Annedroids

THE PRODUCER'S GENDER CONCEPT BEHIND THE SERIES

J. J. Johnson

Annedroids takes what kids have come to expect from gender roles on TV, yanks out the circuitry, and reworks it entirely. The series features titular character Anne, an unapologetic science whiz with a particular knack for robotics and computer programming. Working opposite her are newly arrived Nick, an earnest and kind-hearted kid and bombastic Shania who's also no slouch in the engineering bay herself. Furthering the theme of blurred gender rigidity is Pal, whom Anne designed to be neither male nor female and who incorporates characteristics of all three kids through mimicry. But this fresh take on gender roles is only one of many motivations behind *Annedroids*. Beyond its inherent agenda of pushing STEM-based educational content, it also aims to show the fun side of being smart, particularly in the sciences.

I was inspired to create *Annedroids* after reading a IZI-research report presented at PRIX JEUNESSE in 2010 that found that girls represented less than 33 % of characters on television. Additionally, girl characters were often portrayed in very narrow gender roles. I realized then, as a content creator, that I had been perpetuating some of the same stereotypes and gender inequality discussed in the report. *Annedroids* was my response.

"You're a girl?" – Nick
"You're a boy?" – Anne,
pilot episode

Gender does not come with a rigid set of rules for what makes a girl a "girl" or a boy a "boy". Therefore, to explore gender authentically, I felt it was necessary to present as many different interpretations as possible. When television series feature just one female character, she's forced to represent all types of girls against a multitude of male characters who can each operate in their own unique personality spheres. With *Annedroids*, we were intent on demonstrating a wide spectrum of girlhood starting with our titular character Anne. Anne was raised by her father and is an unapologetic science whiz with a particular knack for robotics and computer programming. She delights in her failures as much as in her successes and sees things not for what they are but for what they could become. Her personal style reflects her junkyard environment; her clothes are hobbled together and usually dirty and her hair is tied back with electrical clamps and twisted wire. Anne is an independent leader who, over the course of the series, discovers that she has as much to learn about friendship as she does about science. Anne is not boy focused, pop culture obsessed, or status driven. She's a self-assured STEM genius who

loves to solve problems and share that knowledge with her friends.

On the other end of the fashion spectrum is Anne's friend Shania. The aforementioned IZI-study report also examined the lack of diversity in body shape in children's programming, and thus was forged Shania. Confident, funny, and a sport enthusiast, Shania is the antithesis of Anne. She quickly develops a crush, is up to date on all the latest trends, and has an eclectic style that's completely her own. Though wildly different from Anne, Shania often proves she's no slouch in the engineering bay herself, as her off-the-cuff ideas often lead to surprising solutions.

"You could be famous! FAMOUS!" – Shania, pilot episode

Rounding out the main girl-lead cast is Hand, the first android Anne ever built. Best described as a massive 16-foot autonomous claw, Hand is the strongest of the androids and was constructed to assist Anne in moving around or handling dangerous objects that she herself can not. Though non-verbal, Hand is the most emotional of Anne's robotic creations and epitomizes a character that often doesn't know her own strength or how to handle her feelings. Hand chose to be female, just as all of Anne's creations are allowed to choose their own gender identity.

"I didn't program (the androids) to be a boy or a girl." – Anne, episode 2

This is a deliberate nod to the audience and an ongoing plot point throughout the series: gender is not fixed or assigned but rather something you feel and can decide for yourself. If any one character best supports this notion, it's Pal, Anne's "Personal Android Lightbot".

"What makes you think Pal's a he?" – Anne, episode 2

Pal is Anne's most humanoid looking android and her latest creation. The pilot episode of the series concludes with Pal literally being brought to life.

My goal with Pal was to introduce a clean-slate character – one who would be able to reflect on life through a completely innocent filter. Not unlike Pinocchio, Pal just wants to be a real kid and looks to the entire cast to figure out how to build its personality.

Pal being a genderless character throughout the four seasons provides a great and natural way to explore gender and related stereotypes. Pal often does not understand why humans behave the way they do, resulting in innocent yet mature questions that often even leave the adult viewer pondering. In slowly learning about emotions and experiences, Pal starts to form its own identity and pushes Anne to allow it to venture beyond the fortified walls of the junkyard and explore the real world. Similarly, in the final episode, Pal makes its gender path choice after both Nick and Shania try to sway its opinion. Pal ultimately decides to be Pal – choosing not to present as either male or female. Pal just wants to be itself – unique and beautiful:

"I just want to be me." – Pal, finale episode
"So you're like, smart and stuff…" – Nick to Anne, pilot episode

Balancing out our lead female kid cast is Nick. In the pilot episode Nick happens to be upon the junkyard and quickly proves himself useful to Anne. Nick is introduced with a cloudy background story that suggests he has troubles with his dad. That relationship is further explored throughout the series and was embedded to provide opportunities to explore a male's more emotional and vulnerable side. In fact, Nick often proves to be the most connected to his emotions, often leaning on his friends for support. Again, the intention was to play with typical gender roles – Nick is brave, courageous, and tough, but also emotional, tender, and loves his mom. Gender equity does not just apply to the good guys … er, girls. It must also envelop the villains. Ada was created to provide a foil for Anne and a

counterpoint to her argument that androids should decide their own fate. Ada is the head of a robotics company who strongly believes that androids should be created to help and service humankind. As such, she spends a great deal of time trying to capture Anne's androids. When the actress playing our villain became pregnant, there was network pressure to mask the pregnancy. Instead, we purposefully elected to embrace it – why can a pregnancy glow not be a glow of rage? Ada is a mom, a president of a powerful organization, and intent on helping humanity no matter what it takes. She's a wonderfully complicated character who's made only more interesting because she's with child.

The AV Club and The New York Times described *Annedroids* as "what 21st Century TV should look like" because it takes what kids "have come to expect from gender roles on TV, yanks out the circuitry and reworks it entirely." The series has proven to be a commercial success, licensed in every country in the world except for two. Annedroids has demonstrated that kids and parents are open and ready to ever more inclusive and sophisticated story telling in a way I never thought possible. One of my proudest outcomes from the series was a parent writing to us to let us know that her son had dressed up as Anne for a costume party. He wanted to be Anne because she was 'powerful' and 'smart' and 'built robots'. Expect to see more characters like Anne in all our upcoming shows. ◼

THE AUTHOR

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