger version of themselves. Each Gem has a specific role in society on Homeworld and although they are all coded as feminine their body types show a wide variety of difference and sometimes even appear to be androgynous.

Amethyst often alters her physical form for comedic relief, she regularly does so by changing into a male bodied or muscular persona. In the episode "Tiger Millionaire (S1. E9.)" the audience as well as Steven is introduced to Amethyst's alter ego, The Purple Puma, when he stumbles across an underground wrestling circuit. Although the Puma is in fact Amethyst he is addressed as a male. As stated the Gems are inherently sexless beings and do not have a prescribed gender, in fact they are not even on the binary.



(Amethyst as The Purple Puma)

As The Purple Puma, Amethyst acts in a crass manner flexing Herculean muscles sporting thick chest and armpit hair. The Purple Puma allows Amethyst to act out hyper aggressive behavior in the ring and explore a more masculine side. When out of the ring

Amethyst reverts back to her normal form, that of a thickly bodied girl with large hips and ample bosom. The juxtaposition of the two forms express the diverse personality of Amethyst, unlike a human she is able to change her form and present as masculine or feminine. Her alter ego is exemplary of a diverse gender expression. Amethyst is not the only character that challenges the gender binary on *Steven Universe*.



(Amethyst)

As stated Gems are able to fuse with one another to create a bigger stronger Gem. For example, two Rubies can fuse with one another to create a larger, more powerful Ruby. Fusion is a sort of symbiosis in which two or more Gems coexist in one body. In the episode “Alone Together (S1. E37)” Steven accidentally fuses with his human friend Connie Maheswaran. The result is a human/Gem hybrid named Stevonnie. The fusion is surprising to The Crystal Gems as they did not think fusion with a human was even possible, but due to Steven’s unique genetic makeup he is able to integrate with Connie.



(Connie)

Stevonnie is a physical combination of the two characters and identifies themselves with gender neutral pronouns and is aware of their symbiosis, referring to themselves as “us” instead of “I.” Stevonnie is not a main character in the series, but has a recurring role, often appearing when Connie and Steven fight together. Fusing to become stronger, combining Steven’s defensive shield attack with Connie’s offensive sword skills. Stevonnie is a single being possessing both genders as part of their identity, Steven and Connie respectively. They do not identify as male or female existing as something entirely unique and outside the gender binary. Again, Sugar is successful in presenting a dense concept such as gender identity to a young audience in an easily understandable allegory.



(Stevonnie)

Queer Relationships

Children's media is structured in such a way that marginalizes or completely disregards non-heteronormative narratives. When narratives that pose an alternative to the heterosexual patriarchy do appear they are often met with confrontation. As stated earlier, the book *And Tango Makes Three* was negatively received by conservative audiences. Arguing children were too young to fully understand a non-heterosexual relationship. Even the suggestion of homosexuality or a reality outside a traditional heteronormative frame is considered taboo. Think back to Tinky Winky of *The Teletubbies*, many viewers recognized his purple coloring and triangular antenna as symbols of gay pride causing controversy among conservative groups.

Steven Universe is the first show for children to so openly present non-traditional relationships and be widely received by audiences. Recently children's programs have become more inclusive to present audiences with homosexual characters and relationships. However, they are suggested rather than stated, never being formally addressed or the characters are secondary and have little to do with main story line. Creators of *Avatar: Legend of Korra* were

met with outrage after ending the series, suggesting a lesbian romance between two female protagonists.

One of the show's creators Bryan Konietzko confirmed the relationship on his blog stating he wanted to present it more directly but worried it would never pass with the network. "We never assumed it was something we would ever get away with depicting on an animated show for a kids network in this day and age, or at least in 2010 (Konietzko 1)." The series finale ends with Korra and Asami, the two female leads entering a portal to the Spirit World hand in hand, referencing a heterosexual couple's wedding depicted a few scenes earlier. The sheer suggestion of a lesbian romance caused upheaval with conservative audiences.

Recently shows such as *Gravity Falls* and *Clarence* have presented homosexual couples, but they are background figures and not given much attention. It is in this respect that *Steven Universe* stands alone. Rebecca Sugar has stated, "[LGBTQ] stories are not considered appropriate, are not considered G-rated content, and because they're not, they're kept out of media for kids. And think that is profoundly sad (Segal 1)." The series presents a homosexual relationship through the act of fusion and the main character Garnet.

When asked about the concept of fusion, Sugar stated she wanted to present a relationship in an action packed way that would keep the shows target audience of six to eleven year old boys entertained. Comparing partners in a relationship to teammates working together for a greater good. fusion is achieved when two or more participants enact a synchronized dance and are able to synchronize. Gems turn into pure light and join. They must be mentally, physically and emotionally synched in order to fuse with one another. The end result is the formation of a new Gem creating an entirely new identity. Gems of the same type that fuse simply become larger. For example three Ruby type Gems would form a new bigger Ruby. Gems of different types form a different kind of fusion which looks different from its smaller

counterparts. For example, when Steven fuses with Connie they create Stevonnie and when he fuses with Amethyst they create Smoky Quartz.



(Smoky Quartz)

In the show's premiere, audiences are introduced to Garnet as the acting leader of The Crystal Gems. She is the strongest, most level headed of the team, possessing the gift of foresight. As Steven and the audience begin to learn more about the history of The Crystal Gems and their fight against Homeworld it is revealed that Garnet is actually a fusion of two different Gems, a Ruby and a Sapphire in the episode "Jail Break (S1 E52)." As stated, fusion is the act of two or more Gems entering a symbiotic state of being, one in which the participants combine to form a new Gem. Garnet is the living embodiment of a relationship between two female presenting characters. Sapphire and Ruby share such a strong love that they have chosen to remain fused at all times in the form of Garnet.

The episode "The Answer (S2 E22)" and subsequent picture book of the same title sheds light on Ruby and Sapphire's relationship. Sapphire was once a high ranking official of

Blue Diamond's Court and Ruby was her bodyguard. Sapphire is called to court at the Cloud Arena to use her gift of foresight to predict the outcome of Rose Quartz's rebellion. Sapphire states her physical form will be destroyed and she will enter stasis. All goes according to Sapphire's prediction until Ruby decides to alter the course of fate and save Sapphire. In the process, the two accidentally Fuse and create Garnet, warranting a negative reaction amid Blue Diamond's Court. Blue Diamond commands they be destroyed when Sapphire takes hold of Ruby's hand and leaps from the Cloud Arena toward Earth. They take refuge in a cave on the surface of the planet and begin exchanging their thoughts and feelings with one another. Agreeing that their fusion was a feeling unlike any other they had ever felt before.

They decide to perform a fusion dance once more and live as their new form Garnet. Eventually Garnet crosses paths with Rose Quartz and Pearl. She offers to unfuse for the comfort of Rose, but Rose denies the gesture. Garnet finds acceptance from the rebel Crystal Gems and begins to ask Rose three questions. "How was Ruby able to alter fate?" "Why was Sapphire willing to give up everything?" "Who am I?" Rose calmly looks at Garnet and expresses, "You already are the answer, love." Garnet is the living embodiment of a loving relationship between two characters who are coded as female. Their relationship serves as a platform to present audiences with a healthy non-heteronormative relationship. The message of which is love.

The fairy tale like episode and children's book confirms any doubts that viewers may have had about the nature of Sapphire and Ruby's relationship. It presents a queer relationship at the forefront of the series rather than leaving it up to suggestion. The reception of the show has not changed since presenting audiences with the romantic relationship nor has it had to censor itself for American audiences. Unlike earlier children's programs that have depicted

same sex couples, *Steven Universe* has only fostered positivity through its message of love and inclusivity.

Conclusion

Rebecca Sugar has successfully created a show that presents non-heteronormative identities and relationships that appeals to wide audience. She is presenting children with a cartoon that fall outside traditional storytelling. Presenting sensitive boys and tough girls alongside gender non-binary characters. Furthermore she presents love between two female bodied characters without fetishizing the relationship. For the first time ever, a show like *Steven Universe* is being widely accepted by audiences and can only suggest that America is coming to a more progressive, inclusive attitude toward LGBTQ+ identities. The show presents the message of love and acceptance toward all life forms. Teaching its viewers to understand other's realities without judgement. *Steven Universe* is a wonderful program for children which will hopefully foster more empathetic and inclusive generations.

It would be beneficial to conduct research on how children receive the show's message of inclusion and love. Although Sugar is clear in her intentions with the show, it is uncertain if young children are able to grasp all of the positive messages she is presenting her audience with. The series is a wonderful tool in socializing audiences with identities outside the heteronormative framework, but if the message is not received as intended valuable lessons on inclusivity run the risk of being overlooked. Further research on how children understand sexuality and gender should be conducted in order to determine whether they interpret *Steven Universe* as its creator intended.

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