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Cartesian dreams, engagement aesthetics, and storytelling strategies in the online space

Abstract
In 2012, The Lizzie Bennet Diaries *aired as a web series adaptation of Jane Austen's* Pride and Prejudice*. The series of YouTube videos was supplemented by various social media platforms, including Twitter, Tumblr and Google+, and was awarded an Emmy for Best Original Interactive Program in 2013. Since then, there has been a swift rise in classic novels adapted through social media platforms online. These webseries have made use of multi-platform storytelling strategies with varying degrees of success. As a relatively new method of storytelling, transmedia narratives have yet to invite the equivalent academic scrutiny of traditional media like novels, television shows and films. Creative producers employ strategies that create an illusion of reality, or a Cartesian dream, which facilitates an 'engagement aesthetic' and allows viewers to immerse themselves in the narrative. Viewers approach characters and situations on the internet as if they are 'real' because, in the online space, 'reality' is a construction of the user.*
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When Descartes (1641) began to question whether what he saw and felt was 'real' or an illusion, he meant it as a question of existential theology. He wanted to know, as definitively as possible, how he had come to the beliefs that he held and what effect they were having on his mind and behaviour. He came to the conclusion that his own mind – his own thoughts and feelings – was the only thing that he *knew* was real. The reality around him, the buildings, environment, animals, and other people could all be a trick conjured by an evil demon to deceive him. Even his physical body could be a figment of that demon's trickery. But a demon could not trick him into consciousness.

Descartes' musings are especially relevant to the illusory experiences encountered in cyberspace, where viewers are potentially detached from reality. Descartes writes that when we are engaged with potential 'demons' or deceivers, we should 'avoid giving credence to any false thing' (Descartes 1996: 9). In the online space, there is no way to know definitively that the internet users who interact through social media and community forums are who they claim to be. Every internet user creates their own profile and occupies the space through a deliberate construction and this information can be as truthful or deceitful as the user chooses. In the online space, we are each of us an evil demon and a Cartesian dreamer; deceiving and being deceived. As Descartes notes regarding his dream:

> But this task is a laborious one, and insensibly a certain
> lassitude leads me into the course of my ordinary life. And just
> as a captive who in sleep enjoys an imaginary liberty, when he
> begins to suspect that his liberty is but a dream, fears to

awaken, and conspires with these agreeable illusions that the deception may be prolonged. (Descartes 1996: 9)

We can only know the truth of our own selves, just as we can only know the truth of our own consciousness, but we are ignorant to the truth of others.

The storytelling strategies that allow narrative adaptations to exist in the online space take advantage of this unknowability of the user. Every internet user has to suspend some of their disbelief in order to interact in the online space at all – accepting on some level that the other users' constructed profiles may or may not be truthful reflections of the physical body. This creates an environment where the responder can either assume or deny the reality of others, much like Descartes' dream.

Recently there has been a significant shift towards using online social media platforms to tell stories. 'Transmedia' narratives play out in the online space by telling the story over a number of social media platforms (generally those used by the narrative's target audience). They create the illusion of reality by allowing viewers to interact with characters and storylines. This interaction creates an 'engagement aesthetic' where viewers are expected to participate and draw pleasure from their interactions with the narrative, much in the way artists create interactive installations or video game designers produce texts that are primarily purpose-driven (Ricardo 2013). This engagement aesthetic is the driving factor in viewer investment in transmedia narratives because they are, at their core, online performance pieces.

This paper is concerned with the various storytelling strategies used to establish and maintain a textual link (or link established through the narrative) between the online narratives and their viewers, or between the deceivers and the deceived. The storytelling strategies employed by *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (*LBD*) (Su & Green 2012a), for example, were ground breaking in that they combined various forms of social media production to create a narrative that existed alongside the viewers and occupied the same (virtual) space. The *LBD* was the first narrative of its kind and the first to experiment with this approach. Transmedia storytelling allows viewers an opportunity for more immediate and complete immersion by structuring the characters in the virtual space in a similar manner to real-world internet and social media users (Seymour et al 2015). These characters engage in the online environment as (assumed) extensions of a physical body. In the *LBD*, the narrative played out in realtime (a film-making technique where events occur at the same rate that the audience experiences them) over the course of a year. Actors portrayed characters through the vlogs, which updated regularly and established the main narrative arc, while a transmedia team supported the story through updates to the characters' social media pages.

The focus of this article is how transmedia narratives and storytelling strategies are structured to develop an immersive space similar to Descartes's dream. These include the development of textual bodies in the online space (Ashford 2009), the development of subplots through secondary characters, and social media blackouts that act as 'silence' in the text. This article's scope of inquiry includes audience reactions that are readily available without a password in the public domain (thus excluding Google+ and private blogs). Excluded from this analysis are webseries based on fantasy texts, such as *Classic Alice* (Hackett 2014), based on *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865), and *Carmilla* (Hall 2014), based on *Carmilla* (Le Fanu 2014 [1871]); text-only webseries played out through blogs, such as *Project Persuasion* (Brideau 2014), based on *Persuasion* (Austen 2014 [1818]); and original webseries with literary themes but no direct source material, such as *Writing Majors* (Stillwell 2014) and

University Ever After (Seales 2014). These types of transmedia narrative were excluded for expedience and because the Cartesian dream and associated methods of deception are more overt when there is a clear attempt to make the webseries as realistic as possible.

What the online environment does, essentially, is create an alternative space where traditional social barriers such as age, gender and race are secondary to the user's ability to engage with the various platforms and formats. Both the viewers and the characters in the narrative occupy the online space as 'textual bodies' (Ashford 2009). The textual bodies produced by contemporary internet users do not have the same limitations as their physical bodies and they are free to interact with their favourite characters as equals within that space so long as the producers of the transmedia maintain a level of realism in how the characters utilise each social media platform (Seymour 2014). When a user builds a profile, tweets their interests, or performs any of the acts of engagement typical to the online experience, they are constructing themselves in the virtual environment. This 'self' may be very different from the 'self' that occupies the physical world because, as discussed above, the online self acts simultaneously as a Cartesian deceiver and victim.

The *LBD* production team referred to their use of various social media platforms to portray the series as 'transmedia' (Bushman 2013) but prior to this, the term was mainly used to describe narratives told through print or television and then re-produced or supplemented via migration to the online space (Toffoletti 2008; Jenkins 2006). Popular examples of texts that migrate across platforms include BBC's *Sherlock* TV series (with blogs attributed to Sherlock, John Watson and Molly Hooper available online) and *Gossip Girl* book series. The *LBD* occupied the online space exclusively at first and so the term 'transmedia' did not refer to multiple spaces where the narrative can be consumed (physical book, television, or the internet), but instead referred to the use of multiple *platforms* within the same space – the internet. For the purposes of this discussion, 'transmedia' will refer to the use of multiple social media platforms within the online space.

Methodologically speaking, this paper draws from the method of netnographic research outlined in Xun and Reynolds' 'Applying netnography to market research: The case of the online forum' (Xun & Reynolds 2010: 30). Xun and Reynolds approach online research as an extension of ethnographic (or non-participant) research based in the observation of a textual discourse or dialogue. They write that this approach is 'genuinely anthropological' (2010: 18) in that it is primarily driven by observation of participants and the culture that has grown around them. Their research presumes that online users are aware that their textual communications are open to public access and therefore suggest that informed consent is not required for the analysis of these communications within the academic discourse.

In social media, the user employs multiple information strategies to essentially create a virtual version of themselves to occupy the online space. One of the most important storytelling strategies employed by transmedia narratives is the creation of a textual body, which facilitates audience interaction through the Cartesian dream cultivated in the online space. This serves to increase viewer investment by establishing the engagement aesthetic where their participation is an expectation of the form (Jenkins 2006). Ashcroft writes that although the textual body and the physical body are technically separate, 'to describe this process as disembodying is perhaps misleading' (Ashcroft 2009: 59). The textual body is an *extension* of the user's physical self, rather than a completely separate self (although the two may behave quite differently), and this in turn constructs an expectation that the textual body has an associated physical body

beyond the online space. Whether the real-world (or IRL) user understands the characters' fictional nature or not, the evidence outlined in this paper and the expectations of Descartes (discussed above) indicates that most users will willingly suspend their disbelief when they approach the dream space.

The online environment is widely accepted as the primary domain of modern consumers of media, particularly the millennial generation who grew up as the online space became more mainstream (Curwood et al 2013; Wilkinson 2011; Jenkins 2006). Contemporary viewers and consumers are engaged in a primarily text-based culture; research indicates that up to 80% of young people use social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to communicate, with up to a third of their writing practice taking place outside of the learning environment (Curwood et al 2013). The latest generation of readers and viewers are one of the first to grow up in a visually rich but text-saturated culture – including web blogs, text-based social media, and online stories (Wilkinson 2011). Literacy, then, has become inexorably linked with the online space. The migration of narratives to the online environment is a reflection of this new textual environment.

It is difficult to measure the immersive effect of online texts because audience members interact with the text in different ways. Many audience members engage directly with the social media aspects of the transmedia narrative, exchanging Tweets with characters, liking their statuses and commenting on videos. Likewise, there are many audience members who do not feel compelled to interact with the text in an active manner. These 'lurkers' may enjoy the series and tune in regularly, but they will not leave comments or attempt to contact the characters in-world. The discrepancy between YouTube subscribers (people who have set their account to notify them when a new video is posted), YouTube commenters, and YouTube viewer numbers, demonstrate the various levels of activity undertaken by online viewers. This paper uses YouTube subscriber numbers and the number of followers on social media pages to gauge a series' popularity because these numbers indicate how many viewers, both active and lurking, regularly consumed the narrative. To measure the texts' immersive effect, I examine viewer contributions to the narrative space and their analyses of these narratives on various social media platforms. By examining how the audience interacts with characters, a passive observer can see a clear element of emotional engagement between the viewers and the narrative.

There is empirical evidence to suggest that readers become fully immersed in stories when they have an element of realism and recognisability (Johnson 2012; Bal & Veltkamp 2013; Mar et al 2006). Although these studies focus on literature, the results can be extrapolated to include most forms of fictional media, particularly transmedia adaptations that have a novel at their core. Ricardo's (2013) work on the engagement aesthetic in visual arts argues that strategies which place a piece within the responders' experience causes the viewer to invest in the narrative behind the piece. Transmedia narratives that incorporate the Cartesian dream of the online space in order to engage with viewers as equals should theoretically be just as engaging as static narratives.

The *LBD* employed a 'transmedia team' to oversee the use of social media throughout the series. Each character had a presence on Twitter, but other social media platforms were used to indicate a character's interests; Mr. Collins had a profile on LinkedIn (Collins 2012), while Georgiana Darcy showed her interest in music through the popular platform ThisIsMyJam (Darcy 2012). As discussed above, these sites were updated in real-time to create the illusion that the characters' physical bodies were living out the narrative beyond the online space. Characters would live-tweet events (meaning that the characters

described events as they occurred in the fictional reality), and also performed their emotional story arcs through engagement with other characters online; Jane and Bing followed each other on Twitter within hours of meeting, and Lizzie followed Darcy on Twitter before she arrived at Pemberley.

As well as maintaining Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn pages for the characters, the *LBD* also used additional vlogs running concurrently to the main narrative to allow the secondary female characters Georgiana Darcy (Su & Green 2012c), Charlotte's sister Maria (Su & Green 2012d) and Lydia Bennet (Su & Green 2012f) to portray characterisation and subplots beyond what is seen in main vlog that is run by Lizzie Bennet. These subplots have a minor effect on the main narrative arc but they are not necessary to understand the story. Instead, they provide secondary characters with the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings in a manner that assumes they are, if not the protagonist in the overall narrative, the main character in their personal narrative. As Lydia Bennet says in response to a viewer question about whether she considers herself a secondary character in someone else's story: 'You're only a secondary character if you let yourself be' (Su & Green 2012g). This creates an illusion of personhood beyond the textual self and allows the narrative to take advantage of the Cartesian dream state in the online space.

Although each character's presence was maintained during the course of the series, the true success of the *LBD*'s engagement aesthetic can be seen in Lydia's downfall, which played out almost entirely through the social media outside of the main vlogs. While Lydia's trip to Las Vegas (a modernised trek to Brighton) is performed through her vlog (Su & Green 2013c), her experience of attending New Years Eve parties and meeting up with Wickham is live-tweeted (Su 2013a). The interactions between Lydia and Wickham through their respective Twitter accounts revealed the nature of their relationship to the audience, which was alternatively playful and almost disturbingly co-dependent. As the series acts as an adaptation, the viewers were aware of the outcome of the *Pride and Prejudice* narrative (although they did not know how the outcome would be adapted to the modern context) and so they recognised the dangers that Wickham posed to Lydia. Audience members took to Twitter, interacting with Lydia's textual body through social media as though she were a real woman trapped in an abusive relationship. Although Lydia was technically fictional, she existed and interacted with the audience within the online dream, and her health and well-being were considered as important as if she were a real woman (Seymour et al 2015). This supports the Cartesian dream of the online space by developing Descartes' observations about the manipulation of truth (by a deceiver) into a constructed fictional character.

On January 30, 2013, viewers discovered a website promoting a sex tape starring Lydia and George that would be released on Valentine's Day of that year. This was the narrative's modernised version of Lydia and George's elopement, although the narrative structures Lydia's downfall as less to do with her naiveté and more to do with Wickham's predatory nature. Unlike other social media platforms in the narrative, which were broadcast to the viewers by the transmedia team, the website promoting the sex tape was discovered by Tumblr user erinwert (2013a) after she followed a link in the YouTube comments. In this way, the construction of the engagement aesthetic allows the audience to have a direct effect on the narrative and develops the plot's conflict in a more realistic manner – it is highly unlikely that any character in the series would promote Lydia's downfall, but the discovery of an incriminating tape by an audience member is significantly more likely.

While some viewers used social media pages like Twitter and Facebook to inform Lydia's family of the existence of the site, hoping that the Bennets

would be able to shut the site down, other viewers suggested hiring White Hats (ethical hackers) to crash the site before the tape was released. Show organisers had to intervene before they could do so (berniesu 2013), as the narrative required Darcy to come to Lydia's rescue and not the online community. These attempts by the viewers to alter the course of Lydia's story arc demonstrated their emotional investment in Lydia's story (Seymour et al 2015). Later, after Lydia learned of Wickham's betrayal, the character was shown utilising the various social media platforms at her disposal to contact him and reconcile:

> @TheGWickham please just pick up your phone George. please.
> @TheGWickham its okay if something happened, if it wasnt your fault. just please please talk to me. i'm here. just tell me it wasn't you.
> @TheGWickham you wont answe your phone I don't know what else to do just call me okay pleas egeorge
> @TheGWickham remember everything you told me when we watched the sunrise? this isn't you. i know you. i believe in you. please George. (Su 2013b)

There is an increase in spelling errors as she becomes more frantic; she repeats 'please' several times as she appeals to him to contact her, and she reminds Wickham (and by extension the audience) of the romantic nature of their relationship using an example that occurred off-screen (the sunrise). This scene was not, until that point, known to the audience. Lydia's story arc (and by extension the narrative arc as a whole) was facilitated by the creation of a textual body so realistic that viewers began to interact with her and feel responsibility for her within the dynamic of the online Cartesian dream.

Another example of a transmedia adaptation that maintains the characters' online presence in order to facilitate the narrative arc is *Green Gables Fables* (Whitson, Harmon & Trotter 2014a), an adaptation of *Anne of Green Gables* by LM Montgomery (2014 [1908]). The main character, Anne Shirley, is an orphan fostered to the Cuthbert siblings in Avonlea, Canada. Her love interest, Gilbert Blythe, appeared for the first time in episode twenty-seven (Whitson, Harmon & Trotter 2014c), but his Twitter account was active from the beginning. Traditionally, audio-visual narratives establish the legitimacy of a character by giving them a physical face, but in transmedia narratives there is an opportunity to establish a character's legitimacy through their textual body. Like the *LBD* before it, *Green Gables Fables* introduced the main love interest through social media several months before he appeared on the vlogs. His presence in the online space was enough to establish a significant fan following for the character.

At the beginning of the series, before Anne and Gilbert meet, his Twitter account is used mainly to share pickup lines with his followers (Blythe 2014a). Anne and Gilbert's meeting does not take place in the videos, although Anne recapped the encounter in the ninth vlog: 'Top Five Worst Flirting Techniques' (Whitson, Harmon & Trotter 2014b). Instead, their first meeting was live-tweeted by both Anne, Gilbert, and the secondary characters Josie Pye (2014b; 2014c) and Rachel Lynde (2014a; 2014b). Like Lydia's live-tweeting of her encounters with Wickham in Vegas, Anne and Gilbert's first encounter played out over Twitter in realtime and the audience experienced it along with them.

Viewers' interactions with Gilbert were very tongue-in-cheek during the beginning of the series, but their teasing became slightly less playful when Gilbert entered into a relationship with Ruby Gillis. Just as the audience had prior knowledge of the narrative conclusion in the *LBD* and used it to

accurately predict the relationship between Lydia and Wickham, the audience of *Green Gables Fables* engaged with Gilbert's textual body by predicting his relationship with Anne and assuming that his relationship with Ruby would be short-lived. Some viewers speculated that this was another attention-seeking behaviour intended to make Anne jealous. In November 2014, Gilbert responded to the audience's insinuations:

> @Call_Me_Gil: Been getting some weird notifications lately...
> (Blythe 2014c)
> @Call_Me_Gil: Just going to say this once- It's really none of
> your business who I date, and I don't appreciate suggestions
> that I'm using people. (Blythe 2014d)

The maintenance of Gilbert's textual body inspired audience members to engage with him. This engagement aesthetic fuelled the illusion of the online dream by allowing the character to respond to the viewers' understanding of his relationship with Ruby in-world. Tumblr user rebeccathehistorian (2014) stated on her blog, after seeing these tweets, that she needed to remind herself that the series was fictional: '[w]ith these two tweets especially, specifically, I can't help but having my mind think that there is a Gilbert Blythe who lives in Avonlea, Saskatchewan, Canada' (2014). Sustaining the illusion of the online dream allows the creators to act as a Cartesian deceiver and support the engagement aesthetic of the story.

Later, this engagement aesthetic is seen more clearly when Gilbert began vlogging for a school assignment (Whitson, Harmon & Trotter 2014d). In the vlogs, Gilbert describes how overworked and stressed he feels in his last year of high school. As was the case with Lydia in the *LBD*, viewers responded to Gilbert as if he were a real person beyond the confines of the online environment and offered him emotional support via the YouTube comments:

> *Holly Shoemaker*: 'It's going to be ok Gil. And you are not
> being weird or dramatic at all. Those are very valid feelings
> that a lot of people (myself included) have experienced'
> *Becky Joan*: 'You're gonna be okay, dude. Trust me, college
> isn't nearly as scary as it seems right now. Yeah, the
> applications are hell, but once you get through those, it's a lot
> better. Plus, you're a super-smart, super-determined kid. I'm
> sure you'll do great'
> *adymlv*: 'Oh, Gilbert. This is kind of what I've been feeling for
> a while now… You don't have to do it all at once. So just relax,
> everything will work out as it should and you WILL get there.'
> (Whitson, Harmon & Trotter 2014e)

He is a fictional character, but his textual body is compelling enough for viewers to suspend their disbelief and interact with him as if he were an IRL internet user staring down the barrel of college application season. Tumblr user victoriatonks writes: '…a young man, apparently very tired, stressed out, overworked, frustrated... It all felt very real' (victoriatonks 2014). This storytelling strategy creates an engagement aesthetic, generates an interactive aesthetic, intensifying viewer engagement and strengthening the engagement aesthetic of the online Cartesian dream.

The Autobiography of Jane Eyre (*AOJE*) (Aref & Babins 2013a), an adaptation of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë (nd [1847]), uses Twitter to develop secondary characters' textual bodies beyond the main narrative of Jane's vlogs. The series is set in Vancouver and follows Jane as she starts a new job as a nanny and falls in love with her employer, Mr Rochester. Jane later discovers

that his 'dead' wife is actually alive, suffering from a mental illness, and is kept under around-the-clock care in Rochester's house. As with the *LBD* and *Green Gables Fables*, the textual bodies in *AOJE* are established through the secondary characters' Twitter accounts allows various subplots to play out and develop the illusion of the online dream. A company Twitter account for Thornfield Exports (2013a), which is Rochester's company in the adaptation, was established to portray the subplot of Rochester's financial difficulties in the wake of Jane leaving him. Unlike Pemberley Digital, which was very successful in its own right, both in the narrative world and beyond (given that it has been a figurehead in four well-known transmedia adaptations since 2012), Thornfield Exports was shown to be almost entirely dependent on financial assistance from the family of Rochester's wife.

Before Jane left Rochester after discovering his wife, she was portrayed on her vlog criticising him for treating the women in his life so badly (Aref & Babins 2014a). In particular, Jane condemned his treatment of his wife Beth; hiding her away, pretending she did not exist and living on her wealth. In response to this criticism, Thornfield Exports tweeted that the company would be hosting a 'Tour-de-Chance' BIKE-A-THON for mental health awareness (Thornfield Exports 2013b). This particular subplot became crucial to Rochester's character arc because, in response to the BIKE-A-THON Rochester's in-laws withdrew the financial support that was keeping Thornfield Exports afloat (Aref & Babins 2014b). This led to the financial troubles that prompted Beth's suicide and a car accident, which left Rochester crippled. This, in turn, led to Jane's reconciliation with him. As a storytelling strategy, Rochester's company acted as an extension of his textual body and supported the online dream by ensuring that his online presence was maintained as realistically as possible through multiple, corroborating sources.

Another subplot, the relationship between Mr Rochester and his daughter Adele, played out exclusively through their respective Twitter feeds (Rochester 2013a; Rochester 2013b). When Jane discovered that Rochester's wife was still alive, she pointed out that she was not the only victim of his deceit: '[Adele] doesn't even know her mother is alive' (Aref & Babins 2014a). Her criticism here was particularly concerned with the distant and cold relationship Rochester had cultivated with his daughter. After Jane left Rochester, a series of tweets between Rochester and his daughter showed a more playful and supportive tone to their relationship, indicating that Rochester took Jane's criticism to heart.

> @AdeleCRochester: You're late for my piano lesson. (Rochester 2014a)
> @Pilotsthoughts: @AdeleCRochester I'm just upstairs, and 1 minute late! (Rochester 2014d)
> @AdeleCRochester: @Pilotsthoughts Grace says: 'A minute lost, is a minute lost forever.' (Rochester 2014b)
> @Pilotsthoughts: @AdeleCRochester #TerrifyingMottos (Rochester 2014e)
> @AdeleCRochester: @Pilotsthoughts And do you even REALIZE how many stairs there are in this house? (Rochester 2014c)
> @Pilotsthoughts: @AdeleCRochester Fair point. (Rochester 2014f)

While Jane was absent and could not show Rochester and Adele interacting on her vlog, their textual bodies allowed the audience to experience the reconnection between father and child that was not part of the main narrative action. Later, both Adele and Grace Poole confirmed that Rochester had

significantly improved his behaviour on Jane's vlog (Aref & Babins 2014b; 2014c). Although the videos themselves served to make the audience aware of these subplots and their conclusions, the way they played out through Twitter supported the illusion of the online dream by implying that the secondary characters went on living their lives after exiting the main storyline.

Secondary characters exist in the limitless space of the online environment, allowing the narrative to develop these characters and their relationships beyond the singular perspective of the original text. For example, the *LBD*'s Maria Lu (Su & Green 2012d) began vlogging shortly after Charlotte accepted Mr Collins' offer to work at his production company as a partner (a modern update of the originary text's marriage proposal). Through Maria's internship at Mr Collins' company, the audience sees Charlotte in her new role as partner and her attempts to distance herself from Lizzie's vlogs after their falling out. Maria's vlogs serve a narrative purpose by acting as the catalyst for Charlotte and Lizzie's reconciliation. During her vlogs, Maria points out that Charlotte misses making the *LBD* with Lizzie (Su & Green 2012e). This in turn facilitates Lizzie's visit to Mr. Collins' company and her run-in with Darcy. In this case, the secondary characters ensure that certain narrative events take place when necessary.

Georgiana Darcy performed in her own vlogs while she beta tested a new video publishing app for Pemberley Digital, the company her brother owned. Gigi's vlogs (Su & Green 2012c) allowed the audience to see Darcy's search for Wickham during the climax of the series, but more importantly they show Gigi's personal development from the victim of the original texts and other adaptations, to a woman who exudes power and agency as a result of her technical expertise. While Darcy is searching for Wickham, Gigi contacts Wickham. As they are speaking he downloads the app that allows the Darcys to track his location. The fact that Gigi was able to use an app that her brother's media production company created adds a level of legitimacy to the series because, as discussed above, the Pemberley Digital company went on to ostensibly produce the subsequent transmedia adaptations *Welcome to Sanditon* (Su & Green 2013b), Emma Approved (Su & Green 2013a), *Frankenstein MD* (Harris, Register & Su 2014) and *The March Family Letters* (Shelson & Evans 2014). Although Descartes (1641) notes in his *Meditations*: 'I suppose, then, that all the things that I see are false… Perhaps nothing [is certain], unless that there is nothing in the world that is certain' (1996: 9), he notes that there needs to be a) a deceiver, and b) a victim of that deception for the dream to be maintained. The development of Pemberley Digital in the online reality allows the company to 'exist' because it interacts with the audience and continues to develop new material.

The online dream is further supported when characters make guest appearances on other webseries. These characters carry various subplots across the online space, supporting those narrative threads while maintaining the illusion of their textual bodies' reality for the benefit of the audience and the engagement aesthetic. *AOJE*'s Jane referenced the *LBD*'s Lizzie Bennet as the inspiration for her decision to begin vlogging (Aref & Babins 2013b). This connection creates a textual link between the two webseries, demonstrating the internal 'reality' of these stories that share the same online space. The *LBD*'s Caroline Lee (a modernised Miss Bingley) appeared in *Emma Approved* (Su & Green 2013a), the transmedia adaptation of Austen's *Emma* (1999 [1816]), to the general astonishment and excitement of fans of the *LBD*. Caroline made a guest appearance in *Emma Approved* as Mr Elton's shallow, social-climbing bride. As the original narrative failed to provide a first-name for Mrs Elton, the inclusion of Caroline Lee in the adaptation could be justified. Caroline carried the subplot of Mr Elton's attempt to make Emma jealous after she rejected him,

as well as maintaining the characterisation of Caroline Lee established in the *LBD*. The character's transition to different narrative purposes was relatively seamless, because there are minor but insignificant differences between Austen's Caroline Bingley and Mrs Elton. This storytelling strategy maintains the illusion of the online dream by supporting the internal reality of the transmedia narrative by allowing characters to exist beyond their original stories and go on 'living' their lives after their original narrative purpose has been fulfilled.

Characters with similar personality traits such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*'s (Wilde 1990 [1895]) Cecily Cardew, and *Anne of Green Gables*'s (1908) Anne Shirley, connected via social media when both of their stories were adapted into transmedia. *In Earnest* (Cole, Straight & Pullen 2014) portrays Cecily Cardew as a 19-year-old art major who falls in love with her adopted brother's best friend. Both she and Anne are portrayed in the original narratives and subsequent adaptations as romantic poetry-lovers who are given to day-dreaming, and if they had been written into the same story they would probably have gotten along very well. Anne's textual body reached out to Cecily's via Twitter (Cardew 2014a) and Tumblr (Cardew 2014b). The two were portrayed in their respective series as becoming 'internet friends'. This friendship became important in the later stages of Cecily's character arc when she addressed Anne through various social media platforms and her vlogs as a source of comfort. Not only did the friendship between these two characters help support Cecily's subplot of grief and recovery, it also represents the kinds of relationships IRL internet users cultivate through their online textual bodies. It serves to sustain the illusion of the online dream by mimicking the reality of internet friendships and reinforces the applicability of Descartes' observations that truth is a consequence of knowledge.

When the death of Anne Shirley's foster father Matthew coincided with a social media blackout from Cecily (a period of narrative silence when characters do not engage in the online space), she returned to the internet to discover what she had missed. She was portrayed on Twitter berating herself for not being available when Anne needed her: 'I should have been there' (Cardew 2015). This narrative link between the two characters allowed them to model emotional support for internet friends in the wake of personal misfortunes. Many viewers acknowledged the difficulty of supporting friends in the online space:

> @cecilydarcy Is this about Anne? It's really sad that it happened during your honeymoon, but you couldn't have known, Cecily (Luisa 2015)
> @cecilydarcy You didn't know sweetie <3 It's not your fault (TreeMermaid 2015)
> @cecilydary I know that everyone's telling you this, but how did you expect to know? What matters is you know now. (Elaine 2015)

This is a reflection of the Cartesian dream; IRL internet users can only know when their internet friends are in pain when they state it clearly – and the sheer magnitude of content available in social media may mean that a call for help could go unnoticed when an internet user takes a break from online activity.

As was the case with Lydia Bennet in the *LBD* and Gilbert Blythe in *Green Gables Fables*, viewers approached the characters Cecily and Anne and offered their support to the characters' textual bodies. They praised Cecily's desire to support Anne and offered their own condolences:

> @AnneWith_An_E Anne, I am so, so, so sorry...: My deepest
> condolences. I never even knew Matthew and yet I feel broken.
> (Jethro 2015)
> @AnneWith_An_E Oh Anne. I'm so very sorry for your loss.
> My heart goes out to you and Marilla. (WifeMomKnitter 2015)
> @AnneWith_An_E Anne, my greatest sympathies. I can't
> imagine the pain you are going through. Through this virtual
> message, I give you a hug. (Grimm 2015)

Although Anne, Marilla and Matthew are fictional characters, their construction within the online space supports the shared illusion of reality at work in the online dream. Viewers of the series went so far as to offer virtual equivalents to physical affection because the suspension of disbelief creates the illusion of a physical body beyond the online space.

In the online space, silence is an interesting and engaging storytelling strategy. The engagement aesthetic is rendered more structurally interesting when the characters suddenly become unavailable for the viewers to engage with. As discussed above, this technique is referred to as a 'media blackout' or 'social media silence'. In the transmedia narratives examined here the media blackouts generally resulted in a demonstrable desire for more content and interaction. While the *LBD* maintained the social media presence of characters throughout the climax of the narrative, Lydia's choice to 'take a break' from social media after her sex tape scandal demonstrates a narrative decision to effectively silence her for the remainder of the narrative. The conclusion of her character arc was instead portrayed through Lizzie's vlogs, essentially through Lizzie's voice. Viewers found this difficult to accept because Lydia's narrative arc felt too 'victimised' and they wished for her to take ownership of her story: '*She needs to reclaim her vlogs.* They ended with George getting the last word (through Lydia)' (erinwert 2013b). Viewers called for a clear demonstration of Lydia's recovery from what some argued was a kind of sexual assault, and the producers of the *LBD* responded to these desires through the novelisations of the series: *The Secret Diary of Lizzie Bennet* (Su & Rorick 2014) and *The Epic Adventures of Lydia Bennet* (Rorick & Kiley 2015). These texts exist beyond the transmedia's engagement realm, however, meaning fans were unable to engage with Lydia's textual body at the time of her blackout.

Silence is used to much greater effect in *Nothing Much To Do* (Bollinger 2014a), which is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1994 [1598]) set in modern-day New Zealand. The series employed concurrent vlogs to tell the story of Beatrice and Benedick's romance but, unlike the *LBD* and other transmedia narratives where the side vlogs supported subplots without being completely necessary to understanding the narrative, the viewing of concurrent vlogs in *Nothing Much To Do* was absolutely necessary to understand the story. The series performed its media blackout in response to Claudio's betrayal of Hero (updated in the series to a slut-shaming attack (Bollinger 2014b) delivered on her sixteenth birthday) and the characters went silent during the height of the narrative's emotional conflict. Viewers took to Tumblr to voice their frustration at the producers for failing to update the audience on their situation:

> Maybe the new episode is never coming. Maybe this is it.
> Maybe the last nmtd video you will ever see is Verges and
> Dogberry asking Leo convoluted questions. (scarletwinterraven
> 2014)
> Person: Are you OK? NMTD Fan: NO, BECAUSE IT'S
> WEDNESDAY IN NEW ZEALAND AND WE STILL
> KNOW NOTHING! *sobs*. (itsnotliketherearehillshere 2014)

> Dear thecandlewasters, One, I would like to say that we all absolutely love NMTD, from the bottom of our hearts. But here's the thing, we are gOING INSANE FROM THIS RADIO SILENCE. (seasnns 2014)

The silence acted as a textual response to Hero's betrayal and served to increase the engagement aesthetic by generating suspense. Some fans noted that the timing of *NMTD*'s media blackout was particularly useful for facilitating narrative engagement by drawing viewers to check their social media frequently in the hopes of an update. Tumblr user aeternāmente (2014) compares the *NMTD*'s media blackout to a similar circumstance in *AOJE* when, after Jane left Rochester, she took a break from Twitter (in a similar manner to Lydia Bennet from *LBD*):

> In NMTD, the sudden lack of transmedia comes right at the climax of the story… In AoJE, the onset of the transmedia silence really isn't treated as a focal point in the story. The climax has already happened, and now we were in the middle of the fallout. The lack of transmedia didn't serve as a structural subversion of the climax as it does in NMTD. (aeternāmente 2014)

Here, aeternāmente makes the distinction between media blackouts as a storytelling device to increase suspense and media blackouts that maintain the illusion of the online dream. In her analysis, *NMTD*'s blackout heightened the audience's tension whereas *AOJE*'s blackout allowed the audience an opportunity to essentially recover from Rochester's betrayal of Jane. Either way, silence turned out to be an effective storytelling technique to increase the narrative's engagement aesthetic because it supports the illusion of an online reality where characters exist beyond their narrative.

The illusion of an online reality begs the question of whether the textual bodies of fictional characters can be considered 'real'. In the purest intellectual sense, the answer is no. These bodies are constructions used by producers to achieve a narrative purpose. In some cases, producers needed to reign in overly-enthusiastic fans who attempted to engage too much with the textual bodies of characters to the detriment of the story (Seymour et al 2015). As discussed previously, when Lydia's sex tape was advertised online and fans began suggesting hiring White Hats to hack the site, the producers intervened because they had a clear narrative goal in mind and could not allow the textual bodies to develop organically as an IRL internet user's would (Seymour et al 2015). The constructed nature of the textual bodies would appear to indicate they are not 'real' in the way that textual bodies created by the viewers are.

However, it is difficult to evaluate the authenticity of *any* textual body in the online environment. In a space of Cartesian dreamers and evil demons, the textual body exists as a deliberate construction regardless of whether the producer of the body intends it for a narrative purpose. The fact that transmedia narrative producers are open and honest about the constructed nature of the fictional characters is the only indication to viewers that they have been deceived. The social media pages are run by characters (they are listed as the primary users, not the producers of the series, and all activity on these pages are attributed to the characters' user names) and they interact in the online environment in the same manner as IRL internet users. They even appear in the video blogs to verify their physical body and further the illusion that the textual body exists as an extension and construction of an IRL internet user who happens to have the same name and experiences as a character from a classic novel. Some viewers of the *LBD* and subsequent series were unaware of the

fictional nature of the vlogs until other viewers pointed it out (Seymour 2014). This creates an affect which, at least philosophically, makes these characters 'real' as part of an experience where nothing and everything is real – the Cartesian dream.

Regardless of the 'reality' of the characters, their existence in the online space facilitates the engagement aesthetic by creating a textual and empathetic link between the audience and the characters. Textual bodies, created and carefully maintained through social media, develop and carry subplots to further the illusion of the Cartesian dream. Viewers are as much a part of the transmedia narrative as other textual bodies, existing in the narrative world alongside the characters and interacting with them at their leisure. Media blackouts, along with the IRL internet users' Twitter interactions and online commentary, act as a way to measure the viewers' investment in the stories. These interesting and compelling storytelling strategies also offer creative producers a new way to approach the adaptation of stories, increasing their relevance to the modern viewer and demonstrating their timelessness in the digital age.

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