

This is a pre-print version of Jennifer deWinter and Stephanie Vie's webtext "Sparklegate: Gamification, Academic Gravitas, and the Infantilization of Play" published in *Kairos: Rhetoric, Technology, Pedagogy*, 201(1), available at <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/20.1/topoi/dewinter-vie>.

Jill Morris speaking:

So the origin of the sparklepony is more complicated than us deciding to pass out glittering horses at the CCCC because it's funny. It actually came from an in-joke on Twitter from Computers and Writing when it was at Purdue. I was in a panel sitting in the audience with my friends and we were . . . it was about gaming, so we were being sort of obnoxious on Twitter, which we tend to do. And one of the presenters, and I sadly do not remember who, was presenting about *World of Warcraft* and the fact that *World of Warcraft* had recently released a mount, which is, you know, a horse or whatever that people ride around on. And that particular mount happened to be a giant glittering horse.

And the presentation was about how this giant glittering horse was . . . people were turning against it and saying it was bad for two reasons. One was because it was a giant glittering horse made out of stars and so they called it a sparklepony, and that was feminized. And then the second reason was because you could buy it for 25 dollars and so you did not have to actually earn it. And in the game, it's popular to earn things. And this is before me or Mary, who also worked on the game, even started playing *World of Warcraft*. We joined later that summer. And the reason we joined was that presentation. Because we decided that we wanted a sparklepony. So we Tweeted, "I want a sparklepony!" And a bunch of other people, even people who were not in the same room, also said they wanted a sparklepony. And Dawn Armfield, who was sitting behind me, said she wanted one too.

And naturally we weren't going to pay 25 dollars to get people digital horses. But it spread. It became viral instantly at that conference. And so we had a meeting later that day to plan *C's the Day* for the very first time to come up with quest lines and achievements and things that we were going to give out. And we joked about giving out sparkleponies. But it was totally a joke. We weren't going to do it, because expense and so on.

Um, well, as the year went on, about six months later, people on Twitter were still saying, "If you do this game, you have to make sparkleponies." And my response was, "Well, shit." [laughing] Um, I was a director of the writing center at Baker College and so my job became to figure out how to manufacture sparkleponies for very cheap. Because we didn't have funding that first year but I had work-study labor and I had idle work-studies. And so we had to make a design that

could be made by these students that were working for me.

Um, and so we came up with this little wooden horse that we dipped in paint and then dipped in glitter and then threw a googly eye on. The first one was creepy looking; he had these mesh wings and no eyes because the actual horse has no eyes. And we really tried to make it look like the *WOW* mount, which is a Celestial Steed, but when I put the googly eyes on it and dipped it in glitter, everybody loved it. And so we just started making it then.

Um, so it was really . . . it was an in-joke. Uh, and what we found was that people love them in a way that we did not expect them to. I don't know what it is about ponies and what it is about this silly little wooden horse, but people want them. So that first year we handed them out and people loved it. This . . . uh, from there on out, it just kind of grew, and more and more people wanted them. But we made them because people wanted them. We didn't make it for any other reason. We never would have done it if we hadn't had support on Twitter first, um, and so when people started criticizing it, my first response was "But people asked us to make these." That seems sort of, uh, silly to me.