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# Lizzie in Real Life: Social and Narrative Immersion Through Transmedia in The Lizzie Bennet Diaries

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## Abstract

This paper examines *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a transmedia adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* that has charted new territory in its ability to establish meaningful connectivity between the audience, the creators and the characters of the series. Anchored by a bi-weekly YouTube vlog, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* capitalizes on (and often veritably invents) the narrative power of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, 8Tracks, LinkedIn and others; in doing so, the creators are not just telling a story — they're building a world. And by asking their audience to welcome *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* into their virtual social hubs, the creators are in turn inviting the audience into the world of *LBD*, offering them opportunities to connect with and even develop these characters through mutual play. The critical and popular success of this Emmy Award-winning series indicates that audiences around the world crave an immersive television experience, one that doesn't end when the credits roll.

In the age of time-shifted TV and an ever more fragmented audience, how do television series maintain and quantify a fan base? How do fans assert their devotion to a series, or corral the attention of their favorite series' creators to make their praise and critiques known? Which social media giant has the television industry in its clutches, convincing those in the C-suites that they're the be-all and end-all of audience connectivity? Twitter, Twitter and, you guessed it: Twitter. With its initial public offering in September of 2013, Twitter all but proclaimed its monopoly over television chatter; as Katie Walsh writes in her essay in this issue, "What Does Twitter Really Offer TV Audiences, And At What Cost?" live-tweeting TV became "the number one way that a billion dollar company was going to prove its value."<sup>1</sup>

But Hollywood began reinforcing Twitter's dominance long before the company's stock market debut. As DVRs spread like wildfire, audiences stopped feeling like they had to either tune in or drop out, and ratings became far less reliable markers of audience share. Twitter filled

the data gap, offering quantifiable evidence of the audience's attention (and eventually even teaming up with Nielsen to promote social TV metrics). In turn, TV series worked to find ways to integrate Twitter into their live broadcasts, using official hashtags, prompting tweet-sized plot speculation during commercial breaks and even running audience tweets on screen during a show.<sup>2</sup>

To its credit, live-tweeting has helped the floundering television industry hold on to its fleeting live roots. After all, to fully experience and participate in Twitter-mediated TV, audiences have no choice but to watch the live broadcast. Twitter integration has also proven its efficacy for validating audience participation and giving fans the opportunity to, as Walsh writes, "insert themselves into the game of television via technology and social networks in order to possibly demonstrate their dominance or superior knowledge over the text; to manifest their ironic or negotiated readings of the show."<sup>3</sup> Now more than ever, audiences are motivated to define themselves by their taste, to declare themselves devoted fans

and to prove that allegiance and critical dexterity to their fellow aficionados. But just how much of a negotiated reading can take place in a mere 140 characters? A tweet that dons an official hashtag is a bona fide check-in, a piece of grassroots marketing, an announcement to one's network that they're in, say, Gladiator mode (as *Scandal* fans proudly call themselves). And from the network's vantage, that's golden. But for the viewers, particularly those seeking prolonged, sophisticated and narratively immersive connectivity that goes well beyond the ephemeral, dialogue-stunting hashtag, Twitter-driven social TV doesn't cut it.

So, some turn to independently produced web series that embrace a new type of social storytelling, one that boasts veritably limitless possibilities for cultivated audience connectivity: transmedia. Instead of simply using Twitter and other social media platforms for grassroots marketing, transmedia storytellers actually build their narratives across these platforms, rolling together video, audio, text and social engagement into what Henry Jenkins calls "a unified and coordinated entertainment experience."<sup>4</sup> By bringing their scripted content directly to the second screen and repurposing social platforms as tools for storytelling, transmedia producers are eliminating the divide between the characters and the audience, instigating dialogue from fan to fan, fan to character, and fan to creator. Each platform contributes something distinct to the property — YouTube offers up a space for more traditional episodic storytelling; Facebook can directly connect creators with the audience; and, yes, Twitter's real time accompaniment still contributes to a sense of live viewing, which serves to both connect audiences that are watching the story unfold together and give the characters dimensionality in familiar, "real world" territory. Those three social giants are just the tip of the iceberg, with such niche platforms as 8Tracks and Lookbook offering further ways to reimagine social networks as tools for storytelling.

There is perhaps no transmedia property that better exemplifies these possibilities for innovative storytelling and audience connectivity than *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a YouTube webseries developed by Hank Green and Bernie Su. This modernization of Jane Austen's 1813 novel *Pride*

and *Prejudice* exemplifies the ways in which transmedia can breathe new life into a story that has arguably been at the crux of 10 too many a media adaptation. Capitalizing on the distinct storytelling opportunities presented by some dozen social platforms — and using some platforms in imaginative ways that transcend their proposed purpose — this web series doesn't just tell a story; it builds a world. In doing so, it revitalizes a narrative that has universal resonance for its global virtual audience, and proves that in this age of adaptation, transmedia could be the last bastion for original narrative redux. Moreover, it proves that audiences are compelled by sustained critical engagement with both narrative content and the people behind it, if only given that opportunity.

The industry dominance and terminology of "transmedia" may be relatively new advents; world building, however, is not. In fact, Austen can be counted among the original world builders. Her writing is distinguished by an unmatched ability to not only tell relatable stories of love, family and society, but also evoke the nuances of the worlds in which her stories take place (and with biting wit to boot). For those reasons, Austen's books have connected with readers for nearly two centuries since her passing, and filmmakers, TV writers, and even graphic novelists find themselves revisiting such novels as *Emma*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park* for inspiration time and again. None of Austen's works, however, can match the canon established around what is undoubtedly her crown jewel, *Pride and Prejudice*. Why? Simply and hyperbolically put by *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*' co-creator and executive producer, Hank Green, "because it's the best story of all time."<sup>5</sup> A tale concerned with love and courtship, class and generational conflict, it has transcended both temporal and national bounds decade after decade. There are the adaptations that strive to remain true to the source, like Aldous Huxley's 1940 feature screenplay of the same name. The box office success of that film proved that classics (and particularly Austen's classics) could be tastefully adapted for the modern movie-going audience. That audience was captivated by Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier's portrayals of the iconic Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy; the film jumpstarted both of their high profile careers on

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screen, as well as what Rob Nixon refers to as an “Austen renaissance.”<sup>6</sup> Another adaptation that seemed to all but spring directly from Austen’s mind’s eye was the 1995 BBC miniseries starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth. A critical and popular success in both the United States and the United Kingdom, the six-hour miniseries offered the most detailed depiction to date of *Pride and Prejudice*, proving that television was the insurmountably effective medium for retelling Austen’s intricate tales (insurmountable, that is, until transmedia enters the fray).

In addition to the more straight and narrow period pieces, that renaissance would go on to include Austen remixes like *Bride and Prejudice*, a 2004 adaptation that transformed the tale for Bollywood, and *Pride and Prejudice: A Latter-Day Comedy* (2003), which places the story in modern Mormon Utah. Other works used *Pride and Prejudice* as a springboard for a looser adaptation, paying clever homage in the scheme of an original story; though *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001) was an enormous critical and commercial success, audiences weren’t coming in droves just because they knew it was a reinterpretation of *Pride and Prejudice* (in fact, given the millions that saw *Bridget Jones* during its initial theatrical run, it’s inevitable that some of them had no idea whatsoever). They came because the themes of this story resonated with them, as they had with each version before it. And as Cecilia Salber writes in *Persuasions Online*, a publication of the Jane Austen Society of North America, Helen Fielding (who wrote the books on which the *Bridget Jones* franchise was based) “provides a glossy and humorous prism through which Austen’s themes are refracted.”<sup>7</sup> It was that *refraction* that made *Bridget Jones* such a tremendously exciting property, one that will no doubt go down as a classic in the romantic comedy genre. It didn’t just reflect the themes of *Pride and Prejudice* in a way that the audience had seen half a dozen times before; it refracted them — bent the material, changed the direction of that light, if you will — to offer a new perspective.

So too is *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* a refraction, but on an exponentially greater scale. *LBD*, as fans and creators affectionately call the series, straddles the line between Huxley’s interpretation and Fielding’s, as it manages to modernize the

source text while staying astonishingly close to the linear structure of Austen’s novel (that is, in the serialized YouTube portion of the property). In this particular modernization, Lizzie Bennet is a 24-year-old graduate student studying Mass Communications and living at home in a suburban California town with her overbearing, marriage-obsessed mother. She regales an online audience with tales of her sisters’ (Jane and Lydia) dating tribulations, the financial challenges her family is facing, the solace she finds in her best friend, Charlotte, and the trials of facing one Mr. William Darcy. This distinct reimaging of Lizzie mirrors some of the current cultural anxieties of emerging adulthood in a looming recession, which is why the property rings true with both Austen devotees and the uninitiated.

While each and every one of the characters in *LBD* can be linked back to a character from the original *Pride and Prejudice*, certain characteristics and dramatics are reimaged for a more diverse and tech-addled audience. *LBD* may be comparably loyal to the themes and structure of the source text, but the transmedia property was sure to have a very different audience from adaptations like the BBC miniseries, whose audience could best be described by a Boston Globe reporter as a “sorority of smart, discerning women of a certain age with a relish for literature, period drama, and English accents.”<sup>8</sup> In large part, that sorority resided in the United States and the United Kingdom, where the series made its first broadcasts on the A&E Network and BBC One respectively. Conversely, *LBD* draws a strikingly global audience; accessible to anyone with a web connection, the Los Angeles-based production has gained steam in such far corners as Italy, New Zealand, India and Sweden, just to name a few. According to the series’ Facebook page analytics, its largest contingent of fans resides in Sao Paulo, Brazil. *LBD* lures a diverse new collective of smart, discerning young Austenites with a relish for web culture, girl power, and a heaping dose of irony. In turn, the writers of *LBD* make meaningful modifications to the source text, giving their diverse young audience more opportunities to identify with the characters and the story. For one: ethnicity. Charlotte Lucas becomes Charlotte Lu and Charles Bingley becomes Bing Lee, both Asian Americans. Fitz Williams, a character



A comparison of casting choices for the BBC miniseries and *LBD*. The creators of *Lizzie Bennet* assembled a diverse cast, which reflects the modern media industry in which their adaptation takes place, as well as the demographics of the series' global audience.

derived from Colonel Fitzwilliam, is black and gay in *LBD*. They sub out an elopement for a sex tape scandal, and a proposal for marriage is replaced by a proposal for a business partnership in the exciting realm of new media storytelling, a tidy in-joke for both the creators and Hank Green groupies alike.

And perhaps the most understated but effective shift of all: *LBD* is a story that is far more concerned with the relationships of female friends and sisters than it is with romance. As Ashley Clements, who stars as Lizzie Bennet, noted in a behind-the-scenes interview,

One of the most prominent aspects of the story of *Pride and Prejudice* is the love story between Lizzie and Darcy. But one of the things that makes *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* really unique is how much

we have focused on the friendship that Lizzie has with her best friend Charlotte, and her relationships with her sisters, Jane and Lydia.<sup>9</sup>

In focusing on these dynamics, *LBD* has the opportunity to play with audiences' expectations that have been developed by way of other, more traditional romantic comedy properties. For instance, in Episode 97 ("Special Delivery"), Lizzie tells her audience that someone showed up on her doorstep in the rain the night prior, and of course, the audience is expecting it to be Darcy. But instead, it was her best friend, Charlotte, showing up with ice cream and a DVD. The series gives female friendships the same level of import as romantic intrigue, a true-to-life reflection that's often missing from mainstream media properties. In an essay that takes issue with the dearth of female friendships in such popular series as *The Mindy Project*, *New Girl*, and *Scandal*, Entertainment Weekly's TV critic Melissa Maerz laments, "I miss the Lucys and Ethels, the Mary Tyler Moores and Rhodas, the Carries and Mirandas, women who could call each other on their flakiness, and still clink martini glasses afterward."<sup>10</sup> Lizzie and Charlotte are characters that can stand among that cohort. The traditional television space leaves precious little time for female camaraderie, instead favoring the ratings grabbing "Will they/won't they?" scheme. With the creative liberties that arise from both not being attached to a TV network and having the ability to introduce story elements on multiple platforms, a transmedia series like *LBD* has the capacity for both female friendship and romance.

In addition to drawing from (and expanding upon) the character dynamics frequently observed on contemporary TV, *LBD* also reflects the production methods and episodic structure of many of the series on television today. It's these elements that compel Su, the series' head writer and executive producer, to characterize the transmedia property as resembling TV more than any other medium. As he put it, "Our show, I think unlike any other scripted web series, is more like a TV show than anything else. While other episodes are being edited, episodes are being written, being rehearsed, being shot — we had to keep that cycle



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going.”<sup>11</sup> But with all due respect to Su — after all, who am I to tell him what his own project is or isn’t? — his remarks only scratch the surface of what is so compelling and distinctive about *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. While this series marks an undeniable evolution on the TV medium, it can’t be understated how crucial the other components, those that do not reflect the television structure, are to the full experience of *LBD*. Jay Bushman, the transmedia producer for *LBD* (and a self-described “multiplatform story evangelist”) explained in personal correspondence: “I think if you don’t consume all of the transmedia content, you haven’t seen the full show.”<sup>12</sup> The anchoring work, or “mother ship,” as Henry Jenkins calls it, is certainly the *Lizzie Bennet* YouTube videos, which unfold like a linear television narrative in bi-weekly episodes.<sup>13</sup> But the series could not exist without those “textual outposts,” or “paratexts” — “all those things that surround [a property] but aren’t quite the ‘thing’ (or the ‘text’) itself.”<sup>14</sup>

It would be exhausting for both writer and reader to enumerate every single way in which the paratexts function in *LBD*, but I’d like to give a couple key examples. In addition to the Lizzie-curated videos, there are offshoot video series, like *The Lydia Bennet*, *Domino*, and *Better Living with Collins and Collins*. Some of these serve to move secondary plot lines along; others serve to bring depth, humor, and a sense of realism to the universe of *LBD*. Bits of the narrative play out on Twitter, on which characters’ accounts interface with one another and also with engaged fans, whose input can sometimes draw out pieces of the story (more on this to follow). Characters will have profiles on social media platforms that reflect their personalities; for instance, fashion maven Jane Bennet has a Lookbook.nu profile where she posts photos of her latest ensembles; the ever-networking Ricky Collins has a LinkedIn page; and bubbly Gigi Darcy uses This Is My Jam to share current chart-topping tunes that reflect what’s happening in the narrative. Meanwhile, the two new media companies, Pemberley Digital and Collins and Collins (which sub in for the estates in Austen’s take) have fleshed out websites that share press releases in real time as that news unfolds in the story. One asset of this multi-platform approach to storytelling is that it gives web users multiple

entry points by which they can join the world of *LBD*, and in turn expands the potential market by reaching different audience segments.<sup>15</sup> Given that the tone and producer-to-consumer experiences on Twitter and YouTube are distinct, users can choose to be more engaged with whichever community suits their social media practices. On YouTube, viewers engage with one another, discussing stylistic and narrative choices made by the *LBD* squad, often drawing comparisons with the source text and flaunting their Austen fandom. Meanwhile on This Is My Jam, transmedia editor Alexandra Edwards takes on the role of Gigi Darcy to discuss musical choices with fans, ultimately shedding insight on Gigi’s emotional state in the scheme of the narrative. There’s finesse to the way in which the *LBD* team reveals these paratexts; Bushman describes it as the “rabbit hole technique, where you lay out a large amount of content before alerting the audience to its existence.”<sup>16</sup> He goes on:

These were some of my favorite parts of the show — not just the surprise element, but the way it makes the story suddenly coruscate out into a much wider world. So the first idea for that was to have Bing, Caroline and Darcy tweet among themselves for the first month (in fact, Darcy’s first tweet was published before the first episode went live) but not reveal that fact until almost a month in, when Jane and Bing first meet and begin following each other on Twitter. That was the moment, I think, when the show really started to take off and to generate the amazing connection with the audience. We seeded Gigi’s character from almost the very beginning, where you’d get to learn about her journey recovering from Wickham’s abuse through her music choices, so when she entered the main storyline (in episode 77) she came with a whole history.<sup>17</sup>

While extratextual elements like those company websites, playlists and fashion portfolios don’t necessarily move the plot forward on their own, they create a depth to the world of *LBD* that is

rarely achieved in other media properties that focus solely on a singular narrative text. It serves as a key enhancement to the story that these paratexts bleed into the virtual spaces we inhabit outside of the YouTube video frame. If a fan is using Twitter to catch up with friends, colleagues and breaking news when they see an exchange between @ggdarcy and @FitzOnTheFitz, it blurs the line between their everyday reality and the *LBD* narrative, which creates an immersive relationship between the audience and the property. As Jenkins writes, “the extension may add a greater sense of realism to the fiction as a whole.”<sup>18</sup> This ability to create a real time continuum for the story is an advantage that transmedia storytelling boasts over film and even television. In a film, or even a television miniseries like that of the BBC, creators are forced to only share the high points; according to Bushman, “events must be compressed and it’s easy to lose the sense of the reality of the world... It’s easy to forget that life isn’t just all high points. A transmedia approach lets the story breathe, lets the story slow down an allow that audience to live in the world, and to form deeper and stronger attachments to the characters.”<sup>19</sup> Jenni Powell, who produces the series, says that viewers “talk to Lizzie as if she’s real. They’ve made friends with her, they care about what’s going to happen to her.”<sup>20</sup> The audience willingly and actively partakes in this level of play because it enhances their experience of the series. Ever the mass communications student, Lizzie comments on this effect herself in a conversation with Darcy when asking him to engage in costume theater:

Lizzie: “There’s this theory about levels of mediation in media that says it’s possible for artificiality to remind the audience both that what they’re seeing is a construction while at the same time adding to their level of immersion.”

Darcy: “You thought that costume theater as ourselves would remind the audience that this isn’t a conversation we would naturally have but because of that, the obviously constructed nature of the scene would by its very artificiality create its own sense of verisimilitude.”<sup>21</sup>



Both the audience and the characters themselves engage in masquerade in a collaborative effort to build out the world of “*LBD*”. Here, Charlotte and Lizzie reenact a conversation between Lizzie and her mother (who only appears in the series by way of costume theater); Kelsey Geller, a fan, joined the production team to make a video for the Collins and Collins YouTube page.

The paratexts I mention above aren’t meant to fool the audience — they’re most likely cognizant of the artificial constructedness. But the “costuming” invites play, invites immersion, and just as Darcy suggests, establishes that authenticity into which the audience can buy in. (This is also an instance in which *LBD* uses a meta-commentary to reveal how it is, in part, meant to connect with a critical audience that is regularly engaged with new media practices and theories.)

To this immersive end, it’s difficult to determine when the action cuts for *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, or if it cuts at all. While the YouTube videos were in fact highly produced (despite striving to go against the grain of that aesthetic), followed a typical independent production schedule and were released on a schedule, the rest of the content was released often and at random. Arguably, the series was running straight through from April 9, 2012 until March 29, 2013, when Lizzie posted a postscript to the series and said goodbye. By that logic, once the characters (and to an extent, the audience) joined the world of *LBD*, they had pledged their participation in this world. The

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audience is a necessary addendum here because to a certain degree, this property could not have grown to the extent it did without the fuel of its audience, who themselves contribute paratexts. For example, the Collins and Collins website posted a release explaining that they were seeking new talent for their *Better Living* series, and requested that viewers submit audition videos. The request drew dozens of submissions, ultimately resulting in one fan, Kelsey Geller, recording a *Better Living* video with the *LBD* production team. That video appears on the series' website and YouTube channel, wherein fellow fans thank Geller for her simple and comprehensive tutorial on "Changing Illumination Globes" (a Collins euphemism for changing a light bulb). These fellow fans are at play with Geller and the larger series; they fuel the realism of this world by offering up their own sort of costume theater. And individual fans aren't the only ones to take part in the masquerade. Leaky News, a news outlet and fandom hub that publishes pop culture news and reviews, surprised *LBD* fans with a Q&A with Gigi Darcy during South by Southwest Interactive, interviewing the character as if she were truly representing Pemberley Digital at the festival.<sup>22</sup> In the comments, some readers keep up the charade; one comment reads, "I'm glad Leakynews (sic) has decided to also report on power players in the entertainment industry like Pemberley Digital. Gigi Darcy seems like a very talented young lady and I wish her all the best in her future. I hope PD has recognized her talent and will utilize it in future product demonstrations." Another reader's comment puts the Q&A in context with both the *LBD* world and the creators' bodies of work: "I want this to mean that Domino will be used in the next adaptation they do, meaning all the Su/Green literary vlog productions take place in the same universe." Be it through conscious costume theater or through a critical reading of the adaptation at large, fans are constantly finding ways to meaningfully engage with the paratexts.

Inevitably, there's the skeptical audience contingent that isn't quite ready to buy in. But when they push back, *LBD* is ready to aim and fire. For example, when a Twitter follower read that Gigi and Fitz were allegedly having a rendezvous in the courtyard of Pemberley Digital, the user

challenged the characters for proof. Almost instantly, @ggdarcy shoots back a selfie of her and Fitz, sitting in a courtyard. It's as though they never stop living the story. Of course in reality, as Bushman divulged, that picture was just snapped during a break on set as a preemptive move in case an opportunity arose to share it with fans.<sup>23</sup> It's not unlike the behind-the-scenes photos shared on the Twitter and Facebook pages of such socially-driven TV series as *Pretty Little Liars* and *Orange is the New Black*. But the *Lizzie Bennet* team distinguishes itself by knowing exactly when to deploy its social assets. Instead of just dropping the picture into the ether as a means to stir fan excitement, they wait for the perfect moment to capitalize on audience engagement. As a result, they're not only stirring fan excitement, but also enhancing that illusion of reality.

To further solidify the sense that this narrative is unfolding in real time, characters refer to current events that ground the content temporally. Going a step beyond TV series that have a Christmas episode or a Thanksgiving episode (one that they most certainly shot at least a month prior), *LBD* takes advantage of the immediacy enabled by interactive technologies by referring to things that *just* happened. One character makes a passing joke about that week's episode of *The Big Bang Theory* on Twitter; another muses about going to the current Stanley Kubrick exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. It gives audiences the feeling that this is truly happening in real time, and they've got to hold on if they want to stay on board. This highlights one of the advantages transmedia storytelling has over the traditional TV model: given that transmedia storytellers can publish new media at the drop of a hat, they're able to be nimble and reactive to both audience engagement and the current events of the "real world." While in television, shows that are praised for their ability to engage with current affairs (*The Good Wife*, for instance) lag behind the headlines by at least a month's time, *Lizzie* and friends can react just as quickly as the fans.

A flexible approach on the part of the *LBD* creators allowed them to bring fan-made elements like Geller's Collins and Collins video into the fold. It happens again with fan-made art that appears on the characters' Twitter pages; likewise, some of

the Twitter conversations catalogued on the series' website using Storify are conversations that were started *by* fans. For example, while Lydia is in the throes of her toxic George Wickham tryst, Brazil-based fan Maria Raquel Silva, a.k.a. @\_mrsilva tweets, "@TheLydiaBennet your videos are getting sadder and sadder. I always supported you, but this is getting hard to watch."<sup>24</sup> Lydia goes on to explain her feelings for George, discounting the advice of the small chorus of fans echoing Silva's tweet. The producers couldn't anticipate these conversations, but they built the world around them to include the thoughts, opinions and questions of the fans in the *LBD* world. As Louisa Stein writes, *LBD* "acknowledges the vibrancy and richness of fan production. Rather than attempting to rein in all that unpredictability, these web series become hybrid productions...integrating fan creativity in substantive ways while still progressing a particular, defined story and set of performances."<sup>25</sup> Bushman echoes Stein's point, noting that the *Lizzie Bennet* team was mindful to create frequent opportunities for fan interaction and conversation, but that there were never places for the fans to affect the outcome of the story.<sup>26</sup> In essence, the audience isn't invited to co-write the story, but they are certainly invited to co-create the world. It is to the credit of the producers that they so unabashedly invite this type of fan participation, for as Jenkins writes in "The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn," certain franchises struggle with the desire to "police and preserve continuity," who see fan-produced content as a "threat."<sup>27</sup> This might also speak to the liberties afforded by an adaptation — the creators don't feel compelled to exercise full control over the narrative, because it wasn't quite their story to begin with.

The invitation to co-create speaks to a point that Jenkins makes in "Transmedia Storytelling 101:" transmedia storytelling is an "ideal aesthetic form for an era of collective intelligence."<sup>28</sup>

Pierre Levy coined the term, collective intelligence, to refer to new social structures that enable the production and circulation of knowledge within a networked society. Participants pool information and tap each others (sic) expertise as they work together to solve

problems. Levy argues that art in an age of collective intelligence functions as a cultural attractor, drawing together like-minded individuals to form new knowledge communities.<sup>29</sup>

The *Lizzie Bennet* fan base produces a collective intelligence. Networked through countless social platforms, both those regulated by the producers of the series as well as fan fiction forums and blogs of their own creation, they share their knowledge of the *Pride and Prejudice* source material, their findings in the world of *LBD*, and their interest in piecing together new elements of this narrative in conjunction with the production team and actors. It is for this reason that the series' being an adaptation actually works in its favor. With the narrative skeleton of Austen's text, and the knowledge they glean along the way with *LBD*, viewers have a substantial foundation on which to build their knowledge community.

With these two mother ships at their disposal, fans can engage in two transmedia tendencies that Jason Mittell outlines in *Complex TV*, — "What Is" transmedia extensions and "What If?" transmedia paratexts.<sup>30</sup> Mittell defines a "What Is" transmedia extension as "scattering narrative understanding across a variety of extensions to be reassembled by a collective team of die-hard fans to piece together the elaborate puzzle." On the other hand, "What If?" transmedia paratexts "pose hypothetical possibilities rather than canonical certainties, inviting viewers to imagine alternative stories and approaches to storytelling that are distinctly not to be treated as potential canon." In having the Austen source material as a constant narrative anchor around which to build out the *LBD* world further, participants in this space can piece together the never-ending puzzle of what this modern Austen universe would look like using the narrative understanding of *Pride and Prejudice* as their guide; in other words, they can engage in "What Is" transmedia expansion. But within those paratexts, when they tweet with characters or pose questions to Lizzie to be answered in her Q&A vlogs (questions like, "What do you like about your mother?"; "What do you tell people when they give you a hard time for studying mass communications?"; or a fan favorite, "Pirate or



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ninja?”), that is where they engage in the “What If?” All of this is fueled by an “encyclopedic impulse” in both content creators and consumers by which “we are drawn to master what can be known about a world which always expands beyond our grasp.”<sup>31</sup>

This distinguishes the pleasure derived from the enclosed Austen properties, those “classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story.”<sup>32</sup> It would seem as though *LBD/Pride and Prejudice* fans can have their cake and eat it too; they’re free to roam as far as they can, building out of this world that the *LBD* franchise offers, while always being able to return to the solace of the pre-established closure that *Pride and Prejudice* affords them.

While there’s comfort in the closure, I’d argue that the excitement of the unknown expansion is far greater. This reveals itself in the *LBD* world particularly in the case of *The Lydia Bennet*, a spin-off series that is shot by Lizzie’s younger sister, Lydia, in the same video confessional format as the mother ship videos. *Lydia* can be consumed as a standalone series, though it is certainly both enhanced by and an enhancement to the viewing of *Lizzie*. As Jenkins writes, it’s ideal that each episode be “accessible on its own terms even as it makes a unique contribution to the narrative system as a whole.”<sup>33</sup> Game designer Neil Young calls this “additive comprehension” — the practice of adding new information with each piece that forces the audience to revise their understanding of the larger text.<sup>34</sup>

The inclusion of *Lydia* (and to a lesser extent, the first-person paratexts of other characters) speaks to a profound difference between *LBD* and the adaptations that have preceded it, a difference only made possible by transmedia storytelling. As Bushman expounds, “Most interpretations assume that Lizzie is always right, and conflate her point of view with Austen’s point of view. But the omniscient narrator of *PC&P* has a sly voice, and is just as judgmental of Lizzie as Lizzie is of everyone else. A transmedia take on the material opened up the story and allowed other perspectives to inform the storyworld.”<sup>35</sup> *Lydia* fleshes out the character of Lydia Bennet, and at first it would seem as though it were to a gratuitous end. However, as Austen die-hards know, Lydia and George Wickham’s eloping

in the original novel becomes a dramatic lynchpin. The opportunity to build out the character of Lydia over the course of the series enlivens this drama when it finally arrives (in this iteration, in the form of a viral sex tape). Moreover, with the use of a spin-off series, Lydia’s growth as a character doesn’t compromise Lizzie’s position as either heroine or narrator. In the YouTube comments for Episode 85 (“Consequences”) of *Lizzie*, in which Lydia first learns about the sex tape, viewers remark that they hadn’t connected with this character in the original novel, but that *LBD* had developed the character such that they are invested in her story, and that they feel for her. This is particularly meaningful in the scope of the greater *Pride and Prejudice* canon because, as Bushman explains, Lydia Bennet had become “a much more reviled character through the various adaptations that made her not just spirited but grating.”<sup>36</sup> Knowing that Lydia had this reputation in the Austen fan universe gave the creators “room to subvert that expectation.”<sup>37</sup> The *Lydia* transmedia extension is a triumph for the writers of *LBD*, because they prove deft at not only expanding the environment of the story, but the characters themselves (a far more challenging feat, especially when writing for an audience that is predisposed not to sympathize with that character). According to one user, *Lydia* not only highlights the character-building skills of the creators, but their ability to create meaning out of framing. YouTube user Joshua J. Knowles commented on Episode 26 of *Lydia*, “You can see through the progression of the [*Lydia* series] how the frame consisted solely of Lydia, then Lydia and George evenly, to now dominated by George.” This comment speaks, a) to the constructedness of these videos, which are presumably approached with the same consideration as any TV series, and b) that audiences are tuned in to this constructedness and can glean meaning from it. This is another instance in which *LBD* reveals itself as a property that connects with an audience engaged in media practice.

As precedent proves, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* certainly won’t be the end of the Austen renaissance, nor does it mark the last retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*. Other transmedia producers are already taking note of the wide success and devoted fan base that the Emmy Award-winning

*LBD* looped into its world; they're also taking action. Judy L. Tyrer, a game designer in Colorado just raised \$100,000 on Kickstarter to fund *Ever, Jane*, an MMORPG (massive multiplayer online role playing game) based on *Pride and Prejudice*. In her pitch, Tyrer says that in *Ever, Jane*, "instead of kill or be killed" it's "invite or be invited. Instead of destroying dragons, we use gossip to destroy our enemies. While traditional MMOs have epic raids, we have extravagant balls."<sup>38</sup> Tyrer says her aim is to use Austen to bring "the fun of virtual worlds to a non-gaming audience." Interestingly, Su too described *LBD* as something of an MMORPG.<sup>39</sup> In both of these properties, content creators are infiltrating online communities traditionally reserved for fanboy communities and giving feminine audiences a reason to get in the mix. By playing up the emotional connections that can be built from producer to viewer, character to viewer, and viewer-to-viewer, properties like *LBD* have the potential to change the gendered nature of transmedia for good.

While further adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* seem all but inevitable, one can only hope that the true legacy of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* won't be furthering the Austen renaissance,

but instigating a transmedia renaissance. With this series, which trumps the detail and scope of every version of *Pride and Prejudice* that has come before it, transmedia storytelling sets the new gold standard for literary adaptations. A humble Bushman concedes, "For me, one of the great successes of *LBD* is that I think we've proven a transmedia storytelling model, one that can be replicated, and hopefully sold, financed and enlarged to be able to exist on its own."<sup>40</sup> *LBD* proves that there is so much more potential for social television beyond the mindless check-ins and hashtags; that Twitter can serve a higher purpose than simply being a means to announce that you're in Gladiator mode. Fans can and will profoundly engage with narrative media if given the opportunity. They'll challenge content creators to push the boundaries of the narrative universe. They'll stay tuned in around the clock through their everyday social platforms, investing themselves in the development of these characters as if they were their friends. Television audiences are, in large part, just as hungry for this level of connectivity; they don't want the story to end when the credits roll and the late night host launches his monologue — and why should it have to?

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- 11 "THE LIZZIE BENNET DIARIES: INTERVIEW W/ CAST & CREW!"
- 12 Jay Bushman, e-mail message to author, January 31, 2014.
- 13 Henry Jenkins, "The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling (Well, Two Actually. Five More on Friday)," *Confessions of An Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, December 12, 2009, [http://henryjenkins.org/2009/12/the\\_revenge\\_of\\_the\\_origami\\_uni.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html) (accessed December 17, 2013).
- 14 In a conversation with Henry Jenkins about his 2010 book *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts*, Jonathan Gray explains the term "paratext" as follows: "I draw the word from a book of that title by Gerard Genette, a French literary theorist. He was interested in all those things that surround a book that aren't quite the 'thing' (or 'the text') itself. Things like the cover, prefaces, typeface, and afterwords, but also reviews....Your readers may be more familiar with 'hype,' 'synergy,' 'promos,' 'peripherals,' 'extratextuals,' and so forth...Certainly, paratexts are absolutely integral in terms of marketing, and in terms of grabbing an audience to watch the thing in the first place. But we've often stalled in our discussion of them by not moving beyond the banal observation that hype creates profits. What I wanted to look at is how they create meaning, how our idea of what a television show 'is' and how we relate to it is often prefigured by its opening credit sequence, its posters, its ads, reviews, etc. Meanwhile, 'peripherals' belittles their importance, since they're not at all peripheral, at least in potential....'para' suggests a more complicated relationship to the film or show, outside of, alongside, and intrinsically part of all at the same time. Hence my fondness for [paratext] in particular." Quoted in Henry Jenkins, "On Anti-Fans and Paratexts: An Interview with Jonathan Gray (Part Two)," *Confessions of An Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, March 8, 2010, [http://henryjenkins.org/2010/03/on\\_anti-fans\\_and\\_paratexts\\_an\\_1.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2010/03/on_anti-fans_and_paratexts_an_1.html) (accessed February 7, 2014).
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- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, pre-publication edition, MediaCommons Press, 2012-13 (accessed December 17, 2013).
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- 32 Ibid.
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- 34 Ibid.
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- 36 Jay Bushman, e-mail message to author, February 7, 2014.
- 37 Ibid.
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