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## Opportunity for engagement : how viewing "The Lizzie Bennet diaries" transcends traditional reader response

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# Opportunity for engagement: how viewing "The Lizzie Bennet Diaries" transcends traditional reader response

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OPPORTUNITY FOR ENGAGEMENT:  
HOW VIEWING “THE LIZZIE BENNET DIARIES”  
TRANSCENDS TRADITIONAL READER RESPONSE

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors with Distinction

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University of Northern Iowa  
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For hundreds of years, publishers have worked to understand the relationship between a reader and a text. This relationship between a reader and a text has changed dramatically as technology develops, allowing readers to interact with a text in new ways. As years pass, the technology available to content creators as well as consumers changes drastically, often resulting in adaptation of text. One text that has been adapted many times is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel has been recorded on tape, made into a television series, adapted for the big screen, and now has been brought to an entirely new medium: YouTube. This new adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* was released on April 9, 2012 and is unlike any other. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is a web-based series of videos that retells the story of *Pride and Prejudice* in the modern era. The project was created by Hank Green and Bernie Su, both notable in the field of web video writing and production. According to the press release for the series, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, "combine[s] web video and social media in a way never before seen for a literary adaptation." The story plays out through video blogs, mainly from the perspective of Lizzie Bennet, a twenty-four year old grad student in the field of mass communications.

These technological changes have resulted in significant change in the interactions between readers, writers and publishers, and the content itself. In order to explain the way these changes have resulted in a new kind of engagement, first I will address reader response theory and the timelessness of *Pride and Prejudice* itself. Then I will discuss the ways *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* provides an experience that is relevant to its modern viewers. I will also explain the way this adaptation encourages interaction with the content, rather than simply eliciting a response. Finally, I will provide evidence to support the assertion that *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* has provided an experience that goes beyond reader response and instead provides a new, more interactive experience that would be more aptly titled as reader engagement.

A text is only that—words on a page—until a reader interprets the author's message. In *Literature as Exploration: Fifth Edition*, Louise M. Rosenblatt discusses reader response theory and the idea that the meaning of a text is dependent upon its reader:

There is no such thing as a generic reader or a generic literary work; there are only the potential millions of individual readers of the potential millions of individual literary works. A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. The literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text: the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings (24).

There is not one singular inherent meaning in a piece of literature. Further, the meaning that is interpreted from a piece of literature is dependent upon the reader, and two separate readers bring two diverse meanings to the same text. The meaning of the text “exists in the transaction that goes on between reader and text” (27). This is good news for those creators who wish to recreate age-old stories. If a novel was written over two hundred years ago and its meaning or significance was static and resisting of change, adaptation would be a nearly useless art form. But, because readers interpret a work and bring their own meaning to a text, stories continue to be adapted for modern audiences. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is only one of numerous adaptations of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, but the adaptation created by Hank Green and Bernie Su has been marketed to its audience in a brand new medium: video blogging on YouTube.com.

One question must be answered when considering the relative success of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* or any other adaptation of the text of *Pride and Prejudice*: how has a text that was written over two hundred years ago still managed to maintain its cultural relevance? *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* has been viewed by millions, yet its source material is over 200 years old. Austen wrote the characters and events of *Pride and Prejudice* in a society completely different from what can be experienced today, but people still find interest and promise in her story. One possible explanation for this timelessness comes from the structure of the story itself. In *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, Wolfgang Iser suggests that gaps in the plot of a story provide the indeterminacy necessary to create reader engagement: “they [the gaps] offer a free play in the interpretation of the

specific ways in which the various views can be connected with one another. These gaps give the reader a chance to build his own bridges, relating the different aspects of the object which have thus far been revealed to him” (8). A story with gaps in its structure allows readers to make personal connections and thereby become more invested in the story.

Some critics claim, and have claimed for hundreds of years, that the structure of *Pride and Prejudice* is what made and currently makes the novel so relatable on an emotional level and thereby adaptable. Although some early critics argued that *Pride and Prejudice* is not “a great novel because it fails to address such all-important subjects as death, religion, and human sexuality,” other critics argue that the nature of the novel’s “artistic brilliance raises it above questions of subject matter... Beneath its comic exterior it does in fact confront the larger issues of life” (Harris 52). If an emotional or human connection is essential to the longevity of literature, then the critics who describe Austen’s work as “artistic brilliance” must be correct, as *Pride and Prejudice* has had success for over two centuries after its publication.

The indeterminacy of *Pride and Prejudice* has allowed for countless adaptations to be made over the story's two hundred year existence but *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is of a different nature than the numerous adaptations that came before its time. Thanks to the appeal to a modern audience and especially to its departure from a stereotypical romance, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* has become relatable and interesting to some for whom *Pride and Prejudice* was not. As a brand new interpretation of the classic novel, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* has done remarkably well. According to Louise Rosenblatt in *Literature as Exploration*, “some interpretations... are more defensible than others in terms of the text as a whole” (75). Out of the many adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*, it is certain that some favor one interpretation over another. The difference in the case of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is that not only are characters and small plot points adapted, the adaptation itself occurs in an entirely new medium. In an article for hypable.com, Marama Whyte makes a judgment on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* as compared to other modernized adaptations: “Given the choice between added scenes

involving zombie hunting, added sex scenes, and expanded character development - we'll take the third option." It appears that many readers would much rather have a dose of reality than fantasy with their modernization. Viewers have taken very well to the expanded lives of the characters within a modern setting, and are eager to take in the content. Adaptations like *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* are only possible because meaning is not inherent in a text and must be brought out by an interaction between the reader and the text.

An example of basic interaction between a reader and a text is literary criticism. Early criticism on *Pride and Prejudice* is highly limited; only fifteen early reviews of Austen's work have been found, and only three of those fifteen actually directly address *Pride and Prejudice* (Abbey 52). The little response that has been located shows evidence that gaps in the structure of *Pride and Prejudice* have been providing readers with a positive reading experience even from the novel's first publication. In an essay in *Atkinson's Casket* dated 1832, a review of the first American edition of the novel states, "The plot of this novel is simple, natural and intelligible. The characters are few, and the whole structure of the novel [is] such as to insure it a ready passport to public favor, and a large share of popularity" (Harris 55). A simple, natural plot allows readers to apply their own knowledge and experiences. The small number of characters prevents readers from becoming distracted by sub plots, but instead allows readers to become attached to the characters. The description of the novel as structurally pleasing with just the right level of indeterminacy is reinforced in an essay written by literary critic W. F. Pollock, dated 1860: "The plots are simple but well constructed, sufficiently involved to excite interest, and they are brought round at the end by means neither too obvious nor unnatural" (Abbey 29). A novel with a complicated plot may prevent readers from making as many connections as they can to a more simple plot. As a plot becomes more complicated with details, there becomes less opportunity for readers to use their own experiences and knowledge to fill in the gaps. When readers can use their own experiences to connect to a novel or any other piece of literature, the interest level of the piece will be heightened. This penchant for indeterminacy does not date back only to the nineteenth century. In her

editorial on the early criticism of *Pride and Prejudice*, Cherie Abbey notes that Austen “has not been forgetful of the important maxim, so long ago illustrated by Homer, and afterwards enforced by Aristotle, of saying as little as possible in her own person, and giving a dramatic air to the narrative” (28). Leaving gaps in the structure of a story has been allowing readers to weave in their own personal narrative for many years.

Over a span of 200 years, modern viewers of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and readers of *Pride and Prejudice* during the early years of its publication alike have commented on the simplicity of the story. In 1818, critics actually criticized Austen's novel for its simplicity in *The Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany*:

We have always regarded [Miss Austen's] works as possessing a higher claim to public estimation than perhaps they have yet attained... In this raised state of our imaginations, we cannot, it may be supposed, all at once descend to the simple representations of common life... Yet the time, probably, will return when we shall take a more permanent delight in those familiar cabinet pictures. (qtd. in Abbey 31)

Little did this critic know that these “simple representations” would be a contributor to the novel's success. Additionally, if critics thought that people in 1813 were in a raised state of imagination, they may struggle for words trying to describe the state of the current population's imagination. Unlimited input is available from radio, television, and especially from the internet, but people are still taking part in the aforementioned “permanent delight” and familiarity of Austen's story. The critic from 1818 had it right: the time did come when the audience was more likely to appreciate the familiarity, or unfamiliarity, of that time gone by. This is the nature of literature. Literature allows people from one time to “experience... diverse patterns of the past... Thus the writer often becomes the medium through which the future is forecast” (Rosenblatt 186). Even if Austen has not literally forecast any part of literary history, her works have created a link between the past and present. The link is not one that allows people to exactly experience the world as it was in 1813 when the book was published, but

instead the novel was written in a way that allows people to imagine themselves in the situations and perspectives of the characters in the novel. This is possible in literature because of the interaction that takes place between the content in the text and the reader's imagination. Thanks to the nature of the way a text is read, it has “a far greater chance of outlasting its historical genesis... because their structure continually allows the reader to place himself within the world of fiction” (Iser 29). This applies to the indeterminacy of *Pride and Prejudice* as was mentioned earlier, but it also makes a link between the human characteristics which are explored in the novel and also experienced by people today.

The same indeterminacy that pleased readers of *Pride and Prejudice* in the early nineteenth century continues to please those who take in the multiple adaptations of the story today. In an article from *The Awl*, a current events and culture-based website, Janet Potter claims, “From the number of times I’ve read the book or watched the BBC and movie adaptations, the plot no longer holds any surprises, and yet the suspense is always there.” If the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* was overly detailed and left no room for creators of future adaptations to explore, it would seem that as the number of adaptations increased, the interest in the plot would decrease. That is not the case with *Pride and Prejudice*. New adaptations continue to be made because people are still interested in *Pride and Prejudice*. This is made possible because Austen created a story with enough indeterminacy to allow each adaptation enough room to create a new and exciting product.

The timelessness of *Pride and Prejudice* can be attributed to the novel providing a reading experience that is strongly based in social and cultural reader-to-reader and reader-to-text connections. These connections are made possible by the very nature of humanity: “Is not the substance of literature everything that human beings have thought or felt or created? ...Whatever the form--poem, novel, drama, biography, essay--literature makes comprehensible the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers” (Rosenblatt 5,6). No two humans experience the same life, but each human being can reach out to connect to each other through shared human experience.

These shared human experiences are made available by connecting through literature. The needs, emotions, concepts and circumstances of human experience are what fill in the “gaps” of works of literature with indeterminacy, as described by Iser. Authors, artists, and other content creators do not narrow their focus on emotions and feelings and ideas that are entirely their own. If they did, literature and art would cease to be one of the ways humans connect with each other (Rosenblatt 130). These creators seek to connect ideas and people alike.

Reading *Pride and Prejudice* or watching *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* or, especially, doing some kind of combination of both, gives the reader and viewer an idea of the way they personally can connect to people and events that occurred over two hundred years ago. A work written by “some dead woman,” as some young people may complain, suddenly turns from an incomprehensible and ancient document into a fascinating look into the life of a girl who might not be as different from the reader as was expected. This ability to connect, according to Olivia Rosane for *The Slate*, “is an assurance that something of our humanity remains constant between the world of quills and parchment and the world of styluses and screens.” Rosane goes on to point out general human truths: people still judge people on nothing more than a general impression, and that the people in anyone’s life (especially families) are likely to be strange and embarrassing. By this logic, being embarrassed by something a family member said at a ball around the neighbors is comparable to a family member posting something embarrassing on Facebook or any other social media website. Portraying the emotional conflicts of the characters in Austen's novel through social media allows modern viewers to connect much more easily. A reader of *Pride and Prejudice* may not be able to understand why Lizzie's relationship with Darcy is so strained at the beginning of the story simply by reading the descriptions of their conversations. Viewing the conversations between Lizzie and Darcy (as well as viewing the reenactments of their conversations before Darcy is ever actually seen in Lizzie's videos) may help modern viewers engage with the characters.

*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is an adaptation that truly belongs to the modern viewer. One of the key differences between *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is the change in focus from the all-importance of marriage to a more modern set of priorities that allows room for focus on the role of female friendships, education, and having employment and a career. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* stays true to the plot and theme of the original novel and provides a modification of the plot to ensure the audience's continued emotional investment but does not conform to the restrictions of the genre of romance literature.

*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* has challenged the stereotypes of the romance genre. In *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway notes that “formulaic literature has been defined most often by its standard reliance on a recipe that dictates the essential ingredients to be included in each new version of the form” (29). Radway makes this claim when speaking of categorical romance novels from the likes of Harlequin and other publishers, but the general idea applies to all novels that fall under the descriptor of romance. Radway also describes the typical romance as “a collectively elaborated female fantasy that unfailingly ends at the precise moment when the heroine is gathered into the arms of the hero who declares his intention to protect her forever” (97). Anyone who has watched *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* may be able to imagine Lizzie scoffing at Radway's cloyingly sweet description of a romance. Even from the first few initial episodes of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* when Lizzie introduces her sisters and Charlotte, it becomes evident that the story is going to have many more layers and complexities than that of a typical romance. Jay Bushman, one of the writers for *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* as quoted in McNutt's *Cultural Leanings*, said they specifically avoided ending the series with the focus on the relationship between Lizzie and Darcy:

Since we spend the first 59 episodes on her relationships with people other than Darcy, it would feel pretty lousy if the show ended with her only focused on him without any recognition of all the other people in her life who are so important--and all the other relationships that make our version of this story different than all the others.

Bushman's observation on the need for focus outside of the relationship between Lizzie and Darcy emphasizes the differences between a classic romance novel and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. The writers spent time developing the relationship between Lizzie and the other characters, and so focusing only on the romantic relationship in the story at the end would make for a much weaker and less believable story. Modern viewers are living in a world where getting an education and finding a job are a priority. The way a typical romance novel focuses around the relationship between one man and one woman and her reactions to the man may still appeal to some modern viewers or readers, but the lack of complexity outside of the romantic relationship will likely leave something to be desired. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* does not even qualify as a romance according to the standards expressed by Radway, who believes that in order for a book to "qualify as a romance, the story must chronicle not merely the events of a courtship but what it feels like to be the object of one" (64). Some would argue that because the video blogging is done primarily by Lizzie and she does describe to viewers her experiences with Darcy that *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is in fact a romance. I would argue that *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* should not be forced to fit the romance mold because the majority of the episodes occur before Darcy is even introduced as a character, and because the conclusion of the series focuses on other non-romantic relationships in Lizzie's life.

Despite not being focused solely on romance, relationships and marriage do still play a large part in the plot of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Hints of marital obsession are retained; the first video opens with Lizzie reciting the iconic first line, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (Austen 1), but in a comical modern twist, Mrs. Bennet has emblazoned the phrase on t-shirts for each of her daughters. Lizzie still portrays her mother as marriage-crazed and overbearing. Even though the viewers never actually see Mrs. Bennet, some of the most comical moments of the series are the reenactments of her conversations as performed by Lizzie and Charlotte or others. Viewers never actually see Mrs. Bennet, but Lizzie dons a large floppy hat and scarf when she portrays her mother, spouting exaggerated phrases such as, "My

Lizzie is getting an advanced degree in Mass Communications, which dooms her to a life of unemployment, so she could use a rich husband like you,” and, “Five hundred women! There are prostitutes and teenagers and probably not-so-distant cousins! ... Those are now five hundred women with a better chance of marrying that man [Bing Lee] than any of my hopeless, pathetic, single daughters” (Green and Su). As Michael Anderson points out in his article for WIRED magazine, "Mrs. Bennet's... notions are not completely out of circulation even two centuries after Austen brought them to life." From these modernized, if slightly crude and sarcastic, portrayals of Mrs. Bennet, it becomes clear that *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* achieves a balance between acknowledging the timelessness of motherly smothering and avoiding the old-fashioned worry of "marrying off" daughters in a family.

Much to the chagrin of their mother, Lizzie and her sisters are motivated to get an education and find a successful career. The writers of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* combine the process of finding a man to marry with the process of finding a job, resulting in a refreshingly modern but still believable adaptation of the role of marriage in Lizzie's life. Actress Julia Cho, who plays Lizzie's best friend Charlotte Lu (Charlotte Lucas, in the novel) in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, was a proponent of the changes: “I love that in our modern adaptation we made the marriage-to-job translation, which I think resonates with a lot more young people today. Yes, we can all dream about finding our own version of Darcy, but there are other ways to seek personal and professional contentment” (qtd. in Grate). During the time when *Pride and Prejudice* was written, it would have been unrealistic for women to dream about leaving their home to join the work force or otherwise pursue a job independently. Cho's character Charlotte accepts a marriage proposal from Mr. Collins in the novel, but in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, she accepts a large job offer. The change may surprise viewers who are anxiously awaiting the moment when a romance begins to blossom between Mr. Collins and Charlotte, but it does not detract from or affect the momentum of the plot. Instead, the change makes for a more relatable subject and adds another layer of complexity to Charlotte's character and thereby her and Lizzie's friendship which is not as developed in the novel.

Although romantic relationships are present in the series, they are not the only kind of relationships that are given any significance in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Lizzie also focuses her attention on the friendships and bonds she forms with her sisters and her female friends. Viewers can certainly still take pleasure in living vicariously through Lizzie and Darcy's relationship; there is even a playlist on the YouTube channel that is comprised only of those video blogs that concern the two or their relationship. But in an additional successful effort to provide a balance between romance and a modern representation of a college student trying to find her way in the world, viewers also are given the opportunity to live other non-romantic aspects of Lizzie's life vicariously. Green and Su's adaptation is the first to present Lizzie's relationship with Charlotte as more than a friendship based on membership to social circles, or as a friendship of convenience. Charlotte is cast as Lizzie's best friend but plays a much more integral role in the series than in the novel. Charlotte is responsible for editing (and often makes an appearance or comments on) Lizzie's video blogs. This portrayal of close friendship is yet another example of the richness and relevance of content in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*.

*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is actually structured to promote the development of the characters. One way this was made possible, according to Su, was the pacing of the adaptation. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* moved slowly through the adaptation to "establish characters and relationships... to make sure every character felt multi-dimensional and alive" (Su). Lydia, Jane, Wickham, Charlotte, and all the other minor characters in the story were made to be real people with real contribution to the story, rather than characters who happened to be in a story based on the romance between a couple of main characters. The writers of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* are clearly putting more effort into the minor characters in order to expand viewers' attachment to them. Whyte writes, "In a show that has taken pains to help us understand even the most minor of characters, Lizzie and Darcy both appear in the most accurate representation of Austen's original characters that we have ever seen." Not only does the adaptation create a more detailed and realistic picture of each of the characters, but the depiction of the main characters has only benefited from the change.

One of the most noticeable expansions was of Lydia's character. The development of her character is one of the more outstanding differences between the novel and the vlogs. Cho attributes the nature of the storytelling medium to the writers having the ability to stretch the story to focus on Lizzie's female family and friendships as well as her relationship with Darcy. This double-focus is yet another way more modern viewers can find a way to connect to *Pride and Prejudice*. Creator Su wrote on his Tumblr about "big thematic changes" being due to, in part, the viewers being "a different generation." Changes needed to be made in order for the series to appeal to a generation that grew up completely separate from some of the struggles and main cultural challenges originally presented in the novel.

While changes are necessary to make an adaptation stand out from its predecessors, too much deviation from the original could result in a poor reception of the adaptation. Radway claims that romances cannot stray too far from the standard form. Romances rely upon "certain events, characters, and progressions to provide the desired experience" (63). *Pride and Prejudice* is clearly a romantic novel; it would not be surprising to find *Pride and Prejudice* on a list of the top romance novels of all time. The story of the way Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy come together is one that countless readers have both swooned and agonized over for many years. Notwithstanding the depiction of Lizzie and Darcy's relationship, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* seems, in all of its modernity, to have leaned away from the typical romance novel. The vlog series challenges the stereotypes of the romance genre through its emphasis on the relationships between women, as well as the prioritizing of friendship and sisterhood over marriage. Changing the priorities of the characters to be more modern makes the series more relevant. Relevance, according to Rosenblatt, is an integral part in allowing readers or viewers to connect to content: "If the work presents experiences and ideas highly relevant to the student's own preoccupations, his interest will often carry him over the hurdle of the language difficulty and give him sufficient motivation to infer meaning" (206). Adapting a work to appeal to more modern audiences will not warp the meaning beyond any interpretation. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is a current example of

the way adaptation or modernization only adds to an audience's interpretation of meaning.

The creators of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* chose video blogs as their medium through which they would reach modern viewers. The use of video blogging and other forms of social media allows viewers of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* to experience the novel in a way that encourages engagement with, rather than response to, the content. Aside from the content being modernized, Green and Su, co-creators of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, use YouTube to distribute the product, allowing viewers to experience the novel through new and modern aesthetic experiences. Green and Su have provided lovers of literature with a valuable tool. There was no doubt a certain risk in telling a story in a way no one has tried before, but the series has become a great success. Viewers have the opportunity to experience content that has been in existence for over two hundred years in a way that is familiar and convenient. It is important to consider new ways of presenting old material and ideas. Some writers, including Rosane in an article for *The Slate*, compare Green and Su's foray into the digital media world to Jane Austen's effect on the novel form itself: "What Austen did for the novel, LBD creators Hank Green and Bernie Su do for the vlog, and digital media generally. They take a storytelling medium that is new and strange and potentially threatening, and they make it comfortable." There is no reason any literature purist should fear that digital media will take over and render the written word irrelevant. Green and Su are not looking to start a revolution; they just believe that digital media has a place in storytelling in a modern age. If a piece of literature is of quality, like *Pride and Prejudice*, its themes will maintain relevance through the ages, but other aspects of the novel may not retain relevance and common understanding as well as the themes. These outdated aspects of a novel then cloud the meaning that can, in other more modern circumstances, be retained and widely observed.

The popularity of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is a testament to the success of using YouTube as a storytelling medium. What sets this adaptation apart from any other film or book adaptation is the serialized nature of the content. Episodes were released two times per week, with every episode remaining available on the project's YouTube channel. The serialized nature of the project's releases is

akin to that of the serialized novel. Iser suggests that a serialized novel “results in a special kind of reading” (11). What sets this kind of reading apart from the reading method used on any other reading material is the interruption in content. How the interruption is planned and how the reader reacts to the interruption may have an impact on the reader’s interpretation of the content. When the reader (or in the case of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, the viewer) must pause in between the installations, more time for reflection, questioning, and prediction is provided. Therefore, breaks in serialized materials should be carefully and specifically chosen in order to create the reading experience intended by the creator or writer. Serialization is perfectly supported by YouTube, which provides a subscription feature that conveniently places new videos specifically catered to each user’s interests on one page and also marks which videos have not been viewed.

Content creators have been taking advantage of the serialization of content for many years. Early journalists Rufus Benjamin and Park Griswold cleverly devised a plan that would allow them to market a serialized story for free. They began circulating “Brother Jonathan,” a story that could be distributed without cost as a newspaper due to the small amount of actual news that was included (Radway 23). Benjamin and Griswold succeeded due to free distribution, but they also made the effort to appeal to an audience which they suspected may be tired of the crime, politics, and other common topics of the regular news (23). Brother Jonathan was successful because, as a regularly serialized and distributed publication, it created a regular audience.

Authors of dime novels also recognized the importance of finding or creating an audience that would regularly consume the product they were creating. Their goal was to “further sales by supplying it [the audience] with endless imitations of the first success” (23). The authors and publishers of dime novels were able to produce books that were similar enough to secure an audience of readers who knew what to expect from the book, but the books were different enough from each other (though still “imitations” of the first) that readers were still interested in purchasing the stories. In the same way the producers of dime novels adapted the books themselves in order to secure an audience, the founder of

Pocket Books Robert de Graff tuned into readers' opinions of the places where they were purchasing books. Actual bookstores were not as populous as they are today, and de Graff knew that most Americans found them to be "intimidating and inhospitable" (Radway 28). Although it would seem counterintuitive to sell books everywhere but in a bookstore, de Graff was keen to market to the preferences of the audience. The bookstores may be full of books, but unless they were also filled with people book sales would not flourish.

Green and Su faced some of the same challenges as previous creators and distributors of content. Even if they were able to adapt *Pride and Prejudice* successfully, it would not matter if an enthusiastic audience was not created or located. Where they have been wildly successful is in the selection of the medium through which they tell Lizzie's story. YouTube has proven to be a nearly perfect place to set up a system of regular installations of a story. The same way dime novel authors continued to provide audiences with imitations of their previous works, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* regularly posted or uploaded episodes twice a week. In addition to providing regular and familiar content for its audience, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* also chose a familiar, accessible, and popular location or medium. As local bookstores become obsolete due to the installation of chain owned mega-stores, and even the corporately owned bookstores struggle to stay afloat, Green and Su catered to the preferences of their audience and chose to market their content on YouTube where it would be available for free to anyone with an internet connection.

The success that *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* found on YouTube is not without its challenges. Beyond the technological requirements of the internet and a device equipped to play YouTube videos, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* must prove its worth to those who are skeptics of the internet medium the creators have chosen. This is not a new struggle. At the height of its popularity, the romance novel and its readers were ridiculed. Radway's research on romance readers provides a glimpse into the struggle. When asked to compare the hobbies of reading romance novels to the hobby of watching sports on television, one of the women felt the need to "defend the leisure pursuit they enjoy so much" because

“the larger culture condemns [reading romance novels] as frivolous and vaguely, if not explicitly, pornographic” (54). Categorizing *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* as pornographic would be an unfair exaggeration, but it would not take much of a stretch for some traditionalists to find YouTube to be frivolous. Critics and scholars may dismiss the possibility of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* containing any valuable content because it was created on YouTube, but others who witness the story unfold with an open mind may find that the medium provides a valid method for effective storytelling. It is hard to say if this is the future of storytelling, but Green and Su have proven that modern tools and forms of media can be used to bring a classic story to a modern audience.

Even as sound as the medium of YouTube seems to be for storytelling, there was still the matter of finding or creating an audience willing to view and continue viewing the content created for *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Green was able to convert viewers from his YouTube channel “Vlogbrothers,” a channel he shares with his brother John Green. On the topic of securing an audience, Radway notes, “finding an audience for each new book and developing a method for getting that book to its potential readers” is one of the most pressing issues for publishers in a “modern society” (32). Green had a large advantage in this situation, having already slowly built up an audience familiar with YouTube. Green’s subscribers and regular viewers made a perfect audience on which to focus advertising, which largely consisted of plugs in the videos for the Vlogbrothers channel, as the viewers were already familiar with the medium and Green’s quality of standards. Green’s experiences in advertising for a new audience can be compared to that of the publishers of the initial romance novels. Publishers found that once an audience had been established, “they could limit advertising expenditures because the potential or theoretical audience they hoped to attract had already been gathered for them” (Radway 32). Green and Su also spent a surprisingly small amount of money and effort on creating a buzz for their project, as an audience that reflected the population that they intended to create content for was already in existence. Green also had a direct connection to and influence upon the content that the target audience was already consuming. This meant that the audience of the Vlogbrothers channel was already developed

enough that Green and Su did not have to start from scratch in the quest to find or create an audience that would take interest in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*.

Although audiences can easily overlap, there is no doubt that the experiences of reading a book or watching a video blog are very different from one another. A reader of a text is free to pause and reflect on the text whenever necessary, simply by looking away from the words on the page. In the case of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, the “give-and-take” process that is essential in extracting meaning from a text or other source must take place much more quickly. The video will not pause itself if the viewer finds a particular word confusing or begins a tangent of thought due to a personal connection to something in the text. Watching a video gives the viewer much less control and (unless of course the viewer utilizes the pause function) does not allow time to think like a reader experiences when they put a book down. The video will continue relaying content until the reader physically stops the delivery, unlike with reading, where as soon as the reader begins reflecting on the content they have read, the input of new content ceases because they are not continuing to read. In this way, the reader may easily become overwhelmed with the input from the video and lose sight of the content which is most important to the telling of the story. Rosenblatt claims that the instantaneous delivery of audiovisual materials gives viewers a chance to put up a wall between themselves and the content, thus increasing the necessity for reflection: “Anything said about the need for reflection on the reading experience applies also to the audiovisual media, since their very immediacy creates an even greater impetus toward a self-protective shield” (177). For many viewers of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, the comments section provides a means with which that wall can be breached. As can be expected, the comments on the videos range from relevant and observant to irrelevant and obscene, but more importantly the comments allow a place for viewers who wish to engage in reflection with the material to do so. Some comments, like the following from user “vielsu” on Episode 14 “I Really Suck at Video Games,” indicate a critical viewership: “Watching these early videos having seen all that's happened since makes you really realise how Lizzie was really constantly, low-level mean to Lydia... Such amazingly clever

writing- I never noticed it the first time round.” Other comments on the same video, like the following from user “Tarantallegra2,” actually mark observation of the characters themselves interacting on YouTube: “Awww, Lydia is rewatching Lizzie's videos (sadface).” The comments show that the wall continues to be breached even a year after the series has been released. The first appearance of Darcy in Lizzie's videos was highly anticipated, and the day that the video was released was dubbed “Darcy Day.” Many comments on Episode 60, “Are You Kidding Me!” show a continued attention to Darcy Day even a year later. User “Rebecca Beam” commented, “It's been a year... Happy Darcy Day to all of you!” and user “Franzz Layno Paqueo” chimed in with a comment on the significance of Darcy Day: “Forget Halloween! Celebrate Darcy Day Year One!!!” The comments section provides a place where users can contribute their personal opinions and experiences. This makes viewing the series, whether for the first time or over again a year later, an interactive experience.

Even with all of the potential for reflection and interaction, YouTube could be stifling the ability of its viewers to respond to content in an original way. Readers are meant to interact with a text, to connect emotionally, and to appreciate the content of literature. According to Rosenblatt, “The greater the reader’s ability to respond to the stimulus of the word and the greater his capacity to savor all that words can signify of rhythm, sound, and imagine, the more fully will he be emotionally and intellectually able to participate in the literary work as a whole” (48). These are reasonable and necessary goals, which would ideally be achieved whenever a reader picked up a text. The observations that Rosenblatt makes in the case of written word can also be applied to the content from *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Viewers should respond to the “stimulus” of the video and increasingly value the meaning gleaned from the script, emotional portrayals, and structure of the video blogs. There is a possibility that viewing the vlogs may spoon feed the viewer the meaning of the story, essentially cutting off a viewer’s ability to interpret and make personal connections that would otherwise be exercised while reading a novel. This is why it is important for the creators of the series to not only create an audience but also to be in tune with the expectations of their audience.

Being aware of the expectations the audience has for the content of the series allows its creators to present the content in a way that will interest and motivate its consumers. In order for an audience to have any kind of reaction to a text, each individual reader must first have a reason to purchase or in some other way invest in the text. Readers must choose the texts they believe are worth their time and money. In some ways, readers have been directly influencing the production of the material they read for many years. Early in American history, writers would solicit the funds needed for publishing from “specific, known subscribers” and would try to cater to the interests of the subscribers in order to generate more interest and willingness to contribute (Radway 21). The creators of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* have employed a similar tactic. Many of the viewers who began watching the vlogs were already viewers of Hank’s Vlogbrothers channel and therefore were accustomed to watching content on YouTube. Green and Su appealed to an audience that was already accustomed to using the internet to fund their project by creating a Kickstarter. The following is an explanation of the way the projects are completed from [www.kickstarter.com](http://www.kickstarter.com):

Project creators set a funding goal and deadline. If people like a project, they can pledge money to make it happen. Funding on Kickstarter is all-or-nothing--projects must reach their funding goals to receive any money. All-or-nothing funding might seem scary, but it’s amazingly effective in creating momentum and rallying people around an idea. To date, an impressive 44% of projects have reached their funding goals.

The website also describes how content creators such as writers or composers used similar strategies to raise funds. The creators would raise money “not just with help from large patrons, but by soliciting money from smaller patrons... these subscribers might have received an early copy or special edition of the work” (Pemberly Digital). Kickstarter is designed to loosely follow this example, using the internet to allow people from anywhere to contribute to the project without concern that their money would be wasted, as no money is given to the creators until the goal is reached.

The Kickstarter for *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* was set to last one month, from March 22 - April

22, 2013. The fundraising goal for the entire month was set at \$60,000, which would be used to make the series available on DVD to those who contributed as well as to support the production of more web and vlog-based projects. The response to the project was enormous, and the goal was reached in the first three hours of the month-long fundraiser (Taylor). In total, 7,158 people donated \$462,405 to the project. According to Molly Taylor in an article for *The Daily Beast*, Su is proud of the way fans have taken to the serialized storytelling: “The series had an audience of thousands from the first episode, and that audience has stayed loyal ever since.” This purchasing and investing behavior goes above and beyond typical reader or viewer response. The \$462,405 raised by the audience of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* exceeded the original fundraising goal by 670%. According to Radway, repeated purchase and consumption indicate that “audience satisfaction has been achieved” (49). After such a remarkably speedy and successful round of fundraising, it seems clear that audience satisfaction has been reached and exceeded in the case of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*.

Some projects only aim to provide audience satisfaction for the sake of then capitalizing off of the resulting profit. Often when this is the case, literature is written to fit a specific formula that is meant to meet the needs and satisfy the majority of the audience, but only at the lowest possible price. It is especially common for romance novels to be written this way because their readers have come to expect a certain structure and outcome. By providing the expected outcome while putting in as little effort as necessary, publishers make a maximum profit while still only putting forth a minimal effort. However, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* was not created to turn a profit. This is not to say that money was not an issue for Green and Su; Green noted on a thread on Reddit.com that copyright played a part in which novel they chose to use for the adaptation (ecogeek). Additionally, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* initially received no funding other than what Green provided out of his own personal funds. After a few months of increased viewership, the creators were able to make some money from the ads that play before the videos, but those funds were not enough to repay Green’s initial investment. It was not until an unexpected deal was made with media and entertainment company DECA that Green was repaid for

his initial investments (Miller). This model of production does not sound anything like the model of production for typical contemporary romance literature as it is described by Radway. She argues that the contemporary romance is “nothing more than a highly sophisticated version of... category literature and... its publishers are, if anything, even more interested in profit than were their nineteenth-century counterparts” (23). While “highly sophisticated” is an apt way to describe storytelling through the use of video blogging on the internet, the creators of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* did not produce the content with the intent of making a large profit.

Green and Su were much more interested in discovering a relationship between viewers and the content than turning a profit. Even at the beginning of the project, the series had a large viewership largely due to Green's popularity as a vlogger already being well established in the YouTube community. As the number of episodes grew, the audience grew as well. On a Tumblr post describing the audience perpetuation of the series, Su wrote, "My philosophy in getting the word out is to tell ‘one to tell many.’ I mean sure if you have a friend that’s a Jane Austen fan, they should at least check out *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*... But I like trying to tell someone or some organization that has the ear of lots of people.” Green and Su are focused on the audience and the way the audience responds to and interacts with the content. This does not sound like the money-hungry voice of a publisher who produces material to fit into a specific genre for the sake of finding an audience that will make the purchase. Viewers of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* should instead expect a sincere effort from the creators to bring the material to the audience in a new and exciting format.

Thanks to Green and Su's focus on their audience, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is more than another modern adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. The interactive nature of the series allows for engagement on a deeper level than with the novel. Using YouTube as the main outlet of production for *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* has changed the way consumers and producers of content interact with each other. Viewers can choose to watch only the videos that Lizzie posts, but the videos themselves promote higher engagement. In Episode 20, “Enjoy the Adorbs,” Lydia promotes her own videos, her

Twitter, and even a Twitter for her cat (who takes the name of one of the other Bennet sisters): “I did get a cat. I named her Kitty. She follows me around everywhere and now you can follow her 'cause she's on Twitter!” When the controversy between Lydia and George Wickham was playing out, regular everyday users like President Lucy (@Lucy\_Shanners) expressed their distaste for Wickham on Twitter and found themselves engaged in the conflict with Lydia:

George Wickham: @TheLydiaBennet I've got a buddy who's a sky writer. Want me to make a call? I will. Anything you want to show you my heart :)

President Lucy: @TheGWickham @thelydiabennet I HATE YOU [MOST] ARDENTLY WICKHAM

Lydia Bennet: @LucyShanners @TheGWickham God, just leave him alone! What is wrong with you guys?

Using digital media as a tool for interaction allows creators Green and Su to retell *Pride and Prejudice* in a way that makes the story easily accessible for an audience which has incorporated technology into almost every aspect of life. Not only has *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* adapted the story to be told through video blogging, the story is also expanded to other social media outlets. As Liz Shannon Miller wrote for *Giaom*, “The show’s extensive transmedia components, covering characters and action happening off screen...deserves a large portion of the credit for this engagement.” The show provides more than one outlet for engagement. Each of Lizzie’s episodes are featured on YouTube. Several spin-off channels have been created, including “The Lydia Bennet” featuring Lizzie’s sister Lydia, “Maria of the Lu,” featuring Charlotte’s younger sister, “Collins and Collins,” which features instructional videos, “Pemberley Digital,” hosted by Gigi Darcy, as well as a second video blog project modeled after one of Austen’s unfinished novels, “Welcome to Sandition” (Green).

Additionally, several of the characters have Twitter accounts, Tumblr blogs, or Pinterest pages. This allows each viewer to be as involved in the project as they wish. Jane Bennet's Pinterest page reflects the progression of her relationship with Bing Lee. During the time after Bing cuts ties with

Jane, she creates a Board titled “miss it.” This board is comprised of quotations about breakups such as, “I can feel you forgetting me,” and, “Fri(END) Girlfri(END) Boyfri(END) Bestfri(END) Everything has an end” (Bennet, Jane). Users on Pinterest have commented on these two Pins on Jane's board with comforting and reassuring comments, telling Jane “Everything will work out in the end—I know it” and “Bing could never forget you Jane!” The reactions to the details of the plot that only occur in readers' minds while they read the novel are playing out in a visual and interactive way thanks to the transmedia components of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. A new kind of interaction is taking place between the creators, actors, and viewers of the series because there are so many different ways that viewers can gain input from the world of Lizzie Bennet.

The viewers of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* use the transmedia components of the project to participate in the creation of content, while simultaneously consuming the content. In the same way, a reader picks up a book and, while reading, is brought into the world of the author. Rosenblatt describes this process as participation between the reader and the literary work: “The reader seeks to participate in another’s vision--to reap knowledge of the world, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain insights that will make his own life more comprehensible” (7). In reading *Pride and Prejudice*, the reader seeks to participate in Austen’s vision. In viewing *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, the viewer seeks to connect emotionally and participate in Green and Su’s vision of Austen’s world. What sets *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* apart is the ability its viewers have to literally participate in the world. Viewers can comment on videos, where the creators or actors (who keep character in all of their transmedia outlets) can respond to them personally. Viewers can follow the characters on Twitter, Tumblr, and Pinterest and interact with them there. Fans go to sites like Reddit.com to interact with the creators. Question and Answer videos were created where the characters address questions written in by viewers of the blogs. These examples are only a few of the ways utilizing social media and YouTube has allowed participation and interaction with a text to go beyond the reader and the text itself.

One of the ways active participation was showcased in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* was through

the excitement and anticipation of the first appearance of Mr. Darcy, which was noted on Twitter with its own hashtag: #darcyday. Through the first fifty-nine episodes of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, Darcy was often a subject of conversation but was never pictured. As the series drew closer to the episode in which Darcy would be featured, the hype steadily increased. Speculation as to who would portray Darcy grew in the comments section of the vlogs, over Twitter and in forums. Liz S. Miller discussed #darcyday in a story for *Giaom*, noting that the “level of fan engagement... made #darcyday a landmark one for the series [and] helped it recently secure a deal with DECA for infrastructure and financial support.” Miller linked the project’s ability to stimulate viewer engagement with its financial success and its support from the media and entertainment company DECA. The viewers’ responses to the way Darcy was unveiled indicate the project’s successful attempts to engage and involve its viewers. This is not, however, a new phenomenon. The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* has been enthralling readers from the beginning. Mary Russel Mitford, a critic and writer in the early nineteenth century, responded to the twists of the novel. Her review of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1814 in which she declares who should be romantically involved with whom is even slightly reminiscent of a YouTube comment:

It is impossible not to feel in every line...the entire want of taste which could produce so worldly a heroine as the beloved of such a man as Darcy. Wickham is equally bad. Oh! They were just fit for each other, and I can not forgive that delightful Darcy for parting them. Darcy should have married Jane. (qtd. in Abbey 54)

Mitford's present-day contemporaries are the kinds of YouTube viewers who plague Lydia Bennet's nightmares. In a conversation with Lizzie after she discovers how George Wickham is going to ruin her reputation, Lydia is convinced that Lizzie and the viewers of the videos have strong opinions regarding how the characters should comport themselves: “(Lizzie) I don't want you to leave. (Lydia) Why not? They do. (Lizzie) No. (Lydia) 'Lydia, get over yourself!' 'Lydia, you're being too dramatic!' 'Lydia, you dragged Lizzie away from Darcy and Gigi, where she could have been happy forever! You're so selfish’” (Green and Su). Regardless of the amount of time that has passed since the novel's publication,

readers have been searching for a way to engage with the novel and to express their interpretation of the novel to others. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* gives people an outlet (many outlets, in fact) through which engagement and participation with the content is easily achieved.

Audience or reader participation can be achieved without various forms of interactive technology; people have been reading and actively participating with texts for centuries. But there is a kind of text which allows for more participation than others. Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has been described as a novel with a certain indeterminacy, which according to Iser, is the key to reader engagement and participation. "Texts with such minimal indeterminacy," says Iser, "tend to be tedious, for it is only when the reader is given the chance to participate actively that he will regard the text, whose intention he himself has helped to compose, as read. For we generally tend to regard things that we have made ourselves as being read" (10). Not only is this indeterminacy at least partially responsible for the novel's ongoing relevance and timelessness, but it also lends itself to an increased possibility for reader interaction. Gaps in the plot that must be filled in through interaction allow the reader or viewer to feel as if he or she has actually participated in the creation of the project. For this reason, *Pride and Prejudice* was an excellent candidate for adaptation, specifically into a video blog. Active participation is a distinctly important function of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*.

Part of the reason viewers of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* were so eager to participate in the interactive nature of the project is due to the social function of the vlog series for escape and enjoyment. Fans of the series are loyal; they watch regularly, recruit new viewers, and are "rewatching, reblogging, GIF-making, meme-generation superfans" (Miller). The fans of the vlogs are not only fans of the YouTube series. They have taken the story to new levels, incorporating it into other forms of social media and making it a large part of their lives. In this way, it offers an escape from the monotony of day to day life by integrating content that is considered interesting and significant. The escape that literature provides from a person's daily life influences the relationship between the reader and the literature, but also between the reader and the publisher or creator. The reader purchases or spends time

on a piece and finds that it provides them with some kind of entertainment, distraction, or escape. The reader then continues to invest in the literature or others of the same sort to maintain that enjoyment. Publishers recognize this in their readers, and some take advantage of readers seeking escape.

Knowing that readers seek escape was not enough information for publishers to create a product to completely satisfy their consumers. Obtaining response from an audience is an integral aspect of the creative process. For early publishers, gaining feedback from their audiences was a challenge. There was no effective direct way to know if the product that was created met the needs of the consumers. Therefore, “publishers simply had to trust that continuous feeding would mean continuous buying” (Radway 23). Early publishers did not have the advantage of reading reviews online or reaching out to the public through social media. They simply found what worked and consistently provided the audience with a product to consume. Sales that were consistent and that led to more profits were often those that were from a publisher to a predictable and consistent audience, or the same group of readers for every new piece of literature (24). Publishers found readers who were satisfied by their content and continued to market toward those readers because it was a safe bet that they would continue investing in literature that addressed their interests. From this description, it would seem that the creators of content see the needs and interests of their public as a series of lists on paper, rather than as characteristics of a living, breathing group of people.

In a world of instant gratification, it would be easy for any kind of creator to perform a Google search to find this kind of list of what an audience thinks of the content being created. There is, however, a benefit to contacting an audience directly to discover its needs and interests. Even over 150 years ago, Charles Dickens was taking the opinions of his readers into consideration. Part of his ability to do so came from the fact that his writing was serialized. He did not do all of his writing in advance of its serialized release. Instead, he wrote the parts week by week, and between each installment he “tried to find out as much as possible about the way in which his readers visualized the development of the story” (Iser 10). Dickens recognized the advantage given to him by publishing his work serially.

Writing a novel in one sitting and then publishing and releasing it to the public does not allow the author to get any feedback from the audience before creating the final product. When producing serialized content, the author or writer can gather audience feedback and even respond to or incorporate the feedback into the next installment of their piece.

The method of gathering audience feedback used by Green and Su is similar to that of Dickens. On Reddit.com, Green was asked by user “tehnerdofnerds,” “What’s the most challenging part of participating in something this big? Do you feel a lot of pressure to please the viewers, since there is such a vast majority of them?” Green responded, “I mostly feel pressure to create a good thing and I hope the viewers will agree that it is good. I have learned a lot about what people like, though, by reading comments and seeing what episodes do well, and examining how our demographics and views have grown.” When asked about pleasing viewers, Green acknowledged looking to the response from the viewers for judgment on the series. During Episode 75, “Merry Christmas,” viewers were encouraged by Lizzie, Charlotte, and Jane to post their own video responses in a similar vlog form: “The point of a holiday card is to catch up with people that you don’t hear from often. (Charlotte) But you already know all about us. (Jane) And it would be so good to see you. (Lizzie) So please post a video response and tell us about your favorite holiday tradition. (Jane) No matter what holiday you celebrate” (Green and Su). Aside from comments and video responses, YouTube tracks a variety of statistics on its videos, including number of views, time watched, subscriptions, engagement (which includes likes, dislikes, comments, sharing, etc.), demographics, and discovery/traffic. The ability to track these statistics is yet another way YouTube is changing the way readers and/or viewers are able to interact with and impact content creators.

Due to the interaction with the creators of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, viewers actually experience the plot shifting as they respond to the material. In Episode 38, “Tale of Two Gents,” Lizzie is hedging the topic of her interaction with George Wickham, and she gives in to talking about him, noting, “Well, you all keep asking in the comments, anyway, so, um...” (Green and Su). Many viewers,

especially those who did comment on Lizzie's previous videos that broached the subject of George Wickham, likely feel a rush of excitement after hearing Lizzie address their interests, closely followed by another rush of excitement after learning that Lizzie is about to reveal additional information. After Jane and Bing leave together for New York, the writers include an update which, according to Lizzie, is a result of comments left on previous videos: "So some of you have been asking about Jane now that she's moved to New York with Bing... Well, sort of with Bing. She's called several times about how excited she is, and it's great that we've been better at communicating" (Green and Su). Viewers connect with the creators and with the actors. Viewers share their opinions frequently and without restraint, and sometimes the opinions of the viewers may even have an impact on the final product. This is not to say that the viewers had any control over the project. In an article for *WIRED Magazine*, Michael Anderson puts it best: "[Even though] *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*' audience could chat with the show's characters on Twitter and Facebook, leave video responses to the various channels, and even ask the characters questions through frequent Q&A videos, the project remained a story." There was no way for any of the viewers to change the major plot points of the novel, but nonetheless, viewer participation played a large part in creating the nature of the adaptation. On a thread started by Green on Reddit.com, user "bethaliz" asked, "How do you feel when you see a comment/tweet that has predicted exactly what and how an event is going to happen? Are there any surprises that you haven't seen predicted yet?" Green's response included a tip of the hat to a particularly observant (or lucky) viewer: "There is an upcoming surprise that I saw predicted EXACTLY... I certainly didn't make a big deal of it when I saw it, but it was pretty exciting to me... It's cool to see people thinking forward and, every once in a while, maybe we take a tip or two from viewer ideas. We're on a late enough schedule to incorporate them."

This nod to viewers' influence on the series is not the only comment Green has made. According to Anderson's article for *WIRED Magazine*, Green noted that "Lydia's increased presence in the series was due entirely to the positive fan response to her portrayal, but that is inherent in the nature of responsive serial fiction." This was played out in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* but also in Lydia's own

series of videos. In Episode 86, "Sisterly Support," Jane and Lizzie talk about how Lizzie may remedy her strained relationship with Lydia and learn more about what happened to her sister by watching her videos: "Maybe you should watch all her videos. Lydia listens to you. To both of us" (Green and Su). Viewers can also take this opportunity for enrichment (made easy by links to Lydia's videos at the end of several episodes of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*) of the story if they so choose. Although fans could not control the outcome of the story, nor create any major changes in plot, their engagement did have an impact on the way the story was told. The influence of an active audience got the attention of both actors and writers of the series and resulted in changes to the adaptation.

A reader's response to literature requires the reader to impart some of their personal experience into their reading of the text. The experiences available to viewers of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* create an environment that not only supports but expands reader response. The parts of the interaction between the viewer and the content exist outside of the viewer's imagination. The interaction between the viewers and the creators and "characters" via the actors and actresses on the many different elements of transmedia associated with the series allows the input of the audience to affect the content of the series. A more appropriate term for this kind of interaction is reader engagement. The viewers of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* are not only imparting their personal experiences on the content of the video blogs, but they are experiencing the story shift according to their own level of engagement. Because Green and Su have created an adaptation that allows viewers to engage with the text, I believe they have created one of the most successful adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* since its original publication over 200 years ago. Since *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* has concluded the series has continued to gain fame and recognition for its accomplishments. The series won an Emmy award in the category of Original Interactive Program and several other awards including Best Web Series from TV.com and Best Interactive Series during the "Streamy" awards, which present awards to creators of original online content (Pemberly Digital). The creators of the series are also planning a second adaptation of another of Austen's novels: *Emma*. The series is titled *Emma Approved* and is scheduled to release in

October 2013. Judging by the success of the first adaptation and the plans for a second, it seems that content creators everywhere would be wise to begin familiarizing themselves with this new kind of reader engagement. Creating content through the modernized medium of video blogging could be the next "big thing" in novel adaptation.

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