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***The fan-networked capital of self-published web serials: A comparison of Worm and Nunslinger*****Abstract**

*This article evaluates two web serials: novels published in serialised instalments through digital mediums. John C McCrae's Worm (2011-2013) was self-published online in the style of a blog, and Stark Holborn's Nunslinger (2014) was published by Hodder & Stoughton as serialised e-books. This article refers to debates on the publishing industry (Young 2007; Thompson 2012), self-publishing (Young 2014; Tushnet 2017) and digital publishing (Colbjørnsen 2014; Mustafa & Adnan 2017), and applies these to a comparative study of Worm and Nunslinger in order to demonstrate how web serials can engage online fan networks that refashion the forms of capital accessed by established publishing houses. This article concludes that web serials such as McCrae's work as 'slow' media that gain traction over a period of years using word-of-mouth and crowdsourcing through online fan networks.*

*Keywords: publishing industry, self-publishing, web serials, digital publishing*

**Introduction**

Popular self-published books such as Andy Weir's *The Martian* (2011), EL James's *Fifty Shades* trilogy (2012) adapted from her Twilight fan-fiction web serial titled *Master of the Universe*, and Eliezer Yudkowsky's fan-fiction web serial *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality* (2010-2015), have been disseminated in innovative online serialised format. Serial publishing in periodicals was established in the seventeenth century and became common in the Victorian era (Law 2000). It involves the publication of literature as separate instalments, usually monthly or weekly. Contemporary authors of web serials adapt many of the financial and technical strategies of their Victorian predecessors, and many self-publish rather than work with a trade publisher. The contemporary publishing industry is increasingly varied, encompassing independents, small presses, and multinational conglomerates (Thompson 2012: 147-169), and increasing 'inter-organisational rivalry' leads companies to compete for bestselling books and authors (10). Publishers can make offers to authors of contemporary web serials with certainty that the book has market viability, particularly if the author has built communities of fans. Sometimes these authors move to traditional publishers and sometimes they decide not to pursue trade publication (Young 2014: 40).

Broadly, this article refers to web serials as novels published in serialised instalments through digital mediums. The web serials evaluated herein are John C McCrae's *Worm* (2011-2013), which was self-published online in the style of a blog, and Stark Holborn's *Nunslinger* (2014), which was published by Hodder & Stoughton as e-book instalments, followed by a complete compilation in e-book and print. While e-books replicate traditional print formats, self-published web serials like *Worm* revise traditional publishing models. In John B Thompson's detailed overview of the contemporary publishing industry, *Merchants of Culture*, he suggests that publishing companies rely on five forms of capital to thrive: economic, human, social, intellectual, and symbolic (2012). Holborn has access to the capital of his/her publisher, while McCrae has to find alternatives in his online self-publication. In what follows, this article compares the serialised publications of *Worm* and *Nunslinger*, and evaluates how McCrae adapts the five industry capitals of large publishers like Hodder & Stoughton. Due to the latter publisher's importance to this article, it focuses particularly on the large, multinational conglomerate segment of the publishing industry. Digital technology allows self-published authors to access tools that replace trade publishers (Young 2014: 35-36). McCrae uses digital platforms to create his own innovative forms of publishing capital, which allows him to refashion traditional publishing models to an online self-publishing model.

**Symbolic capital: Credible books**

The symbolic capital of publishers is difficult to define. Thompson writes that publishing companies are 'cultural mediators and arbitrators of quality and taste' (2012: 8). Considering how publishers build their brands in different ways, and how the concepts of 'quality and taste' are subjective, it is correspondingly difficult to pinpoint how self-published authors create symbolic capital. A consideration of the different modes of publication of *Worm* and *Nunslinger* provides insight into how a self-published author can build symbolic capital without the support of an established publisher.

Stark Holborn's *Nunslinger* was initially published beginning in late 2013 and throughout 2014 as a web serial of twelve e-book instalments, collected in three books every three months. Once all instalments had been released, the entire work was collated into a single paperback publication of 615 pages. *Nunslinger* is a gun-slinging western that tells the story of Sister Thomas Josephine and Abraham C Muir, her kidnapper. She empathises with him and they become friends, while they are relentlessly pursued across North America by an obsessive syphilitic lieutenant. Holborn's publisher, Hodder & Stoughton, is owned by Hachette Livre, one of the 'Big Five' publishing companies. Hodder & Stoughton publish many well-known and bestselling authors, such as John Grisham, Jodi Picoult, Russell Brand and David Nicholls, and have a very high level of credibility and symbolic capital due to their authors and ownership by one of the largest publishing conglomerates in the world. Holborn is a pseudonym for an unknown author, who can use the symbolic capital of his/her publisher to draw in readers who might otherwise avoid the western genre or the work of an unknown author. The initial serialised e-book publication of *Nunslinger* is an unusual publishing format for Hodder & Stoughton, and also does not follow the usual mode of publication of web serials, which are generally uploaded onto websites. However, Justin Mellette claims that the collection of serial comics into bound and printed publications lends them more respectability, as they seem less 'expendable and impermanent' (Mellette 2015: 322). Hodder & Stoughton's release of *Nunslinger* as a collected print copy could likewise be a demonstration of their ethos of credibility, demonstrating a preference for books in collated volumes.

McCrae self-published *Worm* on his own website in serial instalments released twice weekly between June 2011 and November 2013, with the book totalling 1.6 million words. The site has a simple home page, with a list of contents that allows readers to navigate to specific chapters. It is separated into ‘arcs’ like a comic book, due to its length, and each arc into chapters. At the end of each chapter, readers can leave comments in order to discuss the narrative and cliffhangers, ask questions, leave compliments, or suggest copyedits. The narrative is set in a world where people who experience a traumatic ‘trigger’ event can develop superpowers. They are then named ‘capes’ and can choose to join supervillain gangs or fight for the government institution known as the Protectorate. The protagonist, Taylor, is a teenager who is badly bullied at school and gains the ability to control insects and spiders. She joins local supervillain group, the Undersiders, with the intention of infiltrating their network and turning them over to the Protectorate. However, Taylor develops friendships with the members of the Undersiders: Grue, Tattletale, Bitch, Imp, and Regent, and learns that the Protectorate have dubious political endgames.

McCrae has never published *Worm* in any other forum or medium, and he would have difficulty doing so due to its length. In this way, the novel forces one to confront the question of how a book is defined. Sherman Young defines a book as a technology that encompasses author content, goes through a publishing process, and is an artefact. He suggests:

The publishing industry, because it *creates* books *defines* what a book is. The book has long been defined by its relationship with those who publish, and whose role has been to provide the necessary expertise and infrastructure to allow authors access to editorial, marketing and distribution. (Young 2007: 26, original emphasis)

However, McCrae has created his book outside of the traditional publishing model and has therefore taken editing, marketing and distribution into his own hands. Its solely online status also distinguishes it from books usually perceived as ‘high quality’.

A publishing company’s symbolic capital might be represented by the beauty of their books as printed artefacts. *Nunslinger*’s eventual print copy and each of its instalments have beautifully illustrated covers. By publishing on a simple website with unexceptional aesthetic value, McCrae’s symbolic capital instead correlates to his separation from the publishing industry. His symbolic capital is founded on his reading community’s perception of his ‘authenticity’. This supposed authenticity contrasts with the view that publishing conglomerates are synonymous with commerce, even though self-published works are also often sold for money. As Young explains, all publishing is ‘commodification of the written word’ and self-publishers have ‘found mechanisms to commodify their work without using the traditional publishing companies’ (2014: 35). Online fan communities often identify the objects of their fandom as unrelated to mainstream commerce and consumerism. Indeed, as Rebecca Tushnet explains, ‘rules’ surrounding online fandoms are contradictory as fans seek to separate their communities from those of commercial publications, even though it is not always possible (Tushnet 2017: 182-183). Further, Tushnet writes: ‘Though a non-commercial ethos is an important part of many fandoms, what *non-commercial* means is up for debate in a world that does not in fact have separate spheres for the market and the private’ (173, original emphasis). McCrae taps into the online fan communities who *symbolically* find web-written works more authentic.

Authenticity is a troublesome term. As Sarah Banet-Weiser explains:

Even if we discard as false a simple opposition between the authentic and the inauthentic, we still must reckon with the power of authenticity – of the self, of experience of relationships. It is a symbolic construct that, even in a cynical age, continues to have cultural value in how we understand our moral frameworks and ourselves, and more generally how we make decisions about how to live our lives. We want to believe ... that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions, something outside of mere consumer culture, something above the reductiveness of profit margins, the crassness of capital exchange. (Banet-Weiser 2012: 5)

Through establishing an online fan network, McCrae demonstrates this idea of authenticity by placing his work outside consumer culture, profit margins, and capital exchange. As Banet-Weiser further argues:

What is understood (and experienced) as authentic is considered such precisely because it is perceived as *not* commercial. Even when history bears out the fallacy of this binary, as it inevitably does, individuals continue to invest in the notion that authentic spaces exist – the space of the self, of creativity, of spirituality. (10, original emphasis)

Following this logic, while *Nunslinger* was published in an innovative way as a web serial, it was not removed from the commerce of bookselling; meanwhile McCrae’s crowdsourcing model circumvents the commercial model of the book industry in a way that can appeal to online fan communities. It is a work in progress, published in an uncommercial creative space. Readers separate his book from those published by traditional publishers; for example, on the home page of *Worm*, a reader has commented: ‘your product is remarkably clean, I think I’ve spotted 2 typos & one glitched name. That’s better than some of the PRINT books I’ve read, from big publishing houses, printing books for established name authors’ (McCrae 2011-2013). Thus, McCrae creates his own symbolic capital by setting himself apart from traditional publishing houses and making connections to an online fan culture that values self-publishing.

### **Social capital: Online networks**

According to Thompson, social capital is the network that publishers and editors cultivate with agents, suppliers and retailers (2012: 7). McCrae replaces these institutional networks with direct fan-based networks of readers. His readers act as advertisers through grassroots, online ‘book talk’. By using the format of serialised publication and removing himself from the commercial trade of publishing, McCrae can further draw upon this fan-based social capital.

One of the most intriguing differences between *Worm* and *Nunslinger* is that McCrae’s mode of publication allows his book to be in a state of flux, simultaneously published and in the process of editing and publishing. Holborn’s book, on the other hand, uses a more traditional method of publication that sees each instalment edited and released as a final product. Both, however, remained unfinished until the final instalment was published. This publication process is endemic of the serialised format as a whole. Writing about Charles Dickens, Jonathan Grossman suggests:

What matters about the serialisation of the nineteenth-century novel is that it materialises through its story’s serial delivery the novel’s formal capacity to express individual fates collectively networked

as they proceed from shaping past toward an unwritten future. (Grossman 2012: 58)

The unknown of the future allows serialised books to drum up reader excitement. The difference between the modes of publication of the two web serials is that readers of *Worm* have a space in which they can then discuss the cliffhangers together, facilitating social enjoyment of the book. As Young suggests:

The essence of a book is not grounded in Gutenberg and movable type. Instead it lies in ideals like the democratisation of ideas, of thinking and reflecting, of absorbing the thoughts of others, of creating one's own; of public conversation and discourse. (2007: 29)

Although not a printed object, *Worm*'s medium and mode of publication work synchronously to encourage readers to converse with each other.

In serial literature of both new and old media, time is an important factor in increasing reader immersion and conversation. As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue, 'What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the way in which older media refashion themselves according to the challenge of new media' (Bolter & Grusin 2001: 15). This relationship is demonstrated by the borrowed elements of Victorian serialised literature in web serials. While modern readers often encounter Dickens' novels in cumbersome paper volumes, they were released in instalments to his contemporary readers. The release of novels in instalments allowed time to become an important factor in reader immersion. As Ben Winyard writes about studies in which Dickens' novels were released to modern readers in digital instalments:

These digital reading projects demonstrate that slowing down and encountering the novel in rigorously, temporally separated instalments over an extended period opens up spaces that facilitate discussion, analysis, ambiguity, devotion, and fantasy. (Winyard 2015: 2)

Indeed, serialised publications build reader anticipation and thus open conversations, speculations and fantasies. For *Worm*, this has moved into the digital territory of fan fiction and fan art, which Winyard terms, 'the proliferation of imaginative surpluses' (2). Although Dickens did not work online, he built a physical space for his readers through public readings and theatricals. He often had crowds of thousands at his readings (Winyard 2015), and as Juliet John suggests, he 'consciously exploited newly available modes of mass dissemination' (John 2010: 2). These important factors – time between instalments, and interaction with readers through mass dissemination – are those that have also made *Worm* so popular. Indeed, books can make readers slow down (Young 2007: 41). McCrae manipulates time through the release of serial instalments. He also exploits contemporary forms of mass dissemination to communicate with his readers. Online fan communities need a space to interact online, such as *Worm*'s website, because 'Communities need places, even virtual places, to be communal' (Tushnet 2017: 179). The allowance of reader comments on every chapter of his web serial embeds a community space into the book itself. *Nunslinger* also facilitates conversation, but not on the same level as *Worm*. It replicates a serialised publication process, but – unlike the communities of McCrae and Dickens – does not provide a forum where readers can interact with the author and each other in large numbers to further drum up reader excitement.

McCrae also slows time in his publication model. He took two-and-a-half years to publish all instalments of *Worm*. His site data shows an impressive rise in site views from 2011 to mid-2018 (McCrae 2018). Throughout June 2011, the month that *Worm* began to be published, the site had only 13 views. The following month there were 1,773 views. In June 2012, McCrae's site had 26,844 monthly views, and in June 2013 it had 207,833 monthly views. For the month of November 2013, when the book ended, the site had a record of 1,390,648 views. However, the site has continued to receive high view rates since the book ended, suggesting that new readers are still discovering the book. In June 2018, it had 693,675 monthly views. At time of writing, the site has had a total of almost 47 million views and has received a total of almost 67 thousand comments. The site views per year demonstrate a dynamic leap in readers from 2012 to 2013, peaking after the book finished. Although fewer viewers are reading the book each month, the total annual number of views has risen, suggesting increased consistency. This slower rise could be due to the end of the serialised release of chapters twice a week. The overall site views are only now (in late 2018) plateauing.

To put this into industry context, *Worm* is a slow-moving book rather than one that fits into the six-week shelf-life that Young (2014: 41) and Thompson (2012: 266) suggest is the norm. Short-termism is an increasing problem in the publishing industry, because, as Thompson argues:

Within the large corporations that occupy the centre of the field, it is more and more difficult to publish for the long term, to adopt acquisition strategies that are aimed at building a backlist over time, precisely because the overriding imperative is to meet your budget targets. (379)

As an individual self-publisher with no bottom line, McCrae has the luxury to allow his fan networks and social capital to grow slowly. Perhaps one of the most innovative aspects of Hodder & Stoughton's serialised publication of *Nunslinger* is how the company allowed the author to publish over the course of one year, rather than giving the book a short shelf-life.

While Holborn has access to Hodder & Stoughton's social capital, McCrae has utilised his online communal space to replicate social capital. The internet can be utilised to connect readers from around the world. Paul DiMaggio et al define the internet as, 'the electronic network of networks that links people and information through computers and other digital devices allowing person-to-person communication and information retrieval' (2001: 307). While some studies, such as that by Robert Kraut et al, demonstrate that internet usage results in loneliness, depression and stress (Kraut et al 1998), DiMaggio et al point out that 'compared to real-life social networks, online communities are more often based on participants' shared interests rather than shared demographic characteristics or mere propinquity' (DiMaggio et al 2001: 317). The responses to *Worm* demonstrate a flourishing internet community based on shared interest. The community created through digital publication allows authors like McCrae to utilise the benefits of the internet in ways that print books cannot. He utilises the benefits of new media, which Flew suggests is easily manipulated or adapted, networkable, dense, compressible and impartial (Flew 2008). The easy adaptability and networkable characteristics of publishing online have worked in McCrae's favour. Digital publishing networkability is part of a larger trend in the publishing industry, as demonstrated through the switch from printed newspapers to digital news sites. With this change comes a switch in how authors and readers communicate, and as David Gance writes, at least 37% of news readers also contribute to the creation of news (Gance 2011). Reading fiction on smartphones is also increasingly popular, rising from 24% of e-book readers in 2012 to 54% by 2015 (Earls 2017). While the media often reports the flattening of e-book sales in recent years, Nick Earls points out that these figures are often taken from

Nielsen data, which fails to represent books without ISBNs (2017). Therefore, web serials like *Worm* are not included in that data, but may still reach a wide range of readers who provide networks and thus social capital.

### Intellectual capital: The digital Wild West

Intellectual capital, which includes intellectual property, is an increasingly complex area of concern in the digital publishing market, particularly following digital interventions such as Google Books. As Thompson argues, the ‘publisher’s stock of contracts’ is an ‘extremely valuable resource’ that allows them to financially profit from intellectual content (2012: 6). Authors give publishers intellectual rights in return for royalties on sales. Self-publishers, on the other hand, control their own book prices, editorial decisions, and publication timetable (Young 2014: 36). Self-publishing online raises the spectre of intellectual property rights, but also opens new avenues for authors to interact with their readers. Fan communities often operate by allowing the adaptation of original works into fan fiction and art. Provisions for the protection of fan adaptations have also taken place within the legal framework of intellectual property rights (Tushnet 2017). The tightly held control that McCrae retains over his intellectual capital is perhaps best illustrated by the absence of comic or screen adaptations of *Worm*. However, he states on *Worm*’s ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ page that he allows fan-fictions and artworks based on his book, as long as the creators credit him. A fan-made audiobook podcast of *Worm* is available and freely endorsed by McCrae, and he shares fan artwork in his site’s gallery. This endorsement and encouragement of fan creation allows the book to proliferate online creative ‘surpluses’ that further advertise *Worm*. The website also tracks the progress of McCrae as an author learning his craft, which is an important factor for online fan communities (Tushnet 2017: 175). As Tushnet writes, fandom can act as a ‘training ground’ for ‘economically significant endeavours’, and even more importantly, it can help writers ‘find their own voices’ (2017: 194). By responding with their own creative fan works, McCrae’s readers engage in the creative process alongside him.

Anonymity is another important factor of online fan communities that may affect intellectual capital. Ideas on anonymity abound in *Worm*. Like many authors of serial publications in the Victorian era, McCrae used a pseudonym, ‘Wildbow’, when he began releasing chapters, and later revealed his legal identity. Anonymity is also important within the narrative. The protagonist, Taylor, relies on her secret identity as ‘Skitter’ to protect herself and her family from the consequences of her superpowers. As *Worm*’s audience reads the book online, the idea of anonymity is layered. The author is anonymous, the protagonist is anonymous, the readers are anonymous, and if they wish they can leave anonymous comments at the end of each chapter.

*Worm* is published on the digital frontier. Although it is not a conventional western like *Nunslinger*, it has elements of the genre. In the book, Taylor says of her hometown, ‘It’s a legal wild west, with very little precedent holding things together’ (McCrae 2011-2013: Cell 22.3). There are similarities to the idea of the frontier in both web serials, and the internet more generally. While mostly governed by increasing legal restrictions, ‘The Deep Web, the bit of the World Wide Web that’s not indexed by search engines like Google and Bing ... is a lawless cyber frontier with similarities to the Old West’ (Stockley 2015). Anonymity on the internet can lead to many criminal problems, from financial and privacy violations, to drug and firearm sales, to the less illegal but more widespread problems of aggressive and antisocial behaviour. Leonie Rösner and Nicole Krämer write that:

One of the key reasons for online aggression is attributed to the anonymity of the internet. This traces back to the theory of deindividuation, which states that people lose their inner constraints and feel less self-aware, inhibited, and responsible for their behaviour when they are anonymous. (Rösner & Krämer 2016: 1)

On the other hand, anonymity can be beneficial for online fan communities. Tushnet writes that fans feel safe from ridicule when they use pseudonyms, and authors can use pseudonyms to ‘play particular versions of themselves’ and keep their legal identities private (2017: 172). This privacy allows authors to take creative risks and experiment in their writing (175).

*Nunslinger* also retains anonymity of both author and protagonist. The author’s biography states, ‘Stark Holborn is the pseudonym of a thrilling new voice in fiction. But he – or she – knows to keep friends close ... and secrets closer’ (Holborn 2014: v). The name of Holborn’s protagonist, Sister Thomas Josephine, was chosen by her when she made her religious vow, and her birth name remains secret. When she goes on the run with Abe, lies are spread about her by a tabloid journalist (58). After she escapes and is framed for more murders, she is given the appellation ‘*Cuervo*’, Spanish for ‘Crow’ because she brings death with her and because of her nun’s habit (301). As Taylor discovers over the course of *Worm*, Sister Thomas Josephine’s reputation grows increasingly wicked despite her insistence that she is innocent. Near the conclusion of the serial, the tabloid journalist accuses her of crimes that were committed by a copycat. As Taylor learns in *Worm*, a name can take on a life separate from a person. Throughout *Nunslinger*, the Sister discovers that ‘A name is a burden’ (491; 495). In the conclusions of both *Worm* and *Nunslinger*, the only way for the protagonists to escape their damaged reputations is to take on new pseudonyms. Both web serials end with the reported deaths of their protagonists, followed by epilogues demonstrating that they have faked their deaths in order to begin new lives elsewhere under new names.

Interestingly, a name can also become a burden in the digital Wild West of publishing. Thompson argues that editors judge the value of manuscripts they receive based on factors including the author’s track record, and thanks to Nielsen BookScan, ‘Authors carry their sales histories around with them like a noose around their neck’ (2012: 199). Furthermore:

Ironically, in a world preoccupied by numbers, the author with no track record is in some ways in a strong position, considerably stronger than the author who has published one or two books with modest success and muted acclaim, simply because there is no hard data to constrain the imagination, no disappointing sales figures to dampen hopes and temper expectations. The absence of sales figures sets the imagination free. The first-time author is the true tabula rasa of trade publishing. (201)

One way that authors can bypass the difficulties of a mediocre track record is by changing their names. Holborn may have changed his/her name due to a mediocre track record, or perhaps due to the conventions of the western serialised genre. Another possibility is that Holborn is an author well-known for writing in a certain genre, who wants to experiment without the associations of his/her name (much like JK Rowling’s publication of her crime books under the penname Robert Galbraith). For whatever reason, web serials allow authors to become chameleons and experiment with their writing using the anonymity of the internet.

### Human capital: Crowdsourcing communities

Human capital refers to staff employed by publishing companies, such as editors and marketers (Thompson 2012: 6-7). To replace this human capital, McCrae relies upon his reader networks to crowdsource his editing and marketing. His consistent online publication of *Worm* twice a week, without a publisher or professional editor, allows the occasional grammatical error to slip into his published text, and yet readers respond to the immediacy of contact to McCrae and become crowdsourced editors. In comment sections attached to each chapter, they tell him where he has editorial errors and he subsequently fixes them. Through ‘word-of-mouth’ his book has become distributed among an ever-broadening online community, who in essence take over the marketing of his book in a grassroots micro-media campaign. This community displays an almost familial duty-of-care towards McCrae’s book, perhaps most clearly demonstrated through collective editing and word-of-mouth marketing. He thus crowdsources marketing and editing to create his own human capital from within his fan community.

Editors are important to the success of a publishing company. As Thompson writes, they ‘are able to identify and acquire the new projects that are likely to be successful and are able to work effectively with authors to maximise the potential of these projects (2012: 6). Fan communities likewise seek out work that they find exciting. When there is provision to leave comments within each chapter, as in *Worm*, these fans can act as amateur editors to ‘maximise the potential’ of the writing. They essentially help the author to train in his or her craft. For example, in the comments under the first chapter of *Worm*, readers using the pseudonyms Anzer’ke and Pinkhair engage McCrae in a conversation about how edits made on an earlier version of the chapter have removed some of the emotional impact (McCrae 2011-2013: Gestation 1.1). In the first comment under the following chapter, a reader named Allison points out word repetition (Gestation 1.2). These kinds of examples are echoed throughout the entire book, alongside McCrae’s responses to reader queries about aspects of his story world and characters.

McCrae gathers his readers through word-of-mouth, which is important advertising for book sales (Schmidt-Stölting et al 2011; Bao & Chang 2014). Terje Colbjørnsen includes word-of-mouth as part of ‘book talk,’ which encompasses amateur reviews (such as those on Goodreads, and on social networking sites), online conversations (such as those between McCrae’s readers at the end of each chapter), and information sharing (2014). This ‘book talk’ is basically the ‘hype, buzz and word-of-mouth ... [that] takes place on internet platforms’ (Colbjørnsen 1104-1105). Advertising in traditional media, such as television, print, and author interviews, is no longer as important to the marketing of books, and instead publishers are turning their focus to ‘micro media’ and targeting niche readerships to build word-of-mouth. As Thompson argues:

Word of mouth tends to have a cumulative character, in the sense that the more you can get people talking about a book, the more likely it is that they will tell others about it, who will in turn tell others and so on, leading to a kind of rising tide of positive chatter. Despite the preoccupation with the media among media scholars and commentators, good old-fashioned word of mouth remains the cornerstone of the marketing effort. (2012: 247-248)

By taking advantage of book talk in online spaces, McCrae directly sources human and social capital from his readers. By freeing his intellectual property so that fans can interact with his work creatively, his book is referenced on other online sites of fan activity such as DeviantArt, which acts as free advertising. In this way, McCrae has allowed his human capital to develop organically through online chatter over a number of years.

### Economic capital: Bestsellers and author wages

Economic capital refers to the financial resources of the publishing house, who act as the ‘principle risk-taker in the publishing chain’ (Thompson 2012: 6). Large publishing companies provide many benefits to their authors, such as economic capital that allows them to offer larger advances. On the other hand, these publishing companies, particularly those linked to financial institutions or parent companies – such as Hachette Livre to their parent company Lagardère – have to fill a ‘gap’ to make their top line, and tend to rely on bestsellers (Thompson 2012). The contemporary ‘bestseller’ is a subject of contention. Alan Sorensen suggests that the majority of books sold in the USA are published by a handful of large, multinational conglomerates whose fiction lists are approximately ten percent of their published product, despite fiction making up about seventy percent of the manuscripts received by those publishers. As he argues, unsolicited manuscripts – those not represented by a literary agent – ‘are estimated to have fifteen thousand to one odds against acceptance’ (Sorensen 2007: 720). In Australia, comparable figures for 2017 show that out of 3,859 publishers, 28 (one percent) published 100 books or more in the year, while 2,264 publishers (59 percent) published a single book (Hanke 2018). The one percent would mainly consist of large publishing companies, while the majority of the latter were probably self-publishers. Further, bestseller lists such as those distributed by the *New York Times* cause publishing companies to decrease the number of ‘risky’ authors they publish, particularly first-time authors. Self-publishing online allows these novice authors to find a medium and audience for their writing, and can aid them to attract traditional publishers. Self-published authors do not receive an advance, although they can receive a larger percentage of royalties on sales.

The bestseller is the outcome of a publisher’s economic and symbolic capital. As Colbjørnsen writes, the bestseller is a product formed by the cultural ideas and values of publishers and readers, and:

In order to be recognised as a noteworthy cultural item, a book needs to be acknowledged by someone with that authority. Although national peculiarities and differences persist, all bestsellers typically need some form of approval. While the importance of the gatekeeping function of publishers may be diminishing in the age of the Internet and digitised distribution, traditional publishers still have an aesthetic and literary authority. (2014: 1113)

McCrae’s book has not been acknowledged as a bestseller, and instead sells using a system that relies upon a dedicated fan community. The book would need significant changes to suit a more traditional publication model. It has the potential to enter the mainstream, though, as *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Martian* have before it. Colbjørnsen uses the *Fifty Shades* trilogy as an exemplar of a bestseller. It crossed from online self-publishing, to e-book through a small publisher, to print book by a traditional publisher; and once it was endorsed (ie published) by a large publisher, it became a bestseller. While the e-books

allowed for faster distribution, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy did not become a bestseller until print copies were made available, because:

[F]an fictions born online find new ways to readers via blogs and social networks, via POD presses and small publishing houses to a global audience. Online retail and the fluency of eBook distribution certainly played a critical part in this process. But it remains noteworthy that in order to reach this audience, the trilogy also had to go by traditional publishing houses and retail outlets. In this case at least, the digital bestseller was tightly integrated with the traditional distribution circuits and market information regimes. (2014: 1114)

Thus, McCrae's book will not become recognised as a bestseller in its current format. However, he does fund his craft using a non-traditional model that relies on digital fan networks.

McCrae uses crowdsourcing not only to edit *Worm*, but also to make a living wage directly from his readers, perhaps more than he would have made through a traditional publisher. Authors are advanced royalties based upon projected sales, and are given royalties of around ten percent for additional books sold. If they use a literary agent, a percentage of their royalties are paid to the agent. As Rowe argues in *Forbes* magazine, publishing companies are massively increasing profits, while authors are earning forty-two percent less than a decade ago (Rowe 2018). The decline in author earnings has been attributed to piracy, Google Books, and Amazon's dominant position in the US market. Recent figures demonstrate that the average American author's annual income from their writing is US\$8,000 (Flood 2015), with similar figures in the UK and Australia (Kean 2018; Zwar et al 2015). If these royalties and advances are based on projected profits, it is clear that bestseller lists and Nielsen BookScan data can account for how much a publisher is willing to pay an author. As studies have discovered, 'most books stay on the NYTBL [*New York Times* Bestseller List] for only a week, and books lasting more than a year are extremely rare' (Yucesoy et al 2018: 6). Yet, bestseller lists and author earnings are based upon how many copies of a book sell during its initial release (Schmidt-Stölting et al 2011). As Colbjørnsen suggested, 'fast-seller' might be more correct than 'bestseller', since books that work as 'slow media' by selling well over a longer period of time do not generally make bestseller lists (2014). However, by using word-of-mouth and the slow release of *Worm*, McCrae has utilised 'slow media' publication to earn a wage from his writing.

While Holborn would receive payment in the usual way, through royalties and an advance, McCrae relies upon entertaining his readers in order to persuade them to pay for his work. McCrae is not counted in official mediators of book sales such as Nielsen BookScan or the *New York Times* Bestseller List, but he makes a reasonable income beyond traditional publishing models. Indeed, utilising fan networks can aid authors to earn more. Tushnet finds that 'participating in creative fandom is actually likely to make participants more cognisant of the value of creative labour, and thus more willing to invest financially in creators who are seeking profit than fans who don't produce their own works' (2017: 189-190). McCrae funds his writing through patreon.com and often writes extra 'bonus' chapters when he receives additional funding. He has 1,244 contributors or patrons on his Patreon site, from whom he collectively receives US\$5,128 a month ('Wildbow', as current in October 2018), plus he makes an undisclosed amount via his PayPal account where readers can pay one-off donations (McCrae 2011-2013). In two months, McCrae earns more than the annual salary of the average US author.

Crowdsourcing and crowdfunding are becoming increasingly important to the book publishing industry. As Ezaleila Mustafa and Hamed Adnan suggest, crowdsourcing is a new digital frontier in publishing, and could mean that 'authors will not need advances from publishers, while publishers will know what the market tastes and wants are' (Mustafa & Adnan 2017: 289). This finding leads them to conclude that:

The emergence of crowdsourcing can be used to strengthen the traditional publishing industry. The innovation and efficiency offered by crowdsourcing and other digital tools have the power to better connect authors with the audience with their work... [W]ith the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, individuals become active contributors, not passive browsers. (294)

McCrae utilises crowdsourcing in these ways, receiving regular income from readers, discussing ideas with them through immediate digital contact, and responding to comments on how his work can be edited. By including them in his creative process and allowing them to author their own fan works, McCrae may be increasing his economic profits. Young also argues that publishing companies are beginning to realise the value of crowdsourcing from online self-published books, and that these online works are a digital 'slush-pile' (2014: 39). Publishers can court popular self-published authors, knowing that they come with an existing readership. Thus, McCrae's digital mode of self-publication may be placing him in a more advantageous position to move to a traditional publisher, if that is his goal.

## Conclusion

This article examined John C McCrae's self-published web serial *Worm*, with some comparison to Stark Holborn's serialised e-books *Nunslinger*, published by Hodder & Stoughton, in order to pinpoint how McCrae achieved success without access to the capital of a large publishing company. While *Nunslinger* utilises the old and the new – serialised westerns and digital processes – it does not capitalise on fan communities in the way of self-published web serials. The innovations of self-published web serials allow the authors to work with a community of fans who help to edit, market and finance the books. In the Wild West of online publishing, McCrae does not have the capital of Hodder & Stoughton and must innovatively adapt his own forms of capital. McCrae released chapters twice weekly, allowing his cliffhangers to maintain momentum and build a steady readership by continuing publication over two-and-a-half years. His work was published before it had completed the editing phase, allowing readers to take part in the creative process. This encouraged them to fund the author. Further, online fan communities respond to the perception that the works they read and create are non-commercial.

Web serials are a medium that utilises fan communities and crowdsourcing in order to replicate the publishing model in an online space, and for these reasons publishing houses would need to reconsider their publication plan if they chose to enter the medium. Or, following the advice of Tushnet, the 'hybrid spaces' of online writing could remain places for publishing companies to discover new talents, who have been nurtured in spaces free from overt commercial and legal imperatives (2017: 196). McCrae is an interesting example of a self-published author who seamlessly matches audience, content and a serialised publishing medium for ultimate readability, thus providing his own capital outside the bounds of tradition.

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