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MODELING PARTICIPATORY LITERACY (IN YOUR PANTS):
AN ANALYSIS OF PRINT AND NEW MEDIA CONVERGENCE IN THE
VLOGBROTHERS' YOUTUBE VIDEOS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Modeling Participatory Literacy (In Your Pants): An Analysis of Print and New Media Convergence in the Vlogbrothers' YouTube Videos

Engaging with the spoken and performed content of more than 600 YouTube videos, this dissertation examines how networked digital media can be used to speak to a young adult audience about the value of books, reading, and writing. Using a thematic analysis, supplemented by discourse analysis and visual analysis, this study constructs a portrait of two influential adult YouTube stars, the Vlogbrothers (John and Hank Green), and specifically identifies their personal literacy practices. This research then analyzes how the online video platform of YouTube transforms those practices into modeling behavior for their adolescent fan-base. The research further describes how the Vlogbrothers create social, networked spaces where their fans can participate in literacy practices and how they use the YouTube platform to engage their fans more fully in those practices. The research also traces how those practices ultimately inform and reflect broader community values. This dissertation thus contributes to a more nuanced appreciation of how reading and writing can manifest in the context of social and digital media and calls for a reconsideration of anxieties that online media, like YouTube videos, will undermine adolescent literacy habits. At the same time, this dissertation contributes to ongoing research into how youth and adults collaborate to support learning in online and informal spaces, especially in the context of youth-oriented fan communities. These contributions and their implications are discussed, with specific attention paid to how this dissertation can contribute to future work on the role of fan communities in providing broad-based learning opportunities.

For Mom and Dad,

And for Tim:

For helping me keep the faith.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION, OVERVIEW, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Literacy Anxiety in the Digital Age

In 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts published a report, titled *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, that voiced a number of explicit concerns about the diminishing reading habits of young people. This report was a follow-up to a 2004 survey-based study, titled *Reading at Risk*, which detailed a decline in reading amongst Americans in general, and it specifically noted that “declines were steepest amongst young adults” (NEA 2007, 5). The report echoed concerns in mainstream media about contemporary youth’s deteriorating reading skills and reading comprehension, represented by a spate of educator-authored titles published around the same time: Tovani’s *I Read It, But I Didn’t Get It* (2000), Blaunstein & Lyon’s *Why Kids Can’t Read* (2006 & 2014), and Gallagher’s *Readicide* (2009). Notably, many critics placed the blame for these declines on competition for attention from other media, noting that reading time for young adults was often shared by video/computer game playing, instant-messaging, emailing, or web-surfing; and the NEA report intentionally placed the act of reading in direct opposition to online digital media use, remarking specifically that “literary reading declined significantly in a period of rising Internet use” (2007, 8-9). In creating this opposition, these reports and texts played into broader social anxieties about the impact of online and digital media on the literacy practices of the young and ultimately reinforced the pervasive assumptions about young adults and reading identified by reading research scholars Ross, McKechnie and Rothbauer: that young adults don’t read, that they prefer music, television, and computer-based media, and that those media are inherently rivals with books for the attention of young readers (2006, 102).

Around the same time, similar anxieties about the impact of digital technologies on the writing skills of young people also began to emerge. Anecdotal examples raised concerns that “the quality of writing by young Americans [was] being degraded by their electronic communication, with its carefree spelling, its lax punctuation and grammar, and its acronym shortcuts” (Pew 2008, i). In response, researchers sought to explain the relationship between digital forms of communication and the development of the youth’s writing skills in hopes of mitigating any perceived negative effect. Notably, these articles often constructed forms of writing in categories that placed traditional writing practices in direct opposition to digital media-based practices: online versus offline, formal versus informal, text versus “txt” (Rosen et al 2010; Plester, Wood, and Bell 2008; Kemp et al 2010; Kemp 2011). A 2008 Pew Internet and American Life project survey, titled *Writing, Technology and Teens*, found similar dichotomous thinking in youth themselves. While the associated report ultimately concluded that writing was a widespread practice among teens, it also noted that youth conceptually separated the formal writing associated with school from their online writing practices: “they do not believe that communication over the internet or text messaging is writing” (Pew 2008, ii). The report similarly argued that “new technologies...have changed the meaning of what it means to write and write well” (3).

By contrast, on January 1, 2007, brothers John and Hank Green initiated a YouTube video-blog (vlog) project that would use digital media to celebrate, promote, and provide opportunities to engage in traditional literacy practices. These videos then quickly garnered a significant fan-base of predominantly teens and young adults, who would ultimately join the Green brothers (known to their fan-base as the Vlogbrothers) in those literacy practices. In the videos, the Vlogbrothers spoke often about books, reading, and engagement with their favorite

stories; they embraced reading fandoms, and in return, their fans openly shared their love of books and reading with the brothers and each other. The Vlogbrothers would simultaneously encourage their fan-base to participate in a variety of reading and writing-focused activities, including forum-based book discussions, collaborative creating writing projects, and video-based celebrations of favorite books. They would then draw attention to these efforts both in their videos and in their live events.

All of which not only promoted the acts of reading and writing within their fan community, but also provide new ways of thinking about and understanding how print-based practices and online media interface to create a convergent, mutually reinforcing form of literacy. Remarkably, the Vlogbrothers themselves rarely use the word “literacy” itself; within the six-year scope of this study, they only speak the word twice: one in reference to scientific literacy and once in support of the global literacy efforts of the Harry Potter Alliance, a fan community that largely overlapped with their own. Yet the rhetoric employed within their videos, the personal practices performed in them, and the relationship the brothers actively craft with their fans through them all reveal the significant role that literacy-related practices play, both in the lives of the Vlogbrothers and in the community of fans that evolved in response to their videos. This dissertation research, then, seeks to engage in a deep analysis of traditional literacy (reading and writing) as it appears in the Vlogbrothers’ YouTube videos and to trace the evolution of literacy-related practices into literacy-related values within the Vlogbrothers’ adolescent fan community. In doing so, the project aims to speak both to the anxieties about conventional literacy skills raised by the advent of the digital age and to the adversarial relationship between online and offline literacy practices that often form the foundation of these anxieties.

Nerdfighteria: A History

To understand the significance of books, reading, and writing within the Vlogbrothers' videos and in the resulting fan community, known as collectively as Nerdfighteria, it is essential first to recognize who the Vlogbrothers are, who the Nerdfighters are, and how the relationship between them emerged over time. Fortunately, both the Vlogbrothers and Nerdfighters were (and remain) invested a common community-foundation narrative that they actively participate in constructing. The brief history provided below therefore draws from various instances of this form of community storytelling: building a common narrative from both the Vlogbrothers, including videos like "How to Be a Nerdfighter: A Vlogbrothers FAQ" (2009), and the Nerdfighters, represented by interviews from the Nerdfighter-produced collaborative documentary, "A Film to Decrease Worldsuck: The Nerdfighters Documentary" (Lindgren 2013).

The Vlogbrothers

Brothers John and Hank Green established their eponymous YouTube channel *vlogbrothers* (<https://www.youtube.com/user/vlogbrothers>) on January 1, 2007, and for the first year of the channel's existence took turns posting videos to their shared channel every weekday. After the first year, they continued to post videos regularly, at least a few times every week, and over time the channel garnered a sizable, actively engaged audience. Despite the channel's eventual popularity, though, the original intention of the channel had nothing to do with reaching young people or establishing any kind of notable following. Instead, their purpose was to exchange daily vlog-post letters as a way to strengthen their interpersonal, familial relationship. As the tagline for their initial project, Brotherhood 2.0, suggested and the animated text that opened their early videos confirmed, their intent was to explore "a whole new kind of

Brotherhood” through “365 days of textless communication” (2007, “Brotherhood 2.0: January 1st”).



Image 1.1 Logo from opening animation for Brotherhood 2.0 Project, from “Brotherhood 2.0: January 1st” (2007)

Even after their broader audience was established, the brothers’ focus remained fraternal. For example, both brothers continued to open their videos with their catchphrase greetings, “good morning, Hank” or “good morning, John,” even as the video content itself shifted to address a wider audience and included direct references to their fans. As John Green noted in an NPR interview more than a year after the project started, “when the audience got bigger, it was more people, but ultimately the most important person in our audience for me was always Hank” (Seabrook 2008). Further proof of this limited audience can be seen in the fact that the brothers exchanged videos for nearly seven months before any received more than 1,000 views (Lastufka and Dean 2009, x).

The focused, insular nature of the project, the channel, and the videos altered significantly in July 2007, however, with Hank Green’s song-video homage to the release of the final volume of the Harry Potter series. Titled “Accio Deathly Hallows,” the song and its associated video drew a significant audience and was featured on the front page of YouTube

(2007, “July 18: Accio Deathly Hallows (no spoilers)”). Viewers, particularly teenage and young adult fans of the Harry Potter novels, responded to Hank’s enthusiasm, to their shared fandom, and to the creative manifestation of that fandom. They began to watch videos previously posted to the Vlogbrothers’ channel and found kindred spirits in the video’s witty, engaging, and often self-deprecating stars. Hank’s video thus became a watershed moment in the establishment of the resulting fan community, and the channel rapidly morphed into a venue for popular videos that resonated with a predominantly teen and young adult audience. The Vlogbrothers meanwhile continued to express a personal interest in books, in reading fandoms, and in critical and creative engagement with stories and the wider world; and their honest desire to share their enthusiasms with each other fed into and connected with the broader community of viewers. The YouTube channel generally, then, became the inspiration for a fan community that similarly valued intellectual and imaginative engagement with books, media, and the world: a community called the Nerdfighters.

The emergence of the Nerdfighters, in turn, influenced the Vlogbrothers to continue creating and posting video content after the initial year-long Brotherhood 2.0 experiment drew to an end. Rebranding their channel at the beginning of 2008, the Green brothers abandoned references to Brotherhood 2.0 and replaced it graphically with a more prominent recognition of their Vlogbrothers identity.



Image 1.2 New logo from opening video montage, from “Nerdfighting in 2008, Pakistan, and Hillary Clinton” (2008)

A new introductory montage flipped quickly through brief selected clips from the previous year’s videos, simultaneously drawing viewer attention to the channel’s history and signifying the value of previous content to established fans. At the same time, the music used in the montage was identified by Hank as produced by self-identifying Nerdfighters, and the final image included text designed to lead viewer-fans to an early collective online space:

nerdfighters.com. In this way, the Vlogbrothers’ video content strengthened their connection to the Nerdfighters and established some of its earliest community values: familiarity with videos, creative production, and online participation across multiple platforms.

The Nerdfighters

John Green made his first mention of the term “Nerdfighters” in a video posted a full five months before Hank’s Harry Potter fan video (“Brotherhood 2.0: February 17, 2007”).

Curiously, the phrase itself was the result of a textual misreading, as John mistook the name of the video game AEROFIGHTERS as NERDFIGHTERS.



Image 1.3 John finds the video game Aerofighters, from “Brotherhood 2.0: February 17, 2007” (2007)

Throughout the rest of the video, John extrapolated on the possible premise of a video game called “Nerdfighters,” suggesting a Street Fighter-like combat game in which a team of nerd characters “fight the scourge of popular people.” He then composed (and sang) a potential theme song for the resulting game:

We’ve got calculators and trombones.
We’ve got D&D and Star Wars drones.
(They’re in the original box too, which makes them a lot more valuable)
Nerd Fighters. We’re fighting nerds!
We’re no longer just using our words.
(Although, by and large we are really articulate, so...)
When I’m not watching Battlestar Galactica
I’m designing weapons that will kick your ass-tica!
Nerdfighters, we fight with our brains,
Nerdfighters, we bring the fracking pain!

These lyrics, celebrating the innate power that comes from a nerd’s intelligence, inventiveness, and position as the ultimate fan, resonated with viewers who had revisited earlier videos, and the term was ultimately embraced by the growing fan community.

At one level, then, the Nerdfighters can be defined strictly by their relationship to the Vlogbrothers. As Hank recognized in the video “How To Be a Nerdfighter: A Vlogbrothers FAQ” (2009), “Nerdfighter is basically just the community that sprung up around our videos,

and basically we just get together and try to do awesome things and have a good time and fight against World Suck.” Nerdfighters themselves often acknowledge this foundational aspect of their fandom; as one defined the community in the Nerdfighter documentary, “we are the fan-base of two guys who became famous on the internet” (Lindgren 2013). Yet from the very beginning, the Nerdfighters defined themselves in broader terms that decentralized the Vlogbrothers and returned to the connotations found in John’s song: a band of likeminded self-identifying nerds who drew strength and pride from their inherent nerdiness. An alternate description of a Nerdfighter thus quickly emerged as the primary definition, one encapsulated by John in the Vlogbrothers FAQ (2009): “a Nerdfighter is a person who, instead of being made out of, like, bones and skin and tissue is made entirely of awesome.” In recognition of this popular definition, the Vlogbrothers regularly began making reference in their videos to “made-of-awesome Nerdfighters.” Notably, this broader definition also allowed the Vlogbrothers to self-identify as Nerdfighters themselves, a distinctive feature of the fan community discussed in more detail below.

The reference to awesomeness also played a role in one of the earliest and best known Nerdfighter catchphrases: Don’t Forget to be Awesome (or DFTBA). Initially a reminder used at the conclusion of Vlogbrothers’ videos, both the phrase and the initialism rapidly extended its reach to function as a greeting between fan community members. Over time, these and other insider references became a defining feature of the Nerdfighter community (see Table 1.1 below and Appendix A). Knowledge of and use of these terms, inside jokes, and catchphrases ultimately functioned as a way to identify oneself as a Nerdfighter to other members of the community.

Brotherhood 2.0	The name of the first year of videos on the vlogbrothers channel. In 2007, John and Hank decided to go one year without textual communication (sic). Instead, they would vlog to each other, each uploading a video every other day (except for weekends). The result? All of this.
Vlogbrothers	The name of Hank and John’s main YouTube channel. See A Brief History of the Vlogbrothers (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yk05_6Mf1GU)
Nerdfighter	Someone who, instead of being made out of bones and organs and stuff, is made entirely out of awesome. How do you know if you’re a Nerdfighter? If you want to be one, then you are. (To clarify - a Nerdfighter does not fight nerds. A Nerdfighter fights for nerds.) Term coined after John played an arcade game called Aero Fighters in an airport in video. The font used in the game made the words “Aero Fighters” look like “Nerd Fighters”.
Nerdfighteria	The collective online community of Nerdfighters; the official definition within the Nerdfighter lexicon is itself full of insider references: “Its exact location is not known (possibly <u>Winner, South Dakota?</u>), but contains within its bounds, if it has any (See <u>No Edge</u>), vlogbrothers and associated channels, <u>the Ning</u> , <u>Our Pants</u> , and anywhere where awesome is being done, and <u>worldsuck</u> is reduced.”
John Green	Half of the YouTube channel Vlogbrothers, father of Henry and Alice, husband to Sarah and brother to Hank. New York Times bestselling YA author of <i>Looking for Alaska</i> , <i>An Abundance of Katherines</i> , <i>Paper Towns</i> , <i>The Fault in Our Stars</i> and co-author of <i>Will Grayson</i> , <i>Will Grayson</i> and <i>Let It Snow</i> .
Hank Green	One half of the vlogbrothers. Also known as the brother of the author, John Green. Majored in Biochemistry in college, now a YouTuber, entrepreneur, and musician. He is John’s third favourite band behind The Mountain Goats, The Mountain Goats, and in front of John’s fourth favourite band, The Mountain Goats. (See also Who the eff is Hank?)
Who the eff is Hank?	A question commonly asked on Question Tuesday. The answers are always hilariously inaccurate. Early viewers were confused by John opening the videos with “Good morning, Hank” and would ask this question in comments.
Question Tuesday	The day that John answers real questions from real Nerdfighters. Rarely uploaded on Tuesday.

Table 1.1 A Selection of Nerdfighter References, Inside Jokes, and Catchphrases (adapted from *The Official Nerdfighter Lexicon* <https://nerdfighteria.com/lexicon>)

Accio Deathly Hallows	A song by Hank, which was featured on the front page of YouTube (when that was a thing) in July 2007. This greatly increased the number of subscribers to the vlogbrothers channel. Contains surprisingly accurate predictions about the plot of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. The wrock band Harry and the Potters have taken to encouraging Hank to play the song as often as possible.
Worldsuck	The Nerdfighter shorthand reference to global events and forces that contribute to people’s misery. It is the mission of Nerdfighters to “decrease worldsuck” through acts of kindness, fundraising for charities, and collaborative social action (i.e. “being awesome”).
Secret Project	Super Secret Projects, often undertaken before one of the brothers’ birthdays. The specifics of the projects are communicated via email after signing up to a Super Secret Mailing List.
Project for Awesome	A charity event that has taken place every December 17 since 2007. Created by John and Hank, the Project for Awesome attempts to take over the YouTube homepage and fill it with videos about charity. Anyone who wishes can make a video about a charity of their choice and upload it to YouTube. For the 48 hours of the P4A, everyone likes, shares, and comments on these videos in order to raise money which will be given to select charities at the end of the event.
Punishment	If Vlogbrother rules are broken (i.e. a video is longer than four minutes, or failure to post the video on time), Nerdfighters may choose a punishment for the offending brother to perform which must be completed within 1 week. Wives have veto power.
Dooblydoo	The description section of a YouTube video, also known to be the “about” section on YouTube videos for links and further information. E.g.: “links are available in the dooblydoo.” Coined by Craig “WheezyWaiter” Benzine.
Ning, The	A Nerdfighter forum which used to be the main hub of Nerdfighteria. Now the location of the Nerdfighter chat and Nerdfighter groups.
Ningmaster	A moderator of the Ning. John first created the term.
French the Llama	An exclamation one makes when completely and utterly excited. The phrase came into an existence during the Project for Awesome 2010 when John didn’t know what FTL stood for.

Table 1.1 (cont’d)

“In your pants”	A phrase added to the end of book titles with typically humorous results, a game credited to young adult fiction author Maureen Johnson. There is an ongoing challenge within Nerdfighteria to find the most hilarious/outrageous result. Inspired the name of various Nerdfighter forums spaces, including Your Pants and My Pants.
Giant Squid of Anger	What John becomes when an idea or attitude is completely ridiculous. This also happens to many other people on the internet, especially in YouTube comments. Portrayed by screaming and flailing.
So Jokes	1. (adj.) A phrase adopted by Nerdfighters to replace “so cool” e.g. “VidCon last year was so jokes!” or “Did you see the latest episode of Doctor Who? It was so jokes!”. 2. (n.) Hank’s first music album, full of funny and nerdy and basically awesome songs.
The Evil Baby Orphanage	A proposed solution to the philosophical question concerning the morality of traveling through time to kill political tyrants and mass murders (e.g., Hitler) when they are babies. Nerdfighters conclude that the babies should instead be kidnapped and raised in a dedicated orphanage to be good. The concept becomes fodder for lengthy forum discussions, a self-published card game, several creative writing projects, and a book proposal.
Secret Sister/ Secret Brother/ Secret Sibling	Nerdfighters who posted video responses to Brotherhood 2.0 videos, the underlying assumption being that if someone contributed to project between the brothers, they must be an unacknowledged sibling

Table 1.1 (cont’d)

Over time, the number of insider jokes increased exponentially until their sheer number emerged as related defining feature of the community. The Nerdfighters overtly recognized the abundance of catchphrases at play within their community; Nerdfighter Carli, for example, admitted in the documentary that “there are so many inside jokes that you, like, lose track of them,” while Nerdfighter Allan wryly commented, “a few would be understatement” (Lindgren 2013). The Nerdfighter documentary even dedicated an entire section to explaining the various “Inside (So) Jokes,” the title of which is itself an inside joke. John Green, meanwhile, in speaking about the plethora of inside jokes in their videos, reassures new viewers: “I just want to say to all of the new Nerdfighters, welcome. We're glad you're here. It will all make sense later”

(2008, “Ranting and Giving Stuff Away”). To help with that, the brothers even created and posted a playlist of key videos that served as a starting point for potential Nerdfighters, and the Nerdfighters themselves eventually created an online searchable Nerdfighter Lexicon to track the growing list of intersecting insider terms and phrases (represented in the online lexicon itself in hyperlinks). This dissertation similarly offers an abbreviated lexicon of relevant phrases in Appendix A, as a resource for understanding fan-specific terms and phrases in later quoted content and analysis. To be a Nerdfighter or to understand the Nerdfighters, then, required a working knowledge of fan community lore made accessible by engagement with Vlogbrothers’ videos and strengthened by participation in other Nerdfighter spaces online.

Their existence as an online community also functioned as an early defining feature of the Nerdfighter fan community, or Nerdfighteria. As Nerdfighter Zachary described in the documentary, Nerdfighteria existed “primarily online with interactions in real life.” He went on to recognize that existence as a complex manifestation of networked social media and contemporary digital culture: “I think it’s indicative of our era, of our time, why it’s online. Because I don’t think it would work as well if there wasn’t the internet,” while at the same time, “because it’s online, it allows all the people to get together and hang out and talk and chat and meet.” Nerdfighter Ashleigh, meanwhile, noted a similar pervasiveness of Nerdfighter activity in online social media spaces: “name the social network and I will show you where the Nerdfighters communicate.”

Nerdfighteria’s online presence also connected to its evolution as a predominantly adolescent fan community. As Nerdfighter Riley noted in the documentary, “Nerdfighters communicate online through multiple ways because we’re teenagers, and we’re really good at finding out ways to do that.” The continuing and pervasive assumption that actively practicing

Nerdfighters were typically teenagers or young adults was ultimately reinforced by a survey-based analysis of the Nerdfighter community completed by Hank in 2014. It concluded that approximately 76% of Nerdfighters were between the ages of 13 and 22, and in a video exploring the results of the survey, Hank noted that “high school and college has always been where most Nerdfighters are” (“2014 Nerdfighter Census Analysis”). Visual evidence of this demographic breakdown then manifested in the early video responses posted by Nerdfighters to YouTube, many of which featured young people speaking, and was also present in crowd shots posted by John after various live events and gatherings.

Yet even as Nerdfighteria was emerging as a predominantly young adult fan community, it was setting itself apart from the vast number of large teen-based fan communities, even those with ties to books and reading like the Harry Potter Alliance. Unlike most fandom-based communities, the Nerdfighters were not fans of only one common object, like a particular book series, author, television show, or film. While Nerdfighters were likely to be fans of the Vlogbrothers’ videos, John’s young adult novels, Hank’s songs, or any and all of the above, the underlying commonality between members was the very act of being a fan. As the Nerdfighters regularly asserted, to be a Nerdfighter is to be an engaged and unapologetic enthusiast. As Nerdfighter Riley noted in the documentary: “the entire point of a Nerdfighter is that you’re crazy passionate and super into *something*. It doesn’t matter what it is as long as there is something that burns you deep down to your core...that’s all that a Nerdfighter is,” while Nerdfighter Carli summarized, “we just like fandoms” (Lindgren 2013).

Meanwhile, John famously defined the relationship between fan and nerd this way: “Nerds are allowed to love stuff, like jump up and down in the chair, can’t control yourself love it. Hank, when people call people nerd, mostly what they’re saying is ‘you like stuff,’ which is

just not a good insult at all. Like, ‘you are too enthusiastic about the miracle of human consciousness,’” (2009, “Harry Potter Nerds Win at Life”). The quote was so well-received by the Nerdfighter audience that it inspired an untold number of pieces of fan art. Notably for this dissertation, this enthusiastic engagement with human creativity often expresses itself within the Nerdfighter community in relation specifically to books, reading, and writing. This makes the Nerdfighters of special interest to those concerned about the impact of online and social media on the reading habits of young people.

The Nerdfighters were also unique because, again unlike many teen-based fan communities, the object of the fandom was actively involved in the community itself. The Vlogbrothers were as defined by the Nerdfighters as the fan community is by the brothers. As Nerdfighter Renee described in the documentary, “I think they’re as much on the same level as we are. They’re a part of us, and we are part of the community.” Nerdfighter Riley echoed this sentiment, noting “they don’t act like adults. They don’t act all, you know, stuffy and pompous and look down on the rest of us. You know, they really relate to us. They remember what it was like to be a kid our age, and they don’t stop acting like it.” In this way, the Vlogbrothers established themselves as equals, self-identified Nerdfighters “on the same level” as their adolescent fan base.

The ways in which the Nerdfighters identify with the Vlogbrothers as co-participants in the same fan community built at least in part on a common privileged identity. Results from the 2014 Nerdfighter Census, for example, noted that a majority of Nerdfighters were white, like the Vlogbrothers themselves. As Hank said in describing the survey results, “Race and ethnicity. We are not a very diverse group: 85% non-Hispanic white.” Other racial identities, meanwhile, reported in single-digit percentages. In describing the survey question, Hank even owed to that

fact that he was not sure how to ask about race. Noting that nearly 4,000 people entered in alternatives to the options (including Nerdfighters with mixed race backgrounds), he admitted: “I added this question last second, so sorry that it's not a very diverse group of options...Race is a very difficult thing to try and nail down exactly what any one is, uh of course. But I thought that was important to know more about and obviously it is and I don't know how to feel about it to be honest.” His inability to craft the question and his apparent discomfort and lack of eloquence in talking about the results in themselves suggest the position of privilege that he and the other Nerdfighters occupy without discussing it.

Other demographic similarities were harder to quantify. Since most Nerdfighters reported being young people still in school, for example, there was difficulty in creating points of comparison in terms of education or income. Still regular questions to the Vlogbrothers from the Nerdfighters about going to college suggest a common higher education priority, and the Nerdfighters as a group are typically well-read with ready access to books and the ability to buy more books (a common identity discussed in Chapter Four). And while the census reported that, as a group predominantly made up of non-working students, “Nerdfighteria on the whole does not have a lot of money,” they did have enough disposable income to purchase goods from the Nerdfighter online fan store (30% of respondents/28,000 people) or to donate money to the Kiva microfinancing fundraising site (14% of respondents/12,000 people). They also have regular access to technology, as demonstrated by their participation in a online fan community that includes creating and posting different forms of media. In many ways, these demographic similarities established the Nerdfighter fan community as an inherently privileged one, one that reflects the privileged position of the Vlogbrothers themselves. That privileged position in many

ways allowed the Vlogbrothers to operate as community peers, then, and created some of the limitations on the broader impact of this research (as discussed in Chapter Eight).

At the same time the Vlogbrothers are community peers, they are also leaders who actively cultivate a position of expertise. As Nerdfighter Jennie acknowledges in the documentary, “they’re such good role models for everybody who’s part of the community that they just try to emulate that” (Lindgren 2013). Recognition of this influence manifested in a series of articles in mainstream media during 2013, including Rolling Stone, NPR, the New Yorker, and the Wall Street Journal, each seeking to explain the Nerdfighter phenomenon and what was called “the Green effect,” and ultimately culminated in 2014, when Time magazine named John Green of the 100 most influential people in the world based as much on his relationship with the Nerdfighters as on the popularity of his novels. Researcher Lili Wilkinson (2012) perhaps described the matter of influence best in her article on Nerdfighteria as a kind of heterotopia, “the Nerdfighters don’t form a bottom-up community – it’s created and curated by the Green brothers, and is largely driven by their values and interests.” Those values and interests, particularly as they relate to literacy practices like reading and writing, are the focus of this dissertation.

Project Overview

By studying the Vlogbrothers and the Nerdfighters in the context of contemporary anxieties about the reading and writing practices of young people, this dissertation seeks to create a more nuanced picture of the relationship between books and digital media and to understand digital media’s potential as a method for promoting and celebrating reading and text-based literacy. To do so, I engage in a detailed, systematic analysis of the Vlogbrothers’ YouTube video content, drawing out spoken and visual references to books, reading, and writing

and using them to construct a comprehensive, cohesive portrait of the Vlogbrothers' text-based literacy practices embedded within an audio-visual space. (Specifics of research design and methodology are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.) This portrait in turn allows me to investigate how the Vlogbrothers function as models for literary engagement and literacy achievement to their active and engaged fan-base of young people. This dissertation also intentionally recognizes the interactive and participatory nature of new media sites like YouTube, allowing me to extend the analysis to consider how the Vlogbrothers use digital media to engage their fans in "collaborative interchange" and "to create knowledge and identity in collaborative spaces" (Rosenblatt 2005, 28; Ondrejka 2008, 229). The latter part of this analysis is part of the dissertation's broader intention to understand how the Vlogbrothers' literacy practices and values, especially as modeled to and adopted by the Nerdfighters, might inform evolving theories about the literacy and learning in digital spaces. The project is therefore informed by research from a variety of interrelated disciplines and areas of study (described in more detail in Chapter 2), and the concluding analysis engages in conversation with that research across several points.

Research Questions

In order to develop a fully formed portrait of the Vlogbrothers as models for literacy practices and to appreciate the evolution of literacy-related practices and values within their fan community, this dissertation explores the following research questions:

Question 1.	How do John and Hank Green, individually and mutually as the Vlogbrothers, practice text-based literacy? How does the online video context impact those practices?	Chapter 4
Question 2.	How do the Vlogbrothers’ personal literacy practices inform and construct fan-community values and practices? How do they use online video content and context to communicate those values and to establish a community in which young people can learn and participate in those practices?	Chapters 5, 6, & 7
Question 3.	In what ways might community values and practices, as constructed and modeled by the Vlogbrothers, inform broader theories about the relationship between reading, writing, and new media, particularly as it relates to young people, learning, and literacy achievement?	Chapter 8

Table 1.2 Research Questions and Relevant Chapters

Answers to these questions may, in turn, provide researchers with new lenses through which to consider: (1) the intersection of reading, new media, and 21st century literacies, (2) young people’s traditional literacy practices in online and new media environments, and (3) the impact of new media practices on a broader understanding of critical and creative engagement with texts.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation provides an account of the design, findings, analysis, conclusions, and implications of the research project described above. The structure of the dissertation unfolds as follows:

- Chapter Two provides an overview of the scholarly literature that informs both the research and the analysis. It positions the dissertation at the intersection of various fields, including: print culture and new media studies, and conventional and digital literacies research. It specifically addresses recent developments in informal, community-based learning,

particularly Connected Learning. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the project in relations to both fandom and digital youth culture studies.

- Chapter Three describes the methods used for data collection and analysis, including guiding analytical principles, research design elements, and phases of analysis. The chapter starts with a discussion of the analytical frameworks: thematic analysis (Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield 2015) and computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring 2004). It then provides a detailed account of data set selection, sampling, coding, and theme development, concluding with an overview of resulting themes. The chapter also considers the role of visual/performative elements in the research and the impact of my own position as a Nerdfighter on the analysis.
- Chapter Four considers the first research question and focuses on the Vlogbrothers personal literacy practices and the impact of the online video context. The chapter begins with a discussion of identity-performance theories as frameworks for conceptualizing the Vlogbrothers' literacy practices. The chapter then outlines how the Vlogbrothers perform a defined set of literacy-related practices, and how new media, specifically YouTube, functions as a digital stage on which to perform those practices for an engaged audience. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the Vlogbrothers' construction of self as expert, mentor, and role-model, while also considering how they negotiate emerging anxieties related to authority and celebrity.
- Chapter Five addresses the second part of the second research question and focuses on issues of audience engagement and participation, particularly in relation to evolution of the Nerdfighter fan community. The chapter outlines how the Vlogbrothers' use YouTube, both as content and context, to draw their fans into a dynamic form of interactivity. It then

discusses how the video content specifically promotes active participation in community-based activities across multiple online modalities that are fundamentally grounded in reading and writing literacy practices. The chapter concludes with an analysis of transmedia and cross-platform literacy practices found within both the Vlogbrothers' videos and the Nerdfighter community.

- Chapter Six addresses the first part of the second research question and focuses on the construction of fan-community values and practices. The chapter discusses how the Vlogbrothers model a socially-embedded form of literacy that both draws on and creates interpersonal relationships. It traces how the Vlogbrothers foster the evolution of the Nerdfighters as a community of readers and how they promote reading and writing as shared and collaborative practices within that community. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the role of games and inside jokes in constructing literacy as a Nerdfighter value.
- Chapter Seven extends the discussion of the construction of fan-community values and practices. The chapter outlines how the Vlogbrothers model a personal relationship with books that is informed by a broader social context. It considers how the Vlogbrothers simultaneously value both personal, creative reader response and informed literary analysis as equally valid forms of engagement with text. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the reading as a manifestation of the community's wider interest in active global citizenship.
- Chapter Eight concludes the dissertation by addressing the third research question. It analyzes the project's findings in relation to contemporary theories about young people, learning, and literacy achievement. It outlines implications of the research as a new lens through which to consider print literacy in a digital age, informal learning in socially networked spaces, and the negotiation of adult authority and youth empowerment in those

spaces. The chapter concludes by considering the limitations of the work and opportunities for future work.

Notes on Word Choice

Defining “Text” in Context

Throughout this dissertation, I frequently refer to “text” in a variety of contexts, including text-related practices, text-based literacy, and engagement with text. Similarly, while the Vlogbrothers rarely use the word “literacy,” they regularly use the word “text” in ways that connect directly to conventional literacy practices, specifically reading and writing, and that locate the idea of “text” at the center of the Vlogbrothers’ project. Therefore, before presenting my findings, it is important to specify how I am applying that term in my research and how my use draws from the Vlogbrothers’ (functional if not literal) definition of the word.

In the context of research on information, media, and literature, the operational definition of the word “text” has broadened to include any content object or to function as a parallel for literary or artistic works. The videos themselves could be considered “texts” in this way. The Vlogbrothers, however, employ a narrower, more traditional meaning that is more in line with the Oxford English Dictionary definition: “the wording of anything written or printed” (“Text, n.1”). For example, in the very first video posted to the vlogbrothers channel, Hank Green explains the challenge that initially forms the core of their experiment: “we will no longer be communicating through any textual means. No more instant messaging, no more emailing, only video blogging, and possibly phone calls” (2007, “Brotherhood 2.0: January 1st”). Relatedly, the opening animation for every video for the first year of the vlogbrothers channel reads, (ironically in scrolling text): “Two Brothers, One Video Blog. 365 Days of Textless Communication.”



Image 1.4 Introductory Text of Opening Animation for Brotherhood 2.0, from “Brotherhood 2.0: January 1st” (2007)

Later references continue to connect “text” to content that is written, typed, and/or read, as opposed to something spoken, heard, and/or viewed. Hank, for example, complains when teaching his brother how to make a podcast: “I can't send him a text-based tutorial, which would be, frankly, much easier. Uh, so I'm gonna have to do it in video blog form” (2007, March 12th: How to Make a Podcast). Similarly, in describing the process of co-creating a book proposal via video, initially jokes: “I mean, we don't need text any more. Text is dead,” only admit desperately, “Just kidding. I miss text so bad, Hank. I miss it, I miss it, I miss it” (2007, Brotherhood 2.0: May 16: Beating the EBO into the ground”). Consequently, within the following analysis, “text” refers specifically to written, printed, or typed forms of communication, understood in contrast to audio or audio-visual formats.

This specifically print-based interpretation of the word “text” provides three important, interconnected opportunities. First, it allows me to draw clear distinctions between what the Vlogbrothers are doing, namely practicing and promoting literacy as related to printed text, and the context in which they are doing it, specifically through online video. This distinction, in turn, draws attention to the promotion of conventional, print-focused forms of literacy in the

Nerdfighter community: reading and writing. This focus also places my study in conversation with other digital media research that defines text and textual media in similar ways: for example, as “scenes of reading and writing” (Raley 2013). By recognizing text as a reference to format, rather than object or content, I hope to provide insight into the ways that non-text media, like online video, can engage young people in text-based literacy.

A Note about Names

Also, throughout this dissertation, I will refer to each of the Vlogbrothers by their first names: John and Hank. While more traditional scholarship would employ the use of last names, this research focuses on two brothers who share the same last name (Green), necessitating an alternate choice to avoid confusion and awkward phrasing. The choice to use first names is, in part, motivated by the content of the videos themselves, as John and Hank regularly address each other by first name. For example, the widely recognized opening of nearly every video is the statement: “Good morning, Hank” or “Good morning, John.” Relatedly, given the common practices of addressing each other by name in the body of the video content, some content quoted below already includes first names. Additionally, first names are a fundamental part of their multimedia brand; Hank, for example, maintains popular side-projects on YouTube channels called “hanschannel” and “games with hank,” and the brothers co-produce a weekly podcast called “Dear John and Hank.” Lastly, the Nerdfighter fan-community itself refers to the brothers by first name, not only in individually posted responses and in community spaces online, but also in fan-produced videos and other art that are sometimes featured in the Vlogbrothers’ videos. My use of first names is therefore consistent with the sense of informality and intimacy that the brothers deliberately foster between themselves and their fan-base, an intimacy that functions as a core part of this study.

CHAPTER TWO: AN OVERVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

This dissertation occupies a space where several related disciplines and areas of study overlap. As a result, both the research design and the analysis provided in later chapters draw from a broad cross-section of professional and scholarly literature related to youth, literacy, learning, and digital media. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the literature that informed in the research process and consider the relationship of this research to existing theories and scholarship. As part of this overview, I also place informing areas of study in conversation with each other where applicable to establish an interdisciplinary context for the project as a whole.

I begin by placing the project in the broader context of print culture studies, which provide a framework for analyzing the Vlogbrothers' and the Nerdfighter community's use of and relationship to print texts, even in the face of their digital media practices. I then outline current trends and theories evidenced in reading research, drawing specific attention to recent scholarship on social reading, issues of motivation and reading engagement, and the relationship between reading and empathy. Noting the connection between anxieties over reading and anxieties over literacy achievement generally, I establish various theoretical frameworks for understanding the relationship between traditional and digital literacies; as part of this, I trace the evolving definition of literacy from text-based reading and writing to a broader skill set that includes multiple media formats, participatory practices, and socio-cultural elements. I then shift to consider the contexts that inform the development of reading and literacy practices, including informal learning communities and digital youth culture. In relation to both of these areas of study, I highlight research into youth-adult power dynamics as well as the potential for empowerment and power shifts that appear as an extension of new media. I close the chapter by

placing the project in the broader context of fan studies, which provides an alternative framework for analyzing the Vlogbrothers' and the Nerdfighters' literacy practices and learning practices as fan practices and for evaluating fandoms as spaces where digital culture and print culture overlap.

Print Culture

Despite the fact that this dissertation focuses on the practices of an online community that enjoys and shares digital video, the research itself recognizes and builds on the foundational work of print culture studies. Defined as a “complex social, literary, and bibliographic discourse into the form and function of print in social history,” the study of print culture is largely a reader-centered cultural criticism that works to uncover “who read what, when, and how” (Lundin and Weigand 2003, xi-xii). By placing print culture at the foundation of the research, this dissertation works to explore the ways in which the Vlogbrothers impact the answers to those very questions, directing what, when, and even how young people interact with print materials, whether they are reading them or writing them. This, in turn, provides a lens through which to consider how the printed text functions in the videos and the community, and therefore how the print culture continues to manifest and be valued in a digital age.

The digital age and associated digital culture are often positioned within print culture studies in opposition to the age of print and print culture; and scholars regularly mark the rise of one as denoting a gradual movement away from or a sharp end to the other (Bornstein & Tinkle 1998; Deuze 2005; Assmann 2006). As Frances Robertson recognizes in *Print Culture: From Steam Press to Ebook*, “the advent of digital communication technology, whether as cyberspace or hypertext has been seen, often gleefully, as the end of print culture” (2013, 119). She goes on to outline various anxieties that such an end engenders, many of which echo the fears raised by

the NEA in 2007 and Pew in 2008. The opposition between print culture and digital culture is typically situated in the material reality of printed texts; print culture assumes a fixed text and is embedded in the materiality of books (Danet 1997). Digital culture, meanwhile, allows for elasticity of text, interactivity, and modes of narrativity associated with an older form of oral storytelling. The opposition, then, finds expression in recognizing evidence of shifting practices, of loss and gain, as media moves from one format to another; as Assmann phrases the shift, “something which had been marginalized, restrained, and even completely lost in literate and print culture is being restored by means of the new media” (2006, 11). Rather than focus on shifts or ends, however, this dissertation investigates a point of intersection between the print culture and digital culture; the Vlogbrothers’ videos embrace print culture and celebrate the material reality of books using a digital format, while at the same time promoting digital culture practices, like participation and interactivity, as a mode of engagement with fixed texts like classic novels. For this reason, print culture research remains a relevant source of informing theories.

The study of print culture and print literacy also informs the research in the primacy of printed texts as the subject of discussion between community members. Many print culture studies focus on particular reading materials, and research into youth-focused print culture is largely interested in what youth read, what messages (social, cultural, political, racial, and gendered) are communicated to youth through texts, and how youth understand, interpret, and respond to those messages (Lundin and Weigand 2003; Mallan and Pearce 2003; Bearne and Watson 2000). These studies in turn draw on the traditions of reader-response research, exploring “what people do with texts and objects rather than on those texts and objects themselves” (Radway 1994, 275). This dissertation builds on these foundations, investigating how the Vlogbrothers influence what youth read, engage them in conversation about and critical

analysis of the messages, and model how to understand, interpret, and respond to printed texts. In this way, the dissertation also explores how the Nerdfighters learn to be active and engaged participants in print culture.

At the same time, scholars of print culture understand printed texts and the act of reading as existing within social and cultural contexts that inform and define their meaning and importance. As Cathy Davison notes in the introduction to a collection of essays on the history of social reading in the United States, “literature is not simply words upon a page but a complex social, political, and material process of cultural production” (1989, 2). Relatedly, Anne Lundin in her introduction to a work on print culture and youth argues that “readers relate to interpretive communities and the transformed products of a culture, through which cultural discourse happens and matters” (Lundin and Weigand 2003, xii). The Nerdfighters, under the guidance of the Vlogbrothers, function as a kind of interpretive community and are overtly engaged in the production, interpretation, and transformation of printed texts. By investigating the practices of reading and writing within both the social context of the Nerdfighter community and the broader context of the intersection of print and digital cultures, this dissertation uncovers ways in which books take on facets of cultural production that are uniquely relevant to the teen reader-fan experience.

Reading Trends and Theories

Given the centrality of books and reading to this dissertation, research into the reading practices and reading experiences of teens and young adult also provides an essential foundation for analysis. In some ways, reading research can be positioned in close relation to the research context of print culture with its interest in “who read what, when, and how” (Lundin and Weigand 2003, xii). This dissertation extends this inquiry to include “why” by considering issues

of choice, motivation, and engagement that are central to concerns about teen reading habits in an increasing techno-centric culture (Krashen 2004; Guthrie 2000). At the same time, reading research provides a context in which to consider how the practice of reading as promoted by the Vlogbrothers within the Nerdfighter community replicate, expand on, or even contradict theories about adolescent reading in professional and popular literature.

Research into the reading habits of young people often attempt to identify specific trends and practices. Survey-based research like the NEA's *Reading at Risk* or *To Read or Not to Read* provide statistical evidence of reading trends and establish foundational concerns over declines in reading among teens and young adults in the face of rising interest in non-print media and online technologies. Other professional resources reflect similar concerns and connect them to a decline in overall adolescent literacy (IRA 2012). In contrast, a Pew Research Center study (2013) affords a more optimistic view of teen reading trends and practices, with 46% of participants aged 16-17 and 43% of those aged 18-24 responding that they read books for entertainment. Researchers like Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer similarly investigate the realities of teen reading practices and attempt to refute long-standing myths about teens reading habits. In their text *Reading Matters* (2006), for example, they note that research provides evidence that young people do read and that they choose to read for pleasure (104-6). In the updated text *Reading Still Matters* (2018), Rothbauer specifically notes a recent "sea change" in young adult reading that manifested in increased awareness of and engagement with young adult literature by teens; while she notes that anxieties about adolescent reading habits persist, Rothbauer ultimately concludes again that "if they are supported, teenagers and young adults will voluntarily read and actively read for pleasure" (103-4, 106). This dissertation is directly interested in these kinds of claims, as it considers how the Vlogbrothers function as form of

reader support and how the resulting reading practices within the Nerdfighter community actively refute assumptions about young adults as uninterested in reading.

Research into the reading practices of young people also provides a context in which to understand the broader impact of digital media on those practices, apart from the anxieties that it provokes. For example, reading researchers have noted that the advent of digital media has changed the very definition of what counts as reading, broadening it to include websites, email, forums, chat rooms, listservs, and comment sections (Schmar-Dobler 2003). Significantly for this dissertation, digital media has also changed *the way* that young people practice reading, including how they find and engage with books. Marianne Martens notes that digital media has changed the traditional dissemination model for youth literature, removing adult gatekeepers like teachers, parents, and librarians and allowing for more peer-to-peer marketing (2016, 10-13); at the same time, Martens recognizes that the digital age disintermediated model provides opportunities for authors to communicate directly with their readers (13). Buehler, in describing the affordances of networked digital media, similarly recognizes that readers are able to “join the living conversation about young adult literature” that involves other readers and the authors themselves (2009, 26). Rothbauer, meanwhile, argues that “engaging in online conversations with authors and other readers...can be empowering to teen readers” (2018, 121). Hilbun reiterates this empowerment rhetoric, noting that social network-based reading engagement practices, like blogs, “allow [teens] to participate in the reading, reviewing, and commenting process” that is typically the purview of adult and professionals (2011, 103). Though Hilbun writes specifically in the context of youth services librarianship, she recognizes the role of social media in promoting and engaging young readers, and even uses the Nerdfighters’ Ning as a successful example with its (at the time) 54,000 members. Rothbauer too

connects these social media reading practices to the Vlogbrothers and the Nerdfighters, describing John Green's videos as a noteworthy example of successful connections between author and readers online (129). This dissertation works to develop these brief mentions into a more systematic analysis, investigating not only why they are successful but what the broader impact of that success might be.

Directly related to questions of practice are issues of motivation. In his work on contexts for reading motivation and engagement, John Guthrie (2001) notes that motivation to read is multifaceted, involving a combination of individual and social factors. These social factors are particularly important as a context for this research because they recognize the value of peer-based, shared reading practices. Guthrie notes, for example, that "children who like to share books with peers and participate responsibly in a community of learners are likely to be intrinsically motivated readers." A survey-based study by Strommen and Mates (2004) reaches analogous conclusions, noting that amongst self-identified readers, social interaction – defined as interacting with friends who like to read and being an active member of a community of readers – operates as both a central motivation to read and a function of loving to read. This dissertation recognizes similar trends in motivation within the Vlogbrothers' videos and investigates both how they function as peers/friends, despite the obvious age difference, and how they value choice as modes for constructing their fan community as a community of reader-learners.

At the same time, Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer (2006) make valuable alternative observations about young adult reading motivation in relation to authority and approval from adults. They describe problematic trends in which adults in positions of authority over readers, like teachers and librarians, emphasize reading for information over reading for pleasure and discourage particular kinds of "worthless" reading materials (103). Rothbauer later draws

attention to additional related and dangerous tendencies on the part of adults: “unsanctioned reading and writing is often denigrated by adults, including technology-mediated literacy practices associated with social media, gaming, music-sharing sites, and fanfiction” (2018, 121). These efforts, alongside general hostility within many adult populations toward popular literature and young adult literature specifically, ultimately disempower readers and undermine reading motivation (Rothbauer 2018). This dissertation investigates how the Vlogbrothers as adults subvert these trends by actively valuing technology-mediated literacy practices and promoting the reading of classic, adult-approved literary texts alongside popular, mainstream, young adult literature, thus motivating and empowering readers.

Adult authority over reading, especially in relation to youth empowerment, impacts not only motivation but also the meaning-making experience. Theories from influential scholars like Louise Rosenblatt (2005) draw specific attention to the tension between the adult-mediated interpretative reading process of the type usually found in classrooms (e.g., in which the teacher tells the students what the author means) and more reader-focused transactional practices. Defined as “a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular moment,” transactional reading describes the kind of highly personalized, engaged reading valued by the Nerdfighter community and advocated by the Vlogbrothers (Rosenblatt 2005, 7). As Rosenblatt notes, transactional reading is the process by which readers construct meaning, and “the ‘meaning’ does not reside ready-made ‘in’ the text or ‘in’ the reader but happens or comes into being during the transaction between the two” (7). In this way, her arguments mirror the stance of the Vlogbrothers, particularly the comments of John Green who famously and repeatedly states that “books belong to their readers.” In writing about the transactional theory of reading, Rosenblatt also speaks

directly to the role of the author, authorial readings, and communication between readers and authors. She also notes specifically:

Group interchange about readers' evocations from texts, whether of their peers or adult authors, can in general be a powerful means of stimulating growth in reading ability and critical acumen...When students share responses to transactions with the same text, they can learn how their evocations from the same signs differ, can return to the text to discover their own habits of selection and synthesis, and can become aware of, and critical of, their own processes as readers. (28)

Though Rosenblatt's work here assumes a pedagogical context, it opens valuable avenues for analysis of the Vlogbrothers' videos and the Nerdfighter community as informal learning spaces, in which group interchange about texts and lived reading experiences, as well as discussions of authorial intent, are both modeled and practiced. It also reinforces transactional reading as a practice enhanced by social reading and open discussion of books with both peers and authors, something both practiced and promoted by the Vlogbrothers in their videos.

At the same time, Rosenblatt's theories about modes of personal reading and engagement with text also inform this research. Rosenblatt conceives of reading on a continuum between efferent and aesthetic reading (2005, 10-12). Efferent reading, according to Rosenblatt, "is centered on the public, generally shared meanings, and less on the privately felt aspects" and "aspires to impersonal, repeatable, verifiable" interpretations of meaning; aesthetic reading, meanwhile, focuses on "what was being lived through during the reading, on the ideas as they are embodied in the images, the sensations, the feelings, the changing moods" of the reader (xxvii). This emphasis on the personal, lived experience of reading directly affects levels of engagement with the text itself and the act of reading. Yet, within the classroom, Rosenblatt notes, the tendency has been "to turn the students' attention away from the actual experience, and to focus on presenting a 'correct,' traditional interpretation" (xxvii). This continuum and its manifestation in education, then, contribute a valuable context for the study of the Nerdfighter

community's relationship to reading, especially as the Vlogbrothers' respond to questions about "correct" readings and complaints about classroom-based critical reading practices. At the same time, the Vlogbrothers themselves overtly value and promote a more aesthetic stance, emphasizing personal interpretation and lived experience in ways that overlap with popular fan practices.

As a final point of intersection, the work of Louise Rosenblatt and other reading scholars informs this dissertation in their attention to the relationship between literary or fiction reading and the development of empathy in readers. In her essay on the transactional theory of literary work, for example, Rosenblatt touches tangentially on the concept of empathy when she writes: "literary texts provide us with a widely broadened 'other' through which to define our world and ourselves" (1978, 145). More recently, Maria Nikolajeva has noted: "reading fiction provides an excellent training for young people in developing and practicing empathy and theory of mind, that is, understanding of how other people feel and think" (2013, 95). The underlying theory of reading as a form of empathy development has recently been tested more quantitatively as well, with a series of studies each designed to measure the impact of the fiction reading on the development of empathy in readers (Mar, Oatley, and Peterson 2009; Bal and Veltkamp 2013; Djic, Oatley, and Moldoveneau 2013). Though these studies do not focus specifically on young people, they do ultimately note that narrative immersion, engagement with narrative worlds and characters, lead to a "deeply felt simulation of social experiences" and thus being transported into a story leads to increased empathy (Mar, Oatley, and Peterson 2009, 408). The reading/empathy relationship has likewise sparked repeated interest in mainstream and professional practice-oriented writing about reading, especially in relation to young people (Chiat 2013; McKearney and Mears 2015; Rymanowicz 2017; Priske 2018). Much of this

interest stems from related mainstream anxieties about online media's perceived negative impact on empathy development in children, the concern that social media in particular is creating a generation of socially isolated, "selfie"-absorbed young people, and the increased belief in empathy as an avenue to solving global problems. Research into the connection between reading and empathy-formation intersects with this dissertation in the way that it echoes the reading values stated and promoted by the Vlogbrothers. It ultimately provides a context from which to analyze and understand the way that the Vlogbrothers talk about empathy, or as they phrase it "imagining others complexly," as both a product of reading engagement and goal of human interaction. It likewise provides a foundation for bridging the broader Nerdfighter community values of global civic action (e.g. "decreasing worldsuck") and their online participatory and literacy practices.

Literacies: Print, Digital, and New Media

Anxieties over the possible decline in reading and writing practices among young people also feed into related concerns over declines in literacy generally and over the possible impact on the development of new digital literacy skills. In order to understand and confront this anxiety, then, it is essential to consider shifting definitions of literacy, especially as those definitions are impacted by the embrace of alternative formats like digital media and as youth are expected to be more literate and more broadly literate than ever. A report from the International Reading Association (2012), for example, notes that even as reading declines, the demands of a literate society are elevated. Basic reading and writing skills are no longer sufficient; higher literacy levels require "understanding how reading, writing, language, content, and social appropriateness work together and using this knowledge in effective ways" (Meltzer 2002, 6).

At the same time, even as some researchers worry over the impact of the digital age on conventional print literacy skills, others advocate for an active reappraisal of the value of print or text-based literacy in an increasingly digital and multimedia-focused age (Livingstone 2008; Lankshear and Knobel 2008; Jenkins 2009; Santo 2011). Alternatively called digital literacy, media or new media literacy, internet literacy, twenty-first century literacy, or even hacker literacy, these new paradigms seek to establish literacy as “a set of cultural competencies and social skills that young people need in the new media landscape” (Jenkins 2009, xiii). This dissertation, then, seeks to explore where print/text-based literacy and these evolving multiliteracies intersect, not just where the new builds on or subsumes the old but also where digital and new media literacies become avenues for reinforcing more traditional reading and writing skills. The Vlogbrothers and the Nerdfighter community present particularly rich ground for this kind of inter-literacy research, as they use a multitude of media formats, methods, and forums to support community engagement and literacy practices.

Like the relationship between print media and digital technologies, the theoretical relationship between traditional literacy and digital literacies is typically positioned in scholarly and professional literature as either a) adversarial – new literacies replace old, as digital media replaces books – or b) extensional – new literacy skills build on the foundation of old, as online media reading practices build on print reading. The former of these typically mirror the rhetoric of print culture versus digital culture debates, reinforcing an assumption of inherent difference and separateness. Heather Urbanski, in the introduction to an edited collection of studies of youth writing practices in digital spaces, represents one version of the adversarial model when she argues that “the writing and/or rhetorical component of participatory entertainment has the potential to be significantly different from the centuries of printed text that preceded it” (2010,

4). Similar oppositional rhetoric can be seen in many recent studies that specifically focus on the literacy practices of youth in digital environments (Livingstone 2004; Williams 2008; Schreyer 2012).

Henry Jenkins, meanwhile, in a white paper on media education and participatory culture recognizes both stances while definitively taking the extensional side:

Much writing about twenty-first century literacies seems to assume that communicating through visual, digital, or audiovisual media will replace reading and writing. We fundamentally disagree. Before students can engage with new participatory culture, they must be able to read and write. (2009, 29)

Further evidence of this expansion rhetoric can be seen in other professional texts that seek to define literacy in a digital age. The International Reading Association's position statement on adolescent literacy, for example, defines literacy in broadly inclusive terms: "the ability to read, write, understand, interpret, and discuss multiple texts across multiple contexts" (2012, 2). New definitions of literacy also extend the delineation of what is being read and written; Cope and Kalantzis, for example, argue that multiliteracies "focus on modes of representation much broader than language alone," while Williams notes that digital media allows young people to "writ[e]' texts with print, images, video, and sound" (2005, 5; 2008, 7-8). Lankshear and Knobel in the introduction to their book on digital literacies draw specific attention to the "semantic reach" of literacy definitions in the face of digital culture, noting Richard Landham's early definitional shift from "the ability to read and write" to "the ability to understand information however presented" (2008, 2-3).

Additional definitions of literacy in the context of participatory culture semantically extend both practices and modes of representations while gesturing rhetorically to reading, writing, and print culture foundations. Skills needed to be literate in the 21st century thus include: "the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content;" "the ability to pool knowledge

and compare notes with others toward a common goal;” “the ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities;” and “the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives” (Jenkins 2009, xiv). Such definitional extensions, though, threaten to leave print-based literacies in the dust, an old foundation buried beneath scaffolds used to support seemingly more important, more relevant digital skills. In the Vlogbrothers’ videos and by extension the Nerdfighter community, however, print and new media literacies are constructed as neither adversarial or extensional, but rather as mutually supportive. By focusing on a community that promotes reading and writing practices through digital, audiovisual media, then, this dissertation aims to establish new ways of thinking about the relationship between text-based and new media literacies, exploring it as more than the just old creating a foundation for the new and including ways in which digital media can actually foster traditional literacy skills.

In constructing the relationship between text-based and new media literacies, this research also recognizes the fundamental importance of literacy as a social construction. Literacy scholars studying both traditional and contemporary literacy practices draw attention to this social component; Walter Ong, writing historically about print literacy, recognizes literacy as “a social condition,” while Jenkins and his team of researchers define 21st century literacy skills as a set of “cultural competencies” and “social skills” (1995, 3; 2009, xiii). Other scholars further connection between literacy practices and social practices: Lankshear and Knobel (2008), for example, trace the socio-cultural view of literacy as “a set of socially organized practices” and note that scholars use the term “as shorthand for the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing” (5), while James Paul Gee and Elisabeth Hayes (2011) similarly describe social practices as a key component of advanced literacy skill acquisition. The socially-embedded

nature of literacy plays an essential role in this dissertation, as I seek to understand specifically how literacy practices function as social practices and how social relationships foster engagement in literacy within the Vlogbrothers videos and the Nerdfighter fan community.

Placing literacy within this broader social context also allows this research to build on work that considers literacy as a social good and as a path to participation in social and civic action. In *Literacy in a Digital World*, for example, Kathleen Tyner traces the connection drawn historically between literacy and the social good, noting the trend to craft a causal link between literacy skills and good jobs, an informed citizenry, and an educated consumer (despite scant evidence to support it) (1998, 31-33). Historian Harvey Graff similarly recognizes “the role of literacy and schooling in socioeconomic development, social order, and individual progress” (1995, 4). To achieve the level of social good, though, literacy must be a practice in which individuals can participate; as a result, more recent literacy research has been specifically interested in literacy practices as participatory practices, particularly for young people. The International Reading Association, for example, argues in their position statement on adolescent literacy that “adolescents deserve opportunities to use literacy in pursuit of civic engagement” (2012, 10). Scholars promoting the value of new media as a space for participatory culture similarly suggest that literacy skills contribute directly to young people’s ability to be “full participants in society” (Jenkins 2009, xv). This dissertation explores similar participatory rhetoric in relation to literacy, drawing specific attention to the ways in which the Vlogbrothers connect literacy practices to broader social concerns and rhetoric about world citizenship and educated consumerism (e.g. “decreasing worldsuck”) and how that implicitly promotes participation in community literacy activities as fundamentally connected to the social good.

Informal Community-Based Learning

In considering text-based literacy practices as community-based participatory practices, this dissertation also engages with research into community-based learning and specifically informal learning. Reading and writing in their various forms occupy an intriguing space at the crossroads of private and public practices, formal and informal learning, and professional and peer-based pedagogy. Reading, which has long been seen a solitary pursuit, is increasingly written about in social terms and as a community-based practice that supports literacy learning, while writing is reimagined as a skill practiced informally and online, as opposed to in school and in print, and supported by community – particularly fan community – spaces (Alvermann et al 1999; Kaplan and Chisik 2005; Sennett 2006; Casey 2008; Williams 2009; Urbanski 2010; Alexander 2017). Literacy, meanwhile, is alternatively classified as a skill best acquired in formal settings like school or the natural result of informal interactions with community and family (Gee and Hayes 2011, 16-17).

The underlying tensions then manifest in debates between different modes of learning: that which is guided by professionals and experts in formal and regulated environments and that which occurs in informal communities that allow peers and amateurs to guide each other in mutual learning experiences. The Nerdfighter community itself operates within a similar nexus: an informal community that values school and even replicates formal learning structures, in which adults self-identify as both peer and expert and in which members publicly discuss personal reactions and experiences with reading done both alone and in groups. Research into their literacy practices is therefore necessarily informed by and in conversation with studies and theories related to informal learning communities, particularly as they involve interest-based learning, peer collaboration, and the evolving role of adult as expert and educator.

The Nerdfighters as a learning community provide a useful example of what researchers refer to as Connected Learning, an interest-driven or passion-based form of learning done with the support of friends and engaged adults (Ito et al 2013, 4). In their original construction of Connected Learning theory, scholars from the Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, including Mizuko Ito, Kris Gutierrez, and Sonia Livingstone, identified three essential, intersecting contexts in which learning takes place: Connected Learning is peer-supported, interest-powered, and academically oriented.

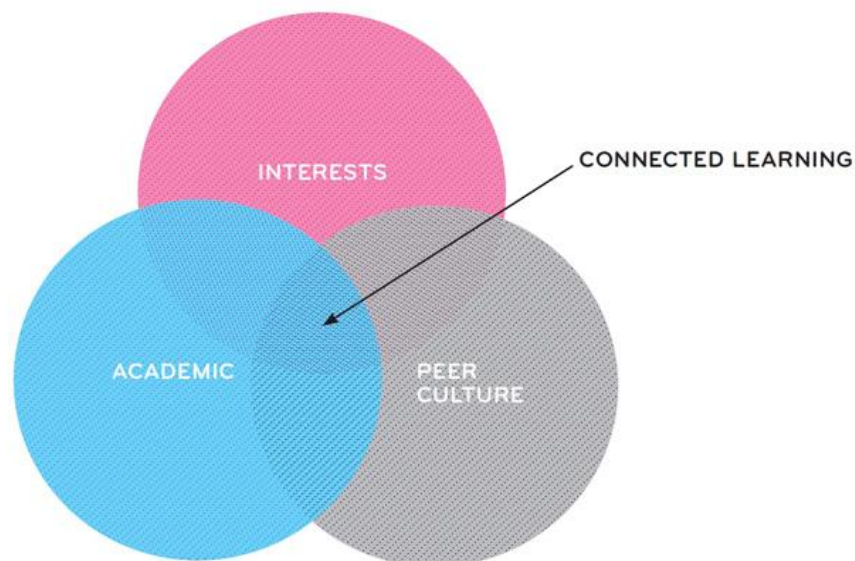


Image 2.1 Elements of Connected Learning (2013)

In 2017, the Connected Learning Alliance updated these contexts, shifting attention away from formal academics and toward broader real-world opportunities in which youth make “tangible connections” to career and civic engagements beyond the classroom (2013). They simultaneously reimagined peer culture to include relationships with both peers and mentors (e.g., caring adults).

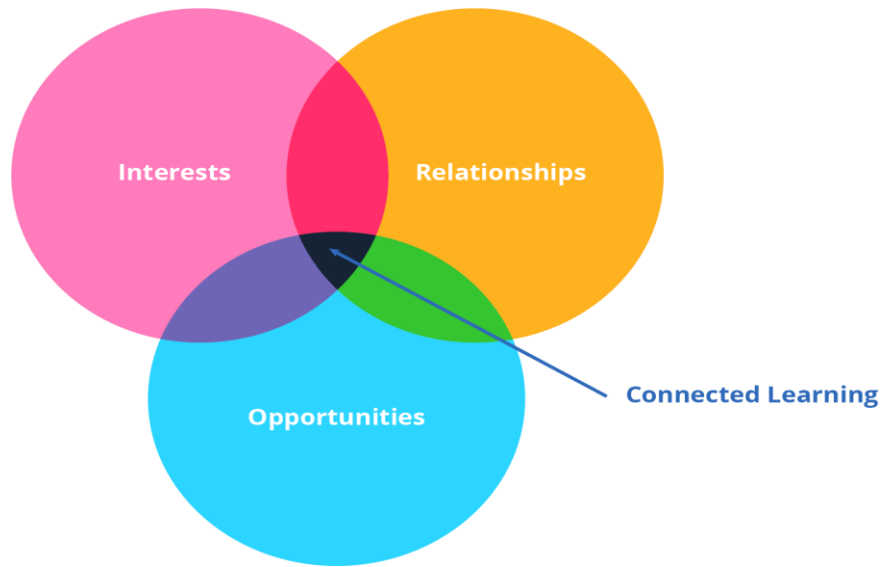


Image 2.2 Updated Elements of Connected Learning (2017)

Ultimately, though, both academic and opportunity-oriented elements function as useful contexts for analyzing the work of the Vlogbrothers in relation to the Nerdfighter community, as they replicate aspects of formal education and create spaces for academically-embedded literacy learning while at the same time creating real-world opportunities for apprenticeships and civic engagement in ways directly related to community literacy practices. The broadened relationship category, meanwhile, provides useful opportunities for considering the Vlogbrothers as fulfilling both peer and mentor roles.

In crafting and updating the theory of Connected Learning, scholars maintain the value of what they term “interest-powered” learning, which occurs “when a subject is personally interesting and relevant” (2013, 12). Connected Learning therefore closely associates with what Gee and Hayes call “passionate affinity spaces,” in which “people organize themselves in the real world and/or via the Internet to learn something connected to a shared endeavor, interest, or passion” (2011, 69). In establishing the theory of passionate affinity-based learning, however, Gee and Hayes also recognize that the process “does not require everyone to have such a deep

passion;” it only requires everyone in the community “to recognize the value of that passion and respect it in some sense” (2011, 69). In drawing from both Connected Learning and affinity space theories, this research seeks to illustrate how the Vlogbrothers use their videos to establish books and reading as a common passion shared within the Nerdfighter community and how they then create spaces where that connection provides opportunities for interest-powered learning.

Because this interest-powered learning takes place within the context of an established and recognizable community, Nerdfighteria also operates at the intersection of Connected Learning and Communities of Practice theories. Connected Learning, as noted above, is specifically defined by social relationship with both peers and mentors. In this way, Connected Learning reflects principles associated with communities of practices, in which social relationships inform the learning process. Recognized as a social theory of learning in which meaning, practice, and identity overlap, communities of practice describe a particular form of situated learning (Wenger 1998, 5). Within communities of practice, “the meaning of learning is configured” by the learning process itself and in direct relation to shared sociocultural practice (Lave and Wenger 1991, 29). Learning thus emerges as a form of enculturation that involves “pick[ing] up relevant jargon, imitat[ing] behavior, and gradually start[ing] to act in accordance with the culture’s norms” (Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989, 34). This research recognizes that Nerdfighteria does not function as a community of practice in the strictest sense; the community does not exist because of the practice but rather the practices are a manifestation of community values. Yet the underlying theory still provides an expanded model for understanding how the Vlogbrothers construct the Nerdfighters as learners, drawing attention to literacy as a form of community practice that informs and constructs community identity. It therefore pays special

attention to the way that jargon, inside jokes, and community-based games situate literacy and learning within the community.

More recently, social and situated learning research has been specifically interested in how the advent of social media and networked technologies has facilitated this form of community-based learning. Cory Ondrejka, for example, in writing about the educational potential of situated learning in virtual worlds draws specific attention to its socially-embedded nature, arguing that learning becomes “a social and collaborative experience, creating context and social bonds” (2008, p.240). Kirsten Drotner (2008) draws similar conclusions in her work on informal learning and digital media, describing the meaning-making process in digitally networked spaces as inherently participatory, collaborative, co-produced, and interactive. Connected Learning, a framework developed in response to digital media, then echoes this earlier research when it describes the learning process as production-centered, openly networked, and grounded in a shared purpose (2013, 12). This dissertation is specifically interested in how the Vlogbrothers use digital media to replicate this kind of informal, socially-embedded learning by connecting social practices with literacy practices through participatory, collaborative, production-centered experiences for their fan community.

Despite Connected Learning’s initial support of academically-oriented learning, much of the research on informal learning places itself in direct opposition to traditional, school-based curricula. As described by Lave and Wenger, communities of practice allow new learners to become full participants through cognitive apprentices “without being taught, examined, or reduced to mechanical copiers” (1991, 29). More recently, Drotner argues that critical discourse constructs informal learning “as an alternative to what is perceived as curriculum-driven and evidence-based school environments” and as a lever for affecting change (2008, 22). Thomas

and Brown draw specific attention to that change when they identify a new culture of learning in which “the classroom as a model is replaced by learning environments in which digital media provides access to a rich source of information and play” (2011, 38). Evidence of similar theories can be seen at work in literacy-related scholarship as well. Drawing from Gee’s work on socially-embedded literacy acquisition and Collins and Brown’s work on situated learning, Tyner recognizes the role of cognitive apprenticeships in language and literacy skill development, arguing that “discourses are not mastered through overt instruction” but through “scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the discourse” (1998, 174). In describing the work of the Vlogbrothers, this dissertation recognizes the essential function of play, particularly in Chapters Six and Seven, and the absence of overt instruction within the videos while at the same time outlining how the brothers overtly and intentionally position themselves as masters of the discourses they value and promote within the fan community.

At the same time, the rhetoric of master and apprentice raises essential issues related to age and expertise and to the adult/youth power dynamic. Within much contemporary work on informal learning, particularly in online spaces, the adult is recognized as peer and equal participant. Gee and Hayes, for example, argue that in passionate affinity spaces anyone can be an expert and that participants do not reach this status through the kinds of professional credentials usually associated with adulthood (2011, 70). Cory Ondrejka, meanwhile, describes virtual spaces as full of potential for “amateur-to-amateur education” that bypasses professional and generational distance (2008, 240). In their extensive ethnographic study of youth and new media, Ito and colleagues draw similar conclusions when looking at youth-adult interaction in online spaces: “these adults participate not as educators but as passionate hobbyists and creators,

and youth see them as experienced peers, not as people who have authority over them” (2010, 351).

The Vlogbrothers build on these accepted tenets about collaborative practice and learning in online communities, regularly commenting about how much they appreciate learning from and with the Nerdfighters; and within Nerdfighteria, all members are peers, with equally valid and valuable reading preferences, interpretations, and meaning-making experiences.

Yet research continues to recognize that role of the adult as leader and role-model within informal learning communities, even in digital spaces. Ito, for example, in the same ethnographic study quoted above, also writes, “adults can have an important role to play in providing leadership and role models for participants in interest-driven groups, even in the contexts of peer-based learning” (2010, 350). Specifically in relation to literacy learning and practice, she notes that adult mentorship remains “central to how standards for expertise and literacy are being defined” (245). And while the Vlogbrothers may not have authority over the Nerdfighters, they do maintain authority over the relevant discourse, especially in relation to reading and writing practices but also in terms of language generally, and the videos then serve as models of behavior within the community; the youth, in turn, see them as voices of authority over everything from reading to dating to adulthood itself.

Research that specifically focuses on education and new media literacy, in fact, often reify the conventional adult-teacher/youth-learner dynamic, even when talking about collaborative work. Chavez and Soep in defining their theory of the “pedagogy of collegiality” describe it as “a context in which young people and adults mutually depend on one another’s skills, perspectives, and collaborative efforts,” yet their specific practice draws on the model of mentorship and apprenticeship inherent in more conventional pedagogy (2005, 409). Vaclavik

and colleagues, writing about adult supportive behavior in connected learning experiences, youth contribute their voice and perspective; adults contribute respect for that perspective but still provide instruction (2017, 920). Unlike other youth-focused communities, within Nerdfighteria, adults remain the leaders, mentors, and foremost voices. Studying this top-down educational model draws attention to implicit tensions between expertise and authority, power and voice, especially since youth give the Vlogbrothers power by choosing to listen to what they say. This unusual, nuanced power dynamic, in turn, makes this research useful to anyone interested in issues of learning and power within digital youth culture more broadly.

Digital Youth Culture

Although digital technologies are often conceived as a generational bridge in relation to sharing passions, constructing knowledge, and producing media, studies of digital culture continue to frame youth as “a class apart” (Palladino 1996, 53). As Susan Herring notes, mainstream media in particular “interprets new technologies and youth practices in normative, moral terms, a process that reinscribes youth as ‘other’” (2008, 71). At the same time, even as youth media scholars eschew and critique terms like “digital native,” they regularly employ the rhetorically similar “digital generation” or related phrases in the titles of their own work (Buckingham and Willet 2008; Montgomery 2007; Watkins 2009; Mesch and Talmud 2010; Rose 2011). While this dissertation focuses specifically on the rhetoric, practices, and content of two adults, the Vlogbrothers, the Nerdfighter community itself is predominantly comprised of young people, especially during the years under investigation here; so the research is specifically invested in the implications of any underlying assumed generational difference. As such, the research and analysis presented here were informed by studies and theories that construct youth as a defined and differentiated category, particularly in their relationship to digital culture, with

the intention of understanding how the Vlogbrothers replicate or subvert assumptions about teens both as a category and as practitioners of digital technologies.

Historically speaking, teens have for more than a century, been defined as a recognizably distinct group “with their own age-related tastes, styles, and social concerns” (Palladino 1996, 54). Contemporary research into teen practices with digital technology and within online environments maintain this trend, often essentializing young people as enthusiastic embracers of new media formats and social media platforms or at the very least classifying their technological practices as essentially different from that of other age-groups. As Montgomery representatively states in her book *Generation Digital*, “by the end of the twentieth century, teenagers embraced this new online world with great enthusiasm, responding eagerly to its invitation to share ideas, contribute content, and otherwise place their stamp on a media system that they themselves could create and manage” (2007, 107). Data from the Pew Research Center seems to support these claims, at least about youth in the United States, not only noting that fully 95% of teens are online but also interpreting this to mean that “teens represent the leading edge of mobile connectivity, and the patterns of their technology use often signal future changes in the adult population” (2013, 3). These statements serve to reinforce assumptions about teens as a homogenous group essentially different from and more technologically progressive than adults.

In opposition to the pervasive access rhetoric often associated with young people, teens are also often essentialized as a site of moral panic in relation to digital, networked, and particularly social media, in ways similar to earlier social anxieties around other forms of media and communication like radio, film, television, and telephones. This generalization simultaneously maintains their separateness and positions them as in need of guidance and support from adult moral authority, even in a technological context where adults are supposedly

less knowledgeable and less well-equipped to model use practices. Many recent studies of youth in the digital age report evidence of this continued trend of moral panic over new media technologies, even as they attempt to value teen practice and to temper anxieties (Montgomery 2007, 3-4; boyd 2014, 14-15; Herring 2008, 74; Ito 2010, 23-4; Burgess and Green 2009, 16). Though this dissertation ultimately reveals a more optimistic and empowering portrait of youth technological practice within the Vlogbrothers' videos, it recognizes the implications of underlying generational anxieties in the reception and manifestation of the Vlogbrothers as authority figures and role models.

Despite the fact digital youth scholars demonstrate an awareness of these essentializing forces and even participate in them, they also provide evidence of differences within the youth digital practices, particularly in relation to engagement and motivation. Ito and her colleagues, for example, in their ethnographic study identify two separate "genres of participation," and thereby draw a distinction between "friendship-driven" and "interest-driven" motivation for participation in new media practices (2010, 14-18). In defining friendship-driven participation, Ito describes practices that are dominated by group activity with peers "to whom youth look to develop their sense of self, reputation, and status" (16). Though Ito notes that this genre of participation is often grounded in age-segmented groups, analysis of the relationship between the Vlogbrothers and the Nerdfighters provides evidence of evolving social bonds that create a network of friends and friendship-driven practices motivated by shared interests. In fact when Ito describes young people who are motivated by interest, she could easily be describing the Nerdfighters: "the kids who are identified as smart, different, or creative, who generally exist at the margins of teen social worlds" (33). This research therefore provides an opportunity to expand our understanding of these genres of participation to include interest-driven friendships

that motivate friendship-driven practices related to those interests. In the context of this research, then, these categories of participation inform not only the understanding of the Nerdfighter community as operating at the nexus of both motivations, but also in analyzing how the Vlogbrothers actively encourage that perception.

Part of what creates the interest-driven friendships within the Nerdfighters is pride in being a nerd, a traditionally intelligent but unsocial or at least awkwardly social figure, so it may be surprising that the Nerdfighters do in fact have a largely social focus. In bridging friendship-driven and interest-driven genres of participation, the Nerdfighter community emerges as a socially safe space in which to collaborate creatively around shared interests and to embrace learning as a social practice. For this reason, the research and analysis presented in this dissertation draws on a variety of theories related to youth socialization in digital spaces. Ito, for example, ties socialization directly to learning: “the most engaged and active forms of learning with digital media happen in youth-driven settings that are focused on social communication and recreation” (2010, 12). Watkins meanwhile observes that “young people spend most of their time online with the same people their interact with off-line,” while danah boyd similarly remarks that “teens often use social media to make or develop friendships, but they do so almost exclusively with acquaintances or friends of friends” (2009, 24; in Ito 2010, 89). These kinds of statements about teen socializing online are particularly interesting in relation to the Nerdfighter community, which in many ways subverts these trends; while otherwise socially isolated, young people join the Nerdfighters in search of friends, and those friendships move from online to offline meet-ups.

As part of understanding the Nerdfighter community as a manifestation of digital youth culture, this research is also informed by the concept of networked publics and third-places.

Defined by boyd as a method for creating safe social spaces in digital environments, networked publics use technology to “network people into meaningful imagined communities” and provide “a mechanism through which we construct our social world” (2014, 201). At the same time, boyd recognizes that these spaces help “develop a sense of others that ideally manifests as tolerance and respect” (2014, 201). Watkins similarly describes the role of digital safe spaces for youth when he notes: “one of the main factors driving young people to online sites is the lack of places in the offline world for them to regularly congregate and call their own” (2009, p.58-9). Young people require networked publics because they do not have access to more traditional “third-places” where they can comfortably gather, socialize, and connect. Furthermore, as nerds who may find themselves on the margins of more conventional modes of youth socialization, members of the Nerdfighter community recognize the appeal of online friends bonded by common interests outside the mainstream. This dissertation explores evidence of this appeal and of the Vlogbrothers’ active promotion of Nerdfighteria as a “meaningful imagined community” that young people can “call their own” both online and offline.

In investigating the Vlogbrothers as community leaders who help construct and nurture this online youth-oriented community, this research therefore also draws on research into issues of the adult-youth power dynamic within digital spaces and specifically into rhetoric around youth empowerment through digital media consumption and creation. Much attention is dedicated within digital youth research to investigating either how teens use new media technologies to escape or mitigate adult power, control, or supervision, or how adults use digital technologies to facilitate youth empowerment, typically in the classroom or through formal mentorship programs (Goldman et al 2008; Rheingold 2008; Kafai and Peppler 2011). Notably this research often connects to the essentiality of literacy skills; David Buckingham, for example,

argues that competency with digital media has the power to “disrupt the existing set of power relations between adult authority and youth voice” (2008, xi). Yet in contrast to the underlying empowerment model found within digital youth culture research, adult power and influence remains an unavoidable reality. As Susan Herring recognizes, for example, “adults create and regulate the media technologies consumed by young people” (2008, 71). Even David Buckingham, in the same text quoted above, also acknowledges the disconnect between empowerment rhetoric and adult-control realities, noting that young people “are likely to experience a strong sense of their own autonomy, and of their right to make their own choices and follow their own paths—however illusory this may ultimately be” (17). So while much scholarship in this area focuses on teen practices online as a way to work around adult influence, this dissertation investigates the Vlogbrothers as a model of adult influence that is actively sought by youth and explores Nerdfighteria as a potent example of a youth-adult alliance that actively supports youth autonomy through participation in fan-community practices.

Fan Studies

Lastly this dissertation is informed by research into fans and fandoms, especially as it intersects in useful ways with other areas of study, including print culture, digital literacy practices, and learning communities. Otherwise known as fan studies, this field draws specific scholarly attention to “the choice of fan object and its surrounding practices, and what they can tell us about the fan him- or herself” (Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007, 5). Though relatively recent as a field of formalized, academic study, fan studies is an established discipline with a variety of foundational texts (Sandvoss 2005; Jenkins 2006; Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington 2007; Hills 2010; Booth 2012). Many of these texts and essays focus specifically on fan communities, the fans themselves, their practices, and the contexts in which they engage with

the object of their fandom. Less research has been done within fan studies into the role and function of the fan object itself, especially when that fan object is a person. With this research, I endeavor to expand the reach of fan studies by focusing on the practices and values of the fan objects, not as a disembodied text or distant persona but as an active, engaged entity that interacts with the related fan community. At the same time, this dissertation builds on existing fan studies research by analyzing the fan practices of the Vlogbrothers as models for their own fans, positioning the brothers as simultaneously both fan and fan object.

To understand how the Vlogbrothers function as both fans and fan objects and how the Nerdfighters evolve and operate as a community of fans, this research draws first on the definition of fans, fan identity, and fan culture as described in fan studies. Historically, fans have been defined by their insider knowledge and their deep intellectual engagement with texts; this intellectual engagement coincides with an equally deep imaginative engagement that feeds the shift from media consumption to fan production (e.g., fan fiction) (Jenkins (Textual Poachers); Gray et al). At the same time, fan studies scholars recognize fan practices as embedded in and expressions of emotional engagement (Hills; Sandvoss). This emotional connection, what Sandvoss describes as “sustained, affective consumption,” in turn informs the construction of the fan identity in which the object of fandom is often interwoven with the sense of self in a way that leads to “active construction of parallels, identity, and ‘identity’ between fans and their objects of fandom” (2005, p.96-97). These modes of engagement are essential to the presented analysis, especially Chapter 7, which specifically addresses how the Vlogbrothers model intellectual, imaginative, and emotional engagement with books and how that engagement manifests in reading and writing practices. This dissertation also addresses the impact of affective consumption in the relationship that the Vlogbrothers’ craft with the Nerdfighters,

drawing specific attention to the way in which the videos create the sense of an interpersonal relationship between fans and fan objects.

Within fan studies, the object of fandom is often conceived as a work or group of works, whether books, films, television shows, or other forms of media/transmedia storytelling, or characters within those works. Much of this focus is grounded in the proposition that regardless of whether the fan object is a novel, a show, a performer, or even a sports team, “they are all read and negotiated as (mediated) texts by their fans” (Sandvoss 2005, p.8). At one level this specific attention to mediated texts aligns with the research presented here, in that the analysis draws almost entirely from YouTube videos. Yet to construct the object of fandom entirely around the concept of consumed texts potentially negates the subjectivity of the fan object and keeps researchers from studying evidence of interactivity. To define the fan object under study as only the videos, and not the men in the videos, would thus ignore the impact of the interpersonal connection that the Vlogbrothers actively construct between themselves and their fans. Instead the Vlogbrothers occupy a space at the intersection of text and persona as fan object; they suggest, for example, that the Nerdfighters are a community that evolved around their videos, yet the Nerdfighters define themselves as “the fan-base of two guys who became famous on the internet.” This dissertation therefore intentionally studies the function of (mediated) performances rather than simply (mediated) texts.

Almost no studies have been published within fan studies that focus specifically on the practices of people who are fan objects. Often research into the practices of people who function as fan-objects is classified instead as part of celebrity studies and centers on the creation, maintenance, and navigation of fame, most of which is not relevant here. Celebrity studies do provide useful context for analyzing identity performance and branding, especially those studies

that consider the recent emergence of social media-based micro-celebrity and the evolution on social influencers (Marshall 2010; Senft 2013; Tolson 2013; Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017). (See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the Vlogbrothers' online identity performance and relationship to celebrity.) Yet these studies, like fan studies, consider the celebrity or fan object in isolation from followers and fans, rather than investigating the relationship between them or any active conversation that might be occurring.

What little scholarly work into the interaction between fan and person-as-fan object typically manifests as gestures to the fact that social media has impacted the appearance of that relationship. As David Beer notes in writing about music fandoms, online networks and social media have created “a reconfiguration of the relations between performers and their audiences,” which creates “the perception of proximity” or the “perception of accessibility” (2008, p.232-33). The recognition of this shift mirrors the comments of those writing about the removal of gatekeepers between books, authors, and young adult readers. As noted earlier in this chapter, studies of youth literature readership, while not technically fan studies research, sometimes mention the recent change in the relationship between authors and fans of their work, particularly in discussing the impact of social media (Hilbun, 2011; Martens 2016). Within this context, several scholars specifically call out John Green as a preeminent example of an author who has successfully navigated online interactions with a vast following of teen readers (Rothbauer 2018; Alexander 2017). Yet these works rarely go beyond noting that digital networks increase accessibility, or at least the perception of accessibility, and focus instead on youth fan practices in relation to the text or to modes of textual-production, rather than analyze any relationship between an author and his/her audience.

Apart from the construction of fan identities and fan objects, fan studies also provides a context for analyzing fan practices. Contemporary studies of fan practices focus on social and productive engagement with fan objects, drawing on themes of appropriation, participation, collective intelligence, and virtual community (Jenkins 2007, 363). In his early work on the productive engagement of Star Trek fans, Jenkins notes that fandoms have the power to turn “spectator culture into participatory culture” (266). Much of this participatory potential has been enhanced by the advent of digital media. As Clay Shirkey argues in speaking about the participatory nature of digital media, “every time a new consumer joins this media landscape, a new producer joins as well” (2005). Burgess and Green (2009; 2018), meanwhile, establish the specifically participatory nature of YouTube as a media platform. These underlying theories in turn provide essential insights into the evolving relationship between media and fan practices.

As Jenkins notes in the introduction to his collection of essays on fans and participatory culture, “fandom has been both reshaped by and helped to reshape cyberculture,” while “new technologies are enabling average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content” (2006 5; 1). This reshaped relationship between fans, cyberculture, and media practices is particularly relevant to any study of the Nerdfighters, as they regularly engage in all these activities in relation to Vlogbrothers’ video content. At the same time, the participatory nature of fan culture on networked and new media platforms is also useful for affirming the Vlogbrothers as fans, as this dissertation explores how they use YouTube to express their own personal fandoms, especially book-related fandoms, and how those participatory expressions in turn becomes models of engagement for their own fans. Relatedly, in noting new media’s facilitation of appropriation and recirculation of texts, the fan studies context creates a context for considering transmedia fan experiences, as fans and texts move from one format or mode of

expression to another. Transmedia fan practices therefore allow for an exploration of how print-based media fandom functions in non-print spaces and how digital media fandoms find expression in print-focused spaces, bridging the gap between print and digital culture.

Not all participatory practices within fan studies center on media production, however. Fan studies scholars also recognize the centrality of socio-cultural fan practices, particularly in scholarship about the emergence and practices of fan communities. Jenkins, for example, in his foundational work on Star Trek fans notes the power of fandoms “to transform personal reaction into social interaction,” while Duncombe in writing about fan-activism overtly argues that the very nature of fandom “necessitates relationships with others: fellow fans with whom to share interests, develop networks and institutions, and create a common culture” (2008; 2012).

Sandvoss, meanwhile, places social connections at the heart of fan studies as a field: “what has formed as a field of academic study of ‘fandom’ does not necessarily include all fans and their activities, but rather focuses on specific social and cultural interactions, institutions, and communities that have formed through the close interaction of committed groups of fans in a subcultural context” (2005, 5). Fan studies therefore provides a context for understanding the evolution of the Nerdfighters as a social group with a common culture (and related communal value system) and for analyzing the role of common literacy practices in the creation and substantiation of that culture, especially as they are modeled by the object of that Nerdfighter fandom (the Vlogbrothers and their videos). The emphasis on shared interests, meanwhile, bridges fandoms and passionate affinity spaces/interest-based learning and creates a space for considering how fan communities function as learning communities.

Fan studies research likewise connects fan practices with research into social networking, both online and offline. Burns, for example, in a chapter on fandom and teen readers, specifically

outlines fandom as a form of social networking. Relatedly, in work similar to Burgess and Green's on the participatory nature of YouTube, Patricia Lange has specifically investigated YouTube as a social networking site, describing not only "how video sharing can support social networks" but also specifically noting that "youth and young adults use YouTube's video sharing and commenting features to project identities that affiliate with particular social groups" (2008, 361). Using fan studies as a lens through which to view practices within these sites, this dissertation endeavors to explore how the Vlogbrothers' YouTube channel functions as a space for readers to engage in social networking, for Nerdfighters to project their fan and reader identities, and for readers and fans to affiliate themselves with the Vlogbrothers and the Nerdfighter community.

Lastly, fan studies offers insights into the impact of being a fan on academic and scholarly research. Matt Hills (2010), in writing about fan cultures, notes that research into fans and fandoms requires the researcher to be more fully embedded within the object of study than is traditionally expected. Paul Booth (2012), meanwhile, draws attention to the fluidity of fan and academic (aca-fan) identities that stands at the core of fan studies research. Indeed, much scholarship into fan communities and fan practices, particularly ethnographic research, begins with an admission of the scholar's fan identity and even a brief history of personal fan practices or involvement with the related fan communities. In light of this custom, this dissertation includes a similar admission of my own aca-fan identity and a statement regarding its impact as part of the overview of research design and methods in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN, ANALYSIS, AND METHODS

Introduction

As noted in previous chapters, much of the research into youth digital culture and media engagement has thus far focused on teen activity, often constructing an empowerment model that ignores or dismisses adult influence or explores it within the limits of pedagogical or parental contexts. At the same time, studies of youth-based fandoms typically focus on fan communities, their membership and activities, often sidelining the role of adult participants or assuming that shared fandom mitigates age-based power dynamics. With this dissertation, I seek to address some of these deficits and assumptions by focusing on the practices and rhetoric of John and Hank Green (the Vlogbrothers), two adults who interact with a sizable youth fan-base (the Nerdfighters) outside of the traditional pedagogical/parental model, but who also maintain aspects of age-based authority for the purposes of shaping what the community deems important (i.e. curating fan-community values). Specifically, I endeavor to understand their practices and rhetoric within the context of youth reading and media-literacy research, investigating how the Vlogbrothers craft literacy-related values and how they use online, digital media to communicate those values to their fan-base.

To accomplish these research goals, I engaged in an in-depth analysis of the online, digital content that simultaneously forms and informs their fan community. In an effort to elucidate both overtly stated and tacit value systems, my research process applied a thematic analysis to that digital content and involved the formal construction of a data set, codes, and themes, guided by the principles and phases of thematic analysis provided by Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield (2015). This chapter provides a description of that research process, including an overview of relevant theoretical analysis models, a detailed account of data set selection,

sampling, coding, and theme development, and an outline of findings and analysis. It also incorporates a discussion of the impact of my own position as Nerdfighter and Vlogbrothers fan on both my research methods and analysis.

Analytical Frameworks

Selection of analytical methods was informed by the intention and topical focus of my research. As noted above, the intention of my project was to gain insight into literacy as an emerging concept and value system as defined and endorsed by the Vlogbrothers and disseminated to the Nerdfighters. For this reason, I elected to engage in a thematic analysis (TA), which as Helen Joffe argues, “is best suited for elucidating the specific nature of a given group’s conceptualization of the phenomenon under study” (2012, 212). For both research design and analysis, I drew primarily from the theories, methods, and phases of thematic analysis (TA) as outlined by Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield (2015) in their encyclopedic work on the subject, with supplemental principles from a related form of discourse analysis (DA) to provide a framework for considering emerging discourse within its technological context. At the same time, given my interest in the impact of the online video format, I also drew on analytical principles from visual image research, particularly in relation to analysis of online video as a form of human communication and public performance. The following sections provide an overview of these relevant methodological and analytical frameworks and of the ways in which each informed the various components of my research design and analysis.

Thematic Analysis

In their foundational article on thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) identify a variety of different theoretical approaches to TA, manifesting along methodological binaries (inductive/deductive, semantic/latent). Later building on this work in their instructional chapter on

the subject, Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield (2015) cluster these various approaches into two common ‘versions’ of TA: “(1) a realist/essentialist, inductive, semantic, and descriptive approach; and (2) a relativist/constructionist, deductive, latent, and interpretive approach” (2015, 226). My research aligned specifically with the latter of these two versions, employing in particular deductive, latent, and interpretive forms of TA.

As described by Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield, deductive TA “views the data through a theoretical lens so that existing theoretical concepts inform coding and theme development, and the analysis moves beyond the obvious meanings in the data” (2015, 225). Implementing this form of TA allowed me to use already existing theories about youth reading and literacy, informal learning practices, and digital culture to serve as frameworks for identifying patterns, codes, and themes. As a related facet of thematic analysis, latent TA “focuses on meanings that lie under the data surface – assumptions, frameworks or world-views that underpin semantic meanings,” while interpretive TA goes beyond simple descriptions of data content “to decipher the (deeper) meaning in the data and interpret their importance” (226). This deductive, latent, interpretive approach thus facilitated consideration of both the explicit and implicit construction of literacy-related values and allowed for what Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas describe as an “integration of manifest and latent contents” (399).

These specific approaches to thematic analysis provided an analytical framework for my research, as well as a theoretical model for research design and methods. The general principles of TA, meanwhile, informed every step of my research, from establishing project parameters and sampling to coding and theme development. In writing about research design and sampling, Braun and Clarke note that “the data set might be identified by a particular analytic interest in some topic in the data, and the data set then becomes all instances in the corpus where that topic

is referred” (2006, 79). This kind of thematic sampling allowed me to draw specific analytical attention to literacy-related content within the larger data set of Vlogbrothers videos. My resulting sample was still large (for a description final data set size, see the section on Data Collection and Sampling below), but TA is specifically designed to facilitate analysis of large sample sizes, especially of secondary sources like media texts, and allows for samples of 400+ items (Clark, Braun, and Hayfield 2015, 229).

My research was likewise informed by the principles of TA as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data” (212). This involved a six-phase process of coding and theme development outlined in the table below:

Phase	Description of the Process
1. Familiarization	Reading and rereading the transcripts, listening to audio-recordings, making notes of any initial analytic observations
2. Coding	Identifying and labeling relevant features of the data (in relation to the research question); identifying patterns in the data
3. ‘Searching’ for themes	Cluster[ing] together codes to create a plausible mapping of key patterns in the data
4. Reviewing themes	Paus[ing] the process of theme generation to check whether the candidate themes exhibit a good ‘fit’ with the coded data and with the entire data set, and each as a clear, distinct ‘essence’ – or central organizing concept
5. Defining and naming themes	Writing theme definitions (effectively a brief summary of each theme) and selecting a theme name to ensure the conceptual clarity of each theme
6. Writing the report	Weav[ing] together the analytic narrative and vivid, compelling data extracts.

Table 3.1 Six Phases of Thematic Analysis

By following these phases, I was able to take advantage of thematic analysis' purposefully "flexible and organic" structure, which allows the researcher to "tweak existing codes as [they] work through the data, expanding or contracting them into two or more codes or collapsing similar codes together, to better fit [their] developing analysis" (235). A detailed description of my implementation of these six phases, including my coding process, is presented below in the section titled Research Methods.

Discourse Analysis

As noted above, thematic analysis draws out patterns that are implicit in the data and is therefore focused on the data itself, its content and meanings, without necessarily considering the context in which the content is created or transmitted. However, I am also interested in the impact of the new media/social media context on the community value-creation process. For this reason, I supplement my analysis with principles from a form of discourse analysis, namely computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA). Throughout their work on the TA method, Clarke and Braun (and later Hayfield) acknowledge an analytical overlap with discourse analysis, noting at one point that TA "can productively be combined with some discursive approaches" to create a "thematic discourse analysis" (2015, 226, emphasis theirs). Like thematic analysis, CMDA can be used to discern patterns in data that provide insight into in "macro-level phenomena," such as coherence, community, identity, and value-systems (Herring 2004, 339). At the same time, CMDA considers language as informed by its digital context, specifically recognizing discourse as "shaped by the technological features" of the system in which it is embedded (Herring 2004, 341). In this way, CMDA provides a supplemental analytical model for examining content in relation to technology and for considering the meaning-making correlation between content and context. Relatedly, in a 2010 article on

CMDA, Herring argues that blogs (and by extension vlogs) are “actively conversational” (241). Using this analytical approach, then, allowed me to gain insight into the ways that content creation and content sharing were mutually impactful and to recognize information exchange as a practice that established and reinforced social relationships between the Vlogbrothers and their fan community, a systematic analysis of which is presented in subsequent chapters.

Visual and Performative Elements

Despite the linguistic and discursive focus of my research, the Vlogbrothers’ choice to use video, rather than written (e.g., blog) or purely audio (e.g., podcast) formats, make it essential to consider visual components as part of analysis. The Vlogbrothers perform their videos in a talking-head style, with each brother individually addressing the camera/audience directly from within his home, or in John’s case, sometimes from various airports and hotel rooms.¹ As a result, the background scenery rarely changes and is infrequently subject to attention by the speaker. Yet the backdrop, which is usually bookshelves, plays a vital role in creating the stage on which the Vlogbrothers’ performance takes place; and the occasional references made by the speaker to those backgrounds draw attention to the brothers’ literate selves in ways directly relevant to this study. For analysis of backgrounds, then, I drew on theories of the performed self from Erving Goffman and from more recent scholars doing related work of the self in online, specifically social media, environments. (A more detailed analysis of these theories and their impact on my analysis can be found at the beginning of Chapter 4.) Relatedly, visual displays, such as props and other material objects or on-screen graphic elements (including textual graphics), are infrequently employed; and cinematic elements like animation or green-screening are not used at all. Again, however, the rare instances of displaying physical objects and props notably include a lot of books and reading-related fan objects; as

such, again analysis of these elements are directly relevant to any understanding of the Vlogbrothers as literate, book-loving readers.

The rest of my analysis of visual components, then, focused on the human element, specifically human performance. For this aspect, I drew on principles from visual image research that is interested in video as a record of human communication behavior. This subset of visual image research typically examines documentary or ethnographic videography, research participant-created videos, and recordings of participant interviews and interactions (Ennison 2016). Yet there is room to use its associated analytical framework, particularly its attention to display, dress, eye contact, clothing, gesture, and body language, to study these same performative elements in online vlogs. The Vlogbrothers' videos, especially those posted during the first six years, offer a compelling mix of the extemporaneous and the consciously performed, especially as the brothers become increasingly aware of their growing fan audience. Consequently, I was able to analyze a host of performative elements, including: the auditory (e.g., tone of voice, non-lexical utterances), gestures (e.g., eye rolling, hair pulling, pointing), broader physical movements (e.g., chair rolling, happy-dancing), and any combination thereof (e.g., a groan of frustration while pulling hair). Analysis of these components provided insight into meaning-making moments that fall outside the limits of discursive language, for example, instances of emotional engagement, and into the function and impact of the video format on communicating and valuing those moments.

Aca-Fandom

I came to this research as a long-standing fan of the Vlogbrothers and a self-identified Nerdfighter. The resulting hybridized identity, described by Paul Booth as a “flexible and porous identity between the fan and the academic,” could raise concerns about objectivity in relation to

my analytic methods (2013, 127). Many of these concerns, however, are mitigated by both the guiding principles of thematic analysis and informing theories of fandom research. Braun and Clarke, for example, argue that it is vital for researchers engaged in thematic analysis to immerse themselves in the data as a method of becoming with the breadth and depth of its content (2006, 87). My own fandom, then, serves as a mechanism by which I gained initial familiarity with my data, rather than the perspective from which I am engaged in the research. At the same time, recent theories in fan-community research note that “present-day scholarship can no longer be ‘set apart’ from the culture and ideology it studies, but is rather ‘set in relation’ with these contexts” (Hills 2010, 46). This perspective eschews the “imagined subjectivity of the ‘good’ and rational academic who is expected to be detached,” embracing instead the value, and even the necessity, of embedded subjectivity when studying fan communities (12). Embedded subjectivity, in turn, corresponds with the values of thematic analysis, which emphasizes “the importance of embracing researcher subjectivity, rather than viewing it as a ‘problem’ to be solved” (Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield 2015, 223). In this way, the research design described below and the analysis provided in subsequent chapters are not only informed by my own fandom but largely possibly because of it.

Research Design

In writing about the research design component of thematic analysis, Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield note: “the researcher plays an obviously *active* role in designing their TA study: selecting theoretical framework(s), research question(s), method(s) of data collection and sample” (2015, 226, emphasis theirs). Chapter One of this dissertation defined my research questions, and Chapter Two outlined the youth literacy and new media theory frameworks that

informed those questions; the following section describes the methods of data collection and sample selection.

Project Parameters

John and Hank Green's YouTube channel (eponymously named *vlogbrothers*) went live on January 1, 2007, and for the first year, the Vlogbrothers alternated posting one video every day, except on weekends and holidays. After the initial year and a total of 260 videos, they continued to post videos on a semi-regular basis, with new self-determined rules governing the schedule and responsibility for publishing new content. Since then, their online media reach has extended to include nearly thirty interconnected YouTube channels, as well as a variety of social media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram, and a podcast distributed via Soundcloud: all of which function to communicate and mutually reinforce community values to various overlapping subsets of their extensive fan-base.

Given my specific interest in the construction of a literacy-related value-system by the Vlogbrothers in the context of the formation of the Nerdfighter fan community, I restricted my research to videos posted to the Vlogbrothers channel; the *vlogbrothers* channel is the foundational channel, the source of John and Hank Green's early popularity and the cornerstone of the Nerdfighter fan-base, and it remained the dominant mode of communicating with fans for several years. I also focused my analysis on the videos posted to the initial *vlogbrothers* channel from its inception in 2007 through its fifth-anniversary year, 2012. This scope provided me with a sizable corpus of videos within which to do my analysis.

Year	Total Videos
2007	260
2008	132
2009	177
2010	158
2011	156
2012	112
Total	995

Table 3.2 Videos posted by year, 2007-2012

By focusing attention on the content of that channel, I am able to trace the development of practices and values alongside the simultaneous emergence of the Nerdfighters.

As the endpoint of my study, the year 2012 stands as notably transitional both in content and viewership. Marked by celebrations of five-year-anniversary moments, the content included a variety of videos that reflected on the growth and character of the Nerdfighter community. In terms of viewership, that year saw a notable increase in the size of the audience for the *vlogbrothers* channel. For comparison, in December 2007 they celebrated reaching 10,000 subscribers; by the end of 2012, they were nearing 1-million subscribers and 300-million video views, numbers they reached at the beginning of March 2013 (“ONE MILLION NERDFIGHTERS!”). The year 2012 also saw the rapid expansion of the Vlogbrothers’ media reach both online and offline. They launched their YouTube-funded, education-focused channels, *CrashCourse* and *SciShow*. Hank Green produced his Emmy Award-winning online video project, *The Lizzie Bennett Diaries*. John Green published his blockbuster young adult novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*. And the brothers embarked on their first cross-country road trip, the Tour de Nerdfighting, through which their interaction with fans moved to include more

offline spaces than ever. Their popularity by the end of 2012 was such that in January 2013, they sold out a live performance at Carnegie Hall in New York City. All of these events marked a shift in the size and nature of the Nerdfighter community and in the relationship of the Vlogbrothers to them, as they emerged as genuine cyber-celebrities.

Data Collection and Sampling

Having established the years, January 2007 to December 2012, and channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/vlogbrothers>) that would form the parameters of my project, I collected data in both video and transcript form. This process involved a number of data-processing steps, each of which is described below. In brief, steps in my analysis included:

- Downloading video and transcripts from an online archive (<https://nerdfighteria.info>),
- Creating searchable spreadsheets with transcripts and related metadata;
- Running targeted text searches using data analysis software; and
- Creating individual documents for deeper thematic analysis.

These initial steps included all videos within the parameters of my study: videos from the *vlogbrothers* channel between 2007 and 2012.

I downloaded video and transcript content from a fan-curated online archive of Vlogbrothers-related digital media. Described by its creators as a “repository of Nerdfighter culture and videos, focusing on projects by John and Hank Green,” nerdfighteria.info includes archived video from thirty YouTube channels, as well as searchable transcripts, bibliographic metadata (e.g., video title, channel, web address, upload date, duration, etc.) and statistical data updated regularly (e.g., number of views, likes, comments, etc.). Though the Vlogbrothers’ videos continue to be available on their original channel, this online archive includes advanced search features, organizes videos by subcategories like year, channel, and topic, and creates

downloadable JSON files. This additional functionality in combination with the provision of associated metadata and transcripts allowed me to download all my relevant data from one source.

I used the online archive’s search and download features to create one JSON file for each year within the scope of my study including the following associated data: channel ID, channel name, video ID, title, upload date, duration, transcript, and link (a discrete web address that connects to the video on its original YouTube platform for stable access and sourcing). The JSON files each were imported into Microsoft Excel, where data categories were converted into columns and each video with its coordinated transcript became a row. The resulting Excel spreadsheets were imported into an NVivo qualitative data analysis software project file, which allowed me to run targeted text searches of the transcripts and video titles for the purpose of sampling a topic-relevant data set.

As noted previously, thematic analysis allows for the creation of a data set that is defined by analytic interest in a specific topic (Braun and Clark 2006, 79). My analytic interest in this case was defined by my research questions, listed in the table below:

Question 1.	How do John and Hank Green, individually and mutually as the Vlogbrothers, practice text-based literacy? How does the online video context impact those practices?
Question 2.	How do the Vlogbrothers’ personal literacy practices inform and construct fan-community values and practices? How do they use online video content and context to communicate those values and to establish a community in which young people can learn and participate in those practices?
Question 3.	In what ways might community values and practices, as constructed and modeled by the Vlogbrothers, inform broader theories about the relationship between reading, writing, and new media, particularly as it relates to young people, learning, and literacy achievement?

Table 3.3 Research Questions

Given my stated interest in books and reading, I specifically targeted text searches to sample videos that included terminology related to those topics. I also ran text searches to sample videos using terminology related to writing as a way to contextualize community values in relation to content creation (i.e., the creation of written texts like books, which are in turn read) and to literacy more broadly conceived. Distinct searches were therefore run for each of the following:

Category	Search Terms	Purpose
1	Book, literature, text, novel	For investigating the book as object and content apart from reading practices
2	Read, reading, reader	For investigating reading as a practice and activity
3	Write, writing, writer, author	For investigating content creation

Table 3.4 Description of Search Term Categories

I used the functionalities of NVivo queries to search the text of transcripts and video titles for stem words listed above and related words simultaneously (e.g., a search for “write” also returned results for “writes” and “wrote”). This kind of thematic sampling not only established the topical coherence described by Herring (2004, p.351), but also allowed me to investigate books, reading, and writing as both discrete and overlapping concepts within Vlogbrothers’ video content.

Any video that included at least one of the search terms was included in the final data set for deeper analysis. The number of videos sampled and its percentage of total videos from each included year can be seen in the table below:

Year	Total Videos	Relevant Videos	Percentage Sampled
2007	260	164	63.1%
2008	132	85	64.4%
2009	177	104	58.8%
2010	158	92	58.2%
2011	156	89	57.1%
2012	112	61	54.5%
Total	995	595	59.8%

Table 3.5 Total Number vs. Relevant Sampled Videos by Year

The size of the resulting data set, though large, fell within parameters for large-scale thematic analysis (Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield 2015). At the same time, the overall percentage of videos sampled suggested, at least numerically, the significance of literacy-related content to the Vlogbrothers.

Videos and associated transcripts within this final dataset were then parsed using a Python script. Each row of the excel spreadsheet was sourced to create individual plain text documents. These discrete documents were then imported into NVivo for the process of coding and theme development, described in more detail below.

Exclusionary Criteria

Videos that fell within the text search criteria but were excluded from final analysis included those in which the search term appeared only as part of another word (e.g., ready) and those in which the search term “text” referenced text messaging, usually as a verb to denote sending a text message (e.g., instructions to send a text message as part of a group project). Videos created as part of the video-based Truth or Fail trivia game were also excluded; though

initially posted to the *vlogbrothers* channel, these brief, atypical videos eventually gave rise to a dedicated Truth or Fail channel, which fell outside the parameters of this project. Other videos were excluded during the analysis process when the appearance of selected terms did not result in coded content (e.g., a passing reference to having read a fact on a website).

Research Methods

Having established project parameters and sampled data in accordance with TA principles, I followed the six phases of analysis outlined by Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield (2015). These six phases, detailed earlier in this chapter and listed in brief below, provided a framework for both my research methods and for the description of those methods found in the rest of this chapter.

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Familiarization2. Coding3. ‘Searching’ for themes4. Reviewing themes5. Defining and naming themes6. Writing the report |
|--|

Table 3.6 Six Phases of Thematic Analysis, Listed

Familiarization

In describing the first phase of thematic analysis, Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield note that “familiarization involves spending quality time with your data,” including listening to audio or viewing video data beyond what is required for transcription (2015, 231-2). As noted previously, my initial familiarization was facilitated by my position as a fan of the Vlogbrothers and a self-identified Nerdfighter; as such, I have been watching the vlogbrothers YouTube channel almost

since its inception and have engaged in repeated viewings of many videos. This familiarization process, though informal, informed not only the construction of my research questions but also the establishment of my project parameters and development of my sampling method.

Once my research questions and final data set were firmly established, I then engaged in a more formal familiarization process. Due to the crowd-sourced nature of the video transcripts, I needed to validate the accuracy of the transcribed content against the original videos posted to YouTube during each stage of the coding process. This process required listening to audio content with simultaneous reading of transcripts, which added to my familiarity. Formal familiarization involved viewing videos and reading transcripts “in a *curious and questioning* way” that drew attention to implied community values and informed the development of codes and themes (Braun, Clark, and Hayfield 2015, 231, emphasis theirs).

Coding

In coding the videos and associated transcripts that formed the core of my research, I worked through the data chronologically, coding phrases rather than complete thoughts or complete sentences. Chronological coding allowed me to gain a sense of concepts and values coalescing over time in accordance with the simultaneous emergence of the Nerdfighter fan-community and its literacy-related values. Coding phrases was the best method for capturing thought in the kind of oral communication found in vlogs. The extemporaneous nature of the video content does not lend itself to complete sentences in the grammatical sense; and the Vlogbrothers’ style of delivery often includes tangents, so that one coded section may be split by un-related thoughts or phrases or even more lengthy explanations and stories. Recognizing one coded section as split by unrelated content allowed me to recognize complete concepts while avoiding the risk of taking content out of context. By implementing chronological coding in

conjunction with phrase coding, I was able to trace the transformation of phrases into catchphrases that are specific to the Nerdfighter community (e.g., “don’t forget to be awesome,” “in your pants,” and “French the llama”), as well as track the emergence of the term Nerdfighter itself in relation to literacy-related values.

I worked through the data in this way three times: (1) analyzing transcripts and video simultaneously to code spoken word content and auditory elements and to assess transcript validity; (2) analyzing video principally to annotate transcripts with associated visual and performative aspects; and (3) analyzing annotated transcripts alone to focus on the decontextualized spoken word component. As part of the process of coding, I employed multiple coding, which allowed phrases to assigned simultaneous codes as needed; this method reflected the often-intertwined nature of literacy rhetoric within the videos (e.g. writing about books read together). Codes were expanded, eliminated, and consolidated at each stage, in accordance with TA principles, resulting in a final list of 48 codes. Through the following analysis, then, references to codes are underlined for easy reference. (See Appendix B.1 for a complete list of codes with illustrative examples.)

Theme Development

After coding videos and associated transcripts, I collated codes into seven themes, and in accordance with TA methods, I used “existing theoretical constructs to look at data while also allowing emerging themes to ‘speak’ by becoming the categories for analysis” (Joffe 2012, 220). (See Appendix B.2 for a list of codes organized by associated theme.) I reviewed themes at two levels: first in relation to the coded data within each theme and then in relation to the entire data set, ensuring “that both the individual themes and the analysis as a whole captured key meanings and patterns in the data” (Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield 2015, 238). I then named and defined the

themes, using definitions “constructed at the intersection of the data and [my] theoretical assumptions” about literacy, informal learning, and youth digital culture (231). The resulting list of themes delineate seven distinct modes of engagement with text, five of which elucidate the literacy-related values of the Nerdfighter community and two of which draw attention to the mechanics of communicating those values. Brief descriptions of these themes are provided in the table below; more detailed descriptions and in-depth analysis of each can be found in subsequent chapters.

Theme	Definition
Identity Performance	Content/practices related to the Vlogbrothers’ personal identity as performed on the YouTube platform
Participation	Content/practices related to opportunities for participation in community projects and about modes for participation
Reading Communities	Content/practices related to books and reading as the source of social connections or as something shared
Social Literacies	Content/practices related to reading or writing done in a group, collaboratively, or as a community
Emotional Engagement	Content/practices related to displays of emotional response to books or stories
Creative Engagement	Content/practices related playing with, adapting, or creating art from books or stories
Intellectual Engagement	Content/practices related to learning about or analyzing books and stories

Table 3.7 Themes Developed During Analysis

Analysis and Findings

In the remaining chapters of this dissertation, I will provide details of my findings and discuss their implications in the context of existing theories, using the seven themes identified above as an organizational structure.

Theme	Chapter
Performance	Chapter 4
Participation	Chapter 5
Reading Communities	Chapter 6
Social Literacies	
Emotional Engagement	Chapter 7
Creative Engagement	
Intellectual Engagement	

Table 3.8 Themes Mapped to Chapter Analysis

Chapter 4 describes how the Vlogbrothers’ reading and writing practices function as a performance of literacy and a literate identity and considers how YouTube thus functions as a stage on which to perform that identity and model those practices for an audience. Chapter 5 outlines various forms of participation as crafted and promoted by the Vlogbrothers through their videos, explicating how participation in community literacy practices both inform and construct community values. Chapters 6 and 7 then further elucidate those values: Chapter 6 exploring two interrelated forms of social engagement with reading and Chapter 7 discussing more personal, individual forms of engagement with texts. Chapter 8, then, concludes the dissertation with a discussion of implications for contemporary theories on youth reading, literacy, and learning practices, as well as a breakdown of project limitations and possibilities for future research.

¹ There are exceptions to this dominant format, including: (1) videos that are filmed outdoors, (2) videos in which both brothers or another guest appear, or which have a guest host, and (3) videos that feature clips from various alternative locations with voice-over narration. Only a small percentage of total videos fall into these categories, but the function of these alternative formats are included in discussions of visual aspects.

CHAPTER FOUR: PERFORMING TEXT-BASED LITERACY AND AUTHORITY

Introduction

As stated previously, the intention of my research is to investigate how the Vlogbrothers construct literacy-related values and promote those values to their predominantly young adult fan-base. Before engaging with that investigation, however, it is useful to consider why young people listen to the Vlogbrothers about literacy-related topics in the first place and to understand how the brothers position themselves as voices of authority that youth voluntarily follow. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to trace the emergence of the Vlogbrothers as authority figures in relation to literacy practices by addressing the following research question:

RQ1: How do John and Hank Green, individually and mutually as the Vlogbrothers, practice text-based literacy? How does the online video context impact those practices?

Specifically, this chapter outlines how the Vlogbrothers perform a defined set of literacy-related practices that are centered around written text, and how new media, specifically YouTube, functions as a platform, a kind of digital stage, on which to perform those practices for an engaged audience. This survey of practices, in turn, provides a foundation for studying the Vlogbrothers' as mentors to their fan-audience: as adults whose practices they emulate, whose advice they seek, and whose values they adopt.

To do this work, I employ the theories of Erving Goffman and related scholars as a framework to conceptualize the Vlogbrothers' video-based performance of text-based literacy practices as a form of identity construction. I therefore begin this chapter with a summary of the identity-as-performance framework that informs my analysis. I then outline findings related to the Vlogbrothers' literacy-related practices, particularly reading and writing, that make up the performance of a literate identity. As part of this description, I explicate various modes of

performance, including that of reader, writer, and author, and draw attention to connections between practicing literacy and building authority that have implications for the construction of broader community values. I conclude the chapter by considering evidence of their awareness of themselves as experts, particularly in relation to advice-giving and role-modeling, and explore how they negotiate emerging issues and anxieties related to authority and celebrity.

Performing Identity Online

In positioning the Vlogbrothers' performance of text-based literacy practices as a form of identity construction, I am drawing on the theories of Erving Goffman, as well as the work of more recent scholars who place Goffman's theories in a digital context (Miller 1995; Chan 2000; Pearson 2009; Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013). Goffman, in his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, posits that a person's identity is ultimately the construction of social performances that involve both intentional and unwitting communication elements. Given the connections Goffman makes between communication, performance, and identity, his theories are useful for considering online communication platforms like YouTube as modes of identity performance. YouTube is by its very nature a social media space and is therefore a stage for public performance; and the Vlogbrothers chose to post their videos publically on that platform, rather than exchanging them privately or using the functionalities of YouTube to limit their audience. The videos posted by the Vlogbrothers to their eponymously named channel thus function as a presentation of self, a social performance of identity that involves both overtly purposeful and unintended elements, both of which are the subject of this research. Specifically, in this chapter, I use these theories to draw attention to different modes of performance that construct and affirm a literate identity, focusing on the performance of literacy-related, text-based practices like reading and writing.

At the same time, Goffman's theories provide a lens through which to consider how the Vlogbrothers' performance of self fosters a particular relationship with their audience, regardless of whether that audience is a brother, an anonymous audience of young people, or a fan-community. Goffman asserts that a performed identity, despite existing in response to interpersonal interaction and social context, is not an inauthentic or untrue presentation of self. In writing about the construction of identity on personal home pages, Chan relatedly notes that despite the affordances of online media to create an alternative version of self, sometimes "it becomes unrewarding, or even self-defeating, to fabricate completely new selves" (2000, 272). Such is the case with the Vlogbrothers' channel, since the original stated intention of the project was to improve the interpersonal relationship between brothers John and Hank Green by sharing their adult selves. As Hank notes in a 2009 video, "John and I started this project because we live across the country from each other and wanted to talk to each other more" ("Fighting the Flame War!"). They likewise make reference in interviews to using the Vlogbrothers' channel as a method of nurturing fraternal intimacy, and online they celebrate the videos as successfully providing a way of knowing each other better. Falsity, or even perceived affectation, would therefore undermine the relationship-building purpose of the original experiment. The channel's initial function instead implies the authenticity of the identity being performed. Through the course of watching the videos, the broader audience becomes aware of this intention and perceives the authenticity of the performed identity; any practices performed, then, take on the appearance of a true practice, and any sense of authority or expertise feels trustworthy.

Yet despite the assertion of the performed self as an authentic self, Goffman also recognizes the existence of different modes of performance that present different facets of the same authentic self. Most notably, he draws distinctions between regions of performance: the

back stage and the front stage, the latter operating as the space where performers are most rehearsed and aware of the spotlight. Chan provides a related critical interpretation of online identity construction as “a performance of private lives in public space” (272). Evidence that the Vlogbrothers understand their YouTube channel as a front stage space can be found throughout the videos: references to folklore, to scripts, and to editing reinforce the idea of the videos as a construction similar to storytelling, to playacting, and to performance. They also make overt references to the existence of an audience beyond themselves. For example, in his very first video, John remarks, “Hank, I know you know a lot about me, but I feel like we should give people a brief introduction to the characters who are going to be appearing in this video blog” (2007, “Brotherhood 2.0: January 2nd”). The reference to “people” aside from Hank clearly conveys an awareness of a broader, less personally familiar audience, while the classification of those in the videos as “characters” implies an underlying appreciation of identity as construction and performance. By 2008, the existence of an extensive public audience becomes even clearer, as John jokingly comments: “our sibling relationship has returned to, you know, normal. Normal, of course, being communicating via video blog while thousands of people watch” (“Thanksgiving in Asheville”). John’s description, however flippant, suggests an understanding of the Vlogbrothers’ online communication as very much a public performance of private life, as described by Chan. By 2011, the dominance of the Nerdfighter audience is complete, as Hank admits: “the audience is generally or at least started out being my brother...Now that one person has changed, and it’s kind of an amalgam of all of Nerdfighteria. It’s just each of you individually I’m trying to imagine all at once. It’s very strange” (“How to Vlog: From the Vlogbrothers”). This evolution of audience from brother to anonymous but sizable public to fan-community does not call into question the authenticity of the performed identity, however.

Instead, as Goffman and later critics suggest, it draws attention to which facets of the authentic self the brothers choose to present.

Goffman advocates that, in the face of multiple regions of performance and therefore multiple presentations of self, one should protect the self by maintaining divisions between different audiences. This feat is not always possible in online spaces however, particularly in social media spaces like YouTube, where one has limited control over who views posted videos; and as seen in the above quotes, the Vlogbrothers overtly admit to the existence of multiple overlapping audiences that cannot be separated. Instead, the presentation of self in online social media spaces requires alternative methods of communication and identity performance. Miller (1995), in early work on identity performance in networked spaces, describes the crafting of “an acceptable self,” in which communication “given” (intentional) outweighs communication “given off” (unintentional). In this case, the presentation of self is more performative and arguably less authentic, and evidence of this kind of self-conscious performativity can be in the Vlogbrothers’ negotiation of their selves as role models and celebrities, discussed below. More often, however, the Vlogbrothers engage in what Bullingham and Vasconcelos describe as “dividing the self,” in which case online performers “would not always replicate their whole offline identity, but rather, just highlight aspects of their personality.” (2013, 107). This division allows the presentation of self to bridge the seemingly contradictory spheres of authenticity and self-conscious performance. Evidence of this division can be seen not only in John’s refusal to feature his wife and later his children in the videos, but also in the consistent focus on aspects of their personalities that are the most socially acceptable, including their love and appreciation for reading and writing. The performed selves of the Vlogbrothers thus occupy a space between the

authentic and the managed, and their literate identities serve as mediated identities, performed via and viewed through the lens (literal and figurative) of digital video and social media.

Performing a Literate Identity

A Reader Identity

As part of performing a literate identity in their videos, the Vlogbrothers present themselves as readers and clearly establish reading as a personal value and practice. Neither ever overtly claim the identity of reader (e.g., saying aloud, “I am a reader.”), like they do that of writer and author. They do, however, regularly perform reading practices in ways that construct and represent a reader identity. This reader identity manifests in various modes of performance: literal and implied, direct and indirect. Their performances also bridge spoken content and visual elements and convey a variety of tones from playful to serious. Both of the brothers engage in these different modes of performance over the course of the videos included in this study, thus reinforcing the idea of reader as a shared identity and reading as a shared value, but individually they are likely to favor certain modes of performance, simultaneously asserting an unique, personalized relationship with text. In this section, I provide illustrations of these varied performances and consider how each contributes to an overall understanding of the Vlogbrothers as readers.

Literal Performance

A literal performance of the reader identity refers to any act of reading that is presented in the videos. These acts include reading out loud from books and stories they have written (considered in more detail in the next section), from books or stories written by others, and from the Internet generally, often from the text-heavy Wikipedia. Other literal performances include videos in which John or Hank are seen reading on camera but not reading to the camera. Literal

performances provide visual evidence of the brothers as readers who possess a comfort and unaffected familiarity with books and other reading materials. They likewise contribute to an individualized reader identity, as each brother reads certain kinds of books.

Of the two brothers, John is more likely to read aloud from books written by other people. For example, on the death of Kurt Vonnegut, he reads a lengthy passage from *Fates Worse Than Death*, and in sharing his analysis of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, he reads the novel's note from the author. Often these readings have a serious tone, in line with his earnest appreciation of literature generally, but other instances are distinctly playful. The video "GEEKING OUT Over Dying Declarations," for example, is entirely dedicated to reading examples from a recently acquired copy of *Last Words of Notable People* in a tone that is enthusiastic, bordering on giddy. Other readings deliberately undercut the gravity usually applied to serious literature:

Anyway, I've been thinking that we should increase the sophistication factor of Brotherhood 2.0. And that's why, today, I'm commencing a project to read James Joyce's entire Ulysses to you out loud thirty seconds at a time starting now. (Reading from the book) "Stately, plum Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressing gown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air." (Puts the book down) Okay, that was boring. (2007, "Brotherhood 2.0: March 1, 2007: Sophistication. And balls.")

This seeming dismissal of Joyce stands at odds with more academic and considered references to the author's work in other videos and belies his appreciation of Joyce generally; but the reading itself functions in a way similar to all instances of reading out loud to the camera: to denote his familiarity with books that comes from being a reader.

In reading aloud from books, John enacts his reading self not just in the act of reading itself but in the performance of a self that reads in particular ways. At the most basic level, he asserts himself as someone who reads both as a hobby and as an access point to other hobbies (like memorizing dying declarations). At the same time, he reaffirms himself as a reader who

loves classic literature, particularly canon-friendly authors like Whitman, Faulkner, Joyce, Fitzgerald, and Salinger. Reading these authors out loud provides evidence of personal engagement with text at emotional and intellectual levels; and those personal practices, in turn, provide the foundation for constructing these kinds of engagement as community values. (A more detailed analysis of emotional and intellectual engagement as community values appears in Chapter 7).² Yet, in his playful undercutting of Joyce, John acknowledges his willingness to mitigate his own serious relationship with literature for the sake of his audience. His reading aloud is a demonstration of his own personal familiarity with the novel, not a call for his audience to become serious readers of Joyce (a fact reinforced by another video in which he tells them how to fake having read *Ulysses* by memorizing two essential quotes). In this way, his literal performance of reading establishes his own reader identity and models reader practices without overtly indoctrinating his fans.

While John is the brother more likely to read *to* the camera, Hank is more likely to be seen reading *on* camera without reading to it, most often in videos taken by John when the two brothers are together. For example, in the 2012 video “Nerds at the Beach: A REUNION VIDEO,” John records Hank reading a book under an umbrella and they have a brief conversation about what he is reading. In 2007, Hank also creates his own consciously literal performative video, titled “Dum De Dum De Dum De Readin’ a Book.” The video opens with Hank’s assertion, spoken directly to the camera: “I don’t have time to talk to you right now. I’m sorry. I’m finishing a book.” The bulk of the reading performance then consists of shots of Hank reading Philip Pullman’s *The Subtle Knife* in various locations, both indoors and outdoors, while a voiceover of Hank sings:

Dum de dum de de de, readin’ a book;
Dum de dum de dum de, readin’ a book;

Oh dumble de dum de dum dum;
Dum de dum de dum;
Dum de dum be dum de, readin' a book.

After which, the video switches to Hank ruminating about the rationale of adults reading books written for children; but the video ultimately concludes with a post-logo shot of Hank reading during which he again directly addresses the camera: “Oh my God! Stop bothering me! I’m reading!”



Image 4.1 Hank reads silently to himself on video, from “June 25: Dum De Dum De Dum De Readn' a Book” (2007)

Similar to John’s literal performances, Hank’s practice of reading on camera affirms him as someone who reads voluntarily, as well as someone who thinks about himself as a reader who enjoys particular types of books, in this case fantasy literature and literature for young people. Notably, the act of reading being performed in this video, as well as those video by John in which Hank is reading, also portrays reading as a solitary activity, in direct contrast to the kind of social reading that he and John value and promote to the Nerdfighter community (A more detailed analysis of social reading as a community value appears in Chapter 6).

Direct References to Reading

The authenticity of the reader identity conveyed in these literal performances is reinforced in other videos by repeated direct references to reading as a practice in which they are often engaged. Direct references to reading include any overt statements about reading, such as having read something, knowing how to read, enjoying reading, or preferring reading to other activities. They also include generalized references to books as a preferred form of entertainment, since an appreciation of books implies an associated practice of reading.

Of the two brothers, Hank is more likely to make direct references to reading as something he is doing. For example, in recounting his day to day activities, he includes statements like: “this morning, I was sitting in bed, reading a book with my wife,” and “I took off for Atlanta. I read a good book on the way.” John, on the other hand, is more likely to rely on indirect references to his reading, as illustrated in more detail later, but he does make reference to having read specific books when making recommendations. (A more detailed analysis of recommendations as a community practice appears in Chapter 6). He is also prone to infusing his references to reading with a more enthusiastic and emotional response, modeling a kind of emotional engagement with text: “I get this book in the mail and I'm like ‘I'll read a page or two,’ and then I can't stop reading it because it is made of sweetness and funny and awesome!” (“8 Things I Love”). These kinds of direct references lend consistency and authenticity to literal performances of the reader identity by confirming reading as a practice in which they are engaged off-camera as well as on. The reader identity thus emerges as something performed for the camera but also as a facet of a backstage, unmediated performance of self.

Both brothers also directly reference reading as an activity that they enjoy and value. John, for example, in creating a video about six things he is “proud to know how to do, and love

doing,” playfully lists playing disco golf with his dog as one, followed by: “Second, I know how to read!” (2012, “Things I Can Do”). Similarly, Hank notes that “all that book reading has made me think about book reading and how much I like it. A lot.” (2008, “Nerdfighters Blurbing Book Club!”). Relatedly, they both acknowledge books as a preferred form of entertainment, particularly over conventional television. When asked by a Nerdfighter if he prefers the television show *Lost* or *Heroes*, John answers, “Um, books” (2008, “QUESTION TUESDAYS (On Friday)”); Hank, meanwhile, says in one video: “you know what’s better than television crime shows? John Green’s books. Actually, all books” (2009, “Television Crime Shows Suck”). Notably, both brothers acknowledge books as a preferred medium over other formats as well; as John summarizes in one video, “Books vs. movies? Books. Text vs. video? Text” (2007, “October 4th: Happy Dances, Feuds, and Raccoon Infestations”). These personal preferences and values provide the foundation for reading as a valued community practice amongst the Nerdfighters; but they are complicated by the Vlogbrothers’ use of and appreciation for online video, especially as a form of interpersonal communication. The practice of reading and the associated reader identity thus ultimately exist as part of a complex negotiation between the value of offline, textual media and online video media.

Implied Performance

The Vlogbrothers do not rely solely on direct, literal performance of reading practices to construct and present their reader identity, however. They also engage in more implied, indirect performances, what Goffman would describe as forms of communication that “give off” an impression of self. An implied performance of reading in the Vlogbrothers’ videos thus includes any visual reference to reading that endorses the brothers as readers without any associated direct action or statement. As noted in Goffman’s theories about scene-setting in the front stage

performance of identity, this mode of performance includes “furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, and upon it” (33). Visual elements like décor and props play a special role in the Vlogbrothers’ videos, as they most often perform their videos in front of backgrounds that rarely change and are only occasionally subject to attention by the speaker. As such, the selection of that background operates as an implied reinforcement of the identity being performed and constructed.

Both brothers use bookshelves as a background in a majority of their videos, and while the specific look of those bookshelves changes over times as the brothers move and/or redecorate, the dominant background visual of books remains the same. John is the first to use a bookshelf as his background, beginning on January 16, 2007, and he quickly settles on a particular set as his principal setting, though the specific look of the shelves changes over time as he reorganizes, moves, and formalizes his office.



Image 4.2 John’s bookshelf backdrop, from “Harry Potter Nerds Win at Life” (2009)

Meanwhile, during the early years of the Vlogbrothers project, Hank is more likely to film in various locations, both indoors and out; but by November 2009, he too films with a bookshelf as his background, a visual that remains central through the rest of the years covered by this study.



Image 4.3 Hank’s bookshelf backdrop, from “Superhero Creation Myths” (2011)

These visuals imply ownership and, by extension, readership, reinforcing with every video the image of the brothers as readers. The implied performance is later made explicit when the brothers take their audience on various tours of their bookshelves, drawing attention to their extensive book collections. (A more detailed analysis to the function of bookshelves appears in Chapter 7.) In this way, the video format of the performance contributes to the construction of the text-based literate identity in ways that text or purely audio formats could not.

Indirect References to Reading

The Vlogbrothers also imply their practice of reading by making indirect references to book content in ways that demonstrate a knowledge that comes from being readers. Indirect references to reading thus includes any allusion to book knowledge made without a book in hand, including quotes, decontextualized jokes and references, and other demonstrations of book-related expertise. These references contribute to each brother’s individualized reader

identity in ways similar to literal performances, associating each with a specific type of reading material and certain types of reading practices. Yet these kinds of references also form an important part of the reader identity not just because they provide more evidence of personal reading practices and values, but also because they provide a primary foundation for book-based expertise. They demonstrate a knowledge of and level of engagement with books that cannot be easily faked, and as such ensure a deep form of credibility that ultimately translates into literacy-related authority and general positioning as role models for community practices and values.

In terms of individualized reading practices and values, John's book knowledge reinforces his identity as a reader of classic literature. He quotes, like he reads aloud, from favorite writers, particularly poets, including Walt Whitman, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Emily Dickinson, and William Shakespeare. Yet unlike literal performances, these quotes are less conscious performance and more an inherent part of the self. For example, in an early video, he admits to having lines of poetry stuck in his head, "lately I've been having poetry earworms, like this one from Walt Whitman: 'Had anyone supposed it is lucky to be born? Well, I hasten to tell him or her that it is just as lucky to die, and I know it'" (2007, "November 5th: John's Not Happy about Pakistan"). In describing the Whitman lines as "earworms," which typically denote song melodies and lyrics that spontaneously appear in one's mind and that one cannot stop singing, John acknowledges a deep familiarity with the poem that suggests repeated readings. In another instance he describes a road trip: "I had to drive through Chicago, which has always been my favorite American city. A city of so many neighborhoods that you can never discover them all. A city as [poet] Carl Sandburg wrote 'under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs'" ("The Terrible Burden of Destiny: Chicago and Waupaca"). Here the written word functions as an extension of John's own thoughts and feelings, an expression of self. At other

times, he uses quotes to describe why his website name references the Book of Job, why his dog is named for a character from a James Crumley novel, and even why he wanted to name his first-born child Gatsby. Book knowledge thus functions implicitly and inherently as a deeply embedded facet of his most personal self, his reading self.

Hank, meanwhile, presents his reading self as one who reads mostly science fiction, fantasy, graphic novels, and genre novels for young people. Unlike John, he does not quote directly from the books that he reads, but he still establishes a ready knowledge of books and their content. This knowledge manifests in a variety of ways from brief off-hand allusions to longer reflective monologues. In the case of the latter, he at different times offers opinions on genre books he has recently read, ruminates on what he learned from a book on global economics or genocide, and analyzes why he as an adult enjoys reading books for children. Hank also makes brief passing references that similarly evoke an inherent knowledge and familiarity with books. For example, he makes a passing reference to “42” as the answer to the question of life, the universe, and everything, a reference to Douglas Adams’ science fiction series *A Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, and in one particularly playful example, he details the number of times characters in the *Star Wars* films lose a hand, only to note that “of course, if you go into the books, then you’ve got a lot more to deal with!” (“13 SEVERED HANDS!”).

Also, while John uses quotes as an expression of his thoughts and feelings, Hank uses books as a lens through which understand the world and his opinions on everything from travel to technology are filtered through books. For example, in a video about the evolution and impact of Google Translate and its associated AI, Hank notes: “combining speech recognition with an actual bionic implant of any kind...would, I think, have really dramatic implications on what it means to be a person, and anybody who hasn’t thought about that should read this book. It’s

called *Feed*,” a reference to M.T. Anderson’s classic young adult dystopian/cyberpunk novel (“Google in your Brain”). Here, as in other videos, Hank uses his book knowledge not simply to express his own opinion but also as a shared point of reference for engaging in a broader conversation, a practice that has deeper implications for social reading as a community value among the Nerdfighters.

For both brothers, these indirect references to reading create a foundation for a form of book-based expertise. For Hank, the relationship between reading and expertise gained from reading is often direct. For example, as he playfully argues: “I’ve read Kim Stanley Robinson’s Mars Trilogy like seven hundred times. As such, I know all about Mars’s post-capitalist future” (2008, “Please Google, Take Me to Mars”). Yet it is John who ultimately emerges as the authority on book content and who more clearly revels in his position as literary role model. Evidence that the Nerdfighters acknowledge his broad familiarity with literary works and by extension value his opinion on literary matters can be seen in the many videos that involve John answering questions asked by the fan community; at least some of the many questions answered in each of these videos center on John’s opinion about novels, plays, and poems. He has, for example, been asked his favorite Kurt Vonnegut and Toni Morrison novels, his favorite books about Islam, his favorite German author, his favorite personification of death, his favorite lines from various poems and plays. At other times, he is asked to choose between two authors, typically decontextualized from references to specific titles, plots, characters, or even first names: “Joyce or Yates: Joyce...Faulkner or Whitman: Whitman” (2009, “100 QUESTIONS ANSWERED!!!!!!”).

These question and answer videos operate as one of the earliest traditions to emerge in the evolving relationship between the Vlogbrothers and the Nerdfighters, and the answer John

gives thereby also function over time. For example, in an early video he answers that his favorite Shakespeare play is *Hamlet*; in a later video, when asked the same question, he says: “I’ve answered that before. I think last time I said Hamlet, so this time I’m going to say Macbeth” (2012, “The Dangling Rope of Terror: It’s Question Tuesday”). Such shifts do not undermine the authenticity of his answer, however, because by the time the second video is produced, the Nerdfighters understand John’s identity as someone who is well-read, who knows and loves all of Shakespeare’s plays, and who does not have absolute favorites. These interactive moments thus function as important examples of the social aspects of reading that emerge in the Nerdfighter community. The broader implications in relation to community reading practice are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6; still it is useful to note here that these examples also serve as evidence that John’s performance of a reader identity accepted as an authentic presentation of self, one that provides a foundation for further positioning as a role model and mentor in literacy-related practices and values.

Notably, the Vlogbrothers demonstrations of book knowledge also set up space for insider jokes and moments of shared knowledge that create and reinforce community ties. For example, John creates a lolcat phrase “exclusively for people who have read one particular William Carlos Williams poem: ‘Got u sum plumz, but I ated them, kthxbai’” (2008, “Ruins, LOLBooks, and the Blurbing Book Club”). Such moments of common knowledge are especially common in Hank’s references to book content. In 2007, on a visit to a famous Silver Dollar Casino, he notes that the attraction of the place “doesn’t actually make sense to anyone except maybe people who have read Neil Gaiman’s *American Gods*” (“October 19th: Missoula to Seattle”). In 2008, he writes a song that references numerous fantasy and science fiction novels with callouts to the Pillar of Storge, the Realm of Narnia, and the Starfighters of Adumar, from

the Harry Potter-verse, C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Star Wars* series novels respectively ("Book Eight...Another Harry Potter Song"). Another video from 2009 even assumes a common use of books as a source of knowledge about futuristic technology: "fans of science fiction literature will know all the freak about this, but if you take an interstellar journey at near the speed of light, by the time you get to your destination, maybe only a couple of years could have passed for the rest of the universe" ("Become a Time Traveler TODAY!"). In this way, his personal reading practices become points of commonality with his audience, creating a foundation for the kinds of shared fandoms discussed in the next chapter.

In fact, indirect references to reading and demonstrations of book knowledge create the strongest ties to the Nerdfighter community in relation to literacy practices and values. While all performances serve to establish the authenticity of the Vlogbrothers as readers, those practices performed indirectly do the most to establish them simultaneously as peers (who share a common appreciation and knowledge) and mentors (who are experts with a broader base of knowledge that they will happily share). The above practices also set up individual roles for each brother within the community itself: John as the brother more closely associated with emotional and intellectual engagement with text, and Hank as the brother who engages creatively with well-loved texts and participates in fandoms, the analysis of which are focus of the next two chapters.

The Writer and Author Identity

The Vlogbrothers' performance of a literate identity involves not only the consumption of printed text through reading practices but also the production of printed text through writing practices. Like the performance of reading, the performance of writing is complicated by the Vlogbrothers' use of talking-head video blog format, which inherently promotes the spoken over

the written word, and by the rules of the initial Brotherhood 2.0 project, which disallowed any form of text-based communication. These limitations do not prevent the Vlogbrothers from performing a writer identity though; instead they find alternative modes of performance that manifest predominantly through talking about themselves as writers, talking about personal practices of writing, and talking about what they have written, rather than through performing writing practices overtly. As an established author of young adult novels, John comes to the Vlogbrothers project with his writer identity already somewhat established, but over time both brothers ultimately assert themselves as writers through a variety of shared, sometimes cooperative practices. These practices, in turn, reinforce the idea of writer as a shared identity and writing as a shared value. This section provides illustrations of these varied writing practices and considers how each contributes to an overall understanding of the Vlogbrothers as writers, noting in particular intersections between the performance of writer and the performance of authorship.

Presenting the Self as a Writer

Unlike the Vlogbrothers' performance of a reader identity, the presentation of the writing self involves almost no literal performances. Hank never writes on camera, and John does so only twice, both in the first seven months of posted videos. This absence of literal performances is due in part to the restrictions on text-based communication imposed during the first year but is more practically the result of the essentially silent, not-interactive nature of writing itself. As John notes in a video from 2011, "Hank, watching people write is boring, and in my case at least it doesn't even involve that much typing" ("Winkels to the Left, Winkels to the Right: Thoughts from Places, Antwerp"). This comment is supported by the audio-visual elements of the videos of John writing, both of which involve brief, largely silent clips of John with his laptop, with the

bulk of the video content dedicated to John’s often self-deprecating commentary on his writing process.³



Image 4.4 John writes silently by himself, from “A Day in the Life of a Writer (Who Has No Friends).”

In opposition to the practice of reading, which can take advantage of the video format through the act of reading out loud, the act of writing possesses no oral component, unless the Vlogbrothers are reading what they have written, examples of which are described later in this section.

Less able to use the video format to stage literal performances of their writer selves, the Vlogbrothers instead directly and verbally claim the writer identity. For example, in the very first video posted by John to the vlogbrothers channel, John says, “You are Hank Green, you are twenty...uhh...six? You are a web designer and environmental activist and writer. My name is John Green. I’m 29. I’m a writer” (“Brotherhood 2.0: January 2nd”). Hank likewise notes in a 2008 video: “I’m Hank, and my brother is John, and he writes books” (“Obama llama Duck”). Over the course of the six years covered by this study, in fact, every time the brothers introduce themselves as a way of initiating new audiences, they include references to themselves as writers. Notably both brothers are as likely, and in the case of Hank more likely, to claim the

identity of writer for each other as they are for themselves. In doing so, they not only establish writing as a shared practice and writer as a shared identity, they also set up being a writer as something they find noteworthy about their sibling.

Talking About Writing

The mode of performance most often employed by the Vlogbrothers in presenting a writing self consists of either talking about the act of writing or sharing out loud what they have written. Examples of the former include any reference to writing as a practice in which they are engaged, often in the context of specific works they are in the process of drafting, like songs or novels. Not surprisingly, John talks frequently about writing books for young adults, both generally and specifically in reference to whichever novel he is writing. Yet Hank too makes regular references to his own varied writing practices: blogging about environmental technologies for his professional website, writing freelance pieces for magazines, and even getting “a gig doing a book review for the New York Times” (2007, “September 25th: TMBG and NYT”). These references reinforce the writer identity as a shared identity generally, and also establish the writing as not just something they *can* do but as something they *choose* to do both as hobby and as profession. References to writing also communicate a specific kind of writing practice for each brother: John as the writer of fictional novels, Hank as the writer of shorter, nonfiction pieces (though he does at one point try his hand at writing a novel). These differentiated practices, in turn, set up different forms of expertise, with John emerging as the role model for young fiction writers.

Hank also broadens the idea of a writer identity by focusing on himself as a writer of songs. For Hank, song-writing as part of the Vlogbrothers’ project began as a rarely indulged hobby, only to evolve into a regular practice, culminating in a year-long sub-project called Song

Wednesday, during which he was required to post a video performance of a new song he had written every other Wednesday. In the context of constructing a writer identity, the performance of this hobby-turned-profession manifests in not only performing songs but also talking about act of writing them. For example, at different points in 2009, he notes “I am writing an Irish song that requires an Irish fiddle,” and “riding around on a road trip is a really great time to write songs, and I have started to write several of them on this road trip” (“Crazy Man is Crazy (With SEATTLE INFO)”). Then, at the beginning of 2011, after successfully completing the Song Wednesday challenge, he makes this pronouncement: “2010 is over, and that means I will never sing another song again. No more Song Wednesdays, no more songs. It’s over. Of course, I am lying to you. I couldn’t stop writing songs if I wanted to” (“Harry Freaking Potter”). Notably, here he not only owns the writer identity but positions song-writing as an inherent and inescapable part of his self.

In performing a writer identity, the Vlogbrothers usually construct writing as an act practiced independently, as seen for example in John’s video “A Day in the Life of a Writer (Who Has No Friends)” (2007). Yet over the course of the first six years, the Vlogbrothers also practice writing as a cooperative endeavor. For example, in the early part of 2007, John writes a story in jest called “Everyone Poops in My Pants,” which he credits as having been written by Hank Green (though technically it was not), who is also the first-person narrator of the story (“Brotherhood 2.0: February 7, 2007”). He reads the story out loud in the video from February 7; Hank then responds on February 28 with a video that uses John’s audio track and Hank’s illustrations (“Brotherhood 2.0: Everyone Poops in My Pants, A Picture Book”). Notably, the entire story itself is a product of an ongoing game in which the brothers, and later the Nerdfighters generally, add the phrase “in my pants” to the end of book titles (in this case the

popular children's picture book *Everyone Poops* by Taro Gami); Hank had argued in an earlier video that "in my pants" creates funnier titles "in your pants," using *Everyone Poops* as his primary example, which is at least in part why John gives him authorial credit for the story. In this way, the brothers perform creative writing as a collaborative and reciprocal practice. Later instances of this kind of collaboration expand to include the Nerdfighters as well, as the Vlogbrothers develop stories based on the concept of the Evil Baby Orphanage⁴ and recreate one of John's favorite childhood picture books, *Gus the Bug*. Personal practices of collaborative writing thus also serve as a foundation for collaborative values in the broader community, in relation to both writing and imaginative engagement with books and stories (A more detailed analysis of collaborative writing and creative engagement as a community value appear in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, respectively).

The cooperative writing of the "Everyone Poops in My Pants" story also constructs writing as a personal practice that involves a combination of written words, spoken words, and visual images. The use of the video format as a platform for sharing and crafting the story also allows the Vlogbrothers to extend the performance of writing in ways that still replicate the features and structure of conventional, printed texts. For example, the above short story, and later *Gus the Bug*, build on a picture book format, using its static images and simple sentence structure. Over the course of the first six years, the Vlogbrothers also regularly replicate the form and features of a traditional letter in various videos. In 2007, for example, John writes and reads a letter addressed to the people who write the dictionary, playfully opening with "Dear Messieurs Merriam and Webster," and in 2008 he writes to evolution personified: "Dear Evolution, I have always believed in you, and I have always defended you. Now make me a puppy-sized elephant! Your friend, John" ("Dec 12th: W00t is the WORD OF THE YEAR?!", "The Return of Question

Tuesdays”). At other times, virtual letters occur as part of a challenge, a convention of the Vlogbrothers project in which the brothers create videos based on a pre-determined format or theme. Between September 20 and September 24, 2010, for example, John and Hank exchange virtual letters to fifteen-year-old versions of each other, offering earnest advice about life, learning, and language alongside teasing about adolescent romances (“Life Is Like Pizza”; “Non-Virgin...a Lexical Gap”; “Dumping My 15-year-old Girlfriend”). In other videos, the Vlogbrothers continue the tradition by sharing open letters to different audiences: John to students returning to school and Hank to the wizards of the Harry Potter universe. As Hank reminds the audience, an open letter is “a letter that I write to someone or something that everyone gets to see, not just the person or thing that I write the letter to” (“Open Letters,” 2009). Open letters thus serve as a particularly notable example of writing at the intersection of text and visuals because they are fundamentally performative and social. Performed writing practices like these thereby construct writing as something not always practiced in isolation but rather, like reading, as an activity that *can* have a social component. At the same time, these practices, like the story-writing example above, reaffirm writing as able to transcend the physicality of the page or even the computer and to emerge more broadly as an intellectual and creative engagement with words, even as it necessitates familiarity with embodied, text-based traditions, like picture books and letters.

The reading of virtual letters also operates as an example of performing a writer identity by sharing written works. This mode of performance typically involves sharing the kind of writing most closely associated with each brother: John’s novels and Hank’s songs. As noted above, Hank regularly posts performances of his songs as part of the writing process, and he is more likely to share songs he has written than any other kind of writing. John, meanwhile, posts

videos in which he reads from novels as he is writing them, a practice that becomes so common that in 2010, John lightheartedly declares, “so anyway Hank, in keeping with tradition, I thought I’d read to you from the beginning of the book. Story time!” (“Will Grayson, Will Grayson”). In many ways, the practice of reading written works seen in these videos more specifically communicates the brothers’ professional identities: John’s identity as author and Hank’s identity as song-writer, both of which are considered in more detail in the next section. Yet the videos also provide insight into the Vlogbrothers’ practice of writing generally. Writing emerges in these videos as not only something that the brothers can do, but something they commonly enjoy and value.

In other performances that involve reading what they are writing, the act of writing emerges as something inherently connected to their relationship as brothers, especially as brothers who engage in good-natured teasing. For example, between September 11 and September 17, 2007, John and Hank engage in a four-video exchange of recently written works. The interchange begins when John reads a draft of his novel as a way to meet both the requirement to post a video and the looming deadlines from his publisher simultaneously. Hank responds with a video titled, “HA! I read from MY Novel :-P”, in which he does exactly as the title suggests while also teasing John about being distracted. This continues for two more videos before John is able to focus more fully on the Vlogbrothers project. This exchange is notable because it not only reaffirms the brothers’ identity as writers, but it also provides insight into the function of writing as part of their identity as brothers. Here we see writing not just a common practice over which they can bond and a shared endeavor in which they collaborate, but as a sharing of their true selves (in accordance with the project’s initial intentions) and as a

manifestation of their particular fraternal relationship, which often involves playful banter and mischievous mocking.

The Vlogbrothers share more than just works written recently, however. They also post videos in which they read aloud from juvenilia. John, for example, reads from diaries and journals he kept in elementary and middle school, as well as small story-books he wrote and illustrated, including *My Great Mini-Book: It's Wonderful Amazing, My Elf*, and *It Just Isn't Fair*, the last of which won a Young Author's Award. Notably, John had forgotten writing the books, and even winning the award, until he started unpacking boxes of his childhood belongings and sharing the contents on video. Hank, meanwhile, reads notes written in the margins of high school notebooks, and draws attention to an opinion piece that was published in the magazine of the American Astronomical Society when he was sixteen years old. In a 2009 video, he also declares: "Um, the songwriting thing is not new. I thought the songwriting thing was newer than it was. I remember that I wrote some songs in high school, but I did not realize how many songs I wrote in high school" ("Hank's Journal!!!"). While he does not share these bits of juvenilia as John does, his reference to them establishes writing as a long-standing personal practice. Evidence of juvenile writing practices, especially in connection to forgotten practices and products, also suggest the Vlogbrothers' writer identity as one not only long-performed, but also one so deeply and inherently embedded that it transcends memory. At the same time, sharing juvenilia also positions the Vlogbrothers as a kind of peer to members of their young adult audience who themselves want to be writers. Adolescent writing becomes a common community bond and the foundation on which the Vlogbrothers build in offering advice and positioning themselves as role models.

Dramatizing One's Work

As noted above, in reading their written works out loud, the Vlogbrothers perform not only their writer identity generally, but often specifically their writer-profession. Goffman refers to this kind of specialized presentation as “dramatizing one’s work,” and in using the video format to provide visual performances of their professional lives, the Vlogbrothers are in many ways staging authorship. Instances of this staging thus include any references to writing that contribute to a subset of practices related to acts of professional writing or authorship. The purpose of this section, then, is to draw particular attention to the professional writer identity or author identity, especially as it intersects with the writer identity more broadly speaking and impacts the presentation of the Vlogbrothers as writing authorities and role models.

Though John, as the established author, more frequently and more directly stages performances of authorship, both brothers ultimately dramatize their work as professional writers. For Hank, these performances are sometimes related to his work as an environmental blogger, but are more often in reference to his work as a singer/song-writer. For example, as described in an earlier section, Hank regularly writes songs and then posts performances of those songs to the vlogbrothers channel; these recordings include both those made in his house and those made of live performances before an increasingly engaged and sizable audience. He also occasionally offers brief insights into the motivation behind certain songs and once records a lengthy, somewhat rambling account of writing song lyrics in his sleep. Otherwise the performance of the professional facet of his writer identity focuses more on the finished project than the writing process. Of more particular importance, Hank’s performance of his professional writer identity dramatizes the emergence of the profession itself. Over the course of the channel’s early years, the audience gets to watch Hank grow more confident as a writer and

performer, produce and release his own albums, and gradually emerge as a professional writer whose songs people know and love. Additionally, Hank's professional writer identity places him as part of the Wizard Rock community, singer/song-writers whose work references different aspects of the Harry Potter universe, which in turn connects Hank's writer identity to his book-based fandom and the fan practices he shares with the Nerdfighter community. He thus emerges simultaneously as both rock star and fandom-related peer. (A deeper analysis of the function of the reader-fan identity and of socially embedded writing as a community value are discussed in Chapter 6.)

In contrast to Hank's more final product-oriented performances, John's performance of professional writing practices draws more attention to the process of writing. Over the course of the six years covered by this study, John writes, revises, publishes, and promotes two novels: *Paper Towns* and *The Fault in Our Stars*. Through the videos he dramatizes the professional work done at each stage, often couched in self-deprecating commentary. For example, one Question Tuesday video, in which John reads and then answers questions posed by Nerdfighters, offers this exchange:

QJ (John asking the question): How long did it take you to write *Paper Towns*?

AJ (John answering the question): About three years.

QJ: You seemed kind of rushed at the end, were you? Yeah, I spent three years writing the book, but the end, ten minutes.

Another video from 2009 provides visual evidence of John's professional writing practice, an office floor strewn with crumpled pages, alongside his verbal comments: "Hank, when my floor looks like this, it either means that I'm in an editorial panic or that Willy [his dog] has broken into my office" ("Question Tuesday!").

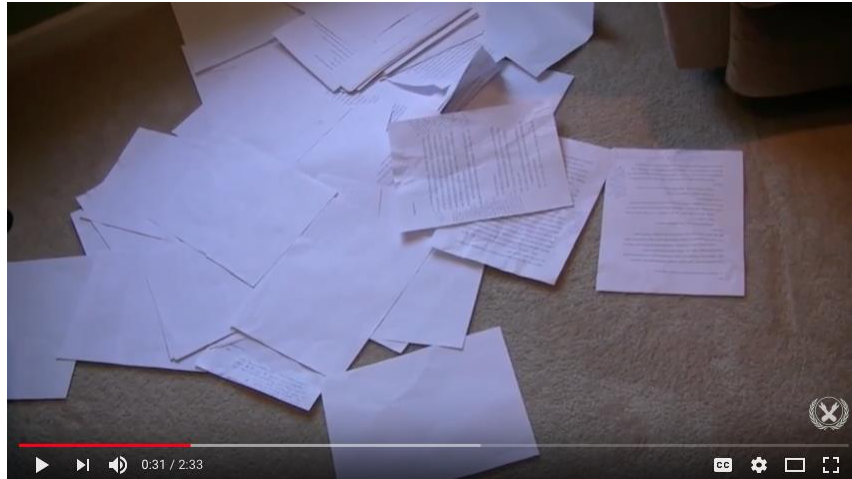


Image 4.5 Drafts of John’s novels strewn on the floor, from “Question Tuesday!” (2009)

Other videos focus more specifically on content-creation and the process of revising. For example, in describing the content of one video, John says, “I’m gonna read from my new book *Paper Towns* which comes out on Thursday. I’m gonna start by reading the prologue, which some Nerdfighters will remember I read several months ago, but it was very different then so maybe it’ll be an insight into the world of revision” (2008, “Paper Towns Reading”). Another video is dedicated entirely to the role of his editor and her impact on his novels: “we finally reached the point where she, like, writes on the manuscript, and we can do the fun stuff like fighting about how to spell the word stormtrooper. And she can write little notes making fun of me, like about how in my fictional universe every day is Friday” (2011, “Men Running on Tanks and the Truth About Book Editors”). By sharing drafts, edited drafts, and final versions of his novels, alongside comments about choosing titles, meeting deadlines (or not), and working with an editor, John presents his professional writing self in a way that simultaneously provides insight into not just into the time and intellectual labor involved in writing, but also the stages of creation. These performed practices also provide a foundation for John’s position as an authority on novel-writing practices, a position that he will use both as a role model to young writers in the

Nerdfighter community, discussed in the next section, and as an authority on authorial intent for young readers engaged in critical analysis, discussed in Chapter 7.

John's performance of his author identity is not simply celebratory, and the videos in which he talks about his writing practices do not focus solely on his successes. In fact, as noted above, many of his performances include moments of self-deprecating humor, and he regularly constructs writing as a struggle. For example, in the video featuring one of the rare literal performances of writing, John resignedly admits, "You just saw me write, like, three new sentences in my novel, all of which I will eventually delete, I'm sure" (2007, "Brotherhood 2.0: April 2: A Day in the Writer's Life"). In another video from later that year, he explains to Hank, "for the next week or so I'm going to be editing, like 14 hours a day, and it's going to be very stressful" (2007, "November 5th: John's Not Happy about Pakistan"). Other references are decidedly more playful. In response to annual questions about the likelihood of his participating in NANOWRIMO (National Novel Writing Month), for example, John suggests instead that he will be taking part in NAFRYBMSCM, "National Finish the Revision of Your Book I Mean Seriously Come On Month," (as he finishes *Paper Towns* in 2008) and NAFADOYBIMSCOM, "National Finish a Draft of Your Book I Mean Seriously Come On Month" (as he starts writing *The Fault in Our Stars* in 2010). These performances intentionally construct writing a sometimes frustrating practice and an ongoing process that does not always move in a forward direction. Notably, John neither romanticizes his profession nor idealizes himself as an author. Yet his comments do not undermine his position as authority or role model. Instead his honesty reinforces a underlying sense of authenticity that, in turn, establishes his credibility amongst the Nerdfighters; they can ask him questions about becoming an author and trust his answers.

John also dramatizes broader aspects of his writing profession, including aspects more akin to literal performance. For example, John posts videos filmed on the road that feature him participating in book readings, book signings, and book tours, including library visits. Some of these videos include clips of his live performances (reading and/or signing books), and many provide shots of his audience from his position at the front of the room or on a stage.



Image 4.6 Crowd-shot from one of John’s live reading events, from “Patron Saint of YouTube.”

In the visual presentation of these moments and events, John’s professional identity overlaps with Hank’s, both in its performative aspects and its sharing of final projects. Notably, in some instances of live performance, the conceptual overlap of a shared identity becomes manifest as the brothers share the stage. These live performances are also recorded and clips shared as part of other videos, creating a self-sustaining loop of overlapping modes of performance. Shared moments on the stage, meanwhile, become more frequent as the Vlogbrothers’ online popularity increases and as calls for them to make live appearances, especially to read and sing in front of crowds of Nerdfighters, become more common. In this way, the brothers’ professional writer identities, the online video context in which they perform those identities, and the performances

themselves (online, live, and recordings of live posted online) intersect and provide the foundation for a kind of cyber-celebrity that the brothers are forced to negotiate.

Negotiating Expertise and Authority

Performing their literate selves in digital videos posted to YouTube sets the stage for the Vlogbrothers to emerge as authority figures for their Nerdfighter fan-base. Both Vlogbrothers, though especially John, embrace this position of authority by providing insights and offering advice that draws on their personal practices and individual areas of expertise. Yet they also exhibit increasing levels of anxiety as the Nerdfighters ask for advice on an ever-widening array of topics from college majors to first kisses to facing “the urge toward nihilism” (“Question Tuesday! Paula Deen Riding Me (and critical reading),” 2011). Their discomfort with their own authority evolves tangential their increasing popularity and, in many ways, echoes their concerns about their emerging position as role models and celebrities. These shifts ultimately force them to negotiate a relationship with the Nerdfighters that allows for mentorship but also positions their fans as peers and equals rather than followers. The purpose of this section, then, is to illustrate these varying modes of interaction and to trace the Vlogbrothers’ relationship to authority and celebrity as it exists on a trajectory from ease to apprehension.

Providing Writing-Related Advice

Building on the foundation of personal practices outlined in the above sections, the Vlogbrothers occupy a position of authority in relation to reading and writing with the highest level of ease and comfort. Evidence of this comfort can be seen in their ready willingness to offer insights about the writing process and advice about writing. For example, in the aforementioned video that features a rare clip of John writing, he also offers wry commentary on the act of writing generally: “the funny thing about writing is that whether you are doing it well or doing it

poorly, it looks the exact same. That's actually one of the main ways that writing is different from ballet dancing" ("July 19: A Day Life of a Writer (Who Has No Friends)," 2007). In a later video-response to questions about his participating in NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month), John similarly provides insights about the writing process: "whether you are writing for fun or for your job, writing requires discipline" and "books are made in revision. For all three of my novels, I have deleted more than 90% of the first draft. And everything that people like about my books emerges in later drafts" ("NaNoWriMo!!!" 2009). Both of these examples begin as responses to questions about John's personal writing practices and, as such, both draw on those personal practices and experiences. Yet John's answers provide more insight into writing generally than into John specifically; he turns the questions into opportunities to make broad statements about writing that serve as a form of modeling and advising. He does so outside the context of specific requests for advice as well, suggesting that he is not only willing but wanting to serve as a mentor in relation to writing practices.

John is not the only brother to offer insightful self-reflective videos on writing-related topics. In 2011, Hank posts a video about creating videos, aptly titled "How to Vlog: From the Vlogbrothers," that like John's videos draws on personal writing practices and experiences:

"I even write out scripts sometimes, so that I can make sure that what I'm saying isn't dull as hell. I wrote out a script for this video. I'm going to post that script on my Tumblr so you can see the difference between the script and what actually gets made into the video."

Here he provides instruction not only on the auditory and visual components of vlogging, but also its written foundations. He repeats the written portion of the exercise in 2014, posting an hour-long screen-capture video of his script-writing to his personal channel hankschannel ("An Hour of Me Writing a Script"); that video, like his previous effort, is eventually posted alongside a resulting video with and without editing as part of an online media-based Nerdfighter Script

Writing Workshop. With these videos, Hank uses references to personal practice to provide insights into the writing process generally and to create opportunities for modeling and overt instruction (as opposed to giving advice).

At the same time, he reinforces broader statements about writing that function as part of broader community values. He provides insight into the editing process that parallel John's reading of different versions of his novels and echo his sentiments about revision, thereby calling attention to a shared facet of different forms of writing. He also draws attention to the differences between written script and digital video, while simultaneously highlighting the necessity of conventional literacy skills to the production of audio-visual content. Lastly, by writing in a digital context, he demonstrates how writing can have a social component. In this way, Hank's video about writing both reiterates and adds to John's insights, providing evidence of how the Vlogbrothers share authority over writing for the Nerdfighter community.

In addition to the insights and instruction described above, the Vlogbrothers also present their writer expertise in ways more openly positioned as advice, usually in response to overt requests for that advice. For example, in response to a video-based request for writing advice, John posts a video titled, "Nov. 26th: Writing Advice (And Notes on Surnameless Tiffany)." Aside from a tangential discussion of the titular Tiffany, the bulk of this video provides writing advice couched as a humorous, self-deprecating analysis of John's own juvenilia, specifically "My Elf", and ends with a summary of John's advice: "Read a lot. And more elf." Here John again draws on personal writing practices and experiences as the foundation for insights and advice. More notably, he suggests reading as the foremost piece of advice for would-be writers. Earlier in the same video he argues, "reading is just as important as writing when you're trying to be a writer because it's the only apprenticeship we have. It's the only way of learning how to

write a story.” Reading, in fact, becomes his most common response to requests for advice for young writers. His advice thereby connects reading and writing practices as mutually reinforcing forms of literacy and provides another foundation for reading as a valued community practice, with writing as a motivating factor for reading and analyzing text.

Aside from reading, the other most common writing advice relates to the impetus and motivation for writing, especially in relation to an audience. In the only video Hank makes about novel-writing advice (posted in response to a request actually made to John), he describes writing this way: “it’s very much like exploring, just like going on a walk through the woods, except you’re in your own brain. Don’t worry about being a writer or being a novelist. Just, uh, talking a walk in your brain” (2007, “September 13th: HA! I read from MY Novel :-p”). Unlike his advice about writing for video, in which he specifically worries about boring his audience, Hank’s presentation of writing here is deeply personal and overtly strives to negate external motivators like an audience. John, meanwhile, is more aware and accepting of audience from the beginning. In the writing advice video from 2007, for example, he argues against creating content that will only have meaning and interest to oneself: “you should write it for other people instead of just for yourself” (2007, “Nov. 26th: Writing Advice (And Notes on Surnameless Tiffany”). Yet unlike his unwavering support of writers reading, John openly modifies the role that audiences should play. In a 2009 video, he asserts: “don’t make stuff because you wanna make money. It will never make you enough money. And don’t make stuff because you wanna get famous because you will never feel famous enough” (“The Gift of Gary Busey”). Here he differentiates between writing with an audience in mind and writing just in pursuit of an audience, a nuanced consideration that resonates with the Vlogbrothers’ shared ambiguity about popularity and celebrity, which is described in more detail later in this chapter.

Despite his apparent comfort and willingness to answer the call for insights and advice on writing, however, John is willing to admit that there are boundaries to his expertise. For example, in response to a request for advice “for writers who can’t seem to finish their books,” John puckishly replies, “Not much. I mean, it took me four years to finish *Looking for Alaska*, so I’m clearly not an expert in the field of finishing. Just keep at it” (2008, “Hank Tried to Kill Me With a Hammer”). Comments like this reaffirm the self-deprecating presentation of his own writing practices, and therefore similarly reinforce the authenticity and trustworthiness of his answers and advice. Audiences can trust that he will not confidently advise skills he does not confidently practice. Relatedly, this example also provides evidence of the connection John implicitly makes between expertise and advice. He is not as comfortable or as willing to offer advice where he does not have expertise. Though, like here, his reticence does not prevent him from ultimately doing so, he purposefully couches his responses in rhetoric that owns his lack of expertise first, a distancing tactic that he employs as part of the negotiation of authority that comes with being asked for advice.

John Green on Expertise, Advice, and Being a Role Model

The Nerdfighters do not only position the Vlogbrothers as authorities on writing-related matters, and they do not only make requests for advice about writing. As evidenced in the posted video responses, the Nerdfighters actively seek other advice about a variety of topics ranging from sex and romance to college and adulthood to philosophical and religious matters. Though the content of advice-oriented videos suggests that Nerdfighter questions are addressed at different times to both the Vlogbrothers collectively and to John specifically, John Green is ultimately the only brother to make videos responding to these requests for advice. The analysis below therefore focuses on John’s video responses and his emergence as authority and mentor.

At the same time, John chooses which requests for advice to answer, and as such, his videos provide insight into the boundaries of his comfort with the role of authority and mentor.

As noted in the previous section, John exhibits the greatest comfort in modeling, providing insights, and giving advice in relation to topics over which he can claim at least some form of expertise, demonstrable knowledge, or personal experience. Part of the construction of John as authority figure and advice-giver, then, can be found in his assertion of expertise. Over the course of six years, he claims to be an expert on a number of topics from Alaskan politics to conjoined twins to love and romance. Notably, many of these assertions connect in some way to his literate identity and to his knowledge of text-based content. For example, in a video dedicated to the most important typos of all time, he claims, “typos are among my fields of expertise” (2011, “5 Worst Typos of History”). Similarly, he claims to be an expert on conjoined twins, while also asserting (more than once) that he owns more books about conjoined twins than there are conjoined twins; and he claims an expertise on the world-largest balls because he wrote about them in one of his novels.

Yet John is equally willing to subvert or make light of his apparent expertise. For example, in the video “College Advice from an Expert,” he asserts, “having both attended college and watched the movie *Animal House*, I feel like college is one of my fields of expertise.” The combination of word choice and tone here complicate what might otherwise be a typical claim to expertise based on personal experience. Instead, John simultaneously admits to being an expert, subverts it with a reference to a satirical film and a facetious tone of voice, only to reinforce his position as authority through the earnestness of the advice he ultimately provides. Notably, he does this in response to requests for advice in areas where the Nerdfighters position him as authority figure first, in which they assume his expertise before he asserts it. As seen in

the college advice video, the Nerdfighters submitted numerous requests for college advice, which prompted this video response. John's half-kidding subversion of his expertise reveals an underlying anxiety at being placed in the role of advice-giver, even as he revels in actually giving advice. He therefore both performs the role of authority and distances himself from the responsibility of being an authority.

Further evidence of this complex negotiation of assumed expertise and advice-giving can be seen in his videos about love and romance. Prompted by requests from the Nerdfighters for advice on romance-related issues, John posts a variety of advice-related videos over the course of the first six years, including: "How to make Boys Like You: Advice From a Nerd," "Beanie John's Love Advice," "Advice on Dumb Boyfriends, Going to College, and More," and "Advice on First Kisses, Stalkers, College Majors, and More." The assumption on the part of the Nerdfighters that John can provide this kind of advice stems in part from the connection he makes between his expertise and his writing; all of John's novels involve a romance-oriented plotlines, so his reader/audience assumes he knows about these kinds of relationships and can therefore offer insights and advice.⁵

As a result, John's response to this assumption of expertise, to being placed in this position of authority, is again simultaneously reticent and earnest. In a semi-sarcastic tone remarkably similar to that used in talking about college expertise, he says, "today I'm going to be answering questions about love and romance. Because, y'know, I'm such an expert in the field" (2009, "Love and Romance Questions ANSWERED"). At other times, he disowns the expertise outright: "Let me begin by acknowledging that I am not an expert in the field of fifteen-year-old boys" (2009, "How to Make Guys Like You"). This claim is belied somewhat by the seemingly authentic portraits of the emotional lives of teenage boys offered in his novels, though; this

reinforces suggestion that, in making this claim, John intends to distance himself from the responsibility of being an authority figure even as he enacts the role of one. Further evidence of this implicit discomfort can be seen in the advice itself. For example, in giving advice about boys to a teenage girl in the “How to Make Guys Like You” video referenced above, he notes, “the fourth way to get a boy to like you is to be yourself. Now, I’m contractually obligated as an adult to give that advice, even though it doesn’t work.” He distances himself from the responsibility of the advice, even as he gives it. At another point, he refuses to give advice completely; when asked a question about losing one’s virginity, he responds: “you know, call me old fashioned, but I don’t think thirty-four year old men vlogging in airports should decide when other people have sex” (2012, “Thoughts on Romance and Sex in an Airport”). Here a more definitive boundary emerges that substantiates the edges of at least John’s comfort level with the position of authority.

Notably, that boundary manifests in statements that involve an expertise that comes solely from being an adult. In fact, both John and Hank express discomfort in providing definitive insights and advice about performing the role of adult. John, for example, remarks:

How do I figure out what the hell to do with my life? Hank, we get some version of this question almost every day. But to answer the question I have to begin by disagreeing with it. The whole ‘what do I do with my life’ question implies that adulthood is this monolithic creature that, like, you acquire your job and your spouse and then you just ride it out until time’s winged chariot shows up. (2012, “What To Do With Your Life”)

In reflecting on the line between childhood and adulthood, Hank similarly comments: “How do I deal with Peter Pan Syndrome? Look, growing up is what you want it to be. We’re grown-ups now, and it’s our turn to decide what that means. Being silly is allowed. That’s not excluded by adulthood!” (2012, “Thoughts on Growing up”). Here structured advice gives way to reflective monologues, even in the face of requests for advice.

This does not mean that the Vlogbrothers do not understand themselves to be role models, but rather that they want to complicate the implication of age-based authority. For example, in reflecting on the idea of role models, John argues:

I actually kind of do consider myself a role model, at least in some ways. I mean, I'm cognizant of the fact that there are young people watching this show... But Hank, I do agree that a simplistic notion of role modeling is stupid... The fact of the matter is the way that we model behavior for the people around us and the way that they model behavior for us is a hell of a lot more complicated than just wanting to do what they do and want not to do what they don't do" (2007, "Brotherhood 2.0: April 10th: Role Models").

In crafting responses like these, John and Hank strive to separate expertise and advice from age-based dynamics that equate authority and adulthood. Instead, they negotiate a more nuanced form of mentorship based in demonstrable knowledge, behavior modeling, and personal practice rather than age, the implications of which can be seen in the construction of community values explicated in the next two chapters.

The Complexities of Cyber-Celebrity

The negotiation of this more nuanced form of mentorship takes place, by necessity of the YouTube video format, within the broader context of social media and the Vlogbrothers' emergence as cyber-celebrities. At the simplest level, the Vlogbrothers are role models because they are celebrities. Though they may actively embrace their position as authority figures and contribute to it through the performance of expertise, the Nerdfighters function as the audience for that expertise, which is given meaning and value because of them. Meanwhile, deeper analysis reveals ways in which the Vlogbrothers' ambiguity about their popularity mirror their ambiguity about their position as role models and authority figures. Their posted reflections on the nature of fame and celebrity thereby furnish useful parallels for understanding their evolving relationship with the Nerdfighters, especially in relation to authority.

During the early years of the vlogbrothers channel, John and Hank generally claim not to care if they are popular, a sentiment that aligns with the original intention of the project and the resultant subordination of any broader audience. Even in the face of the early signs of a Nerdfighter fan-base, they maintain their indifference. For example, in 2007 Hank says,

So maybe we'll become famous YouTubers too! Maybe. Probably not. Really, how could we not be happy with our already levels of fame? I mean, there's being famous but then there's being famous to cool people. And right now, all the people who think we're cool are really cool. So that's way better than being famous with like everybody anyway. ("August 15: Getting Featured on YouTube")

Even in 2008, when a Nerdfighter gathering at a live event with the Vlogbrothers receives local Chicago news coverage, Hank laughs at being called an internet celebrity. As part of a voiceover analysis of the coverage, he says, "internet celebrity!...I think that's hilarious," and then shifts his attention to point out all the different kinds of Nerdfighters as they appear in shots of the crowd or are interviewed by the reporter (2008, "INTERNET SENSATION B\$%CH"). In this way, he expresses a disinterest in conventional modes of popularity. He chooses instead to celebrate establishing relationships with a broader community of peers, a shift that persists even as the Nerdfighter fan-base grows into a phenomenon.

John, meanwhile, is even more ambiguous about the implications of their early popularity. In 2008, for example, he gives the following response to a question about being recognized in public: "it doesn't make me either happy or slightly awkward. It's just kinda nice to meet a Nerdfighter" ("Hank Tried to Kill Me With a Hammer"). Yet around the same time, he also places necessary boundaries around where those meetings should take place. When a Nerdfighter submits the question, "I live about an hour away from you, and I was wondering if I could just, like, come by your house someday. Would that be totally weird?," John not surprisingly replies, "Yes, that would be totally weird" (2008, "SETTING THE QUESTION

TUESDAY WORLD RECORD”). Even as late as 2012, John maintains this inherently wary attitude about his own popularity. As he notes in a video about their most recent live tour,

Hank, writing is something you do alone. It’s a profession for introverts who want to tell you a story but don’t want to make eye contact while telling it, and on some level, writing is the exact opposite of this: [video recording of a curtain opening to reveal a large crowd of screaming, cheering fans]. (2012, “Thoughts from Places: The Tour”)

He, like Hank, appreciates the extent to which their online popularity provides them with an opportunity to connect with likeminded fans, “to meet a Nerdfighter,” but he tempers his enthusiasm as it comes into conflict with issues of privacy and his personal social anxiety.

The Vlogbrothers are similarly dismissive of conventional celebrity and celebrities. John even admits outright: “I’m not very fond of the word ‘celebrity.’ Like, I think the world would be a better place if the word ‘celebrity’ and the idea behind it ceased to exist” (2008, “The Return of Question Tuesdays”). Hank, meanwhile, writes a song that similarly critiques those to who pursue celebrity status: “Well I don’t want to be a big star/ And I’ve never really been a fan of folk who just want to go far” (2009, “This Machine Pwns n00bs: A Song”). At different points, they explicitly trivialize of the importance and lasting value of more mainstream celebrities like Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, Lauren Conrad, Perez Hilton, and Victoria Beckham, though Hank at one point admits to admiration for Justin Timberlake. John also clearly rejects the idea that celebrities should give advice: “celebrities, we don’t want your advice, we want your break-ups and your nipple slips” (2010, “The Marriage Ref SUCKS”). In contrast, in a video entirely dedicated to reflections on the notion of fame, he argues that teachers ultimately have a broader and more lasting impact than any celebrity (2009, “Fame: The Road Trip”). Yet, in direct contrast to their rejection of celebrity culture generally, they are supportive of fans who care about celebrities and in one instance, openly defend a young man named Chris Crocker, who was ridiculed online for his video about Britney Spears (2007, “September 18: In

Defense of Chris Crocker”). These attitudes have clear implications for the Vlogbrothers’ understanding on themselves as emerging cyber-celebrities, especially in that they wholly reject the pursuit of empty popularity and the meaningless authority that comes with it. More importantly, their opinions also reinforce their preference for mentorship over simple popularity and convey their valuing of fan-communities over the fan-object. These preferences and values, in turn, impact their relationship with the Nerdfighters as they strive to position themselves as both teacher/mentors and fellow-fan/peers.

In fact, as part of the rejection of conventional notions of celebrity, the Vlogbrothers reframe the underlying definition of fame to be based in relationships between peers and equals. In the 2009 video “Fame, A Road Trip,” for example, John reflects on perceived motivations behind the pursuit of fame and ultimately concludes: “I think we are genetically coded to seek and yearn for respect. But I don’t think it is the matter of being respected by everyone. I think it is a matter of being respected by the people whom we respect.” This sentiment echoes Hank’s earlier 2007 comment of the implicit value in being considered cool by people you think are cool. For this reason, at different points in their videos, John celebrates the “fame” of his fellow authors, including Scott Westerfeld and Maureen Johnson, and fellow YouTube “stars” like Alan Lastufka and Charlie McDonnell, while Hank gets excited about meeting and performing with his colleagues in fandom, especially popular Wizard Rock musicians (bands that perform music about the Harry Potter universe). Similarly, Hank in a video from 2012 argues: “We’re not going for the most entertaining viral video of the day. We’re going for the people who we connect with, and we like, and we enjoy because of them” (“Online Video about Online Video”). The impetus behind creation, then, and the pursuit of an audience is not fame or celebrity for its own sake, but the collation of like-minded peers with whom to share a kind of collective fame that

can include fans. This reframing ultimately shifts at least part of the power back to their Nerdfighter fan-base and creates a space for a shared authority that, in turn, allows the Vlogbrothers to function as both mentors and peers.

² Parenthetical notes to analysis in other chapters are intended to provide initial links between the personal practices described here and the community values outlined later.

³ Hank likewise calls attention to writing as a boring visual in a video posted to his personal channel, hankschannel, in 2014. This video, titled “An Hour of Me Writing a Script,” provides a recording of Hank’s script-writing process, and its descriptive portion includes the caveat: “WARNING! THIS IS VERY BORING!”

⁴ The Evil Baby Orphanage is an on-going philosophical concept within the Nerdfighter community. In 2007, in response to a video-based conversation between John and Hank about the morality of time-traveling to kill Baby Hitler before he can grow up and commit mass genocide, a Nerdfighter suggested time-traveling to kidnap him (and other baby-versions of known tyrants, dictators, and mass murderers), placing them in an isolated mountain orphanage, and raising them to be good. The EBO, as it is generally known, returns frequently in Vlogbrothers and Nerdfighter related media, including as the topic of videos, as prompts for online community writing projects, and even as a possible subject for a young adult novel.

⁵ John Green’s position as an authority on love and romance is well-established and broadly recognized enough that *Seventeen* magazine asked him to contribute a vlog-column on romantic advice for its dedicated YouTube channel in 2008 (“John Green On Romance,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hd_bVk3ajk0).

CHAPTER FIVE: FOSTERING ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION ONLINE

Introduction

As seen in the previous chapter, the Vlogbrothers use YouTube as a stage on which to model their literacy-related practices and to perform their literacy-related authority. Yet they simultaneously use YouTube, both the videos and the platform as a whole, to engage their audience and to draw them into increasingly complex modes of participation. That engagement and participation ultimately become hallmarks of the Nerdfighter fan community and provide the foundation on which the Vlogbrothers build literacy-related practices and values for that community. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to investigate participatory rhetoric as it appears in the Vlogbrothers' videos in order to explore an essential part of the following research question:

RQ2: How do the Vlogbrothers' personal literacy practices inform and construct fan-community values and practices? How do they use the online video context to communicate those values and to establish a community in which young people learn and participate in those practices?

Specifically this chapter outlines: 1) how the Vlogbrothers use the YouTube platform for a dynamic form of interactivity that initiates engagement with and participation in the Nerdfighter community; and 2) how they use YouTube video content to promote further active participation in community-based activities across multiple online modalities, especially as YouTube is supplemented by other social and new media platforms for intra-community organization and communication. By understanding how the Vlogbrothers construct participation via online video, it becomes possible to observe how the resulting participatory practices inform Nerdfighter fan culture and serve as fodder for the conventions, rituals, and insider references that denote a

Nerdfighter identity. This connection, in turn, provides insight into how the Vlogbrothers draw their young adult fan-base into participation in literacy-related practices and into how the Nerdfighter identity plays a fundamental role in that participation.

Given the centrality of YouTube to this process, then, I begin the chapter by analyzing a set of videos in which both brothers reflect on the centrality of participation to the value and purpose of YouTube; this exemplar works as a context for understanding the role of the YouTube platform in the evolving relationship between the Vlogbrothers and the Nerdfighters and as an entry point for understanding the role of participation in the emerging Nerdfighter community. I then detail the various modes by which the Vlogbrothers engage their audience and promote early forms of participation via text-based functions specific to the YouTube platform. As part of this description, I draw specific attention to the essential role of comments as a space for intersecting fan and literacy practices. I then explicate the Vlogbrothers' video-based promotion of other participatory spaces, including email, dedicated online forums, Twitter, and Tumblr, and I evaluate how these platforms contribute to the overall evolution of Nerdfighteria as a fandom that embraces video and text-based practices simultaneously. I conclude the chapter with an analysis of the Vlogbrothers' navigation of overlapping video and text-based practices, as their active and visible negotiation of these forms directly impacts the construction and dissemination of literacy-related values discussed in later chapters.

Exemplar: The Death of YouTube

In April 2009, rumors began circulating within the community of YouTube video-creators of an imminent redesign to the online platform, one that would emphasize professional forms of video content and focus on attracting advertisers. In response, a variety of popular YouTubers, including the Vlogbrothers, posted video commentary on aspects of the proposed

changes, bemoaning what they declared to be the likely “death” of YouTube. A brief overview and analysis of the Vlogbrothers’ respective ruminations on the topic give useful insight into their understanding of YouTube’s unique value as an online space for community-oriented media creation and sharing. Their video responses also draw specific attention to the participatory elements of the YouTube platform, especially the comments section.

John Green posted his video response to the coming redesign, “The Death of Youtube?? Redesign Coming,” on April 12, 2009. In it he described the rumored changes and acknowledged that primary amongst their concerns was a shift in content focus that would “emphasize professional content over user-generated content.” Related rumors relayed by John also suggested changes to the interactive functions of the platform: “reports are that YouTube will soon have a feature where you can dim all the space, like, out there, outside the video screen.” Taken together, these proposed changes raised fears that the planned redesign would shift usage of the site away from active participation and toward a kind of passive consumption associated with more traditional media like film or television. After describing the reported redesign elements, then, John immediately and definitively declared his dislike of that shift: “I hate that idea. What I love about YouTube is that it’s not television. It’s something you’re called to participate in.” In this way, John positions YouTube videos as existing in a broader social and media context that not only allows for but “calls” for audience participation.

This overt value statement places the participatory nature of YouTube squarely above that of its self-broadcasting function, especially if videos are decontextualized from audience response. As John goes on to state, “my favorite thing about YouTube isn’t even what happens inside of here [the video space]. My favorite thing is what happens down there! Uh, it looked like I was pointing at my pants, but I wasn’t pointing at my pants because I don’t have pants on. I

was pointing at the comments.” He returns to this theme later in the same video when he claims “for our community, at least, the comments and video responses are a huge portion of what goes on in these videos.” Here John positions audience participation, whether through text-based commentary or video-based replies, as contributing to the meaning and value of the Vlogbrothers’ videos. At the same time, he situates that participation in relation to their specific fan community, setting up participation as a recognized Nerdfighter value and practice.

In his own video response to the proposed redesign, posted three days later and titled “The Day the YouTubes Died,” Hank Green similarly values YouTube as a participatory, community-oriented space. In contrast to John’s more reflective, purpose- and practice-oriented video, Hanks relays his concerns in song form. Collaborating with a fellow YouTuber, he rewrites the lyrics to Don McLean’s generational anthem “American Pie” to reflect his own looming sense of disenchantment and loss, swapping the iconic line “the day the music died” for “the day the YouTubes died”. In Hank’s adapted chorus, then, he plaintively wonders:

Oh why, why am I even surprised?
Maybe YouTube can be Hulu and avoid its demise,
But if it comes at the cost of the little guys,
Then I think I might say my goodbyes,
I think I might say my goodbyes.

Here Hank’s lyrics mirror John’s concerns, and those of the wider YouTube content-creating community, that the redesign would effectively replicate the passive consumption model of television: in this case, online television media site Hulu. At the same time, Hank pairs the lyrics with actions, featuring a collage of Nerdfighters/YouTubers signing the chorus:



Image 5.1 Montage shot of singing Nerdfighters, from “The Day the YouTubes Died” (2009)

In this way, the video content celebrates the collaborative, participatory nature of YouTube in both word and deed, while simultaneously demonstrating participation as a Nerdfighter practice.

The song’s lyrics also reinforce this overlap by drawing on examples of the active, participatory nature of YouTube, especially within the Nerdfighter community:

Did you do the five facts thing?
 Or participate in the Google Verb meme?
 Well I sure had fun with those.
 Do you remember your first comment?
 And how much those few characters meant?
 And now you’re a pro at the Captcha codes.

Like John’s video, Hank’s lyrics draw overt attention to shared activities as an important ‘fun’ction of YouTube and to the value of comments as a central part of community participation. Further, many of his lyrics, including those quoted above, only make sense if one is an active participant in YouTube-related content creation and commenting, and in some cases, in Nerdfighteria specifically. To understand the song fully, not just the lyrics but their emotional resonance, necessitates a kind of insider knowledge that only comes from active engagement with the fan community and its YouTube practices. For example, “the Google verb meme” was a Goggle/YouTube crossover activity popularized by Hank “in which you enter your name

followed by a verb into Google and see what the suggested searches are” (2009, “Google Verb! A Meme.”); results are then shared on YouTube, either in the comments or in video responses. By incorporating the meme into his lyrics, Hank crafts a song that carries more meaning, both topically and emotionally, to Nerdfighters who understand the reference and did, as the song says, participate. In this way, participation via YouTube emerges as something of value to the Nerdfighter community, something grounded in and reinforcing a sense of belonging, and something important enough to mourn if lost in the redesign.

Ultimately fears about the proposed YouTube redesign did not come to pass, as the company maintained its focus on the content created and posted by “the little guys.” And intriguingly, when the redesign was eventually released, the Vlogbrothers embraced the changes successfully enough that Google/YouTube referenced them as a model of the updated format (https://youtube.googleblog.com/2009/06/new-channels-coming-soon_9910.html). Still, the videos created by the Vlogbrothers in response to fears about potential changes provide foundational insights into their core understanding of YouTube as a participatory space. They overtly recognize the value of the platform as grounded in its functionalities beyond video broadcasting and connect that value to a form of participation that creates and sustains community ties. This understanding, in turn, implicitly informs how the Vlogbrothers use the platform and their videos to promote engagement with and participation in Nerdfighter community practices online as explored in the rest of this chapter.

Establishing the Roots of Participation

As noted in the previous chapter, the initial conceit of the Vlogbrothers’ project was an experiment in video-based communication between two brothers, yet the brothers recognize and perform to an external audience from the earliest days of their YouTube channel. Beyond that,

they interact with that audience outside the bounds of the videos themselves, using the various informative and interactive spaces provided by the platform to increase engagement first with video content and later with the Nerdfighter fan community. As part of this, they use the video description space, seen below the video in the image below, to provide links to external information and to craft early connections between community members.



Image 5.2 Video as it appeared on the YouTube platform (2008)

They likewise use this space to connect their audience with opportunities for participation in community-related activities outside YouTube. This impetus to foster participation feeds into their use of the comments section, where participation takes on a more direct and interactive quality. Those participatory practices, in turn, provide the foundation for the construction of the Nerdfighter community and lend insight into early community values. They also provide a foundation for understanding how the Vlogbrothers use the combination of video and text-based media spaces to draw their audience into the kinds of literacy-related practices analyzed in later chapters. In this section, I therefore trace an emerging ethos of participation as rooted in the YouTube platform and consider how each contributes to the evolution of the Nerdfighter community practices and values.

Initiating Engagement with “the Doobly-Doo”

To understand references to the video description space made in the analysis below, it is necessary to recount briefly its function and position in the YouTube platform. In the early years of YouTube, information about videos (e.g., title, date posted, brief summary, etc.) was provided in text-based spaces to the side of the video, an area that the Vlogbrothers and other YouTubers called “the sidebar.” After a redesign of the site, this space was repositioned to appear below the video, as seen in the screencapture above. This new placement negated the use of the word “sidebar,” and the Vlogbrothers began referring to this space as the “doobly-doo,” a term drawn from one of their fellow YouTubers and self-identified Nerdfighter, WheezyWaiter (<https://www.youtube.com/user/wheezywaiter>). While initially intended as a space to provide information about the video, the Vlogbrothers quickly shift to using this space to provide links to content related to but existing outside the video’s content. They then call attention to those links in the videos themselves, and over time phrases like “link in the sidebar” or “more information in the doobly-doo” become recognized catchphrases of the Vlogbrothers’ videos.

At the most basic level, the Vlogbrothers use the sidebar/doobly-doo to provide links to information on topics referenced in their videos. For example, in 2009, Hank posts a video drawing parallels between events at the county fair and issues in national politics, including universal health care; as part of the narration, he remarks, “there’s a link in the sidebar to an article from the New Yorker that goes pretty deep into why Americans’ health care budget is so massive. It’s a really great article. It’s long, but I swear, it is totally worth reading. I hope all Nerdfighters read it” (“The Political Situation at the County Fair”). Similarly, in a 2009 video on the political crisis in Iran, John notes, “Hank, because the Iranian government has started to kick out foreign journalists and shut down websites, it’s a little hard to get reliable information, even

for people like me who have spent the entire day reading Iranian Twitters. Link in the sidebar” (“Iran Election Fraud: 5 Reasons to Doubt the Results”). Other links are more playfully proffered, for example when John invites the audience to follow links in the doobly-doo to themountangoatswillcureyourbieberfever.com or to articles on Buddhist non-attachment as a way to get over an ex-girlfriend.

Whether intentionally educational or humorously informative, though, the inclusion of these links and the references to them in the videos invite the audience into a deeper level of engagement with the videos that reaches beyond the video itself to other sources. They likewise provide a context for initiating closer engagement with the Vlogbrothers themselves: to read what they have read and to learn what they have learned. This initial form of engagement thus become grounds for a form of participation in the broader knowledge context that the videos represent; and to be a Nerdfighter is to follow those links as an avenue to becoming the informed global citizen that the community values.

Not all links provided in the doobly-doo are inherently informational in this sense, however. The Vlogbrothers also use the doobly-doo to draw attention to the creative works of fellow YouTubers and Nerdfighters. For example, when Hank creates a new video introduction in 2008, he credits his contributors: “the music was actually done by a Nerdfighter named Ben who is very obviously made of awesome. It’s a band called Center Course. There will be a link to their band over in the sidebar” (“Sledding and YouTube Tag”). Similarly, John publicizes a debut novel: “there’s a link to get *Anna and the French Kiss* by Nerdfighter Stephanie Perkins in the doobly-doo” (2010, “8 Things I Love”). Other instances draw specific attention to fellow YouTube content creators like Michael Buckley or CGPGrey or to fellow Wizard Rock artists like Harry and the Potters.

These links function similarly to those that are more purely informational, drawing the audience into deeper engagement with video content and providing avenues to share enjoyment of certain books, music, and video media with the Vlogbrothers themselves. Yet these external links simultaneously create links between members of the Nerdfighter community, drawing attention to specific content creators as Nerdfighters and creating a list of artists and YouTubers familiar to the Nerdfighter community. Posting content that promotes these links, then, facilitates the growth of the kind of shared fandoms that are a defining characteristic of Nerdfighteria. It likewise marks the Nerdfighters as a community that celebrates its own content creators, an essential factor in promoting the kind of literacy/writing practices discussed in later chapters.

Growing Participation: From Sidebar to Comments

At the same time, links in the sidebar do more than provide avenues for increased engagement with the Nerdfighter community; they also foster participation by providing links to community-based projects. These community projects include a variety of types and sizes from cooperative efforts to raise money to individual-based calls to support Nerdfighters in need to large-scale organized online challenges. The Vlogbrothers then further promote participation by posting video content that not only draws attention to those opportunities but also celebrates those who join in. For example, in recruiting participants for a secret project, Hank suggests:

Now, intelligent and diligent Nerdfighters will probably know what this is about, but whether or not you do, I'm absolutely positive that you want to be involved. It's very exciting. You have the opportunity to do something pretty amazing. But we're gonna need a lot of Nerdfighter help to do it. If you go to nerdfighters.com right now, or click the link in the sidebar, you'll find a sign-up" (2008, "This Video Comes in Threven Parts").

That the project is a "secret" project only reinforces the sense of insider knowledge that comes with participation in these kinds of activities. Notably, the first "secret" project was a surprise collaborative gift for John's birthday, which is why it had to be a secret, and was therefore

simultaneously an expression of both community and fandom. So, though the secret project can be known to anyone who wishes to participate, the impression of being in on a secret contributes to the sense of community, and secret projects over time emerge as a beloved Vlogbrothers/Nerdfighter tradition.

Similarly, John in advocating for a different large-scale community project builds on the sense of community involved:

There are a bunch of made-of-awesome Nerdfighters who are trying to put together a book that will be a guide to Nerdfighting, with definitions of Nerdfighter language and stories from Nerdfighteria and artwork and all kinds of stuff. I think it's a really cool idea to try to crowdsource a book. Nerdfighters, if you are interested in helping, guidetonerdfighting.com. Link in the doobly-doo. (2010, "The Fox Hat IS REAL, but Are Zombies People?").

Here again, the conscious overlapping of participation and insider knowledge contribute to an emerging sense of community values; one must possess knowledge of what it means to be a Nerdfighter in order to contribute, while at the same time, those who contribute are made-of-awesome, the ultimate defining feature of being a Nerdfighter. Notably this instance is also overtly grounded in conventional literacy-oriented terms and practices: definitions, language, stories, books, and writing, a feature of many online cooperative projects which is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

The Vlogbrothers also use the sidebar/doobly-doo to promote participation in offline events and activities as well, often posting links to information about live events (e.g., John's readings or Hank's concerts), tour schedules, planned Nerdfighter gatherings they will attend, and popular events like LeakyCon or VidCon. Most of these meet-ups are spontaneous and smaller in scale, though, especially earlier years, and often the events are specifically intended for Nerdfighters to attend in place of or in support of one of the Vlogbrothers themselves: for example when Hank asks for local Nerdfighters to attend his first live performance. In another

early and notably successful example, John calls on local Nerdfighters to attend a school board meeting to defend his novel, which is facing a challenge: “sometimes these people who make stands for intellectual freedom can feel like they’re going it alone, which is why I’d like to ask from the bottom of my heart that any Nerdfighters that live in or around Depew go to the school board meeting on February 5th. Info in the sidebar” (2008, “I Am Not A Pornographer”). So many Nerdfighters ultimately attend that the room overflows into the lobby, and even though they weren’t allowed to speak, their support keeps the book in curriculum (2008, “QUESTION TUESDAY (On Friday)”; 2008, “Belated Book-tacular Questions”). In this way, links provided in the sidebar/doobly-doo also connect Nerdfighter participation with broader community values, like fighting for intellectual freedom, and establish the foundation for large-scale efforts to decrease world-suck that are hallmarks of the Nerdfighter community.

At the same time, the Vlogbrothers’ also use the sidebar/doobly-doo to give the Nerdfighters a voice in the offline events and activities they attend. For example, after one unexpectedly popular Vlogbrothers event at a public library, Hank suggests scheduling more opportunities for the brother to meet their fans offline: “the only way we’ll know where to go is if you go to eventful.com, and there’s a link in the sidebar, as you might imagine. Among all those other links there’s another one in the sidebar to eventful.com. If you go there, and you request our presence in your city, that my friends will help you see us, and it will help us see you, and it will be awesome” (2008, “Nerdfighting IRL”). Here again the overlap of participation and engagement serves to foster the personal relationship between the Vlogbrothers and their fans, while at the same time empowering the Nerdfighters themselves to take ownership of that relationship by directing where the Vlogbrothers appear, a form of interactivity similar to that promoted through use of the comments, as discussed below. Of course, examples like this, as

well as Hanks' concert and the school-board meeting, could be read as self-serving. Yet to dismiss activities in support of the Vlogbrothers ignores the broader context of participation that stands at the core of the Nerdfighter fan-identity; by promoting participation in offline events, the Vlogbrothers provide their fans with an opportunity to perform their fan identity while also working collaboratively with other fans toward a mutual goal or simply socializing in an environment conducive to celebrating their shared fandoms.

While the sidebar/doobly-doo operates primarily as a unidirectional form of communication that promotes participation in activities outside YouTube, the comments section serves a more direct, interactive participatory function contained not just within YouTube but within the Vlogbrothers' channel specifically. The Vlogbrothers learn early to take advantage of the comments section as a way to foster communication with and within their nascent fan base, and it soon evolves into a core form of intra-community communication. They frequently direct their audience to the comments as a space to leave questions (or answers to questions asked in videos), continue conversations started in the videos, and to offer their opinions on a variety of topics both playful and serious: what to do with a bust of Edgar Allen Poe, whether zombies are people, how and whether to save the book, and if Gatsby is a hero.

This communication, in turn, serves as an opportunity for the Nerdfighters to provide input into video content. Questions asked in the comments, for example, often serve as fodder for later videos, including John's popular Question Tuesday (or Friday) videos, in which he "answers real questions from real Nerdfighters;" in advance of these videos, he solicits these real questions via the comments. In other instances, responses in the comments impact not only what the Vlogbrothers say but also what they do in the videos, as John specifically asks:

So Nerdfighters, let me ask: what can I do for you? Do you want me to do jumping jacks? Make some pudding? Recite an Edna St. Vincent Millay poem shirtless? Let me know

what I can do for you in comments, and I'll do ten of those things in a video I film this weekend" (2008, "Memo to the Fourteenth Century (and to the Tobians)").

Notably, this video is made as part of a reflection on the generous nature of the Nerdfighter community and its willingness to participate in activities that help others; in this way, John uses comments and video interrelatedly to praise and promote a specific kind of community participation grounded in community values.

At other times, the comments provide input into the construction of the more videos entirely. For example, as the second year of the Vlogbrothers' channel draws to a close, Hank solicits input on future content creation:

John, I think we should make videos more often. If people are interested in us making videos more often, you can leave a comment in the comments. You can just say, 'I would like you to make more videos more often.' Based on the reaction we get, we'll figure out whether or not we want to make more videos more often. So it's really up to you guys commenting. (2008, "Please Google, Take Me to Mars").

Thus, the Vlogbrothers promote increased levels of engagement with recent video content and participation that impacts the construction of future videos. Nerdfighters, in turn, feel like an essential part of the Vlogbrothers' channel itself, which contributes to the sense of belonging and even ownership that is a hallmark of the Nerdfighter community. This practice also reinforces the literal implications of John's comment in his "death of YouTube" video that the comments are "a huge portion of what goes on in these videos" (2008, "The Death of YouTube?? Redesign Coming").

Like other aspects of the Vlogbrothers' use of the YouTube platform, the solicitation of input via the comments also extends beyond the content of the videos themselves. The input at times takes on a more direct impact when Nerdfighters provide feedback via comments on actions the Vlogbrothers should take in real life. For example, in 2009, when John grows a beard, he asks: "Nerdfighters: the beard, should I keep it or shave it? Vote in comments," and shaves it

off in response to their decision (“Iran Election Fraud: 5 Reasons to Doubt the Results”). Hank meanwhile asks for input in selecting a new pair of glasses: “thank you very much to the Nerdfighters and all of YouTube for helping me choose these wonderful new glasses” (2008, “This Video Comes in Threven Parts”). The power implicit in this kind of participation is especially evident in relation to “punishments” (See Appendix A for definition).

Some rules established to govern the creation of content during the first year of the Vlogbrothers’ project remain in place in later years (e.g., who must post videos when, how long videos can be, the use of montages, etc.) and are supplemented with the advent of challenges (e.g., Hank must post a new song every other Wednesday). When one brother breaks the established rules, he must endure a punishment invented by the other brother, usually involving some form of public humiliation or gross eating/drinking challenge. During the first six years, these punishments included: John having to wax his chin, Hank having to drink blenderized Peeps and Strawberry Hill, both brothers having to dress up as their most embarrassing moment from high school, and notably, Hank having to make his first ever live performance of his own songs (which at the time terrified him). Over time, punishments emerge as a popular tradition within the videos, with 17 videos dedicated entirely to the discussion and/or performance of punishments. In 2014, Hank even posts a video outlining the timeline of rules broken and associated punishments to that point (EVERY VLOGBROTHERS PUNISHMENT!). It is worth noting that within that overview, he draws attention to the fact that there were no punishments (though there were infractions) during 2012, the transitional year during which the focus, tone, and content of the videos began to shift in response to their growing popularity and the many new projects that divided their attention. Yet by this time, punishment are important

enough to the community as a whole, that the Vlogbrothers voluntarily endure punishments for their earlier infractions.

Another essential aspect of punishments as community-embedded is that the Vlogbrothers frequently turn to the Nerdfighters for help both in deciding if the other brother deserved to be punished and in crafting these punishments. For example, in 2008, John notes that Hank posted a video that was longer than four-minutes; but after Hank tries to defend the extra few seconds, John decides: “Ok, well, I’m just gonna let the Nerdfighters vote on whether or not they agree with you” (“Punish Hank? Save Hank? YOU DECIDE”). In another example, John tells the Nerdfighter audience: “I need your excellent punishment suggestions in comments, and if you have time, I’d love it if you read through all the comments with me and thumbs up the ones you like the most” (2009, “Hank in FAMY”). And though the Vlogbrothers ultimately decide which option to choose, they do limit themselves to the Nerdfighters’ suggestions.

The Nerdfighters, in turn, revel in the power this tradition imparts. They readily provide feedback via comments, and they are even willing to donate money to facilitate more punishments as part of a broader community challenge. For example, in 2012, Hank and John both committed infractions that deserved punishments. John ultimately makes a deal, as recounted later by Hank:

If we could get to a thousand videos before Nerdfighteria loaned a million dollars through Kiva.org, those punishments would be wiped clean. However, if they got to a million dollars first, we would double our punishments; we would both have two. Of course, never underestimate Nerdfighteria, a million dollars was indeed loaned. And so we each had two punishments. We absolved one of them, by doing six videos in a week, three each, which leaves, finally, one punishment each. (2014, EVERY VLOGBROTHERS PUNISHMENT!”)

Here participation in community traditions via punishments, video creation, and raising money to decrease worldsuck are intertwined into one complex challenge that involves both the Vlogbrothers and the Nerdfighters. As noted in the previous paragraph, one punishment

remained outstanding into 2014, when Hank creates a video reminder; but rather than call any kind of statute of limitation on punishments, the Vlogbrothers cheerfully fulfill their outstanding agreement and complete one more punishment each. Examples like this demonstrate not only the Nerdfighters' willing and enthusiastic participation in the Vlogbrothers' project and its associated activities, but also speaks to a deep level of engagement with video content. It also correlates with earlier examples in which the Vlogbrothers promote a sense of ownership over the video and the channel that ultimately bolsters the appearance of a relationship with the Vlogbrothers themselves.

The Vlogbrothers' video content about comments also conveys the relationship between participation in comments and underlying community values. While online comment sections are generally recognized as a danger zone rife with internet trolls and destructive rhetoric, the Vlogbrothers regularly praise the quality of the discourse to be found in the comment section of their videos and draw attention to the intelligent, supportive commentary posted by self-identifying Nerdfighters. For example, as John notes,

Hank, I know a lot of people would think that it is redundant to say 'amazingly stupid YouTube comments,' and that I just could have shortened it to 'YouTube comments.' But the fact is that Nerdfighter comments on YouTube are generally so thoughtful and respectful that I am always kind of shocked when the non-Nerdfighters show up and they're all giant squids of anger" (2009, "On Iran, Islam, and Amazingly Stupid Comments").

In this way, the Vlogbrothers also place the Nerdfighters in direct opposition to the "haters" more commonly associated with comment sections. As Hank remarks about discourse in the comments section, "when the haters come out, the Nerdfighters pounce! Generally, I think that Nerdfighters do a really good job of insulting people though, and they frequently do it by invoking Shakespeare. Zoaster Toaster responded to a pretty offensive comment thusly: 'thou foul-lurking cur resembling a wag-tailed embossed carbuncle!' In fact, I'm really a big fan of

responding to haters' comments with Shakespearean insults" (2008, "Comment Haters and Christmas").

Notably, the tradition of responding to comment haters with Shakespearean insults was originally suggested by John himself in a video from 2007, in which he suggests that a Nerdfighter would contribute a higher class of insult to the world of online comments ("July 27: How Nerdfighters Drop Insults"). John similarly turns vitriolic content into the subject of a nerdy rhetorical game. In one video, for example, he reads comments made on recent Vlogbrothers' videos, replacing the curse words with the name of a famous American poet, correcting their grammar, and reflecting on how insults are supposed to work and why trolls are actually bad at it (2009, "Gay is NOT an INSULT"). Word-based games of this nature become hallmarks of the Vlogbrothers' videos and of their fan community, a tradition which is described in more detail in the next chapter. In this way, the Vlogbrothers construct the Nerdfighter identity as participating in the community value of thoughtfulness paired with intelligence and a working knowledge of classic literature. At the same time, John's position as the impetus for the function of both comments and insults provide insight into how the Vlogbrothers both model practices and invite participation in particular literacy-oriented practices, a dual function of their videos that continues to manifest even as participation itself moves beyond the YouTube platform.

Branching Out: Nurturing Participation Beyond YouTube

Over the course of the first six years of their channel, the Vlogbrothers maintain the sidebar/doobly-doo and the comments as primary modes of engagement and participation. Yet they simultaneously recognize the limits of these platform-based modalities, especially as points of communication with their increasingly active and growing fan base. So as the Nerdfighter community evolves, the Vlogbrothers post content suggesting or promoting alternative modes of

participation and communication beyond the boundaries of YouTube. Their motivation for shifting communication to outside platforms usually falls into one of two categories: organizing community projects or facilitating communication and discourse. In this section, I therefore provide examples of Vlogbrothers video content that directly promotes use of online spaces outside YouTube and consider how they reinforce participation as a Nerdfighter community value.

Coordinating Community Projects

In coordinating community projects, the Vlogbrothers, especially Hank, initially rely heavily on email. For example, Hank describes the email subscription list that will be used to coordinate a secret project and notes, “if you want to be involved in the project, you have to do that [subscribe to the email list], because it’s the only way we’re going to be talking about this stuff, ok?” (2008, “This Video Comes in Threven Parts”). Notably, in soliciting participation he likewise notes, “it’s the same list as the Secret Project for Awesome list, so if you did that and your email address hasn’t changed since, then you don’t have to worry about it.” In this way, Hank establishes the email subscription lists as a recurrent form of communication and coordination that moves with the community from one project to the next. Even two years later, they still use the same email subscription lists as the primary mode of coordination; while coordinating a massive image-based project for John’s birthday that eventually involved over a thousand Nerdfighters, Hank reminds participants: “it would be most important that you read the emails coming into your inbox after you’ve subscribed” (2010, “Demon Four Year Old Interviewed”). Though they ultimately add supplemental elements like instructional videos, email remains a core mode of coordination. To participate in this kind of community project,

then, requires Nerdfighters to engage in cross-platform communication and multi-media literacy practices that are grounded in a text-based platform.

To a certain extent, the use of email is necessitated by the kinds of projects Hank is coordinating, which are often secret projects and therefore needing to eschew the public nature of most social media platforms. In contrast, John is more likely to craft public projects that require minimal amounts of coordination on his part. His projects therefore consist largely of challenges that he presents to the Nerdfighters, which they then use public spaces like forums to coordinate: projects like finding Ivan the Terrible's secret hidden library, recreating his favorite children's picture book, or elaborating on the philosophical discussion of an "evil baby orphanage," all of which are discussed in more detail in the next chapter. In relation to participation generally, though, John uses his videos to create opportunities for the Nerdfighters to collaborate that lie not only beyond the bounds of YouTube itself but also beyond the Vlogbrothers' own participation, relying instead on the Nerdfighters' own continued initiative and content-creating skills. He then celebrates their endeavors and successes, posting videos that draw attention to the work being done on the forums, ideas being shared on the forums, solutions being found and posted on the forums, etc, and he passionately praises participants' skills, intelligence, and perseverance. His projects thus simultaneously build on and reinforce underlying community values, particularly those related to intellectual challenges and decreasing worldsuck.

These practices also manifest in John's later use of Twitter to coordinate community projects and challenges. In 2009, for example, he challenges the Nerdfighters to get celebrity Ashton Kutcher to follow him: "I promised I'd give \$1,000 against malaria, which I figured was a safe bet because Ashton Kutcher doesn't want to follow me on Twitter. But once again, I

underestimated the power of Nerdfighteria, and, indeed, Ashton Kutcher is following me on Twitter, so I gave \$1,000 to buy bed nets” (“Weekend of Surreality”). Here John creates a space for Nerdfighters to work collaboratively on a project that exemplifies how the Vlogbrothers’ negotiate their relations with celebrity culture for the purpose of promoting community values. This challenge on its face seems embedded in the celebrity culture John overtly dislikes, and does not feel himself to be a part of (“Ashton Kutcher doesn’t want to follow me on Twitter”); yet the project ultimately serves to reinforce the core community value of decreasing worldsuck by giving the Nerdfighters an opportunity to donate money to a global cause (via John).

Other uses of Twitter similarly build on pre-existing community traditions and practices. In 2010, for example, John uses Twitter to solicit the kinds of questions usually gathered with YouTube comments; echoing the tradition of answering real questions from real Nerdfighters, he states, “I asked Nerdfighters on Twitter if they had any problems, and it turns out that they do, and I’m going to do advice today, and I’m also going to do advice on Friday” (“Advice on Dumb Boyfriends, Going to College, and More”). Hank later replicates both the call for comments and the video-based response in his own Twitter-YouTube crossover video (2011, “27 Part Video”). Twitter-based projects also bridge online and offline spaces in a ways similar to the Vlogbrothers’ use of YouTube to coordinate offline gatherings; as John describes in one of his videos, “while we are on tour, we’re going a thing called Nerd Cache, where we leave, uh, buttons, bags of buttons, in places. You can only find out about that by following us on Twitter” (2012, “TFiOS PARTY!”). These latter examples are also important demonstrations of a shift, particularly leading up to 2012, away from YouTube and towards Twitter as a primary mode of interaction with a fan community that had grown exponentially with the release of John’s novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, the founding of Hank’s YouTube-based conference VidCon, and the

launch of their new educational channels, *CrashCourse* and *SciShow*. These new endeavors and the ensuing rapid growth of their fan-base marked a significant shift in the Nerdfighter community, which ultimately impacted how projects and participation functioned in definition of the Nerdfighter identity.

Facilitating Interaction With Forums

Before embracing Twitter as a broad-scale form of interaction with and within their fan-base, though, the Vlogbrothers experimented with other text-based forms of communication, especially forums. Over the course of the first six years, Hank regularly works with Nerdfighter volunteers to build and maintain a variety of web-based forum spaces, including My Pants, Your Pants, and the Nerdfighter Ning. Many of these efforts were motivated by the limitations of otherwise popular YouTube-based modalities, including the ever-popular comments section. Even as early as January 2007, John proposed the likely usefulness of forums as a supplement to comments: “Hank, I’ve been thinking some about the brotherhood2.com website. I think it’s time for the Brotherhood 2.0 to have a forum. Because the comments are getting really confused, and there’s so many of them, and it’s hard to read them all at once, and you don’t know which is about what” (“Brotherhood 2.0: May 31: Yogurt eating”). He then reiterated the point in 2011: “Nerdfighteria definitely needs better ways to interact. Like, YouTube comments are awesome but they don’t really lend themselves to building relationships or making stuff collaboratively” (“NERDFIGHTERS UNITE! (in your pants)”). The very existence of the Nerdfighter community and the success of their numerous collaborative projects both on YouTube and off contradicts John’s statement here, as their fan community is clearly able to build relationships and collaborate. Still the underlying sentiment, positioned alongside the Vlogbrothers’ continued efforts to create alternative interactive spaces, work to support the necessity of those

supplemental spaces for community interaction and participation that ultimately informs community identity.

In direct contrast to his critiques of the YouTube comments section, John praises the forums as “a great place to build friendships and decrease worldsuck and make Nerdfightastic things” (2011, “NERDFIGHTERS UNITE! (in your pants)”). In fact, though Hank is more likely to be responsible for the creation and maintenance of the forum spaces, John is more likely to post video content promoting and celebrating their use. For example, in 2007, after the launch of the first Vlogbrothers’ related forum space, My Pants, John notes: “Hank, the Brotherhood 2.0 forum, My Pants, has only been in existence for about eight hours, and there have already been 200 posts! The forum also has nearly 100 registered viewers in its first eight hours of existence” (“June 6th: Lindsay Lohan’s Bikini and My Pants:”). Participation in this initial forum is actually so unexpectedly popular that the site is not prepared to handle the traffic: “we’ve got so many Nerdfighters in My Pants that sometimes the site goes down!” (2007, “August 20th: Winner, South Dakota”). This popularity supports John’s supposition that the growing fan community requires a place to interact effectively amongst themselves beyond the Vlogbrothers-specific YouTube channel and the comments section of its associated videos. Over time, then, the forums increasingly function as supplemental participatory spaces where the Nerdfighters engage with other members of the fan community and that the Vlogbrothers in turn advocate by mentioning in their videos.

Notably, the Vlogbrothers also use their videos to construct these spaces as ones where participation cultivates empowerment within the fan community. They do this by shifting significant aspects of control within the forums and fan spaces to the Nerdfighters. Hank, in describing the recently created Nerdfighter Ning for example, notes that “one of us [the

Vlogbrothers] will post at least one video per week, but on the other days, there will be fascinating pictures and videos from other people in Nerdfighteria” (2008, “The Return of Question Tuesdays”). Here bulk of the responsibility for content creation shifts from the Vlogbrothers to their fans. Then, in 2009, responsibility shifts further, as the Vlogbrothers establish new content-moderator positions called Ning-masters: “they’re going to feature new content on the main page of the Ning. They’re going to organize and moderate the crazy Ning forums. And they’re generally just going to raise up the awesome levels of the Ning” (“Before Looking for Alaska...”). So while early forums like My Pants and fan-spaces like the Nerdfighter Ning are instigated by the Vlogbrothers and initially created by Hank, both spaces are eventually maintained and moderated by the Nerdfighters; and later spaces like forum-based Your Pants and Tumblr-based fan space EffYeahNerdfighters are both built and controlled by Nerdfighters alone. These online participatory fan spaces thus provide space for the Nerdfighter community to grow under the more direct control of its members while John and Hank nurture and promote participation in it through their videos. In this way, the Vlogbrothers not only construct spaces where Nerdfighters can engage with the fan community and participate in fan practices, but also where active participants can emerge as community leaders through the very act of participation.

The progression of Nerdfighters into positions of control within community spaces could work to undermine the Vlogbrothers as authority figures. Instead, John and Hank reposition themselves outside the YouTube platform as (somewhat) equal participants and fellow community members, while using their YouTube videos to maintain their authoritative voice. Some evidence of this can be seen in the above quote when Hank places the Vlogbrothers’ contribution to the Nerdfighter Ning as just one form of content to be found there. In another

instance, John posts a video about participating in the writing challenge known as NaNoWriMo and announces: “to my fellow Nerdfighters who are joining me on the crazy NaNoWriMo adventure, there’s a group about it at the Ning, and we also have an official discussion forum over at the NaNoWriMo website” (2009, “NaNoWriMo!!!”). Here John continues his performance of his authority-creating writer identity, but he also engages with the Nerdfighters as fellow community members and fellow writers rather than as fans of his novels or his videos. At the same time, however, John draws specific attention to a topic that is relevant to himself (i.e., writing), implicitly prioritizing certain forums and practices over others.

Similarly, in the same video celebrating the popularity of the Brotherhood 2.0 forum, John specifically notes:

Hank, I’m so excited that there are so many people in My Pants talking about the things that are at the core of what it really means to be human, like whether or not George W. Bush is adequately evil to be put in the Evil Baby Orphanage. Hank, I can’t tell you how happy I am to finally be having lively discussion about the Evil Baby Orphanage in My Pants” (2007, “June 6th: Lindsay Lohan’s Bikini and My Pants”).

Here again John uses his videos to reinforce engagement in a specific and favorite forum topic and to promote participation in his preferred form of collaborative philosophical and intellectual play. Notably, even the forums themselves are named after a game popularized by the Vlogbrothers and regularly played in their videos: the game of adding “in your pants” or “in my pants” to book titles with often hilarious and mischievous results. To participate in the forums is to post content in My Pants or later in Your Pants, continuing the game the Vlogbrothers’ started while simultaneously reaffirming the value of participating in inside jokes as a manifestation of fan identity and community belonging. In this way, the Vlogbrothers’ use their videos to maintain their position as literal voice of authority over forum topics and their influence over fan community participatory spaces by drawing attention to select examples and interactions.

The topical focus of the forums themselves provide further evidence of the ways in which Nerdfighter community values carry over from the Vlogbrothers' videos into participatory spaces beyond YouTube. For example, the forum section of the now defunct Nerdfighter Ning, an example of which can be seen in the image below, included forums dedicated to intellectual discourse, decreasing worldsuck, book discussion, and clues for participating in Vlogbrothers' video-based scavenger hunts and other games.

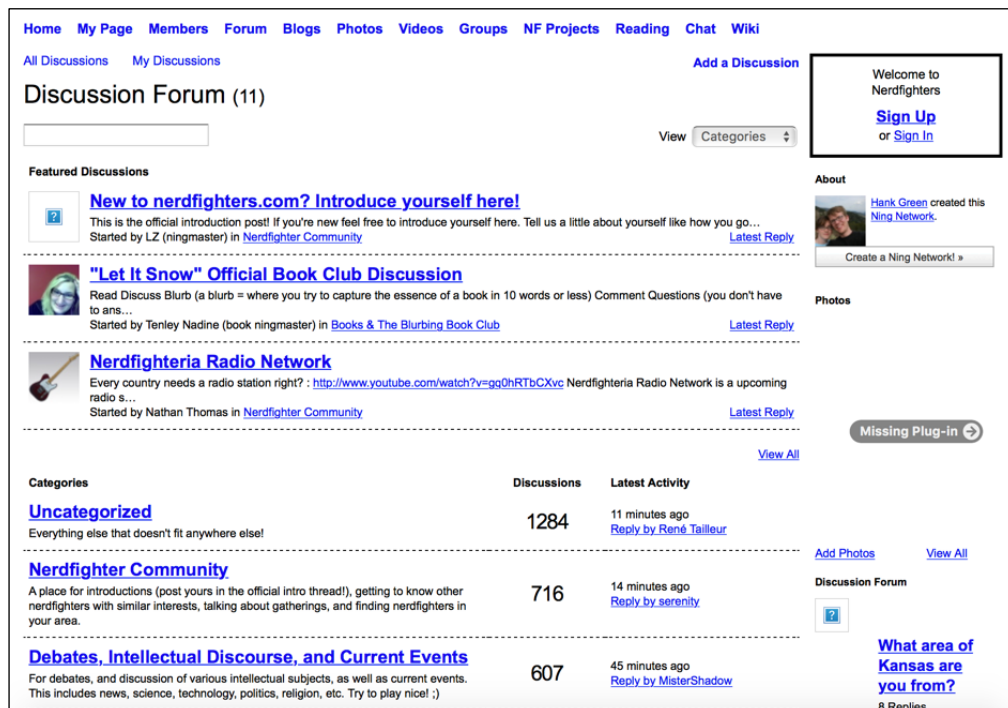


Image 5.3 The forums section of the now defunct Nerdfighter Ning (accessed through the Internet Archive)

The later forum space Your Pants (www.yourpants.org), also now defunct, similarly provided spaces that mimicked the practices and values promoted in the YouTube channel, providing spaces for learning to be a Nerdfighter and defining what a Nerdfighter is, and promoting community involvement with forums to coordinate gatherings and community projects.

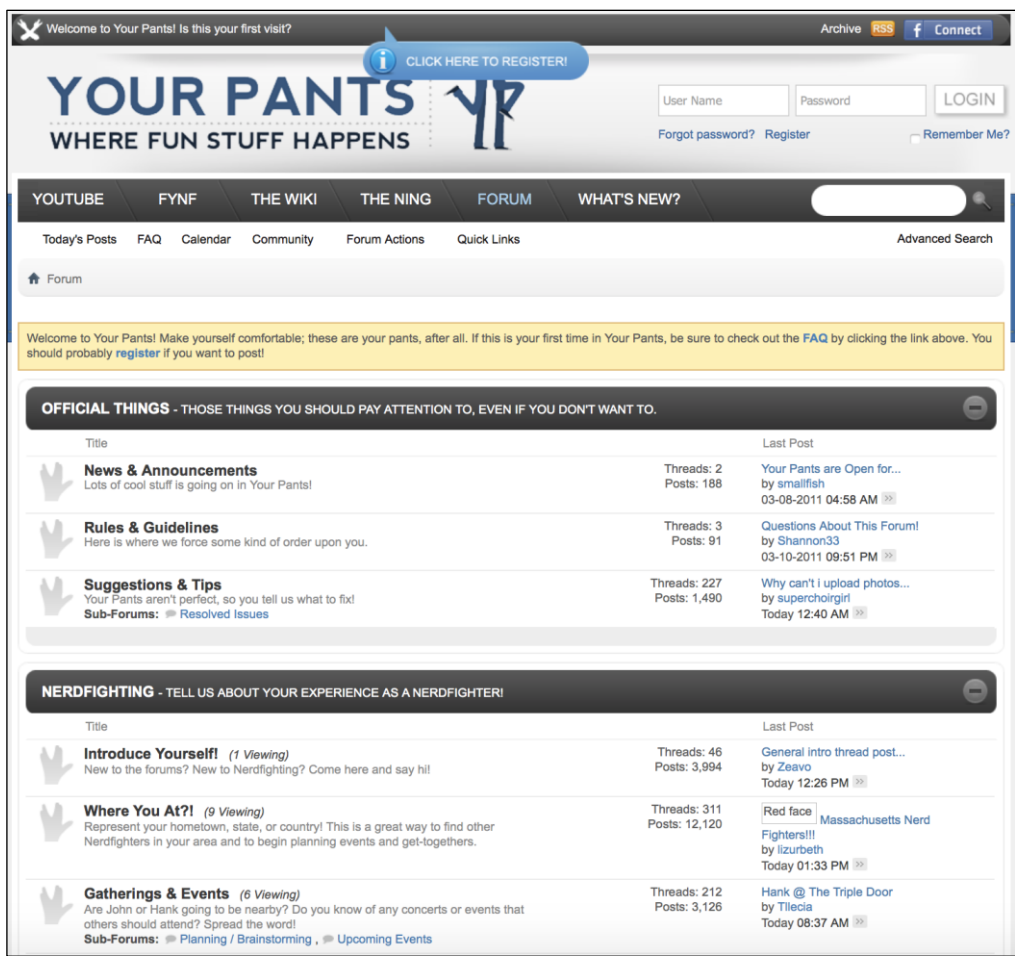


Image 5.4 The forums section of now defunct Your Pants (yourpants.org) (accessed through the Internet Archive)

In this way, the forums served a dual function; they operated as a space where Nerdfighters could interact and communicate outside the Vlogbrothers’ specific domain (their YouTube channel), while still acting as a place where they could more fully participate in the practices and values promoted by the Vlogbrothers. Many of these interactive fan spaces ultimately failed due to the rising cost and complexities in maintaining them, including frequent hacking and spam attacks, as the fan community increased in size, and little evidence of them remains online. The loss and lack of archiving of these spaces, in turn, makes it difficult to provide related examples of Nerdfighters voices from this same time period; reports about the activity made in the videos themselves end up being the only record of what was happening in the forums. The community,

meanwhile, largely shifted its participatory focus to centrally managed platforms like Tumblr. Yet during the first six years of the Vlogbrothers' channel, references to them in video content demonstrate their important early role in fostering interpersonal relationships within the fan community and organizing participation in community-related projects.

Navigating Overlapping Modalities of Engagement & Participation

Despite forays into other platforms, YouTube videos remained and continues to endure as the Vlogbrothers' primary mode of communicating with their fan base, and as noted in the Introduction, the Nerdfighters define themselves as a fan community that emerged in response to those videos. Yet in creating and fostering the supplemental online spaces where Nerdfighters can engage with and participates in that fan community, the Vlogbrothers rely heavily on text-based rather than video-based modalities. This inherent juxtaposition between video and text as a preferred form of communication provides an opportunity to consider how the Vlogbrothers navigate the use of these modalities and model transmedia practices to their fans. During the first year, when text-based communication was forbidden by the rules of the initial experiment, the Vlogbrothers were also forced to draw clear distinctions between video and text; but as the initial project drew to an end, and the brothers continued to post content to their channel, they quickly learn to move fluidly between video and text-based media spaces, and there is evidence of an appreciation for activities where the two modalities overlap. In this section, I therefore explore instances of overlapping text and video practices and consider how those practices inform the evolution of Nerdfighteria as a fandom that actively participates in video and text-based practices simultaneously.

Modeling Transmedia Practices

The Vlogbrothers model practices that operate across media and modality boundaries both within the YouTube platform and between different media platforms. Such practices within the YouTube platform typically involve gestures that intimate a relationship between the video space and the informational/interactive spaces discussed above. Spoken content about the sidebar/doobly-doo or the comments is accompanied by hand gestures toward their associated location outside the video screen space. For example, the visual method by which the



Image 5.5 John performs the “finger moustache” to gesture at the sidebar Vlogbrothers draw attention to the sidebar during the first years of the channel employ a pointing gesture that crosses the face of the talking-head at the center of the frame. Over time, this gesture becomes known within the Nerdfighter community as the “finger moustache.”

Practices that involve the relationship between video and text-based spaces therefore create visual customs; these customs in turn translate into verbal-visual allusions familiar to Nerdfighters and inform the emerging fan lexicon.

This interplay between the video space and the associated text-based spaces only increased over time to create layers of insider references. Lingering confusion over the position of the sidebar in relation to the reversed gaze of the speaker in the videos, compounded by

YouTube's shifting layout, often caused the Vlogbrothers to misdirect the attention of the audience. Even well into 2008, they are still making this mistake, but by this time, the practice of mis-pointing is so common that it has evolved into a playful habit. In one video, for example, John repeatedly and playfully points in multiple direction: "more info in the sidebar [points in the wrong direction], or perhaps the sidebar [points to the sidebar]. I am good at finger moustaches, but I am terrible at remembering where the sidebar is" (2008, "Ranting and Giving Stuff Away"). Misdirected pointing eventually becomes so well-established that, it finds its way into the fan-curated online Nerdfighter Lexicon as part of the fan-written definition of the sidebar: "the now-defunct version of the video description to which Hank and John pointed, usually in the incorrect direction, in most of their early videos. (See dooblydoo.)" (<http://www.nerdfighteria.com/lexicon/#S>). Later, when the sidebar is replaced by the dooby-doo below the video, references to the finger moustache fade into obscurity but remain a part of that Nerdfighter lexicon, and the Vlogbrothers shift to pointing down rather than to the side of the video space. This shift, in turn, provides John with innumerable opportunities to make jokes about pointing at his pants, as seen in the exemplar, connecting intra-platform play with another established Nerdfighter game and verbal tradition.

All of which provides important evidence of the fact that the videos do not exist in isolation, but are embedded in a self-referencing context that is both informed by and informs Nerdfighter community knowledge, practices, and values. Thus, when John speaks about the area "inside of here" versus "down there" in his death of YouTube video from the exemplar, his audience is already familiar with what those phrases represent and the fact that there is a relationship between them to which John is referring. This pre-existing knowledge allows John to draw an essential differentiation between the video and the text-based spaces, the former being

unidirectional and therefore less important to the community than the latter participatory space, even as his gestures and speech model a practice that operates across them.

Other examples of trans-modality within the platform involve play with text-in-video practices. These practices often involve words flashing briefly on the screen during talking-head monologues, but occasionally include more elaborate forms of visual play with text. In one instance, Hank uses different forms of written or typed text to animate his submission to a YouTube-based “Masters of Song Fu” challenge that required participants to compose a song with two verses and a chorus using only ten words. In Hank’s animated video, as the song progresses through verses and chorus, the visuals likewise move through various incarnations of

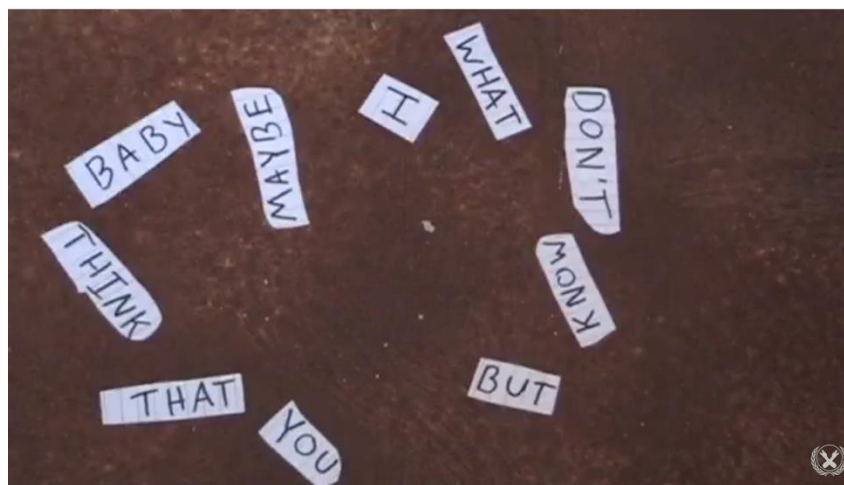


Image 5.6 Hank’s lyrics in motion, from “I Know (A Song in Ten Words)”

the lyrics in text form, including some computer-generated fonts and other hand-written or drawn words (2009, “I Know (A Song in Ten Words)”).

The song therefore manifests as both literal word-play and words-at-play. At the same time, Hank uses his video entry to model both text-based practices and participation in YouTube community-oriented activities to his audience.

Further examples of text-based play build on the kinds of word games that are a popular tradition within the Vlogbrothers' videos and the Nerdfighter community. Using a fill-in-the-blank style of game play, these games allow the Vlogbrothers to cross boundaries not just between video and text but also between different media platforms, including Google and Twitter. Located in use of text-based media platforms, they likewise entail the incorporation of visual examples into the videos, particularly screen-captures of the brothers' personal play. One prominent example of this is the Google-verb meme mentioned in the Hank's song from the exemplar. Another game, played by John in 2011, involved using Google's auto-fill feature to create algorithm-driven questions. As he moves through the questions generated by Google, John

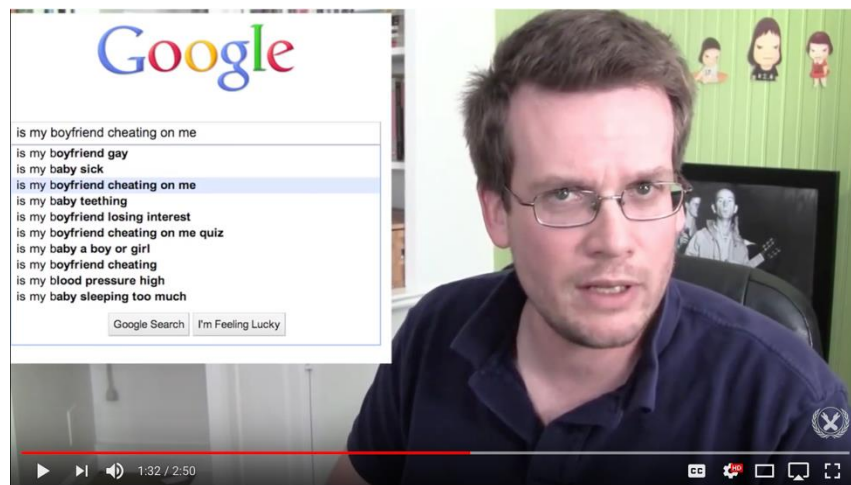


Image 5.7 John plays a game using Google's auto-fill function, from "Is My Boyfriend Gay? Is He Cheating?" both offers answers and playfully speculates on the likely strange motivations for asking Google certain questions. As he describes the game, "when I get stressed out, I like to play 'google auto-fill one again proves that people are weird'" (2011, "Is My Boyfriend Gay? Is He Cheating?"). Visually he incorporates a screen capture of the list of questions, using the blue highlight feature to draw attention to which question he is referencing.

Part of the game then employs an interlacing of seemingly unrelated questions and answers as John moves down the list, an aspect of his play that is nearly impossible to follow without the visual text as reference. Hank, meanwhile, plays a similar game later the same year in which he uses Google auto-fill to ask, “why are...” questions that he then attempts to answer (2011, “Why are Barns Red and Kardashians Famous?”). Though the rules of his game differ slightly from John’s and incorporate a lengthy alphabetical element, his visuals largely replicate those of John’s video, using screen-captures of Google autofill results as the reference point for spoken video content. These transmedia and cross-platform games therefore provide a useful contrast to the more typical Vlogbrothers video in that they require a deeper level of engagement from their audience. As opposed to monologue-driven talking-head videos or even Hank’s song videos, in which visuals and textual elements are not required for comprehension of the spoken content, here textual, video, and aural elements are mutually inter-referential, and the audience must simultaneously read, watch, and listen to grasp the video fully.

Promoting Cross-Platform Participation

Other instances of this kind of cross-platform play incorporate the personal text-in-video practices outlined above while also drawing on and promoting participation from the Nerdfighter fan community. For example, in 2011, Hank creates a video in which he responds to twenty-seven selected comments and questions posted by the Nerdfighters to his Twitter feed. The associated tweets appear in a box at the bottom of the video screen, as seen in the screen-capture below.



Image 5.8 Hank responds to Nerdfighter Tweets in his video, from “27 Part Video”

Over the course of the video, Hank never reads the tweets themselves, limiting his monologue to his own responses. Instead, the audience is required to read the text while listening to Hank speak to understand the context of his commentary, again employing overlapping textual, video, and aural elements for a multimodal impact. Yet in crafting his video, Hank does more than experiment with cross-platform transmedia practices; he also replicates John’s long-standing practice of drawing content from “real Nerdfighters.” In this way, he draws the Nerdfighters into these cross-platform transmedia practices, reaffirming the value of their participation in the fan community on both Twitter and YouTube.

John does something similarly complex in 2009, when he coordinates the creation of a children's picture book that involves Nerdfighter participation across a variety of platforms. John describes the effort involved in this way: "all you need to do is draw one or more pictures based on the text I am about to read you, and then upload your pictures to the Ning. Link in the sidebar. And then I will be able to reconstitute this amazing experience from my childhood" (2009, "Gus Is A Bug"). He later posts a video using these Nerdfighter illustrations, some of which involve text, to fashion an online video-picture book that he then reads out loud. A more in-depth analysis of this collaboration as a form of social writing is offered in the next chapter, but it is useful to note here the activity's foundation in both personal transmedia practice and Nerdfighter participation in fan community projects. The successful projection of the video picture book thus exemplifies not only the promotion of participation across text, image, and video modalities and across forum and video-based platforms, but also the process by which the Vlogbrothers' personal practices inform emerging Nerdfighter community practices through modeling and participation.

Throughout the first six years of the Vlogbrothers' channel, in fact, John and Hank regularly invite participation in activities that cross media and platform boundaries. Even during the first year, when they vow not to communicate interpersonally using text, they overtly value Nerdfighter participation in both text and video forms. For example, Hank encourages Nerdfighters to respond to the survey he distributes annually to his family, "in a text-based form, in a video form, in whatever form you like" (2007, "Brotherhood 2.0: February 16th"). John meanwhile asks the Nerdfighters if they have ever been in a fight and notes, "I would love to see those answers there. [points down toward the comments area]. Uh, or you could post them in My Pants, which is the Brotherhood 2.0 forum, if you were confused. And of course, video responses

are always our favorite” (2007, “December 7th: Fight Night with the Green Bros”). He likewise simply celebrates participation regardless of mode or location: “Hank, you know what I really like? What I like more than anything else in the entire world? Nerdfighters. I have never met a Nerdfighter I didn’t like. I like going to My Pants and seeing what they’re talking about. I like reading their comments. I like watching their videos. I like it when they send me pictures” (2007, “When Nerdfighters Fall in Nerdfighter-Like”). In this way, the Vlogbrothers establish the value of participation as the ultimate feature of being a Nerdfighter from the very beginning, using their videos to initiate, coordinate, promote, and celebrate participation as both community practice and value. Much of this participation, in turn, draws specifically on literacy practices like reading and writing, thereby placing literacy practices at the center of the Nerdfighter community: an in-depth analysis of which is the focus of the next two chapters.

CHAPTER SIX: MODELING LITERACY AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

Introduction

Having established the methods by which the Vlogbrothers establish and promote participatory spaces for their fan community and explored some of the multi-modal, transmedia practices that occur in those spaces, I now want to draw specific attention to print literacy-related elements at play in those spaces and those practices. As described in Chapter Four, the Vlogbrothers' print literacy practices serve an essential function in the brothers' video-based performance of their literate selves and in the establishment of their authority over literacy-related matters. These same practices also serve as models for the Nerdfighter fan-community and, in this way, simultaneously work to promote a shared participation in those practices, to construct shared community literacy values, and to inform the emerging Nerdfighter literacy identity. The purpose of this and the following chapter, then, is to investigate connections between the Vlogbrothers' personal literacy practices and Nerdfighter community literacy practices in order to address the following question:

RQ2: How do the Vlogbrothers' personal literacy practices inform and construct fan-community values and practices? How do they use the online video context to communicate those values and to establish a community in which young people can learn and participate in those practices?

This chapter focuses specifically on the social and community-oriented aspects of those values and practices and examines how the Vlogbrothers model a socially-embedded form of literacy that both draws on and creates interpersonal relationships. It draws particular attention to practices by which the Vlogbrothers recognize reading and writing as standing at the core of the Nerdfighter community and by which they craft spaces where Nerdfighters can participate in

these shared reading and writing experiences. This survey of practices, in turn, provides a foundation for analyzing the process through which reading and writing within the Nerdfighter community emerge as inherently both social and participatory.

Often these participatory literacy practices evolve over several videos, bridging weeks, months, or even years of community activity. I therefore begin this chapter with a description of set of videos that all involve a single shared experience of reading and writing and thereby provide foundational insight into a variety of overlapping literacy-related community practices. I then outline findings related to the construction of literacy as a socially-embedded practice that manifests in two ways. First, I trace the Nerdfighters as a community that emerges out of a shared appreciation for the same books, exploring how the act of reading and reading fandoms serve to create and strengthen social ties. Second, I examine evidence of the established Nerdfighter community as a social space in which members engage in new shared reading and writing experiences. As part of this, I highlight examples of social reading and shared reading experiences like book clubs, as well as examples of social writing and collaborative writing projects. I conclude the chapter by considering how shared reading and writing practices inform the Nerdfighter fan identity, especially in relation to book-based games as a favored fan community practice.

Exemplar: The Paper Towns Collab Album Project

Over the course of the first two years of the Vlogbrothers' YouTube project, John regularly posted videos that focused on the process of writing, editing, publishing, and promoting his third novel, *Paper Towns*. Beyond staging the individual performance of authorship, these videos also crafted a nascent connection between the novel and John's video audience, generating a sense of anticipation and of insider involvement in the writing process as he settled

on a title, revealed the cover, and even gave away advanced reader copies to random video commenters. On October 14, 2008, John further strengthened this connection when he read the opening chapters of the novel aloud days before its official release. Notably, before beginning his recitation, he also drew specific attention to the Nerdfighter fan community: “I’m gonna start by reading the prologue, which some Nerdfighters will remember I read several months ago” and later, “so *Paper Towns* starts out with two epigraphs, one of which is from a poem written by a Nerdfighter, Katrina Vanderberg” (“*Paper Towns* Reading”). This comment not only classified the Nerdfighters as a knowledgeable and engaged subset of his viewership but also identified the Nerdfighter fan-community with books, reading, and writing.

The next day, Hank contributed his own *Paper Towns*-focused video, atypically shot inside a recording studio rather than his home office. In this video, titled “*Paper Towns* Collab Album Project!!!” Hank expressed his own excitement over the novel’s imminent publication and drew attention to shared excitement from the Nerdfighters across various social media platforms: “so there are lots of very important and very cool *Paper Towns*-related things going on right now. There is a Twitter stream containing lots of fake spoilers from *Paper Towns*. Kayley from [YouTube channel] 5awesomegirls baked John a *Paper Towns* cake.” The video then showed a clip from another YouTube video in which Kayley was seen preparing a cake mix. He followed this celebration of fan-activity with the announcement of a collaborative fan-project/product: “Several Nerdfighters and I have all recorded *Paper Towns* songs. We are making a *Paper Towns* collaborative album. Oh my god, isn’t that awesome?” The bulk of the video was then dedicated to outlining how viewers could gain access to this album through their own participation in reader-fan activities:

“We are giving it away for free, but in order to get the *Paper Towns* collaborative album you have to prove your dedication to *Paper Towns*. And you have to do that in three different ways. You have to take a picture of yourself with *Paper Towns* and make it your Myspace or Facebook profile picture, make it your YouTube profile picture, make it every profile picture you can...

Second. Go to your local bookstore and if you haven't, purchase *Paper Towns*, and then put little notes in the book. Write like on the first page, by the dust flap is the best place. Put a little note, maybe sticking up a little bit that says how much you love *Paper Towns*...So it's like a blurb but way better because it's from just a normal person who liked the book instead of some book reviewer who liked the book...

Three. Comment on this video and then send an email to sparksflyup@gmail.com saying that you have done all of those things. We will give you access to the downloads of this album.”

In a manner similar to John's comments, Hank's video established useful and noticeably assumed connections between the Nerdfighter identity, a shared readership of *Paper Towns*, and fan activity both online and offline that involved both reading and writing.

The successive video, posted on October 16, 2008, built on this reader/fan-centered momentum. Titled “What Did You Think of Paper Towns!”, the video featured a montage of various Nerdfighters celebrating their ownership of *Paper Towns*, reflecting on their reading experience, and/or analyzing the novel.



Image 6.1 A Nerdfighter displays her copies of *Paper Towns*, from “What Did You Think of Paper Towns!” (2008)



Image 6.2 A Nerdfighter displays her notes analyzing Paper Towns, from “What Did You Think of Paper Towns!” (2008)

Notably, neither John nor Hank appeared in this video at all, and it was impossible to know for certain which brother was ultimately responsible for making and posting it. Instead, small textual tags within the video itself identified some of the participants, drawing attention to Nerdfighters who were active enough both in the community and on YouTube to be recognizable.

After two more novel-centered videos, posted on October 17 and October 21, the videos returned to their more standard form and content, with both Hank and John reflecting on their day-to-day lives from the confines of his home office. At the end of his first return-to-form video, however, Hank apologized for the delay in providing access to the Paper Towns Collab Album, noting that he would email a link to the digital copy to those who earned it and blaming the delay on the unexpected level of participation: “I’m sorry it hasn’t happened faster. It is ready, but it takes a little bit of time to copy and paste everybody’s email address so that we can send it out to everyone. Because there are, like, hundreds of you. I am freaking impressed. I thought like fifty or sixty people would do it. And no, no, it’s been like fifty or sixty people a day” (“Lonesome Cloud”). In this way, his apology provided evidence of the high level of

engagement within the Nerdfighter community while simultaneously drawing attention to the limitations of intra-community online communication during its early years.

Ultimately the entire series of videos, including the collaborative album itself and the fan activities associated with earning it, could be read as a publicity stunt, a way to draw attention to the book and manipulate the power of fan prosumer practices to increase sales. After all, John often credits the Nerdfighters whenever his books appear on bestseller lists. Yet to do so ignores the broader fan-community context and the way that the Vlogbrothers promote participation in literacy-related events as part of being a Nerdfighter, regardless of their connection to John's novels or later Hank's albums. Instead, this string of videos and related fan practices exemplify the literacy values explored in the rest of this chapter: book fandom, shared reading, collaboration, and participation both online and offline.

Celebrating Communities of Readers

The Vlogbrothers construct one form of socially-embedded literacy by acknowledging the role of book fandom, or a shared appreciation for certain novels, in the creation of social ties both online and offline. As part of this, they celebrate both the reader identity and the fan identity as shared identities that foster connections between individual Nerdfighters and that include the Vlogbrothers themselves. They likewise draw parallels between reading practices and fan practices that provide the foundation for an emerging fan community with reading at its center. That fan community, the Nerdfighters, then reinforce their own bonds through book-centered activities online and offline, and the Vlogbrothers in turn celebrate those bonds by posting videos about community activities and gatherings. In this section, I therefore trace the emerging relationship between readership and the Nerdfighter identity and consider how each contributes to the construction of this particular form of socially-embedded literacy.

Valuing Reader Fans & Fandoms

As part of the process of modeling reading as a foundation for social connections and interactions, the Vlogbrothers establish “reader” as a common identity shared with many of their viewers and specifically within the Nerdfighter community. As seen in the Chapter Four, the Vlogbrothers readily perform their own reader-identity by posting video content of their own reading-related practices. Yet they similarly post content that posits or affirms the Nerdfighters as readers. Early in 2007, for example, Hank states, “I think that a large percentage of our fan base are book readers” (“Brotherhood 2.0: February 22nd: Where Do Books Go?”). Notably, he makes this statement in response to a posted comment from a fan about the difficulty of finding a place to store all of her books, a difficulty that Hank assures her is shared by himself, John, and many of her fellow fans. Further evidence of the Nerdfighter reader identity can be seen in the videos associated with the 2008 Paper Towns Collab Album: for example, in the assumed interest in the novel itself and in the montage of reader responses to the novel. By 2013, this shared reader identity within the Nerdfighter community is so well established that Hank asks a question about reading practices in his first annual Nerdfighter census survey; and the results bear out long-standing assumptions, as 33% of the more than 125,000 respondents claim to read more than 25 books a year and a further 33% claim to read at least 10 (hankschannel 2013, “CENSUS ANALYSIS!”). In this way, the initial fandom surrounding the Vlogbrothers’ may begin as a shared appreciation of their videos but the Nerdfighter identity is quickly supplemented by a shared love of books and reading.

This shared reader identity, in turn, forms an early bond between the Vlogbrothers and their viewers, especially as the Vlogbrothers actively self-identify as Nerdfighters themselves. John, for example, claims in the 2007 video: “I’m an English Literature Nerdfighter! I don’t need

to recharge. I just go to my room, read a couple of stanzas of *The Wasteland*, and I'm good to go. Nerdfighters!" ("Brotherhood 2.0: April 6: Nerdfighters Never Surrender"). At the same time, the shared reader identity establishes a social connection between the Nerdfighters themselves apart from the Vlogbrothers. As Hank writes in the lyrics to a song about Nerdfighter friendship and romance: "Oh, won't you be in Nerdfighterlike with me?... We could go on a date to the library... Over a romantic lunch/We'd blurb some LOL Books... Do a reading of *Pooh Gets Stuck [In My Pants]*...Oh, even though tonight I've got / A date with my bookshelf / I'd much rather touch and hug you / Maybe something else" (2008, "From the Airport: And some Nerdfighterlike"). The song references a host of shared community book-related practices, like meeting at the library and writing book blurbs (practices discussed in more detail later in this chapter), and adding "in my pants" to the end of book titles. To be in a relationship with a fellow Nerdfighter then, as understood and communicated by the Vlogbrothers, is to bond with a fellow reader over literacy activities that are connected to Nerdfighter inside jokes, games, and practices. In this way, the Vlogbrothers recognize and celebrate the intra-community connections that occur over a shared love of books and reading while simultaneously setting up reading to serve a social function that will later form the foundation for shared community reading events.

At the same time, they also foster a shared fan-identity that is inherently connected to books and authors. As part of this, they post content that establishes themselves as fans. Like their personal reader identity, in which case they never overtly claim to be readers, they rarely describe themselves as fans; over the course of six years, they admit to being fans less than a dozen times between them. When they do self-identify as fans, though, it is often in relation to books and authors. John, for example, owns to being a fan of Judy Blume, while Hank claims at different points to be a fan of Ursula LeGuin, Terry Pratchett, Neil Gaiman, and science fiction

generally. In one video he raves, “I love LeGuin. I am a LeGuin fan. I’ve got a whole shelf of LeGuin over there” (2009, “10 Book Reviews in 4 Minutes”). In fact they frequently rave about books, artists, and other video-creators in modes typically associated with fan practices. Like readership, then, they model practices as a form of identity performance. In describing his anticipation for an upcoming Harry Potter movie, for example, John bounces in his chair while enthusiastically singing about how he is “so excited to see the new Harry Potter movie! I get to see Luna Lovegood, and I’m gonna cry at the end” (2009, “Harry Potter Nerds Win at Life”). He likewise expounds emotionally in other videos about people and topics of which he is a fan, from the last words of famous people to conjoined twins to Norbert Weiner, Black Santas, and large balls of twine. Hank, meanwhile, earns early fame for the Vlogbrothers on YouTube via his fan-song about the last Harry Potter novel, and he gradually emerges as an active member of the Wizard Rock community. In this way, the Vlogbrothers’ not only perform a reader-fan identity, but like that of reader generally, position reader-fandom as an identity that they share with other Nerdfighters and establish reader-fan practices as shared practices that are valuable and worthy of respect.

In fostering an implied parallel between reader practices and fan practices (and therefore between the reader identity and the fan identity), the Vlogbrothers also implicate the Nerdfighters themselves, posting content that celebrates the Nerdfighter-as-reader-fan identity and promotes participation in related Nerdfighter reader-fan practices. Evidence of this can be seen in the Paper Towns Collab Album Project videos, as they draw attention to spontaneous reader-fan activities, promote methods for participation in coordinated activities, reward participation in those activities, and spotlight reader-fan excitement and response. Notably, the inspiration to have Nerdfighters leave notes in unsold copies of Paper Towns as part of earning

the album came from an activity in which the Nerdfighters themselves were already engaged; as John notes in a video that predates the announcement of the album, “there are several groups of made-of-awesome Nerdfighters around the country who are inserting little notes into my books in bookstores, telling potential readers to come to Nerdfighter gatherings” (2008, “J Scribble Goes to Borders”). In fact, the Vlogbrothers regularly share, comment on, and display the results of various Nerdfighter fan-practices related to books and reading, often using montages that reinforce these activities as something many dozens or even hundreds of Nerdfighters participate in or drawing attention to objects created by groups of Nerdfighters working together. For example, one video celebrates collaborative fan-practices when John flaunts a copy of a Portuguese translation of his novel *Looking for Alaska*, which hundreds of Brazilian Nerdfighters had read and annotated as a gift for him (2012, “To Be Anything At All: Thoughts from Places, Chicago and LeakyCon 2012”).



Image 6.3 John displays a fan-annotated copy of *Looking for Alaska*, from “To Be Anything At all: Thoughts from Places, Chicago and LeakyCon 2012”

In these videos, reader-fan practices not only demonstrate the crossover between reader and fan identities but simultaneously reinforce them as identities shared by members of the community, and with the Vlogbrothers themselves as they replicate and participate in those practices. Reader-

fan practices likewise emerge as inherently social, shared not only with the community through social media but also shared within the community as they are practiced by multiple individuals at the same time, by groups of people, or by coordinated effort. That those participating in the activities are overtly recognized as Nerdfighters, even as early as 2007, in turn reinforces the connection between the reader-fan and the Nerdfighter identity and places reader-fan practices at the heart of the Nerdfighter community.

Further connection between the reader-fan identity and the Nerdfighter identity can be seen when the Vlogbrothers coordinate the community for book-related fan activism. For example, in early 2008, when John's novel *Looking for Alaska* faces a book-banning challenge in Depew, New York, John appeals to Nerdfighters in the area to attend the local school board meeting in support of maintaining access to the novel ("I Am Not A Pornographer"). This kind of coordinated civic engagement ultimately becomes a hallmark of the Nerdfighter community, and notably the Nerdfighters turn out in a crowd even though John himself is not there. In a less obviously political example from later in the same year, when Nerdfighters in the UK learn that *Paper Towns* would not be published in their country, they mobilize to make their demand for access known to publishers. In a manner similar to replicating the Nerdfighter practice of leaving notes in books, the Vlogbrothers quickly move to coordinate and expand their effort. In a video nominally addressed to John, Hank invites UK Nerdfighters to send their emails to a single email address, the contents of which would be forwarded to John's UK publishers so that they could see the response all at once.

As noted earlier in reference to the *Paper Towns* fan album, these collaborative efforts could be seen as a move to increase sales; but to dismiss them as such ignores both John's own statements valuing the Nerdfighter community over the himself (examples of which can be seen

in the discussion below) and the related efforts' roots in Nerdfighter-initiated activities. The collaborative efforts described above function as responses to a recognition of a shared fandom that already exists within and informs the community. And both efforts are ultimately successful due to the overwhelming participation of Nerdfighters both offline (in Depew) and online (via email). What emerges from examples like these, then, is a celebration in video form of young people coming together as a community, motivated by a shared appreciation for books, to empower themselves in the face of school boards and publishers. That they act without John or Hank's presence but at their behest or by their direction demonstrates the way in which John and Hank cultivate nascent book-related community values (in this case, access to books) and nurture them into coordinated practice.

Fostering Communities Online and Offline

Having used the shared identities of reader and fan to create connections within their fan community, the Vlogbrothers then turn to foster that community both online and offline. In reflecting on the value of communities, they are particularly supportive of online communities, often using the Nerdfighters as an exemplar of all the best that online communities have to offer. As John states in his very last video of 2007 (his last Brotherhood 2.0 video):

Hank, before I go, I need to make one thing clear: Nerdfighters are not about you and me. Nerdfighters are about a made-of-awesome book made by a woman in Australia going to a made-of-awesome baby in the United States. Nerdfighters are about raising money and awareness for important causes. Nerdfighters are about building a supportive community of friends in My Pants. Nerdfighters are about stupid beautiful projects and making each other laugh and think...In the contemporary world where things fall apart and the center cannot hold, you have to imagine a community where there is no center. ("Dec. 28th: John's Last Brotherhood 2.0 Video")

Years later, Hank makes a similar statement: "I think, objectively, what's really interesting about what we're doing here on the internet is when it goes beyond just two brothers and moves into being something that's very large and encompasses a lot of people doing a lot of work to make a

community happen and to make it exist in a very real way” (2010, “Ningmaster Tom”). Though not technically related to literacy practices (though John’s quote does include decontextualized references to W.B. Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming”), these reflections about the value and purpose of the Nerdfighter online community carry important implications that are relevant for understanding related community values. The efforts to promote the online community generally reflect values that both John and Hank connect with reading and writing: empowerment and caring about others.

In defining the Nerdfighter community as one that exists outside of the Vlogbrothers themselves, as being “not about you and me” and “beyond just two brothers,” John and Hank call attention to the unusual nature of the community itself and their relationship to it. The community is at its core a fan community in which the Vlogbrothers function as objects of the resulting fandom, its *de facto* center; and their efforts to direct and advise fan practices reveal an underlying bent toward personal authority. Yet in these and other reflections about online community, the Vlogbrothers clearly communicate that the value and power of that community comes from its base. They celebrate the practices of the Nerdfighters and notably include themselves as part of that larger whole. These efforts in turn empower the Nerdfighters to exist, create community connections, and act amongst themselves. This empowerment model, in which the Vlogbrothers participate as one of the crowd, also informs the rhetoric around reading and writing within the community, as detailed below and in the next chapter. What is important to note here is that the empowerment value is a defining feature of the community itself throughout its inception and growth and therefore informs community literacy practices.

Another defining feature of the Nerdfighter community, as defined by the Vlogbrothers, is the insistence on caring for other community members and other people generally. This focus

on caring is inherently grounded in fan practices; as John describes, “ultimately it’s about community. I’d argue that caring about sports is actually a lot like caring about Harry Potter or Dungeons & Dragons or Nerdfighteria. Caring about stuff binds us to the other people who care about that stuff, and that creates the communities that make life worth living” (2011, “Participatory Geometry”). In this way, he reinforces the parallels between fandom, online communities, and caring; to be a fan creates social connections that lead to communities in which members care for each other. Similarly, while reflecting on the growth of the community during the fifth-anniversary year, Hank concludes, “this marvelous, weird, undefined new thing called online community that doesn’t have any structure and it doesn’t have any rules and nobody knows how it works, it’s a whole new way for people to organize themselves and be active and give and care about each other” (2012, “Happy Birthday John Green!”). Here Hank strengthens the connection between caring and the online community’s decentralized structure, which he describes as no structure at all; to be a part of the community is to organize as equals in a way that allows for mutual support.

Evidence of this form of mutual support can be seen in other reflections about the nature of the Nerdfighters as an online community. For example, in 2010, John states: “my proudest day as a Nerdfighter came last week, not when the Vlogbrothers hit 300,000 subscribers, but when the Nerdfighters came together with Esther and helped the Harry Potter Alliance win \$250,000. That’s what our community does” (“I Like Balls”). Notably John again values the Nerdfighter community over the Vlogbrothers and includes himself as one of those Nerdfighters, and his comment about “our community” functions as one of participation not ownership. In a later video, John draws attention to another example of community caring. When thousands of copies

of *The Fault in Our Stars* were shipped weeks early by accident, John describes the reaction of the Nerdfighter community:

My readers don't just care about my books, they care about each other. And then, Hank, as word leaked out that this had happened, I saw more and more Nerdfighters on Twitter and Tumblr and Facebook saying that they were gonna get the book early but they weren't gonna read it until January 10th. Or saying they were gonna read it but pledging not to ruin the reading experience for the vast majority of people who will not receive their books until at least January 10th. (2011, "There Will Be NO SPOILERS!!!")

What is particularly interesting about the above examples specifically is the way that they simultaneously reinforce the Nerdfighters as readers, as fans, and as people who care about each other, shared identities that inform the broader Nerdfighter identity. At the same time, like the underlying value of empowerment, the value of caring manifests in rhetoric around reading and writing more broadly; the Vlogbrothers actively emphasize building empathy as one of the primary functions of reading, an aspect of reading engagement discussed in more detail in the next chapter. What is important to note here is the role of reading and caring in the self-reinforcing nature of the Nerdfighter identity: Nerdfighters are a community of readers who care about each other, and the fact that they share a love of reading reinforces the community ties that lead to caring.

Of course, it is essential to note that the Vlogbrothers do not only foster the Nerdfighters as an online community. They also promote offline gatherings in ways that express and strengthen the centrality of books and reading. This promotion typically manifests in one of two ways: in formal gatherings that are actively coordinated by the Vlogbrothers through their videos and in informal gatherings organized amongst Nerdfighters that are featured in videos. Yet regardless of the formality or structure of the gatherings themselves, they regularly involve a combination of reading and fan practices from which they gain their purpose and importance.

Formal gatherings typically occur in relation to John’s identity as a professional author, especially in the early years of the Vlogbrothers channel when John was the more publicly



Image 6.4 A Nerdfighter gathering during the American Library Association Annual Meeting, from “Book Nerd PARADISE”

recognizable figure amongst teens and young adults. Gatherings during these early years are therefore usually part of book promotion tours, occur within libraries or bookstores, and are often facilitated by librarians or state library associations.

Notably, even after Hank becomes an equally popular draw and later, when formal gatherings give way to informal Nerdfighter-organized ones, libraries and bookstores remain the most popular venue. Evidence of these book-centered gatherings can be seen as early as January of the channel’s first year, when John posts a video recording of the audience exuberantly shouting his typical greeting, “Good morning, Hank.” (“Brotherhood 2.0: January 26, 2007”). Over time, John stops having to feed the line to the audience because participation in the greeting becomes a well-recognized element of both gatherings and John’s videos; in fact by 2010, after recording multiple versions across multiple gatherings, John comments, “Hank, sometimes I feel like my job is to go around the world and make sure that every single person who wants to say good morning to you has the opportunity to do so” (“Lust and Folly in London and Edinburgh”).

These crowds, in turn, are nearly always identified in the videos as Nerdfighters, strengthening the implied connection between participation, gatherings, and the Nerdfighter identity.

Notably, however, these crowds were initially an unexpected consequence of their online popularity. In a video aptly titled “Nerdfighting IRL” (2008), for example, Hank describes one of the first events that involves a combined appearance of John, Hank, and author Maureen Johnson; eavesdropping on a phone conversation between Maureen and one of the organizers, he reports:

You could kind of hear what was coming out of the ear-piece...and we heard the person she was talking to say that there were sixteen people waiting for us already at the East Grand Rapids Branch, Kent District Library, and we're like, 'yeah! Alright! Sixteen people! That's awesome!'... And she's like, 'no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Sixty. Six-zero. Sixty.'... And by the time we got there, it was like seventy-five, and by the time we left it was ninety-seven.

Their genuine surprise at the turnout mirrors the astonishment Hank exhibits in response to the unexpected participation levels in earning the Paper Towns collaborative album. The Vlogbrothers may intentionally provide opportunities for Nerdfighter social connections online and offline, but they are often surprised by the results and admit to underestimating the enthusiasm and strength of their own fan community's response.

Over that same year, the Vlogbrothers embark on their first official tour, again aptly named the Tour de Nerdfighting, and they post videos that feature not only themselves on the road but also clips of lines, crowds, and engaged audiences. In this way, they celebrate participation in social events and reinforce the value of attendance at these gatherings as a hallmark of the Nerdfighter identity. This connection is further strengthened by the Vlogbrothers share a hand-drawn map of the tour's itinerary, created by a Nerdfighter, which becomes the central visual image on the tour's dedicated website.

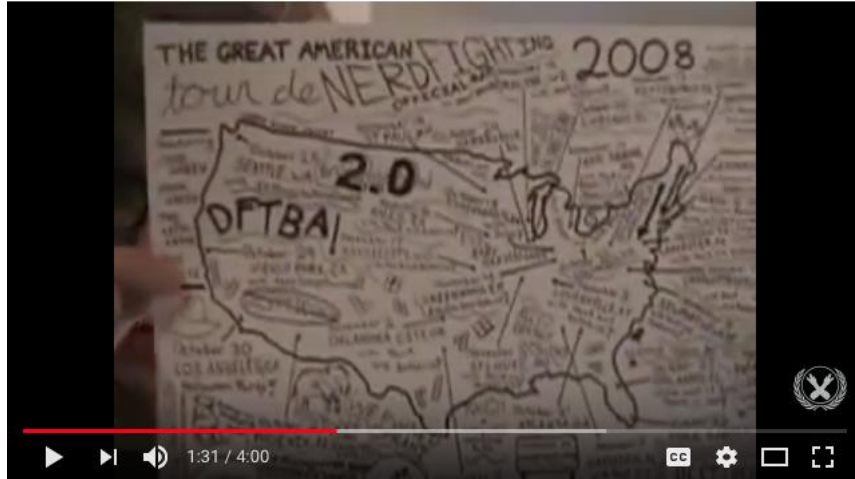


Image 6.5 A Nerdfighter-created map of the Vlogbrothers' Tour de Nerdfighting (2008)

As a result, these crowds only increase in size as the Nerdfighter fan community grows, evidence of which can also be seen in videos, including one gathering where they were forced to hold two separate events because too many people showed up to fit in the venue all at once. By January 2013, as part of the one-year anniversary celebration of *The Fault in Our Stars* publication, they are able to sell out Carnegie Hall. An essential component of these gatherings, though, is that despite being organized and promoted by the Vlogbrothers, they often occur in response to and at the behest of the Nerdfighters themselves. Even when they manifest as part of a book promotion tour, the motivation to attend finds roots in their popularity as the Vlogbrothers and the desire of the Nerdfighters to supplement their online connections with offline socializing.

Still what occurs at the gatherings ultimately remains book-centered. As Hank notes in his video "Nerdfighting IRL," "so what happened? First John read a little bit of Paper Towns. And then Maureen read a little bit of Suite Scarlet, which is her new book," followed by an on-demand performance of Hank's Harry Potter fan-song Accio Deathly Hallows. Notably, the core

content of these kinds of formal gatherings does not change even as the size and scope increases.

For example, in describing the scene of a typical gathering from their 2012 tour, John states:

We arrive early afternoon and find lots of books needing signatures and Hanklerfishes, which takes a couple hours...Then the people start to show up, and there are a lot of them. They wear my face on their torso, or Doctor Who shirts, and they bring book cakes, and they have things I wrote tattooed on their bodies, sometimes in borderline inappropriate places, all of which is amazing and beautiful and also of course completely terrifying...Then I read and talk about *The Fault in Our Stars*, and you sing some songs. (“Thoughts from Places: The Tour”)

Nearly every video focusing on Nerdfighter gatherings like this, as part of tours or as single events, features clips of book readings and song performances alongside clips of enthusiastic, engaged crowds of young participants.



Image 6.6 A cheering crowd from *The Fault in Our Stars* book tour, from “Life On Tour” (2008)

At the same time, the centrality of books at these formal gatherings strategically contributes to their purpose and value. As John argues in response to concerns from Nerdfighters, “I know that many of the events are on a school night, but I’m sure that’s you’ll be able to tell your parents that since it’s, you know, book-related, you should totally be allowed to come. And if you can’t convince them, just have them email me, and I’ll convince them” (2008, “Paper Towns and Touring Questions Tuesday”). By placing books at the center of organized gatherings, the

Vlogbrothers achieve multiple outcomes simultaneously. They build on their personal identities as readers, author, and song-writer, and strengthen the perception that these are identities they share with their fans. They also establish a shared appreciation for the same novels as a reason for young people to make social connections and gather together in offline spaces, where they can share and bond over book and Vlogbrothers fandom. This, in turn, reinforces the implied overlap between reader, fan, and Nerdfighter identities.

Not all Nerdfighter gatherings replicate this formal structure, however. There is also evidence in the videos of more spontaneous, unorganized events, some of which are initiated by one of the Vlogbrothers and some of which involve only the Nerdfighters themselves. For example, on August 08, 2008, a crowd of Nerdfighters join John and Hank at the Bean in Chicago, a gathering that was planned and promoted in advance but at which activities emerged organically at the whim of the Nerdfighters (“Eight Days of Awesome”). In another instance, Hank arranges for Nerdfighters to flash mob a Manhattan Barnes and Noble with only one day’s notice; more than fifty Nerdfighters ultimately participated in this “unsanctioned, unplanned, spur of the moment” gathering, and videos clips taken by Hank and other participants of Nerdfighters crowding the escalators and overtaking the store were then featured in a related video (2008, “Everyone’s Your Friend...”). Interestingly, this impromptu, informal gathering arises in response to the store’s refusal to host a more formally organized event because, as reported by Hank, they did not think John Green could draw a crowd. There is overall, though, less evidence in the videos of informal Nerdfighter gatherings that are not attended by the Vlogbrothers; and that evidence usually manifests in short video clips as part of longer montages or as brief verbal descriptions that simply recognize the gatherings as happening. For example, John notes that Nerdfighters are leaving notes in unsold copies of his books inviting potential

readers (and therefore potential Nerdfighters) to local Nerdfighter gatherings. Yet, the Vlogbrothers still foster those gatherings by mentioning them and praising those who attend them.

Loving Harry Potter Together

To understand fully the social function of reader-fandom in creating the Nerdfighter identity and community, it is essential to pay specific attention to its relationship with Harry Potter novels and associated fan culture. Though the Nerdfighters emerge and evolve in response to the Vlogbrothers' videos generally and though not all Nerdfighters are an active, or even self-identifying, part of the Harry Potter fan community, there is an unmistakable and important overlap that strengthens the connection between Nerdfighters and reader fandom and that speaks directly to reading as a source of social bonding. In fact, the Vlogbrothers themselves readily and enthusiastically acknowledge the overlap between Nerdfighters and Harry Potter fans and the series' role in the formation of the Nerdfighter community. They also participate in and exemplify the overlap, as both brothers self-identify as Nerdfighters and passionate fans of the Harry Potter series. Through these shared identities, then, the practices of the Harry Potter community find expression within the Nerdfighter community, especially those related to reading and literacy.

Publication of the final novel in the fantasy series occurred during the course of the first year of Vlogbrothers' videos. As self-proclaimed Harry Potter fans, then, both brothers post content expressing their excitement about the final book's imminent release, but Hank is the more active fan, and as such, he is the brother more likely to create and post book-related fan-content. The most prominent example of this is the song "Accio Deathly Hallows":

“I’m gettin’ kinda tired of this
Pre-publication media blitz.
You’ve got all of Muggle kind under your spell.
Don’t you know the whole world’s already gone
And reserved a copy at Amazon?
How many more books could you sell?
Now give me my book or go to hell.
‘Cause I need *Harry Potter*
Like a Grindylow needs water.
And as Saturday approaches my need grows!
Oh Accio *Deathly Hallows*,
Incendio Book Sales Embargoes,
It’ll be like phoenix tears on a broken nose.
Yeah Accio *Deathly Hallows*.”

Posted in the days leading up to the release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the video itself functions as a fan expression of both heightened anticipation and impatience. More importantly for the evolution of the Nerdfighter community, though, the video catches the attention of YouTube content moderators who feature it on YouTube’s front page. This promotion leads to the song reaching viral-video levels of popularity, as fellow Harry Potter fans sense Hank’s enthusiasm as genuine and connect with his sense of excitement. This fandom-inspired resonance in turn leads to a surge in viewership of the Vlogbrothers’ channel and ultimately to a growth in the Nerdfighter fan community.

This causal relationship between Harry Potter fandom, Accio Deathly Hallows, and the notable growth of the Nerdfighter community is regularly acknowledged by the Vlogbrothers over the course of subsequent years. For example, on the third anniversary of the song being featured, Hank describes the event and the brothers’ resulting fame this way: “if you don’t know what that means, that was our first time when lots of people watched our videos. And John, as you mentioned in the recent Skype conversation, this marks three years of having one of the coolest, weirdest, most awesome lives ever” (2010, “I Hung out with Snookie...Accidentally”). He also refers to Accio Deathly Hallows as “the song the changed my life” (“Book

Eight...Another Harry Potter Song”). In the same year, while reflecting on the death of fellow-Harry Potter fan, prominent Nerdfighter, and friend Esther Earl, John admits, “if it weren’t for Harry Potter, I would have no Esther, and there probably wouldn’t be a Nerdfighteria” (2010, “With Esther”). The Nerdfighter fan community thus emerges, not necessarily as an extension of the Harry Potter fan community, but as one whose existence and most importantly whose magnitude results from shared readership, shared fandom, and shared appreciation for book-related fan-produced content.

Beyond simply recognizing the implicit connection between the Nerdfighters and the Harry Potter community, the Vlogbrothers also post content that fosters the dual fan-identity and creates parallels between participation in both fan-communities. In one video posted not long after the release of “Accio Deathly Hallows,” Hank even attempts to draw already existing Nerdfighters into a shared appreciation for Harry Potter:

“I’ve written a letter. Dear Nerdfighters who do not care about Harry Potter, I’m sorry. I’m going to keep talking about Harry Potter now. You know, there’s a solution to the problem of not caring about Harry Potter. Read Harry Potter. And then you’ll be part of the club” (2007, “July 24: More Harry Potter?!”).

In posting this video letter, Hank acknowledges the existence of a Nerdfighter community apart from Harry Potter fandom, but simultaneously encourages members of the former to join the latter by drawing attention to it as a “club,” as an inherently social forum built on shared reading and participatory engagement, both of which are values of the broader Nerdfighter community. A later video, celebrating the one-year anniversary of the “Accio Deathly Hallows,” then builds on this sense of participation by featuring a montage of Nerdfighter video-covers of Hank’s song.



Image 6.7 A Nerdfighter learning to play “Accio Deathly Hallows”, from “Book Eight...Another Harry Potter Song” (2008)

Notably, this video also strengthens the Nerdfighter identity as someone who is a fan both of Hank-as-songwriter and of Harry Potter and who expresses that fandom through active participation in transmedia creative practices (in this case, engaging with song, video, and book formats). Further evidence of the Nerdfighter/Harry Potter fan overlap can be seen in videos that feature offline gatherings: for example, when the brothers both attend the Harry Potter fan convention LeakyCon, where large sub-community gatherings of Nerdfighters take place, and in the following description of a 2008 event:

We then went to a Chicago library event, where there were over 280 Nerdfighters! And there were among the most prominent Nerdfighters in existence. They included the Short Sisters; Lena of The Butterbeer Experience; Brittany of the Parselmouths; Lauren, Liane, Kayley, and Kristina of the 5AwesomeGirls; secret sister Rosianna; secret bother Adam! All of these people! All in the same room at the same time. The first time I’ve ever seen any of them outside the YouTube screen! (“Eight Days of Awesome”)

Here well-known members of the Wizard Rock community (fans who form bands and sing songs inspired by the Harry Potter world) are recognized as prominent Nerdfighters; and as Hank continues to produce Harry Potter-related songs, he joins the ranks of recognized Nerdfighter amongst Wizard Rock performers. At the same time, this gathering of Nerdfighters/Harry Potter

fans reinforces the online/offline social connections found and valued within the community more generally, as discussed above.

Notably, the lyrics of the Harry Potter-inspired songs written, performed, and posted by Hank likewise recognize and foster the social nature of reading fandom. Just to understand the songs, the listener must belong to the group of knowledgeable and engaged readers who would recognize decontextualized references to creatures like Grindylows, to spell commands like ‘accio’ and ‘incendio’, to plot points like Snape’s Unbreakable Vow, and to fan-produced theories and plot predictions. Beyond that, the songs employ collective pronouns that imply a kind of collective readership and reader ownership of story and character; Accio Deathly Hallows, for example, notes that “the weight of the world rests on *our* boy” (, emphasis mine). The song “Book Eight” (2008) similarly alludes to a collective readership, one with a shared response to the conclusion of the primary narrative, “I know I’m not the only one/Who wants to know more about Harry’s sons” and to problematic content: “And I want JK Rowling to say/ That the epilogue was crap/ ’Cause we all know it was crap!” (“Book Eight...Another Harry Potter Song”). These lyrics thus function as points of reference to shared fan practices inherently connected to literacy and engaged reading: deep knowledge and textual analysis. Other lyrics reflect on the socially-embedded, community-based nature of reading fandom that extends beyond the text. In “Harry Freaking Potter” (2011), for example, Hank writes:

“Dear Mr.Potter,
I hope that you don’t mind,
But it turns out it’s been years since we left you behind.
We’re here because we love you, but we’re not here for you.
We’re here to learn and sing and make videos for YouTube,
But more than any of that we’re here to be with our friends,
And that’s clearly not the sort of thing that will ever end...
We’re gonna love these books and each other until our dying day.”

The suggestion here is that fans, initially drawn to the character or the narrative, remain attached to fan communities because of the opportunity to engage in literacy-related creative practices and more importantly because of the lasting social bonds created by a shared love of the same books. In this way, Hank's Harry Potter fan-song lyrics reinforce the same socially-embedded values at work in the broader Nerdfighter community: reader fandoms, shared reading practices, and shared content creation.

Social Literacies: Reading Together

While fostering the emergence of the Nerdfighter community as one in which members form social bonds over a shared reader identity and shared book fandoms, the Vlogbrothers simultaneously construct alternative forms of socially-embedded literacy by creating and promoting shared reading and cooperative writing activities. As part of this, they reflect on the value of social reading experiences, model book recommendations as a social practice, and establish a series of Nerdfighter-focused online book clubs. In this section, I therefore explicate how the Vlogbrothers use their videos to initiate social reading experience, and I trace how those experiences and practices ultimately reinforce the Nerdfighter identity as an engaged and literate fan.

Social Reading

As part of the process of modeling social literacies practices as Nerdfighter community practices, the Vlogbrothers use their videos to facilitate shared reading experiences and to exhibit enthusiasm for the act of social reading itself. Evidence of John's excitement over the potential for a shared reading experiences can be seen as early as January 8, 2007, one a week after the inception of the Vlogbrothers channel, when he proposes a book swap between Hank and himself: "I'll read a book you suggest if you read a book I suggest" ("Brotherhood 2.0: January

8, 2007”). With the advent of the Nerdfighters fan community, the focus of this shared reading shifts almost immediately to include the broader audience, and by June 2008, John facilitates the community-wide, shared reading of one of his favorite novels, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Over time, summertime social reading becomes a recognized tradition of the Nerdfighter community, allowing John to comment in a 2012 video: “you know what summertime at the beach means. It means it’s time to slather on the SPF50 and read some great literature together” (“The Physics of Book Clubs and Vidcon”). Further evidence of the Vlogbrothers’ desire to craft social reading experiences can be seen in the Paper Towns collaborative album videos, when Hank initiates reading the novel as a shared endeavor in which Nerdfighters are invited to participate.

Reading the same books at the same time thus emerges in the videos as an acknowledged Nerdfighter practice, one directly facilitated and promoted by the Vlogbrothers. Notably, their facilitation here functions both practically and emotionally; they use the videos to suggest a shared reading, to announce what books to read, and to share responses, but also to draw Nerdfighters into the excitement and to model the emotional engagement in social reading that they hope Nerdfighters will emulate. They also endorse the value of social reading generally by participating in the practice themselves; they do not simply assign books for others to read but rather share in the reading and response as members of the Nerdfighter community.

Book Recommendations

Motivated by their personal inclination toward shared reading, the Vlogbrothers then work to facilitate both formal and informal opportunities for Nerdfighters to read the same books. Informal social reading opportunities manifest most clearly in the form of book recommendations. John’s suggestion of a book swap quoted above serves as an early example of this kind of recommendation process, and like the shared reading practice generally, book

recommendations quickly expand to include the Nerdfighters; and in 2009, John even recommends that Nerdfighters read Gourevitch's book on genocide *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*, the very book he recommends to Hank as part of this swapping of recommendations from two years earlier. Having established himself as someone willing and able to recommend books, then, John soon emerges as the brother to whom Nerdfighters turn for requests for recommendations as well. Regularly posted 'question and answer' formatted videos therefore regularly include book recommendations in response to direct request or indirectly in response to questions about favorite books (e.g., book of the year, books about conjoined twins, or graphic novel), in which his answer often includes the phrase, "I recommend..."

Hank likewise makes similar recommendations based on his own reading preferences, including at different times Anderson's *Feed*, Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker*, the *Watchmen* comic series, and Sherman's nonfiction *The Believing Brain*. Notably these recommendations are typically offered as a caveat to his effusive response to reading the book himself; for example, in recommending Lockhart's *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks*, he notes, "I finished this last night late, after reading it way, way, way too late into the night, and loved it. So, if you're looking for a good book, here's one. I think it actually has a lot to say about Nerdfighting, and in several different ways" (2009, "Five Parts"). Other instances of books recommendations simultaneously serve as invitations to social reading; in 2007, for example, Hank, says, "If you wanna read with me, I'm currently reading *The Lathe of Heaven*, which is not a young adult book but it is only 160 pages long, so it's kind of short and I've heard that you kids like short books. I like short books too" ("Oct 15th: Happy 16th Birthday B20"). In this way, book recommendations serve to reinforce the underlying shared reader identity, not only in

recommending books they personally have read but in the assumed motivation on the part of the Nerdfighters of looking for a good book, a young adult book, or a short book. At the same time, recommendations reveal an implicit social element as exchanging books is an act that happens between brothers and between peers. Recommending books is therefore an act of love for the book but also an act of friendship within the community to create space for more shared reading experiences.⁶

At other times, the book recommendations are more formal; in 2012, for example, John creates a dedicated video “Nerdfighter Book Recommendations: A Gift Giving Guide for Nerdfightastic Readers.” Introducing the video, John builds on his already established identity as reader and authority over book-related topics, noting: “as you know, [his wife] the Yeti and I have a lot of books. Like, we have several thousand books in our house at any given time. I mean, even [his son] Henry as a pretty significant book collection, and he’s two. So, Hank, I do feel a little bit qualified to recommend books.” The format of the recommendations within the video then follow a “if you liked [blank], then you might like [blank]” format. In this way, book recommendations work to reinforce the shared reader identity within the community; not only are the Nerdfighters looking for books, but they have read books against which the recommendations can be compared.

There’s also an assumed familiarity with certain titles and topics that connect to the Nerdfighter identity more broadly, as the recommendations relate to specific interests like decreasing world suck, the Swindon Town Swoodilypoopers, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *Harry Potter*. In the case of the latter, he notably recommends first rereading the series and then reading Melissa Anelli’s *Harry: A History*, “a great book about the Harry Potter fandom,” thus embedding his recommendations not only in shared reading but shared book fandom. He also

lists books that are best for reading with someone else, strengthening the fundamental value of reading as a social, interpersonal practice. The social practice of recommending relatedly manifests as reciprocal, as the video concludes with John's request: "I'm interested to know what you think I should be reading, so let me know in comments;" in this way, reading and recommending emerge as participatory practices within the community, made possible by the social media context in which the recommendations are given. Within the context of book recommendations, then, reading is a potentially social act that allows for shared reading experiences, gift giving, and exchanges between friends.

Hosting Book Clubs

Though the Vlogbrothers use book recommendations to create informal opportunities for shared reading experiences that build on already existing social bonds within the community, they also work to facilitate more formal, structured spaces for reading and responding as a group. One of the primary ways they do this is through the establishment of a series of online book clubs, some more successful and widespread than others. The first of these book clubs, the Brotherhood 2.0 Book Club, originated with John, included only the two brothers, and was structured around the traded recommendations mentioned above: "I'll read a book you suggest if you read a book I suggest" ("Brotherhood 2.0: January 8, 2007"). Despite both brothers' initial willingness to participate, this book club does not last, and it ultimately results in a single exchange of titles. Notably this early effort also fails to model the kind of conversation-driven, socially-embedded literacy practices that the Vlogbrothers later promote and participate in; restricted as they are by the moratorium on text, they do little more than read and voice their opinions about the others' selection in a single video. It does succeed, however, in modeling a mutually appreciative sharing of books outside their personal reading preferences and an

openness to read new titles; as John explains in his video response, “anyway Hank, thanks for the recommendation. I definitely enjoyed *Deep Economy*, even though it didn’t contain any, like, love stories or car chases or metaphors about existential isolation like most of the books I like” (2007, “September 6th: The Book Club Returns”).

Like social reading more generally and informal book recommendations, the practice of book clubs also quickly expands to include broader participation from the Nerdfighters. The first book club of this kind, the Nerdfighting Blurbing Book Club (often called just the Blurbing Book Club), is created and coordinated by Hank, who chooses the first four books based on his own reading interests and requested input from the Nerdfighters in comments. In the initiating video, posted on February 11, 2008, Hank describes his proposed idea to John this way:

We, you and I, and the Nerdfighters, whatever Nerdfighters want to participate, read a book. We read a book every two weeks. Two weeks is plenty of time to read a book. And then everybody writes a blurb. And the blurb has to be less than ten words, has to try to capture the essence of the book in a unique and interesting way. It could be humorous, it could be insightful, it could be exciting, it could be whatever you want it to be, as long as it’s ten words or less. I guess it’s the Nerdfighting Blurbing Book Club. Blurbing Book Club! (laughs) (“Nerdfighters Blurbing Book Club!”)

Notably, participation in this book club involves more than just social reading but also social writing, an aspect that is discussed in more detail below, and Hank mentions both comments and dedicated online forums as spaces for Nerdfighters to post their responses and blurbs. In this way, social reading emerges as more than a shared reading of the same book by community members but also as the sharing of ideas and the sharing of reading-related content with fellow community members. Hank simultaneously reinforces the value of participating by including reminders and deadlines in his videos during the course of each book club.

In longevity, participation, and modeling, this book club is more successful than its predecessor, leading to a shared reading of six different titles, including Maureen Johnson’s *13 Little Blue Envelopes*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*, Terry Pratchett’s *Going Postal*,

and John Green's *Paper Towns*. Ultimately, however, the effort lasts only a year. By February 2009, almost a year to the day after he first proposes it, Hank admits the club has been "completely neglected" ("Winner and Winners and Ningmasters"). The inability to sustain this book club does not extend from lack of participation, however. Instead, as with other social reading effort described in this chapter, the enormity of response surprises the Vlogbrothers, and they struggle to keep up with submitted blurbs and associated blog posts on the forums (citation). The Blurbing Book Club becomes so popular with Nerdfighters, in fact, that when the Vlogbrothers allow the activity to lapse, the Nerdfighters post comments demanding its return on more than one occasion. Still, despite efforts to recreate it under the direction of a specific Nerdfighters, further incarnations are more nominal than actual. John technically announces J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as Blurbing Book Club selections, but no winning blurbs are ever announced. Instead, these books become fodder for more traditional book club discussions facilitated by John alone.

The final incarnation of formalized social reading manifests as the Nerdfighter Book Club, which runs on and off between 2009 and 2012, usually during the summers, and includes three books: *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Fahrenheit 451*.⁷ This book club, which still focused on community participation and feedback, is more conventionally formatted around reading and discussion and is coordinated by John rather than Hank. As a result, the social reading process focuses less on imaginative engagement and coordinated fan-response (e.g., writing blurbs) and more on intellectual engagement and critical analysis (a long discussion of which can be found in the next chapter). Like Hank, John promotes comments and dedicated online forums as spaces for social dialogue, participation and response, and he insists that the book club's central function is social: "we love working on things with Nerdfighteria, big and

small, and so we are re-instating the summertime Nerdfighter Book Club” (2012, “Flinching in the Shower”). Still, the videos associated with this incarnation of the book club often feature John’s authoritative lectures on metaphor and character analysis, followed by questions designed to promote intellectual engagement, and while the final book discussion involves a conversation between the brothers across a series of videos, the overall result is more monologue than dialogue. This impression is reinforced by the fact that videos associated with this book club never reference any comments posted by Nerdfighters, and any text-based evidence of participation was lost with the demise (and lack of archiving) of Nerdfighter Ning forums.

Despite being functionally less social than previous incarnations, this final book club is still important to the discussion of social reading because within its related videos, John reflects directly on the function and value of shared reading as a community practice. As part of the video announcing *Fahrenheit 451* as the selected novel, he tells Hank: “we’re both gonna read Fahrenheit 451, and we’re both gonna make videos about it, and our readings will probably be very different, and that will allow us as a community to discuss how best to read, why we read, what we find fulfilling about reading. I’m very excited about this” (2012, “The Physics of Book Clubs and Vidcon”). Here John clearly defines reading as having both social and individual functions. The reading-as-meaning-making function remains with the individual, a level of engagement explored in more detail in the next chapter, but readers benefit when different readings are shared. Not only does social reading allow for the voicing of different responses but it also provides insight into the value and function of reading generally. Later in the same video, John returns to this intersection between personal meaning-making experiences and the value of social reading:

Hank, ultimately what I love about reading together is precisely what I love about VidCon. You started Vidcon, but we all make it happen together, just as Bradbury wrote

his novel, but it doesn't become real until *we* read it. Of course, even amid the shared experience, we're still alone...each reading of every book is unique, but what a comfort it is to share readings and experiences. How lucky we are when we get to be alone together. (emphasis his)

For John, part of the enjoyment of reading is discussing the book and sharing the experience of analyzing it; a personal value that he communicates to his viewers in reflections like this one. Also evident in this statement is the underlying value of empowerment that the Vlogbrothers associate with reading as described in relation to communities above; reading gives readers power over the text, a power that is shared when reading is social.

Social Literacies: Writing Together

Like reading, writing within the Nerdfighter community is constructed as a social act, a shared practice that strengthens social bonds through participation in both structured and semi-structured fan experiences. The Vlogbrothers actively use their videos to facilitate participation in these experiences, crafting opportunities for Nerdfighters to collaborate on stories, songs, and other forms of online content-creation. Many of these shared activities, in turn, become the foundation for book-related games and inside jokes that further strengthen community bonds. In this section, I therefore highlight examples of social writing practices and community collaboration as seen in the Vlogbrothers' videos, drawing specific attention to ways in which participation in these efforts contributes to the evolving Nerdfighter identity.

Social Writing

As seen briefly in the discussion above, the Vlogbrothers construct socially-embedded literacy practices at the intersection of social reading and social writing. Early evidence of social writing experiences can be seen in both the production of and the requirements to earn the *Paper Towns* collaborative album. The album itself is a product of collaboration, a common form of social writing within the Nerdfighter community discussed in more detail below. Meanwhile, to

gain access to the album, Nerdfighters must write and place “little notes in the book” in book stores, post a comment on the announcement video, and send an email to the designated community email address. Over the succeeding years, the Vlogbrothers continue to provide similar opportunities for Nerdfighters to participate in activities that involve different forms of writing, from posting individual comments on YouTube, to participating in community forum discussions, to contributing to vast community-wide collaborations.

These activities, in turn, not only place the act of writing at the center of shared Nerdfighter community practices but reinforce writing itself as a socially-embedded practice. The placement of notes in books, for example, attempts to draw new readers into the kind of shared book fandom that is a hallmark of the Nerdfighter community while also inviting them to local Nerdfighter gatherings, creating the possibility for new social bonds. At the same time, the Vlogbrothers regularly promote commenting on videos as an inherently social act, designed to promote conversation and intra-community discourse. These forms of writing also mirror the social practices of the Nerdfighter community more broadly, as they shift seamlessly across a variety of media platforms and bridge both online and offline spaces. By promoting social writing activities, then, the Vlogbrothers simultaneously provide the Nerdfighters with opportunities to express their fan identity, to connect with both the Vlogbrothers and other Nerdfighters via social media, and to strengthen their social connections through shared literacy practices.

Social writing also manifests within the Vlogbrothers’ videos, and through them in the Nerdfighter community, as an extension of book club activities. Hank’s initial construction of the Blurbing Book Club, for example, requires both social reading and social writing, as participants read the designated book, then write and share their blurb-formatted responses. At the same time,

the blurbs function in a way inherently different from traditional blurbs. Rather than serving as a method of selling the book, (and thus capitalizing on free fan labor from youth), the blurbs function as a method of engagement with the book and its content in a way similar to a classroom. Indeed, Hank originally constructs the idea in opposition to school-based book reports, a facet discussed in more detail in Chapter Seven.

The Vlogbrothers then promote participation in these literacy events by providing prizes and enthusiastically celebrating the winners: “The winner is... ‘Marvelous! Ten! There’s hell in this non-stop teen jubilee!’ Which amazingly enough is an anagram of Maureen Johnson’s *Thirteen Little Blue Envelopes*” (2008, “Ruins, LOLBooks, and the Blurbing Book Club”). Notably, in selecting this winner, John not only commends writing shared online, but a particular kind of writing that demonstrates a unique, creative literacy skill: anagrams. Word play on this kind emerges in later years as a noted Nerdfighter hobby and a core component of collaborative games, as described in more detail below. Unable to select only one winner, John also shares the following lolcat-inspired blurb:

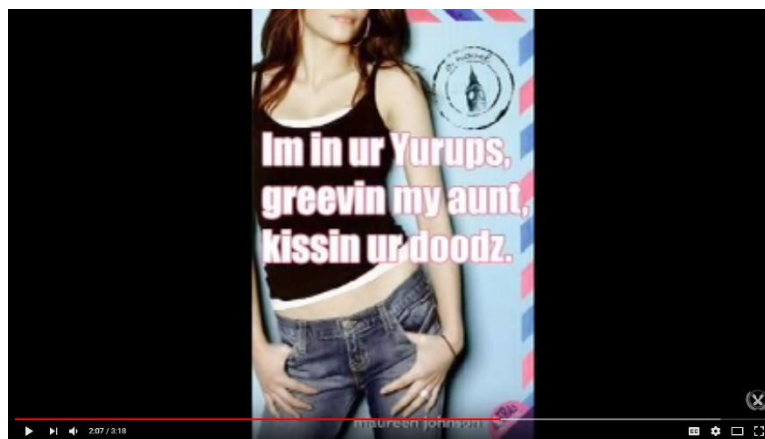


Image 6.8 The winning lolcatz book blurb, from “Ruins, LOLBooks, and the Blurbing Book Club.” (2008)

In this way, the Vlogbrothers validate a diverse set of writing practices that includes the conventions online writing and that bridge visual and textual forms, like memes.

Later, more traditional incarnations of the Nerdfighter book club then attempt to build on this social writing tradition. Indeed, to participate fully in the social reading experience of the book clubs, Nerdfighters are encouraged to contribute to the ongoing discussion of selected books by posting questions and comments on related YouTube videos and contributing to dedicated online forums. For example, in a video from the summer discussion of *The Catcher in the Rye*, John notes: “I think we should discuss that and everything else in this video and any other topics you find interesting in the first fifteen chapters over at the Ning, where I have started an official ‘let’s talk about Holden Caulfield and The Catcher in the Rye’ thread” (2008, *Catcher in the Rye, Part 1*). The Nerdfighters then use dedicated forums not just to post entries or blurbs but to participate in a transmedia dialogue that includes responses to the book, the associated videos, and each other, but that also mimics more conventional, offline book club discussions.

Over time, these social writing spaces, as promoted by the Vlogbrothers, become increasingly formal and directed. In a 2011 video about the latest book club selection, *The Great Gatsby*, John asks: “do you think the way *The Great Gatsby* portrays luxury and wealth and the American Dream accurately reflect the truth about those things? I mean, both in the Jazz Age, when the book is set, and today? You’ll find a link in the dooblydoo to a thread in Your Pants to continue the conversation” (“Gatsby’s American Dream: Reading The Great Gatsby Critically, Chapter 1”). Notably, John uses the word “conversation” to describe the online forum-based discussion of book club books, denoting their inherently social nature. At the same time, this call to participate in written activities around reading experiences employs recognizable community catch-phrases and spaces (i.e., dooblydoo and Your Pants), embedding them in Nerdfighter social traditions. Yet there is limited evidence of the Vlogbrothers’ participation in the conversational component itself. As noted above, no video content is ever posted that responds to

book-related questions or comments posted to YouTube or the forums, and with the demise of the Ning, there is no evidence of Vlogbrothers' participation there either. Instead, the videos themselves function as conversation starters that the Nerdfighters carry forward, and the Vlogbrothers create dedicated spaces and opportunities for social writing, then facilitate and promote participation.

While the Vlogbrothers certainly promote social writing in forum-based conversations, they do not necessarily model social writing through active personal participation. Instead they model social writing in other ways, most notably by modeling their own writing practices as socially-embedded. Despite videos that show the act of writing as often solitary (see Chapter Three for examples of writing in solitude), video content also reveals being a writer, both of novels and of songs, as a socially active profession. Socially-embedded writing in this way manifests not only in relation to the book tours and live events discussed previously, but also in evidence of friendships with other writers. John, for example, regularly posts content in which he is hanging out with other writers and participating in writing groups; as he comments in an early video, “I write a lot with my friends Maureen Johnson and Scott Westerfeld...Today we were joined by Justine Larbalestier and Lauren McLaughlin. And Maureen Johnson's pet monkey (a stuffed monkey sits beside a laptop)” (Brotherhood 2.0: April 2: A Day in the Writer's Life).⁸



Image 6.9 John's writers group working together, from "Brotherhood 2.0: April 2: A Day in the Writer's Life"

He also posts videos of socializing with other authors at writing and publisher-related events, like library conferences, book award ceremonies, and after-event parties; in one video, he specifically describes the American Library Association Annual Conference as “kind of the highlight of the young adult literature social calendar,” where he “gets[s] to meet all these authors I like” (“Book Nerd PARADISE”). Hank similarly posts video content about his friendships with other song-writers, particularly those from the Wizard Rock and YouTube communities; and he often expresses genuine excitement about performing with those he considers role models-turned-social peers. Social writing therefore functions in a manner similar to social reading; a shared love of writing, and a shared appreciation for writing the same form or genre, for the same audience, about the same topic, or on the same platform, creates social bonds. These bonds, in turn, provide opportunities for shared writing experiences within social groups or communities, often in the form of collaboration.

Modeling Collaboration

The Vlogbrothers model this form of social writing by posting content about various collaborations in which they themselves participate. Hank, for example, produces and contributes a song to the Paper Towns collaborative album described in the exemplar. In fact, Hank frequently speaks about song-writing as a collaborative art and acknowledges contributors and co-writers in relation to songs he sings in his videos, including the famous “Accio Deathly Hallows,” the idea for which came from a viewer, and Nerdfighterlike, which he co-writes and sings with his wife. He likewise supports and promotes other musicians’ collaborative efforts, including not only the Paper Towns album but also collaborative albums from fellow Nerdfighter fallofautumdistro and fellow YouTubers, chartjackers: “four YouTubers got together and helped the internet write a song, and they’re trying to ‘jack’ the charts by selling the song for charity. So

far the song is in the top 100 of America's iTunes charts and the top 25 of the UK's iTunes charts" (2009, "Chartjackers, Chris, Touring and Duckies").

Though Hank is not technically modeling in the latter example, he is celebrating the kind of collaborative writing facilitated by digital and social media in which himself does at other times participate. For example, in 2009, Hank posts a video for his bi-weekly song challenge, noting: "I was actually able to collaboratively write this song using etherpad...people just filled stuff in. And so several of these lines are from Nerdfighters" ("DEMOLITION DERBY!"). In this way, Hank not only models collaborative writing over social media platforms but recognizes it as a practice in which the Nerdfighters are actively engaged, himself included. This kind of collaborative writing project, managed by the Vlogbrothers and participated in by the Nerdfighters, emerges as a common social writing experience in the community, and is discussed in more detail below.

John, meanwhile, is less likely to collaborate with the Nerdfighters directly, but is just as likely as Hank to model the practice through videos about his own collaborations. One prominent example of John's collaborative writing practice involves the writing, publication, and promotion of the novel *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*. Co-written with friend David Levithan, the novel is published during the early years of the Vlogbrothers' channel, and so posted videos provide viewers with insights into the collaborative process in ways similar to John's other books.⁹ In describing the book, John notes: "the book is about two guys, both of whom are named Will Grayson, who are different people. And David writes from the perspective of one Will Grayson, and I write from the perspective of the other, and in the middle of the book, they meet" (2010, "Will Grayson, Will Grayson"). Notably, John also posts a video in which he and David Levithan learn that the book would be published, each on one end of a three-way phone call with

publishers, and celebrate the news with cheers and dancing (“November 19th: HOORAY HOORAY HAPPY HOORAY”). In this way, John not only models the collaborative writing practice itself, but reinforces the pleasure, the excitement, the underlying value of collaborating with friends and colleagues over the shared writing experiences.

Facilitating Community Projects

In a manner similar to social reading, the Vlogbrothers not only model social writing and collaboration but further promote the practice within their fan community by celebrating collaborative efforts undertaken by the Nerdfighters and crafting opportunities for them to participate in community-oriented projects. The most well-known of these collaborate projects is the Project for Awesome, an annual YouTube-based fund-raising event that involves posting videos in support of favorite charities, and then “liking” the videos, commenting videos, and liking comments on other people’s charity videos (a form of social writing). Other well-known community collaborative projects that involve social writing but are largely conceptual, like the Evil Baby Orphanage: an on-going philosophical theory, initially proposed by a Nerdfighter in comments, explored in detail across different Nerdfighter forum platforms, discussed by the Vlogbrothers over the course of a dozen dedicated videos, and intimated as possible fodder for a young adult novel that never came to pass. Yet over the first six years, various other projects, however, emerged that specifically required collaborative writing as a mode of participation.

Evidence of the Vlogbrothers’ support for collaborative writing projects can be seen in the frequency and enthusiasm with which they speak about what the Nerdfighters are doing. Often these projects evolve on forums and find their impetus in Vlogbrothers’ videos, like the search for the lost library of Ivan the Terrible. Other projects are initiated by the Nerdfighters and are then promoted by the Vlogbrothers in their videos. For example, in 2010, John draws

attention to a collaborative writing project on Nerdfighting itself: “so Hank, there are a bunch of made-of-awesome Nerdfighters who are trying to put together a book that will be a guide to Nerdfighting, with definitions of Nerdfighter language and stories from Nerdfighteria and artwork and all kinds of stuff. I think it’s a really cool idea to try to crowdsource a book, Nerdfighters, so if you are interested in helping: guidetonerdfighting.com. Link in the dooblydoo” (“The Fox Hat IS REAL, but Are Zombies People?”). Here John not only praises the effort, but simultaneously recruits participants. Notably, this crowdsourced book develops not as a printed text but, like many fan products, as an online text that involves a variety of media formats, including illustrations and hyperlinks. The project thus requires both literacy skills and a working knowledge of Nerdfighter lore for full participation, a feature of nearly all collaborative projects within the community.

Some of the most notable collaborative writing experiences not only result from the Vlogbrothers’ urging but are also coordinated by them. Over several months between the end of 2009 and early 2010, for example, John coordinates the recreation of one of his favorite childhood early reader books, *Gus Has No Fuzz*. The project initially operates as a challenge from John to the Nerdfighters to find a print copy, which they eventually do despite the “significant hurdle” of being given the wrong title; John originally gives them the title *Gus Is a Bug* (2010, “GUS HAS NO FUZZ!”). At the same time, however, John also suggests that the Nerdfighters collaborate on recreating the text as an alternative to finding it:

We know the text, we just need the pictures. So Nerdfighters, if you don't want to get in on the project of finding a copy of "Gus Is A Bug," you can get in on the project of making "Gus Is A Bug." All you need to do is draw one or more pictures based on the text I am about to read you, and then upload your pictures to the Ning - link in the sidebar - and then I will be able to reconstitute this amazing experience from my childhood” (2009, “Gus Is A Bug”).

The resulting collaboration then unfolds over a series of phases, manifesting in written text, image, video, and audio forms, across a variety of community-specific spaces. John recites the original text out loud in the first video and provides the written text; Nerdfighters then replicate the text in written and visual form, adding their own illustrations. John eventually presents the finish new book in video form, reading the text as Nerdfighter illustrations appear on the screen.



Image 6.10 An illustration from Nerdfighter co-created picture book, from “GUS HAS NO FUZZ” (2010)

Notably, in presenting this collaboratively created video-picture book, John gives writing credit to the Nerdfighters, introducing it as “Gus Is a Bug” by Nerdfighteria; he then notes that he “like[s] it even more than the original” and that it will function as his first baby’s “introduction to the awesomeness of Nerdfighteria.” That the project is ultimately credited to the Nerdfighters reinforces collaborative writing as a community practice and promotes participation as a community value. At the same time, John facilitates a collaborative writing project embedded in print culture yet operating within a digital space; the project bridges video and print-based media platforms and replicates the transmedia practices in which the community participates more broadly.

Another notable collaborative writing project is the Omnictionary, a project that not only crosses boundaries between printed text and online media, but also shifts from the Vlogbrothers' to the Nerdfighters' as primary content creators. The concept of the Omnictionary found its inspiration in John's novel *Paper Towns*, in which it operates as a fictional version of the online crowd-sourced Wikipedia. In celebration of the novel's publication, Hank buys the internet domain omnictionary.com, and the brothers jointly decide to "do something interesting with it" (2008, "Three Things"). In describing that "something interesting," John initially explains their effort this way: "Hank and I have been working on a semi-secret project which is kind of like a wiki, only instead of being about facts, it's about lies." He then goes on to describe the on-going project as one in which he and Hank "wrote a story that was entirely different from Paper Towns. And also a story that doesn't really have a beginning, a middle, or an end." In this way, the writing project begins as something entirely conceived by John and broadens to include contributions from both John and Hank. At the same time, the project notably finds its impetus in an intersection of print, instantiated fiction (John's novel) and digital, hyperlinked nonfiction (Wikipedia).

In this same video, then, John actively turns control of this project over to his fans, asking them to pick up where he and Hank have left off. He describes his intention this way:

In the same way Wikipedia is a user-created encyclopedia, omnictionary.com can become a kind of user-created novel. Readers of Omnictionary will pick how they read it in the same way we choose how we read Wikipedia. And instead of being written by one person, it will be written by everybody."

He then concludes the video: "now I am officially opening up Omnictionary to the world. You can re-write the story as you see fit. If you're like me, and you're always looking for new and interesting ways to read and be read by other writers, this seems like a pretty jokes opportunity."

In this way, the project ultimately subverts both traditional narratives and the conventions of the

online encyclopedia from which it gets its inspiration. The Omnictionary thereby functions as a collaborative writing practice that necessitates advanced levels of literacy, even as it reinforces the practice of print-based writing and editing. At the same time, the project subverts the power of the traditional author by conceding control of the story over not only to another writer, but from that writer to another, and so on. That the power shifts from adult author to young adult community-based authorship likewise reinforces the empowerment model at the core of Nerdfighteria-focused projects.

Within two weeks, John posts another video, in which he notes that: “a lot of interesting stuff is happening on omnictionary.com, where Nerdfighters are using the form of a wiki wiki wookie to write a novel” (2008, “The Dread Pirate Fireball Roberts! (And Housekeeping)”). Notably in promoting the project across both videos, he uses phrases that are inside jokes for the Nerdfighters: “a pretty jokes opportunity” and “wiki wiki wookie”; within the community, “jokes” means awesome, and the wiki phrase harkens back to a series of videos in which John and Hank disagree over the proper pronunciation of “wiki”. These phrases more fully ground the Omnictionary project in the Nerdfighter folksonomy.

The project ultimately fails though. Omnictionary.com as a domain no longer functions, and its reference page on johngreenbooks.com is gone. Intriguingly, the “omnictionary” entry in the online Urban Dictionary still exists, however, and its creation is credited to Margo Roth Spiegelman, the main character of the novel *Paper Towns*; the online entry, in turn, functions as a clue similar to the kind left by Margo in the novel’s fictional omnictionary, and connects the novel to its later film adaptation. In this way, though the collaborative effort itself never fully succeeds, the remnants provide evidence of the Vlogbrothers’ continued practice of transmedia, cross-platform content creation that requires in-depth knowledge of Nerdfighter fan-culture.

Like the book clubs, these projects ultimately reach varying degrees of success, with short-term, focused projects, like Gus the Bug, succeeding more clearly than broad-reaching, long-term projects like guidetonerdfighting.com and the Omnictionary. Notably, those projects left largely in the hands of the Nerdfighters with less direct input and management from the Vlogbrothers also fail more readily, providing evidence of the influential role of the Vlogbrothers on participation. Still, what's essential about these community projects is less their success than their very existence. In creating the opportunities for participation and crafting the spaces in which Nerdfighters could collaborate, the Vlogbrothers overtly promote collaboration as a desirable practice and a community value. Indeed, even when the projects fail, they become part of the broader Nerdfighter community folklore and a self-reinforcing element of the Nerdfighter identity. To participate in collaborative projects requires knowledge of Nerdfighters lore and culture and to participate stands as sign of being a Nerdfighter; in turn, the projects themselves contribute to that lore and culture, becoming fodder for future inside jokes, scavenger hunts, and other references. In this way, collaboration and social writing are functionally tied to the Nerdfighter fan-identity and stand as essential social practices for the Nerdfighter community.

CHAPTER SEVEN: PERSONAL ENGAGEMENT IN A COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Introduction

As noted in the introduction of the previous chapter, the Vlogbrothers' print literacy practices, as performed in their videos, serve as models for the Nerdfighter fan-community. Their videos thus work to promote a shared participation in those practices, to construct shared community literacy values, and to inform the emerging Nerdfighter literate identity. By continuing to explore more aspects of the connection between Vlogbrothers' performed literacy practices and Nerdfighter community literacy values, this chapter builds on the work started in the previous chapter. Its overall purpose is therefore to address different aspects of the same research question:

RQ2: How do the Vlogbrothers' personal literacy practices inform and construct fan-community values and practices? How do they use the online video context to communicate those values and to establish a community in which young people can learn and participate in those practices?

Yet while the previous chapter explored social and interpersonal manifestations of literacy practices, this chapter focuses on the values of personal engagement with books and reading and on literacy practices related to the expression of that personal engagement. It specifically examines how the Vlogbrothers model and promote a personal relationship between reader and book – both the physical book itself and its narrative and characters – that manifests in three ways: emotional engagement, creative engagement, and intellectual engagement. At the same time, the chapter places these forms of personal engagement within the broader context of Nerdfighter fan community practices. This survey of practices, in turn, provides the foundation

for analyzing reading and writing within the Nerdfighter community as simultaneously personal and social, a form of literacy participation that is individuated but not isolated.

In exploring the three-fold manifestation of personal engagement with books and reading, this chapter draws specific attention to practices that embody and illustrate emotional, creative, and intellectual forms of engagement, while also considering points of intersection between the three forms. I begin the chapter by considering emotional engagement as an extension of the Vlogbrothers' and Nerdfighters' shared reader-fan identity. As part of this, I highlight examples of emotional attachment to the book as a physical object, one that allows the reader to take pleasure in ownership and display or to invoke as an object of play. I then follow the personal fan response from emotional to creative engagement, tracing how a sense of ownership over the story and a love of story-worlds and characters feeds an imaginative response. Finally I consider how the Vlogbrothers employ a form of reading instruction that allows imaginative response to inform intellectual engagement, meaning-making, and understanding, first of narrative and then of the world and other people. I then conclude by outlining how they construct the value of reading as social and global embedded in the personal and promote reading as an act of empathy that allows readers to "imagine others complexly," the ultimate Vlogbrothers and Nerdfighter community value directive.

"Nerds are allowed to love stuff": Valuing Emotional Engagement

In affirming the deeply personal relationship between the reader and the text, the Vlogbrothers echo the value and importance of book fandoms noted in the previous chapter. As part of this, they again acknowledge and celebrate the overlap between the reader identity and the fan identity that includes the Vlogbrothers themselves. Yet in modeling forms of personal, rather than community-focused, forms of engagement, they also construct within this overlap a

parallel with the nerd identity that allows the reader to emerge as simultaneously both fan and nerd (i.e., Nerdfighter). A common community identity of reader-as-fan-as-nerd, in which a nerd is defined in part as the most knowledgeable and emotionally connected version of a fan, thereby finds expression in both implicit and overt displays of emotion. In their videos, the Vlogbrothers promote this mode of personal engagement as a common personal practice and an underlying Nerdfighter community value by posting videos of their own personal responses and drawing attention to the emotional reactions of Nerdfighters. In this section, I therefore trace the emerging relationship between readership and the fan-nerd identity and consider how each manifests in personal practices related to books and reading, including ownership and display of books.

Performing the Reader as Fan as Nerd

As part of the process of modeling the reader-as-fan-as-nerd, the Vlogbrothers establish all three as inherent parts of their personal identity. Notably, while they do not overtly state their reader identity (as discussed in chapter 4) and rarely lay claim orally to their fan identity (as discussed in chapter 6), they readily and repeatedly own to being nerds and, of course, to being Nerdfighters (nerd identity). John Green is especially prone to make this claim. In 2007, for example, he posts a video with the title, “Oct. 30th: My Name is John Green. And I’m a Nerd,” in which he defends his nerd credentials. In fact, John calls himself a nerd so often in that first year that he remarks on it in a video near the end of 2007: “it occurs to me that over the course of this year-long project, I’ve talked a lot about what a nerd I am and what a Nerdfighter I am and how awesome it is to be a nerd” (November 21st: What I’m Grateful For”). Hank, meanwhile, spends less time actively advocating his nerd identity, though he does at one time overtly claim the identity of Magic the Gathering nerd, noting in the process of explaining the complex rules of the game, “it’s really very complicated. When I say complicated, I mean nerdy” (2007, “March

14: Becoming a NerdFighter”). In this way, Hank draws attention to the nerd identity as something not just claimed but something embedded in certain activities and practices, like enjoying complicated, text-based games. Hank is therefore less likely to need to defend his nerd identity, as he regularly performs practices typical of nerd culture (e.g., reading science fiction and fantasy literature, being a professional science blogger, hosting the educational YouTube channel *SciShow*).

Both brothers ultimately perform their nerd identity on a regular basis, though, often drawing attention to personal practices as embedded in nerd culture. Hank, for example, posts videos in which he shares “nerd jokes,” while John revels in creating anagrams, “the champagne of nerd humor” (2008, “SETTING THE QUESTION TUESDAY WORLD RECORD”; 2011, “31 Jokes for NERDS!”; 2010, “October 22nd: The Anniversary of Young Earth Creationism”). They also frequently comment on their nerdy appearance, particularly in reference to their glasses, and share pictures of themselves as apparently nerdy children and teens. In a 2011 video, meanwhile, about an upcoming livestreaming event in which both brothers would be participating, Hank notes that they “are going to be talking about, you know, well, nerdy things,” and gives the following examples: “John’s gonna read nineteenth century poetry, and I’m gonna talk about theoretical physics, and we’re gonna browse Reddit together, and we’re gonna read books and play songs” (“Live on YouTube”). In this way, the Vlogbrothers associate the nerd identity with specific, sometimes conventional, topics and practices, like understanding theoretical physics and browsing Reddit. At the same time, they broaden the term to include interest in and knowledge of otherwise socially marginalized subjects, like nineteenth century poetry. Notably, by including reading books and poetry within the scope of their “nerdy things,”

the Vlogbrothers also implicitly connect reading practices and nerd culture and, by extension, the nerd identity and the reader identity.

In other videos over the course of the first six years of their channel, the Vlogbrothers reinforce this implied connection between their mutually-held reader identities and their nerd identities. For example, John once notes that his weekend activities including “being a gigantic nerd and spending the entire weekend reading about James Usher and his chronology” (2010, “October 22nd: The Anniversary of Young Earth Creationism”). In a later video, titled “Fitness for Nerds” (2010), John jokingly performs a series of exercises involving a combination of physical books, general references to reading, and knowledge based in nerd/fan reading culture:

I need you to get big books! I have, from one hand, *Infinite Jest* and a biography of Mark Twain, and for my other hand, the *Norton Shakespeare*. You get the books down at the sides, and up, yes! You are Bruce Wayne, except you are Batman because your cape is out! This is the posture for the cape. And you hold it...Books are beautiful for reading, and they're also beautiful for holding! Hold it!...You are Bruce Wayne! Yes. You are a billionaire, you are super-strong, and you are going to bring vigilante justice to your entire city. Hold it!...I know it hurts a little bit. If it doesn't hurt, your books aren't big enough...Alright! Make sure the books, you got a nice, tight grip on the books. And up!

Though the mocking tone and visual performance here mark the exercise aspect of the video as ultimately farcical, the spoken content reveals not only an assumption of common fan-culture knowledge of comic books within the Nerdfighter audience but also an implied understanding that nerds own “big books” that are “beautiful for reading.” Hank, meanwhile, commonly connects his love of reading science fiction and fantasy literature to his being nerd, as seen in the following exchange from a video titled, “Nerds at the Beach: A REUNION VIDEO” (2012) which features both brothers on a shared family vacation:

Hank (reading in a beach chair under an umbrella at the beach): Hi John
John: What're you reading?
Hank: Endymion.
John: Nerrrrd.
Hank: Yeah.

The playful tone of the conversation undercuts the mocking tone with which John calls Hank a “nerrrrd,” especially since by 2012, the informed audience would be well aware of the Vlogbrothers inherent pride in and defense of the nerd identity. In this way, then, the videos provide evidence of the Vlogbrothers’ own shared identity of reader-as-nerd, while simultaneously validating it for their fan community and establishing as one shared within that community.

A parallel connection between the fan identity and the nerd identity is likewise implied by videos in which the Vlogbrothers overtly define and defend the nerd identity, especially in the context of the Nerdfighter fan community. As noted in the introductory chapter, for example, the lyrics to the initial Nerdfighter theme song celebrate the innate power that comes from a Nerdfighter’s position as the ultimate fan:

We've got D&D and Star Wars drones.
(They're in the original box too, which makes them a lot more valuable)
Nerd Fighters. We're fighting nerds!
We're no longer just using our words.
(Although, by and large we are really articulate, so...)
When I'm not watching Battlestar Galactica
I'm designing weapons that will kick your ass-tica!

Relatedly, in an oft-quoted 2009 video about the function of the word ‘nerd’ as an insult, John celebrates an implied nerd-fan correlation:

Nerds like us are allowed to be unironically enthusiastic about stuff...Nerds are allowed to love stuff, like jump-up-and-down-in-the-chair-can't-control-yourself love it. Hank, when people call people nerds mostly what they're saying is "you like stuff" which is just not a good insult at all, like, "you are too enthusiastic about the miracle of human consciousness." (“Harry Potter Nerds Win at Life”)

The nerd identity thus emerges not only as the ultimate manifestation of the fan, but also as one grounded in a deeply held emotional response. To be a reader-as-fan-as-nerd is therefore to indulge in a personal engagement with stories and characters that exists outside broader social pressure for ironic or critical distance. Instead, the reader-as-nerd-as-fan has permission to revel

in their emotional attachment and express that emotional engagement as passionately and actively as they want. Not surprisingly, this quote resonates with the reader-fan-nerd self-identifying audience and is quickly taken up as a rallying cry within the community, refashioned into fan-art by Nerdfighters, and even quoted in a speech by self-identifying nerd celebrity Wil Wheaton.

Notably, this defense of the fan-as-nerd is itself embedded in a broader permission to be a nerd and to take pride in being a nerd that dates back to the earliest days of the Vlogbrothers' YouTube channel. In a quote from early 2007, John makes one of his first of many defenses of the nerd identity, one that is echoed in the later, more well-known defense:

Why is being a nerd bad? Saying 'I notice you're a nerd' is like saying, 'hey, I notice that you'd rather be intelligent than be stupid, that you'd rather be thoughtful than be vapid, that you believe that there are things that matter more than the arrest record of Lindsay Lohan. ("July 27: How Nerdfighters Drop Insults")

Here the defense of the nerd identity is grounded not in fandom or purely emotional engagement but in a kind of emotional intelligence, a thoughtfulness, that likewise informs the Vlogbrothers' construction of the reader's intellectual engagement with books. The nerd is ultimately both intelligent and thoughtful; the reader-as-nerd is both intellectually engaged and empathetic, an alternative mode of engagement discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Practicing the Emotional Response

For the sake of considering the value of emotional engagement as promoted by the Vlogbrothers and commonly held within the Nerdfighter community, it is therefore useful to note that the unified reader-as-fan-as-nerd identity ultimately gives community members permission to express an emotional response to books, stories, and characters. The Vlogbrothers both model and promote this practice by posting videos in which they perform emotional responses in both spoken content and visual elements. The video in which John makes his well-loved defense of

nerds, for example, also features John's own "can't control yourself" excitement about seeing the film adaptation of the final Harry Potter novel. In the video, John bounces up and down in his chair while enthusing in a sing-song voice: "I am so excited about the Harry Potter movie! I get to see Luna Lovegood, and I'm gonna cry at the end!" (2008, "Harry Potter Nerds Win At Life"). Sadly, the audio-visual impact of this moment cannot be captured with a static screenshot, but to viewers of the video, John's almost childlike enthusiasm is clearly conveyed. While his response here is technically to a film not a book, both his excitement and his predicted emotional response are grounded in his emotional attachment to book-based narratives and characters (i.e., Luna Lovegood) and his knowledge of the book content (i.e., he knows he will cry at the end), especially since the emotional moment being recounted occurs before he has actually seen the film.

Another notable example of John's performance of emotional engagement with books can be seen in a 2010 video, titled "GEEKING OUT Over Dying Declarations." The video features John sharing a recently acquired reference book about the last words of various famous people: "Guess what came in the mail! Guess what came in the mail! Did you guess that it's the gigantic dictionary of last words of famous people? Because if not, you guessed wrong! Oh my god, oh my god, oh my g-o-o-od!" He then spends the rest of the video reading giddily reading examples from the book, interspersed with other famous quotes he recites from memory. The intensity of his excitement is reflected in visual performative elements as well, especially when he squeals the final exclamations:



Image 7.1 John “geeks out” over his newest book acquisition, from “GEEKING OUT Over Dying Declarations.”

The emotional impact of this performance is, in fact, so clear that in transcribing the spoken-word content for the fan archive nerdfighteria.info, the anonymous interpreter transcribes the entire speech in all capital letters within minimal punctuation to reflect the tone and speed of the high pitched, increasing fast recitation.

John himself even comments on the intensity of his own emotional engagement in the video, noting “I’m shy in real life, but when I’m in my basement alone with the video camera on I ...sometimes geek out,” and later:

I’m not going to lie to you, Hank, last night I stayed up ‘til three in the morning reading this. I mean, don’t get me wrong, Hank, I enjoyed the *Hunger Games* trilogy, but did it keep me on the edge of my seat like Last Words of Notable People? No way! Sarah kept saying “Turn off the light,” and I would be like “Sarah, did you know that the last words of Archimedes were?”

In this way, he simultaneously performs an emotional engagement with book content and draws attention to that engagement as something specifically personal rather than social. This mode of engagement finds expression in solitude, in his basement or bedroom, in contrast to his public self, and in opposition to his wife’s sleeping or other people’s response to popular texts like *The Hunger Games*.

The video also reflects John's personal values in the specific examples he chooses to share. Not surprisingly, he shares the last words of other authors like Robert Frost and William Faulkner, and in line with his other "nerdy" interests in history and science, he shares the last works of Benjamin Franklin and Richard Feynman. Yet he also shares the last words of classic film star Douglas Fairbanks. These selections, taken as a group, reflect the underlying problematic relationship that John personally has with the idea of celebrity culture, referenced in Chapter Four. While John was overtly, caustically dismissive of a fan's possible interest in and knowledge of Lindsey Lohan's arrest record in a video quoted earlier, here he performs a similarly nosy, almost morbid fascination with and knowledge of the dying declarations of other famous people, including movie stars. John's personal engagement with the content of this specific book thus conveys not only his personal practices but also his personal fandoms and personal cultural values.

In contrast, Hank's videos are less likely to feature emotional performances but just as likely to reference a personal emotional attachment to and engagement with books and reading. In response to being asked if he enjoys science fiction, for example, Hank replies, "yes, yes, yes, yes. Yesyesyesyesyes" (2007, "Brotherhood 2.0: February 16th"). He also admits in his videos to becoming so involved in a story that he stays up all night reading. Often these confessions coincide with emotionally laden comments, like when in response to finishing M.T. Anderson's *Feed*, he desperately repeats: "I don't want Wikipedia in my brain. I don't want Wikipedia in my brain. I don't want a Wikipedia brain" (2007, "Jun 5th: S-S-S-Somethin From the Forum"). Notably, his broader response to the novel manifests as both emotional and intellectual; he intellectually appreciates the underlying social/global implications of the novel, even as it scares him.

Finally, like John, Hank regularly makes statements about liking a book, loving a book, or being excited about a book's imminent release. One prominent example of this is "Accio Deathly Hallows," his fan-song in anticipation of the release of the final novel in the Harry Potter series. While the song has already been discussed in the context of Hank's identity as reader and fan, it is essential and fitting to note that the song, its lyrics and creation, are grounded in Hank's emotional response to the other novels that feed his excitement and anticipation. The lyrics then include references to anger over having to wait for its release, fear over possible plot outcomes, and sadness that the series as a whole is coming to an end:

...Mostly I'm just feelin' sad
I know this could end real bad but
I wish it didn't have to end at all
Yeah I wish it didn't have to end at all.

In this way, the song also functions as an example of personal emotional engagement finding expression in creative fan responses, an alternative mode of engagement discussed in more detail below. That the song reaches viral level of popularity, both generally and specifically with the Nerdfighters, likewise suggests that this level of emotional engagement with narratives and characters is recognized and shared with other readers, a common personal reading practice and value.

Hank's emotional engagement with the Harry Potter series and specifically its final book is reinforced by a later video after the book ultimately arrives. As Hank describes in his related video, "Katherine [his wife] opened the box and then I took the book out of the box and then there was a long silence in which I held the book tightly and Katherine looked directly into my eyes" (2007, "July 24: More Harry Potter?!"). This emotionally fraught scene depicts the moment in terms commonly associated with moments of emotional intimacy between romantic partners, in this case romantic partners who notably share a passion for the same books. Yet the

moment simultaneously intimates possible conflict over possession of the book itself, stemming for a mutual deeply-held desire to read the book immediately and first. The event ultimately resolves itself with a shared reading experience in which Hank and Katherine read the book at the same time, positioning the act of reading again as a moment of intimacy between romantic partners. In this way, emotional engagement with books, stories, and characters emerges as a core facet of a personal reader identity that reinforces social and interpersonal bonds.

The deep personal relationship between reader, book, story, and character also emerges a part of the shared reader identity within the Nerdfighter community more broadly. The Vlogbrothers, in turn, celebrate the value of this relationship by posting videos in which Nerdfighters excitedly claim ownership of books, display their books, dance with their books, hug their books, cry over their books, and other emotionally laden moments. Videos described in the *Paper Towns* exemplar at the beginning of the previous chapter include some examples of this, including the following quote from one of the featured Nerdfighters: “It’s Paper Towns, bitch. Aaaah, it’s so good! Maybe if I rub it on my face, I’ll live forever! I’m not one to cry for fictional characters and events, but I did cry at the end of this book, which doesn’t mean the ending is unhappy” (2008, “What Did You Think of Paper Towns!”). Another video, meanwhile, draws attention to Nerdfighters’ own awareness of the power of an emotional response to narrative and characters; John posts a clip from a video titled “Fictional Characters: Emotional Pain?” by YouTuber lindseythenerdiest in which she “rants about romanticizing fictional characters,” stating “here’s what I’m thinking: the surest way to get anyone hooked on a new book or movie or TV series is to make them fall in love with a character” (2011, “NERD FACTOR”). That John not only features the clip but also gives the source video fourth place in a Nerdfighter video competition simultaneously establishes the argument she makes as one to be

valued by the community and reinforces the connection between nerds, readers, and emotional engagement with characters and narratives.

Other featured emotional responses are not connected with fandom of book content, narratives, and character, but they do connect with books and Vlogbrothers fandom generally. Hank, for example, posts a video that includes a lengthy clip of a Nerdfighter's YouTube video, in which she gains ownership of a copy of Maureen Johnson's novel *Girl at Sea* that had been signed by John Green. Hank describes the clip and the source video this way:

There was a young Nerdfighter in Indianapolis, Indiana who went to get that book you signed, and she recorded her experience, and she was very excited...I want to say that I am in no way making fun of her. I'm a little bit in awe of her actually... You may want to turn down your speakers a little bit. (2008, "Marion the Nerdfighter")

The clip itself is a highly edited selfie video of the referenced Nerdfighter driving to the bookstore, looking for book, and ultimately celebrating her ownership. The breathless exhilaration on display in the video has been reinforced by the editing process, in which the creator increases the number of times she rapidly repeats certain phrases:

"Sorry if the camera's shaking, but right now I'm like speeding to Half Price Books to try and pick up, um, the book that John Green just showed he was signing that Maureen Johnson book, and I'm going to try and get there. I can't remember, I can't remember, I can't remember the alphabet. I can't remember, I can't remember, I can't remember the alphabet. Wait. Wait. Wait-wait-wait-wait-waitwaitwaitwait-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-wait. Oh my god oh my god oh my god! Aaaahhh! Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god! Aaaahhh! Oh my oh my oh my aaaahhhh! Oh my god oh my god oh my god! Aaaahhh! Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god! Aaaahhh! Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god! I got it! I got it! I got it! I got it! I can't believe I got it! I got it! I got it! I got it! I got it! I can't believe I got aaaaahhhh! I got it! I got it! I got it! I got it! I can't believe I got it! I got it! I got it! I got it! I got it! I got it! I got it! I can't believe I got aaaaahhhh! Yah yah yahyahyah! Aaaahhh aaaahh aaaahhh! Is that really your signature? Aaaahh! Is that really-is that really-is that really your signature? It's like J... J scribble. Aaaahh! J... J scribble. Aaaahhh! J... J scribble. J scribble. J scribble. J scribble. K bye"

The end result is a nearly incomprehensible but utterly honest celebration of book ownership and Vlogbrothers' fandom that epitomizes the "can't control yourself" unironic enthusiasm that John

denotes as the hallmark of the reader-as-fan-as-nerd. That both the video and the actions taken within it were done in response to the content of one of John's videos, in which he goes to a local Indianapolis bookstore and signs a novel by friend Maureen Johnson, then serves to reinforce that emotional response as one found in knowledgeable and engaged viewers of their channel, (i.e., Nerdfighters). At the same time, the video signifies the underlying community value that owning books is exciting.

Loving, Owning, and Displaying Physical Books

In featuring Nerdfighters' excitement over the possession of books, the Vlogbrothers' promote not only the value of being emotionally engaged with reading and book content but also the emotional value to be found in owning books and the practice of being emotionally engaged with physical books. Evidence of an underlying pride in owning books and the centrality of that pride in ownership to their vlogger identity can be seen in the regularity with which bookshelves serve backdrops for their videos. Yet books do not just serve as static stage pieces. The Vlogbrothers also frequently post videos in which they enjoy interacting with books as physical objects: holding them up, showing the covers, pointing at the titles, showing off specific pages or author signatures, etc.



Image 7.2 John shows the cover of one of his books, from “Brotherhood 2.0: February 23, 2007: Books”

Other instances of this kind of physical interaction feature the brothers engaging with books playfully as part of a game or general instance of silliness: sniffing them, using them as weights, conversing with characters on the covers, etc. These instances, in turn, allow the physical book to emerge as an object of creative play, a form of creative engagement discussed in more detail in the next section.

Notably, as part of their essential delight in the physicality of books, the Vlogbrothers post videos in which they draw attention to the book’s manifestation as a material object. John, for example, explains why blank pages in a physical book result from the process of book manufacturing or how the loose sheets of paper he signs will eventually become part of the first edition of *The Fault in Our Stars*. In fact, much attention is paid in videos from 2011 about the entire first edition of *The Fault in Our Stars* being signed; yet ebook versions would obviously not be, in which case a true reader-fan (i.e. Nerdfighter) would find more emotional enjoyment in a physical copy rather than a digital one. In other videos, John answers questions from Nerdfighters about his books’ various covers, drawing attention to “all the shoes and feet on the foreign editions of [his] books” and playfully chatting with either sad or happy Margo on the

variant covers of *Paper Towns* (2011, “Question Tuesday! Paula Deen Riding Me (and critical reading)”). All of these videos ultimately serve to value the physical book over other media formats, especially ebooks, which might include an image of a book’s cover but typically do not open with it.

Even Hank, who is the brother more likely to embrace new and digital technologies, overtly values physical books over digital formats. In discussing the imminent release of the first iPad, for example, he ponders the potential impact of this new technology on reading and ultimately concludes that despite being an early adopter of e-readers himself, “there are a couple of reasons why books are always going to be better than e-readers” (2010, “The iPad and Dolphin Murder”). His reasons are notably grounded in the book’s physicality: “Here’s one reason. Imagine that this is an iPad. [holds up a physical book] You’re not going to do this to an iPad.” At which point he hits the book with a hammer.



Image 7.3 Hank hits a book with a hammer, from “The iPad and Dolphin Murder”

He doesn’t explain why anyone would hit a book with a hammer either, yet the visual image certainly draws attention to the book as more difficult to damage or destroy. More understandably, he likewise notes the superiority of the physical book format for a specific kind

of reading: “I also like the flippability of books, especially non-fiction, where I can be like, ‘oh what was that thing that I was reading last chapter, oh yeah yeah yeah yeah there it is.’” He then concludes his analysis with this observation: “I also like this about books: the battery life on this thing kicks ass.” In this way, the superiority of physical books over digital formats is grounded in their materiality, their physical indestructability, their flippability, each of which connects to a specific form of personal reading practice. Physical books in turn emerge as objects with value and importance distinct from their narrative or informational content and ultimately as objects worthy of a fan’s emotional engagement all their own.

In performing their personal relationship with physical books, the Vlogbrothers thus emerge as fans of owning books, and the practice of owning books becomes an expression of personal interest and personal fandoms. As part of this, the Vlogbrothers post videos celebrating their personal ownership practices and featuring the joy and pride that comes from those practices. In 2007, for example, John proudly estimates owning 1300 books in his New York City apartment, a number that doubles over the next six years after he moves to a house in Indianapolis with a dedicated library/office. In that initial year, he draws repeated attention to the sheer size of his book collection, especially while he and his wife are in the process of moving; he faux-complains frequently about the challenge of packing and moving “all these books!” and features numerous shots of stacked boxes full of books (“Brotherhood 2.0: April 24: Moving”). He likewise admits, “it is very hard for me, however, to get rid of books or to moderate the number of books that I have,” even in the face of realizing that he will likely never read many of them again and that having so many makes it hard for him to find specific books (“Brotherhood 2.0: February 23, 2007: Books”). In this way, ownership of books emerges as a source of pleasure and pride again distinct from informational or narrative content.

Amusingly, he also posts videos in which he happily acquires more books. In 2007, for example, he films a video at the New York Book Expo and narrates: “Hank, you wanna know the great thing about Book Expo?...Free books! Free books everywhere. You can take as many as you’d like. As long as you are subtle about it. [Fellow young adult author Scott Westerfeld slyly snatches a stack of five books]” (“Brotherhood 2.0: June 4th: The First Nerdfighter Wedding”). In a later video, he similarly describes the American Library Association conference “book nerd paradise” and makes parallel comments about the fun of getting free copies of books by authors he loves; this video includes a playful interaction with fellow young adult author David Levithan (2010, “Book Nerd PARADISE”). By including his fellow authors in these light-hearted videos about the fun of book acquisition, John not only establishes book ownership as a personal practice but also as a one shared with friends and colleagues; they all value book ownership and find fun in teasing themselves and each other about it.

John also displays pride in owning specific kinds of books and books on specific topics. Even as early as 2007, for example, he draws attention to his “extensive collection of books about conjoined twins” (“October 16th: John’s Library Pwns”); and again in 2010, he notes that he owns “more books about conjoined twins than there are conjoined twins. And yes, that includes if you count them separately, which you should” (“On the Separation of Conjoined Twins”). Further evidence of John’s excitement can be seen in his video about his ownership of the book collecting the last words of notable people and a related video in which he draws attention to his shelf full of “reference, reference, reference, reference. I love the quote books, you know” (2007, “October 16th: John’s Library Pwns”). In this way, John’s ownership reflects his personal interests and his emotional engagement with specific kinds of book content and reading practices.

Hank similarly admits to owning a lot of books, though he does not initially seem to share John's reluctance to get rid of books or moderate the number of books that he has. In 2007, for example, he posts a video in which he takes viewers to a used bookstore, a place he describes as "where books go when we can't fit any more books. Because we will always have this problem" ("Brotherhood 2.0: February 22nd: Where Do Books Go?"). Yet in 2009, he posts a contrasting video in which he describes books he has recently acquired, explains why he is excited about them, then recommends that his viewers should also own these books, and concludes with the underlying value statement: "you can never have too many books" ("I AM COMPUTER MAN!!!"). Taken together, however, the two videos are not essentially mutually exclusive; instead Hank's personal value system about book ownership emerges, in which a reader can never have too many new books to read and be excited about while readers should also share books they like with others by reselling them. Further evidence of this own-and-share value system can be seen in another video from 2008. In describing the books that John gave him for Christmas, Hank notes: "Neuromancer was fantastic. Maus was also fascinating and very cool, but I gave it to the used book store so that they could sell it to a new person. I liked it so much that I wanted to pass it on. THIS [holding up William Gibson's Neuromancer] I liked so much that I kinda want to read it again, so I'm going to keep it" ("Nerdfighters Blurbing Book Club"). Hank thus reinforces the common practice between the two brothers of keeping copies of books of which you are personally a fan, though his personal practice is motivated by an expressed desire to reread, in contrast to John, who keeps books regardless of his intention to reread them. In this way, book ownership, grounded in a love or liking of books, emerges as a common value, grounded in similar but discrete personal practices and mutually promoted to the broader Nerdfighter community.

In promoting book ownership as a shared Nerdfighter practice and common value, the Vlogbrothers also post clips of Nerdfighters celebrating their ownership of books, especially John's books. The montage resulting from the Paper Towns collaborative album challenge provides early evidence of this kind of excited ownership, as the video features cheering, dancing, and proudly holding up their copies. The Vlogbrothers post a similar montage video in 2012, celebrating the release of *The Fault in Our Stars*; the video includes clips of reader-fans opening their copies from the mail, dancing in book store parking lots, laughing and squealing in excitement, interspersed with the occasional spoken expressions of joy: "oh my god, I get to see it!" ("TFiOS PARTY!"). Notably, these clips also feature Nerdfighters replicating the practices of the Vlogbrothers in interacting with the physical copies of the book: displaying the covers and showing off the signatures. Additionally, the Nerdfighters comment on the color of the signature in their particular books or the presence of extra signature from Hank, John's wife, and/or Hank's wife; these comments are themselves embedded in broader knowledge of Vlogbrothers' video content, as John made several videos in which he commented on the signing process, including changing the sharpie pen color and occasionally having others to contribute their signatures. In this way, the video clips function to reinforce underlying community reader-fan practices and values: overtly reveling in the ownership of physical books in connection with fandom of John as both author and vlogger.

The Vlogbrothers' personal pride and excitement over book ownership also finds expression in the practice of organizing and displaying books that they own. As part of this, they post videos in which they display their books, and describe or provide tours of their book collections. Evidence of this practice can be seen from the earliest days of their YouTube channel as part of its initial experiment. On February 22, 2007, for example, in a video aptly

titles “Where do books go,” Hank “gives advice on what to do with too many books” (“Brotherhood 2.0: February 22nd: Where Do Books Go?”). He explores this as a personal problem that is commonly shared within the channel’s nascent viewer community: “it can become kind of difficult to find places to put all of them. I have this problem, and so does [commenter] Julia, and I would like to show Julia and the rest of our viewers how I deal with this problem.” The visual component of the video then showcases various ways books are stored and displayed throughout Hank’s house, many of which he describes as simply “random stacks in random places,” even when those stacks are in fact floating shelves.

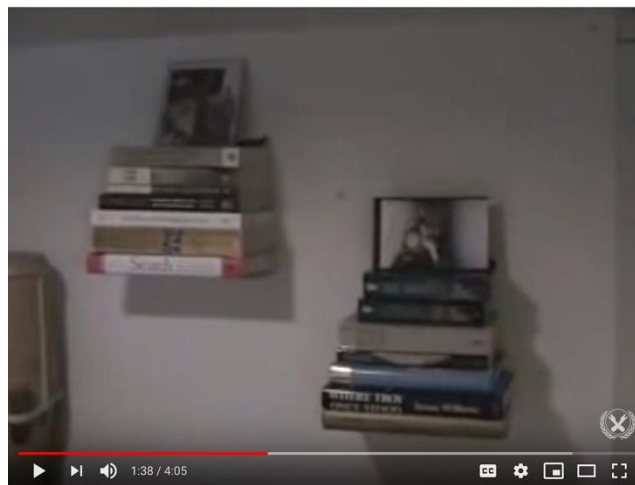


Image 7.4 Stack of Hank’s books, from “February 22, 2007: Where do books go”

Books are seen stacked in many rooms, on top of dressers and tables, and even inside closets. In this way, the tour of these various displays draws initial attention to Hank’s love of books, long before he begins vlogging in front of bookshelves, and the video thus provides early evidence of the centrality of books and book ownership to Hank’s performed identity as a reader.

Inspired by Hank’s video, John posts a video the following day titled simply “Books,” in which he “talks about books with a special guest” (“Brotherhood 2.0: February 23, 2007: Books”). The special guest is ultimately revealed to be young adult author Maureen Johnson, in

her first of many appearances in Vlogbrothers' videos, and they do talk about books briefly at the end of the video, specifically about their support of used book stores and libraries as places that provide access to their books for readers who can't afford to own them. In notable contrast to this, however, the majority of the video features a tour of John's own sizable book collection, including clips of his different bookshelves and narrated descriptions of the books on display there. Also in contrast to Hank's stacks of books, the video reveals that John's collection is displayed neatly on bookshelves, a difference he teasingly draws attention to near the conclusion of his tour: "so Hank, that's where I keep my books around the house. We don't have lots of stacks of books in random places because, whenever we need a bookshelf, we just buy one...So buy more bookshelves. Put them down there by the map of Narnia." In the way, the two videos provide further evidence of the brother's engaging in similar but individuated practices that place the same relative value on having books on display around the house.

Tours of various bookshelves eventually emerge as a standing practice within the videos, especially for John. This first instance of repeating the bookshelf tour occurs in later 2007, when John posts a video celebrating the fact that he has finished cataloguing his personal library on librarything.com. As part of this video, he admits the earlier February tour was largely an "abridged" version, underscoring the sense that his collection of book is actually larger than it first appears. This later October video, notably titled "John's Library Pwns," (2007) features a far more detailed tour of his well-organized shelves and includes at times detailed list of books on display: "we start out with poetry, Hank. You got your e.e. cummings, your Shakespeare, your Dante, your Norton Anthology of Poetry, your Dorothy Parker, etc. Then we've got reference, reference, reference, reference. I love the quote books, you know. I like almanacs. It occurs to be that on the long list of nerdy things I have said in my life, 'I like almanacs' is near

the top.” Here John again draws an overt connection between his reading practices and his nerd identity; and he does so again in a third tour of his library posted in 2010: “Hank, as you may have noticed, my library has been re-catalogued. Call me a nerd, but I love a catalogued library” (“The Fox Hat IS REAL, but Are Zombies People?”). This mention of his library being re-catalogued reminds knowledgeable viewers of the earlier video in which he enthusiastically reports that he has catalogued his library, using the New York Public Library’s *Guide to Organizing a Home Library*, which he is obviously proud and excited to both own and use. In this way, reading practices, book ownership, display, and organization, and a reader-nerd identity are inherently linked through a common performance, each in turn manifestations of emotional engagement with physical books and their content.

Unlike John, of course, Hank’s books are initially not organized, displayed instead in “random stacks in random places.” Eventually, though, he follows John’s lead about the bookshelves, and in 2008 posts a video about his books being on organized display:

“I’ve decided, hey, I can organize my personal home library the way I wanna organize my home library. So yeah, now I get, like, bookshelves behind me the way you get bookshelves behind you. You know, I never stopped wanting to be like you. Yeah, I’d take you on a tour of it, but it’s not very interesting” (“Early Voting with Hank”).

Here again the Vlogbrothers engage in similar but distinct book-related practices; Hank acknowledges copying John in the use of a book displays as a background, implicitly copies John in displaying and organizing his books on bookshelves, and even jokingly references being motivated by a desire to be like his older brother. Yet his tone and his comment about organizing his home library “the way I wanna” suggests an underlying independence from John’s specific practices; his display and his organization, like the make-up of the collection itself, would be inherently personal, a reflection of personal reading practices and interests.

This gesture towards personal practices finds expression again in another video about Hank's book displays posted the next year. In response to a question from a less-knowledgeable viewer if the two brothers are actually filming in the same room, Hank responds: "I realize that our bookshelves look remarkably similar, but if you look on John's bookshelf, you see that there's lame books like The Norton Anthology for English Literature. And if you look at my bookshelf, there's totally awesome books" (2009, "Fighting the Flame War!"). What he means by totally awesome books eventually becomes clear in 2011 when he finally posts an actual tour of his shelves: "these are all my graphic novels. My Hunger Games is currently loaned out. Down here we got Terry Pratchett books. Mars Trilogy books, Neil Gaiman books. These are all DFTBA CDs... we've got VidCon and LeakyCon programs... Here is an evil baby, with a duck on it; it's an evil baby Hitler" ("200 People in Your Pants"). Notably, Hank's display includes not just books, but also his own music and objects related to different Nerdfighter and Vlogbrothers fandoms. In this way, the display of physical books functions as a manifestation of personal practices and draws attention to Hank's pride in owning different books, even as the practice of owning and displaying books and using them as the background in their videos remains a common practice.

"Books belong to their readers": Taking Ownership Through Creative Engagement

The previous section draws specific attention to literal ownership as a manifestation of emotional engagement with books. Yet the Vlogbrothers also promote a metaphorical ownership of both books and their content, including narrative and characters, by engaging in a creative mode of engagement that involves elements of play, artistic interpretation, and adaptation. Many aspects of this mode of engagement are discussed in detail in the previous chapter as expressions of reader-fandom that the Nerdfighter community practice collectively. In this section, however,

I analyze these practices in the context of personal engagement and as a manifestation of a personal enjoyment of books and stories. As part of this, I explore creative play as something the Vlogbrothers do, not just something they encourage their fans to participate in. At the same time, I consider how their personal practices inform the creative engagement at play in the Nerdfighter community more broadly. The section also addresses how the Vlogbrothers intentionally address the relationship between original texts and fan production and issues related to adaptation and copyright as a way of curating the community values that inform creative engagement and play.

Playing with Books

One of the outcomes of owning physical books is the permission it gives for readers to play. John provides evidence of that at the end of his 2007 video about books; at the end of the video, which also featured a tour of his bookshelves and a conversation about books, used bookstores, and libraries with Maureen Johnson, John announces: “I am going to read a book with my Wii” (Brotherhood 2.0: February 23, 2007: Books”) He, then, makes a few playful attempts to use the Wii remote as a kind of magic wand with which he can compel the pages to turn, and eventually resigns himself to waving the remote over the page until the wind it creates (and his own blowing) turns the page.



Image 7.5 John uses his Wii remote to play with a book, from “February 23, 2007: Books”

Notably, his play in this video echoes the distinctions previously drawn between digital technologies and physical books and humorously reinforces the limitations of digital gaming systems in relation to reading practices; but the video also establishes physical books as objects worthy of creative play.

A particularly notable example of this kind of physical play can be found in two related videos posted early in the first year of the Vlogbrothers channel. On January 15, 2007, Hank posts a video that references his reading of Philip Gourevitch’s *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*, the book about Rwandan genocide that John recommended as part of the first Brotherhood 2.0 Book Club (discussed in the previous chapter): “so I brought the book home, and then something interesting happened” (2007, “Brotherhood 2.0: January 15”). The video then shifts to a puppet-like reenactment of a conflict between the genocide book and a copy of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*; the book about genocide is “attacked” by the Harry Potter novel, and the two books then “fight” for the reader’s attention. The comic physicality of the resulting video is difficult to render in screencaptures, but the images below give a general sense of the performative elements at work.

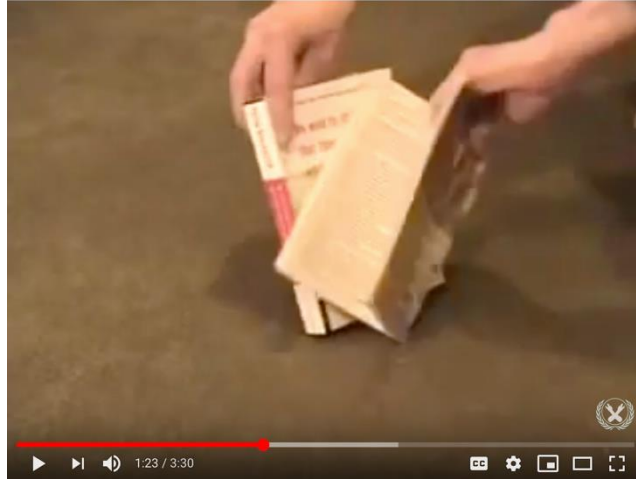


Image 7.6 Hank’s books battle for his attention, from “Brotherhood 2.0: January 15” (2007)

In the first round, the book on genocide temporarily triumphs, only to find itself facing a “crowd” of other Harry Potter novels. They end up “piling” on top of the book about genocide to create a kind of to-be-read book pile with genocide at the bottom.



Image 7.7 The battle for Hank’s attention continues, from “Brotherhood 2.0: January 15” (2007)

In this way, the books (via Hank) reenact physically the inherently abstract competition for Hank’s attention and interest. While Hank wants to read the book on genocide, he finds himself distracted by the lure of rereading Harry Potter. Notably, he ultimately gets distracted from

reading entirely by the process of creating the book fight video and playing with the physical books rather than engaging with the content.

The next day John posts a video of his own “book fight,” inspired not by any competition between books for his attention but by Hank’s playful video:

Hank, your Battle of the Books inspired me to have my own Battle of the Books, because I thought your Battle of the Books was hilarious, and then I thought maybe my Battle of the Books could be kind of like a pale imitation, and people would laugh and say, “well, it’s good but it’s not as funny as Hank’s,” and you know, that’s pretty much my goal with this thing. (“Brotherhood 2.0: January 16, 2007”)

In contrast to Hank’s video, though, which was wordless, John’s more formalized version involves a script and books-as-characters:

Round one: The American edition of *Looking for Alaska* versus the Dutch edition of *Looking for Alaska*.

(American): Hey, how’s it goin’?

(Dutch): OK, how are you?

(American): Hey, why don’t you have an accent?

(Dutch): Uh, I don’t, I don’t do accents, I think they’re weird.

(American): AAAHHHRRRAAARAARAA (pants)

(in high voice): Oh wait, no! It’s the Danish edition of *Looking for Alaska*!

Dodadoodadoodoooo!

And the British edition! Wait, are the British on the American sides? Or are they on the Dutch sides? Oh my God, they’re for Europe, not America!

At the end of the video, John ultimately concludes that his version is not only a pale imitation of Hank’s, but that it is actually personally embarrassing: “It wasn’t until I started editing that that I realized: Oh my God, I am such a loser. I can’t even bring myself to show you the Hemingway versus Faulkner one, it’s even more embarrassing.” Notably, even though John finds the end result somewhat mortifying, he still posts it. In this way, John suggests that the value is in the play itself, in the enjoyment of participating in the fun and in replicating a personal practice that someone else has shared. At the same time, the video exists as a replication that reflects personal reading and writing practices; John uses his own novels and, though unseen, novels by authors he reads and enjoys, and his creative play employs his own way of playing, (i.e., writing scripts

and playing characters). The result thus models the value of creative play that is inherently personal, even while the underlying activity is shared. That Hank’s video is ostensibly more successful, meanwhile, underscores the value of authenticity in creative play; Hank’s video is a creative response to actual engagement (or lack of engagement), while John’s is not.

This intersection of personal creative engagement and shared creative play can also be seen in examples of physical play that connect with broader fan-community games (discussed in the previous chapter). For example, the brothers use physical copies of books to play a version of “stuff on heads,” a Nerdfighter practice in which players cheer up themselves or others by literally putting a series of objects on their heads, or to play rounds of the “in my pants” game, in which the phrase “in my pants” is added to book titles for silly, bawdy, and typically amusing results. In this way, personal enjoyment of books feeds into creative play through the Nerdfighter community. A prominent example of this can be seen as part of the lengthy multiplatform, transmedia scavenger hunt, created by the Vlogbrothers and played by the Nerdfighters in the latter half of 2007. In a video describing the series of clue uncovered thus far, Hank explains:

That clue was 24.1.2.19. What the heck could that mean?! Well, somebody figured it out. In the first month of Brotherhood 2.0, on the 24th day, at the time signature 2:19, John discusses a book. That book is *The Second Coming* by Walter Percy. In that video, John also talks about how he was visiting store managers from the Borders book chain. With another deftly left hint, John indicates a Borders bookstore in Chicago near a water tower. Nerdfighters found a dollar bill inside *The Second Coming* by Walter Percy in that Borders in Chicago! (November 12th: Brotherhood Clue Point Oh!”)

Text written on that dollar bill, of course, provided the next clue. Notably, in the source video, John does not say the title or author of the reference book out loud; he only shows the cover while talking about the content. The use of this brief image as a clue reflects the centrality of the physical book both in the visual medium of YouTube and in real world games; yet is also connects Vlogbrothers personal practices, like owning books and displaying covers in their videos and sharing books they like, with Nerdfighter community fun. As in the scavenger hunt

itself, personal book-related practices inform social book-related practices, reinforcing the idea of books and reading as simultaneously personal and social, individual but not isolated.

Playing with Narrative

The Vlogbrothers also play, though with somewhat less frequency, with book content, including titles, narrative elements, and characters. Given the extent to which the Vlogbrothers actively perform a reader and a fan identity and given the centrality of creativity to their professional lives and hobbies (i.e., author and singer/song-writer), though, there is in fact much less evidence of clear creative engagement beyond a kind of playfulness. Indeed, their personal creative play manifests more as an extension of their emotional enjoyment of books than as a deeper creative engagement with stories and narrative or the more interpretive engagement usually associated with fan-art or fan-fiction.

Still, they do play creatively with book references and as a manifestation of reader knowledge. In one video, for example, John makes anagrams using his book titles, form of play as an expression of nerd identity and author identity: *Paper Towns* becomes “Pants Power,” and *Let It Snow* becomes “Stolen Wit” and “We Nit Lots” (2007, “October 22nd: The Anniversary of Young Earth Creationism”). A later video, meanwhile, features a dance party with a statue of a Black Santa and a sock puppet; the Black Santa, for the knowledgeable viewer and reader-fan, is a reference to a symbolic element of his novel *Paper Towns*, while the puppet is named “Argyle the One-Eyed Book-Reading Sock Puppet” (2009, “Puppet Santa Dance Party/Hard Times in Book Publishing”). In this way, viewers learn that even John’s toys read books, but the level of engagement with the text itself is limited, perhaps because they are his own novels. Indeed, John himself recognizes his own limited ability to engage creatively with stories and his personal preference for other modes of engagement: “yeah, I mean nothing against Black

Santa/Argyle Dance Party, but doesn't a good book offer a level of intellectual and emotional engagement that my puppetry skills do not."

Hank, meanwhile, posts a video with a far more elaborate example of play as inspired by love of a novel. In a 2010 video, filmed partially in a Target store, Hank considers the question: "who do I really admire who wears make-up?" ("Make-up Tutorial: Katniss Everdeen Look"). His answer involves both book-character fandom and play:

First thing that came to my mind was Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of *The Hunger Games*. In the opening ceremony of the Hunger Games, they talk a lot about her fashion, and she's totally into it. [Finds a copy of the book in the store and reads that section out loud] "My face is relatively clear of make-up, just a bit of highlighting here and there."

Later, while in his home office, Hank decides, "that's the look I'm going for... a cool look, nice, dark, smoky District 12 look;" he then applies make-up in an attempt to create that look.



Image 7.8 Hank applies make-up inspired by *The Hunger Games*, from "Make-up Tutorial: Katniss Everdeen Look."

The video description then notes that Hank "applys [sic] makeup in an attempt to lock down Katniss Everdeen's style at the opening ceremonies of the 74th Hunger Games. And, of course, he's screws up so much that Cinna would probably kill him for butchering it so bad." In this way, the novel reflects Hank's personal reading choices and personal fandom, with an underlying assumption of a shared fandom that would allow viewers to understand references to Katniss,

Cinna, District 12, and the Hunger Games without much context or explanation. At the same time, the video operates at the intersection of emotional and creative engagement with the story and its characters by allowing for an act of play inspired by admiration of Katniss and embedded in knowledge that comes from a fan's love of the novel. The video therefore implicitly reinforces the value of books a source of fun that find expression in creative play.

Hank is also the brother more likely to engage creatively with narratives and characters through the more interpretive and productive practice of fan-art. This personal practice finds regular expression in his various fan-songs, many of which make reference to favorite books and authors. His most well-known is, of course, his first Harry Potter song, and each year Hank celebrates both that song and his continuing love of and engagement with the Harry Potter universe by writing and singing a new song about the novels, the characters, the world, and even the fandom itself. Over time he even becomes linked with the established Wizard Rock community, a cohort made of Harry Potter fan-bands. Notably, while Hank's continued engagement with the Harry Potter fan community shifts over time to become increasingly social, as discussed in the previous chapter, his initial creative engagement with the novels as a reader-fan was a personal one, and the first song was, as noted above, an expression of his personal desire to read the final novel in the series.

Knowing John to be less likely to create works inspired by his favorite works, the Nerdfighters notably create fan-art on his behalf. For example, Nerdfighters at different times design shirts that say "Holden Caulfield Thinks You're a Phony" and "Daisy Buchanan Thinks You're a Beautiful Fool," inspired by John's frequently voiced appreciation for and intellectual engagement with the Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. John, in turn, posts videos in which he proudly displays and even wears these creative manifestations

of his own emotional and intellectual engagement. He also arranges for the shirts to be sold in the Vlogbrothers' online store, dftba.org, where the original creators keep all the profits from the sale of their products. In this way, John promotes the value of this personal practice, even though he does not necessarily participate in it himself, at least not to the degree of his fans. This practice ultimately sets him apart somewhat from his fan community, in that he is more likely to engage with texts intellectually (discussed more below), but it is still notable that he endeavors to link the three modes of engagement and promote their value equally.

Nerdfighters similarly create fan-art in response to John's books, including candy bars remade to look like the fictional candy from *Paper Towns*, a Culver Creek shirt in reference to Culver Creek Prep in *Looking for Alaska*, and even a cake that looks like the cover of *Looking for Alaska*, except in place of the phrase "a novel," it says, "a cake" (citation). John supports and promotes this practice in part because of their connection to his own personal writing practices: "it's so fun when I make something up, and then someone else makes something up about the thing I made up" (2008, "On Loving One Another or Dying"). When Nerdfighters create covers inspired by their anticipation for *The Fault in Our Stars*, John makes two separate videos featuring his favorite examples:

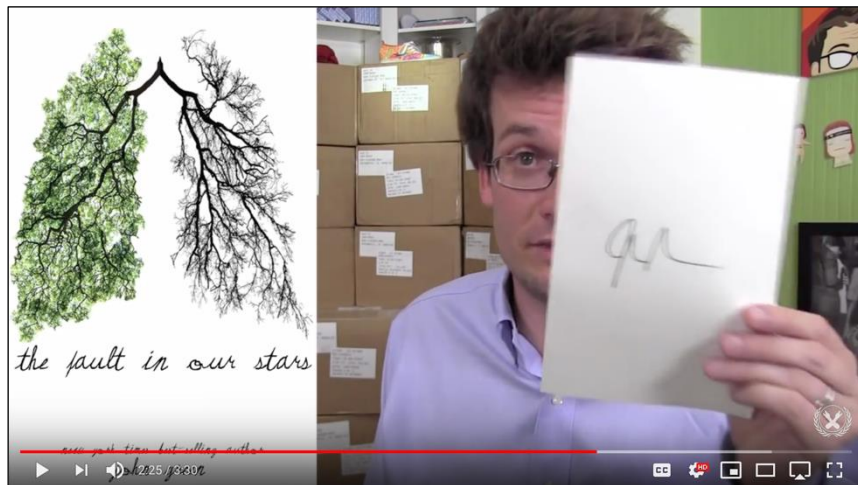


Image 7.9 A Nerdfighter-designed cover for *The Fault in Our Stars*, from "150,000 Autographs."



Image 7.10 A Nerdfighter-designed cover for *The Fault in Our Stars*, from “THE FAULT IN OUR STARS.”

These instances of fan-art are also notable, however, in that they exist at the intersection of Nerdfighters’ personal practices, John’s overt valuation of creative engagement with books, and the broader social context of the Nerdfighter community online. Notably, these particular forms of fan-art are not objects created collaboratively within the Nerdfighter community, like those described in the previous chapter; instead they are creative expressions of personal engagement with John’s stories. At times, John is not even initially aware of them: for example, the series of watercolor paintings of quotes from his books, designed by a Malaysian Nerdfighter name Mei. Yet they ultimately become embedded in the broader social context when the Nerdfighters share them on Tumblr or present them to John at various live events. John, in turn, posts videos celebrating them, drawing attention to the creativity of Nerdfighteria that these personally crafted projects represent, and in some cases making them more broadly available to the Nerdfighter community by mass producing them for purchase on the Vlogbrothers’ online store. The fan-art covers of *The Fault in Our Stars*, meanwhile, give rise to a competition to create the actual cover of the paperback re-release of John’s earlier novel, *An Abundance of Katherines*. In this way, this

kind of fan art ultimately provides insight into the underlying complexities of personal creative engagement within the broader social context of the Nerdfighter fan community.

Playing with narrative also emerges in the Vlogbrothers' videos in discussions of book adaptation as a form of fan-art and creative engagement. Both brothers do actually active engage in adaptations: John of his own novels and Hank of Jane Austen's popular novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Yet within the scope of videos posted to the Vlogbrothers' channel, they are more likely to comment on their efforts and on the nature of adaptation generally, then they are to post content in which they practice adapting works.

Hank, of course, creates an entirely new channel on which to post his *Lizzie Bennett Diaries* vlog-adaptation. That project begins in 2012, as one instance of the Vlogbrothers increasing media reach over the course of that year. Notably, he announces the project's inception as a Vlogbrothers' video (2012, "Introducing Lizzie Bennet"), implicitly embedding its initial viewership and popularity in the Nerdfighter viewer community. As part of that announcement, he claims "the work of fiction we chose was *Pride and Prejudice* because, you know, it's the best story of all time." Such is an odd claim from Hank, who by this time is an established fan of fantasy, science fiction, and nonfiction, and who has never displayed an interest in classic, realistic, or romantic stories. Despite this, Hank affirms his choice as a manifestation of personal interest and enjoyment, nothing that the novel is "such a wonderful romance and the characters evolve so much, and I'm so interested in the story" and that he "wanted something that was a great story that I loved." Not surprisingly given his previous preferences, he also admits that his knowledge and appreciation of the novel ultimately stems from his wife's influence. This confession, in turn, broadens the impact of his personal choice, grounding his creative engagement in both his wife's fandom and his emotional response to his

wife. Creative engagement therefore emerges as potentially personal, interpersonal, and collaborative at the same time.

John, meanwhile, occasionally draws attention to his novels being potentially adapted into film. As part of this, he excitedly announces when specific studios or producers have shown an interest, when he's had meetings with people who might be involved, and when he's asked to write or contribute to the screenplay. Yet he also posts videos reflecting on the challenges of adapting his novels, especially when he plays a role in the writing process. In this context, he implies that this form of creative engagement is one he struggles to practice. Many of these adaptations ultimately fall through, until 2012, when a studio begins the process of adapting *The Fault in Our Stars*. By this time, John openly acknowledges his limitations in relation to adaptation, noting: "I'll be involved in any way that I can be helpful, but I know that I'm not, like, a movie person" (2012, "Sharpie Face Question Tuesday"). Relatedly, in response to a question about his casting preferences from the same video, he admits: "I have no idea because I know nothing of contemporary actors and actresses. Like, in my mind Drew Barrymore is still seventeen-years-old. More importantly, who would you want to play Hazel and Augustus in the movie?" Notably here he shifts responsibility for visual adaptation from the author to the fan audience. He uses the adaptation as a way to draw Nerdfighters into conversation about the way that they visualize the characters and prioritizes their knowledgeable opinions over his own.

Yet John's books are not the only way that the Vlogbrothers engage with questions of book-to-film adaptation. In fact, despite his own eventual involvement in a filmic adaptation of a novel, Hank overtly questions the respective value of this kind of adaptation, especially in relation to inherent value of the source text. In 2011, for example, he reflects on the issue of adaptations this way: "so I brain-cracked this idea for like a year, and then I went to LeakyCon,

where I got re-inspired about books and adaptations and how people should read the book first” (“How to Make Ideas Real: ReadIt1st.com”). He later converts this idea into a practice: “last night, I was tweeting that I think I may stop going to see movies if I haven’t read the book first. I feel like it ruins it” (2011, “The Fair: Testacular”). In this way, Hank argues for the primacy of printed text over visual interpretations. At the same time, he implicitly models social media spaces, both YouTube and Twitter, as spaces to share personal reflections about books and reading. The success of this transmedia effort to effect practice and values is then evident in the rest of the video: “And then I got a lot of people who were agreeing with me on that, and then I made up a logo for a website called Read It 1st, and then I put that logo on my Tumblog [Tumblr blog], and then people commented on it, and then we did, like a back-and-forth.” Hank’s personal reading practice thus reflects a personal value statement related to the books, reading, and adaptation, and that value statement, broadcast socially, in turn reflects and informs a common community value that itself informs broader reading practice within the community. Notably, the underlying value statement does not undermine the value of adaptations as a creative response to popular or well-loved texts; but by arguing that books should be read before the stories are seen, Hank and the Nerdfighters ultimately prioritize the reader’s personal interpretation of the text over those created by film studios.

In contrast to Hank’s argument that films ruins books and the reading experience, John maintains that a film possesses no such power. In response to a plea from a Nerdfighter not to let a movie version of *Paper Towns* “ruin” the novel, for example, John says: “Ok, you are not going to like the way I respond to that request. First, I don’t think that they can ruin a book with a movie. Like, no matter how unconvincing Sean Penn’s Louisiana accent, *All the President’s Men* is still a great book” (2008, “The Unzipped Zipper (Of Your Pants)”). He then goes on to

reflect on the distinct differences inherent in moving from one form of storytelling to the other: “I ascribe to the belief that, in order to properly adapt a book into a film, you have to radically change, like everything about the book. Sorry!” In this way, John offers an alternative value statement in relation to the practice of adaptation, informed by the recognition of differentiating between media formats. At the same time, however, he offers an apology in simultaneous recognition of how readers, especially reader-fans, generally feel about movie adaptations; he does not want to dismiss the power and value of that emotional response. Yet John’s response is also notably similar to Hank’s in the way that it prioritizes print versions over film; a good book cannot be affected by adaptation.

“We get to be teachers”: Analyzing Books and Imagining Others

Videos in which they model practices are not the only way in which the Vlogbrothers use their implied authority to inform and educate their viewers, though, and they frequently position themselves intentionally as educators or teachers. In fact, the pleasure they take in setting themselves up as teachers ultimately leads them to create CrashCourse and SciShow, two intentionally pedagogical channels founded in 2012; John’s video announcing the two new channels via the Vlogbrothers’ channel even includes the celebratory statement, “we get to be teachers!” (2011, “IS THIS HEAVEN?”). Yet the underlying interest in “being teachers” is evident from the earliest stages of their original channel, especially from John who is more likely to take on the teacher persona but also from Hank who frequently enjoys sharing his knowledge about topics of interest to him (i.e., environmental science and new technologies). In connection with books, reading, and literacy, their educational impulse emerges in the way they perform the role of educated reader when engaging intellectually with books. Intellectual engagement with books thus operates within a broader discourse of schooling at work in the videos and is

informed by an appreciation for teachers, education, and intellectualism that connects nerd and reader identities. At the same time, this mode of engagement is also informed by a simultaneous appreciation for the value of the personal critical response, which they construct in a way that intersects with a more emotional, empathetic mode of engagement. This practice, in turn, allows the reader to use intellectual engagement with books to imagine others and the world with more complexity and insight, a core Nerdfighter community value. In this section, I therefore trace how the Vlogbrothers models reading practices at that intersection and consider how they foster community values of personally-informed intellectual engagement with book and stories.

In contrast to earlier modes of engagement, however, this section is notably dominated by content from John's videos. This is not to say that Hank does not engage intellectually with books or that does not model intellectual engagement. At different points, he does engage critically with M.T. Anderson's *Feed* and Gorevich's book on Rwandan genocide, and in one video he postulates on the difference between fantasy and science fiction as genres. Yet, as he notes to John in one video: "as you know, I read books very differently from the way you read books. I mostly think about what they do to me, not how they do it. I like to be inside of a story, and I feel like if I'm analyzing it all the time, then I'm not going to have the book do what it's supposed to do to me" (2012, "An Army of Mindless Drones"). In this way, Hank overtly preferences emotional engagement over intellectual engagement, and his handful of intellectually engaged videos are ultimately overwhelmed by the sheer number, depth, and complexity of intellectual engagement on display in videos posted by John. Instead, Hank largely shifts to from co-practitioner to audience member, as John works to convince him of the value and importance of critical literary analysis. Hank thereby becomes a stand-in for the Nerdfighter audience in a fairly literal way, as seen in one video about literary criticism that John addresses to a fifteen-

year-old Hank (2010, “Life Is Like Pizza”). John, in turn, models not only the practice of intellectual engagement itself but his personal enjoyment of it, as he works to convince Hank and the Nerdfighters generally that it is a practice they should share.

Re-Modeling the Discourse of Schooling

In professional works about literacy learning, scholars like Kathleen Tyner and James Paul Gee often place literacy skill development within a larger “discourse of schooling” that constructs it as something historically and traditionally embedded in formal learning environments (Tyner 1998, 29-31; Gee, citation). Though not necessarily aware of this critical scholarship, John implicitly reinforces this discourse by employing school-related rhetoric, especially in his videos about intellectual engagement with books and practices of critical reading and literacy. For example, he posts a video that is organized “school style,” with different sections labelled as different periods and classes of the school day (2007, “Brotherhood 2.0: January 16, 2007”). In encouraging Nerdfighters to read books so that they can discuss and analyze them together, he frequently uses words like “homework,” “assignments,” “extensions,” “quizzes,” and “pop quizzes” playfully to reference his expectations and activities. To a certain extent, this rhetoric functions as a recognition of school as a common experience and a common point of reference with his largely adolescent audience. At the same time, the fact that these references are almost entirely limited to his videos about reading classic literature and engaging in critical analysis suggests an awareness of these practices as typically school-based practices, ones that he simultaneously replicates and critiques.

In critiquing school-based practices, both John and Hank use this school-related rhetoric to express their frustrations, and the frustrations of their viewers and fans, at the way that topics like math and reading are taught in school. In advocating for the value of using math, for

example, (notably addressed to people who consider themselves “literature people” like him), John argues: “you may think you hate math, but you don’t hate math. You hate the way you were taught math” (2010, “8 Things I Love”).¹⁰ He likewise directly critiques the way literary criticism is practiced in classrooms:

Right, so students of the world, I want you to look at me for a second. Most of the questions that you’re asking in your literature classes are not that interesting. Like the questions of whether the author intended that symbol or that metaphor, let me tell you, as an author who intends symbols and metaphors, that question is not interesting. (2011, “The Education Continuum WARNER CHILCOTTED”).

This question of authorial intent as discussed in literature classes is actually a theme to which he returns frequently, allowing him to model an alternative way to approach the topic, an aspect of his remodeling school discourse discussed in more detail below. In relation to intellectual engagement with books and the practice of critical analysis generally, though, the videos present a clear awareness that John is drawing his fans into a practice that he enjoys personally but that they might resist because of the way they have been taught in school to practice it.

Hank, meanwhile, as the representative of the “math people” who dislike literature analysis, makes similarly critical remarks about school-based reading, especially in relation to mean-making and other practices of intellectual engagement: “do you remember book reports? Book reports are really lame. You end up not writing about the book so much and writing about the author and trying to write about what other people are saying about the book and not what YOU think about the book. And that frustrates me” (2008, “Nerdfighters Blurbing Book Club!”). Notably, his comments about book reports are part of a longer proposal for the Nerdfighter-community practice of writing book blurbs, which he concludes are a superior form of intellectual engagement: “it’s also a really good way to sort of make yourself understand what’s unique and interesting about something new that you’re reading.” In this way, school-based rhetoric functions to separate what John and Hank are modeling in their videos and what the

Nerdfighters are practicing in their community from school-based practices, even as they build on and reference them.

Yet even in critiquing school-based reading practices and literacy learning, John simultaneously recognizes YouTube as an inherently different kind of teaching space than the traditional classroom. Even in playfully assigning his readers to finish certain chapters of a novel by a deadline, he notes: “I know you don’t come on YouTube for homework, but you just got some” (2011, “Kill the Dollar Bill!”). In this way he acknowledges that YouTube videos can play with the rhetoric of school but ultimately they cannot *be* school. At the same time, he acknowledges that schools and teachers face challenges in educating that informal spaces do not have. As part of a longer reflection on YouTube as an informal learning space and himself as a teacher, for example, he explains:

Often when we try to learn about something with Nerdfighteria, whether it’s like quarks or *The Catcher in the Rye*, we see comments in which people are like, “aw, I wish you were my chemistry teacher!” or “you would make a great English teacher,” and I’m always really flattered by that, but unfortunately it’s completely untrue because there’s this huge gulf between that which is informational and that which is actually educational... That’s one of the problems, at least so far, with the internet. The internet is really good at providing information; it has proven less good at providing education. (2010, “Consider the Lemming”).

As part of that same video, he likewise recognizes that the issue is not just with platform and format but also with content: “The problem with being a teacher is you have to teach not only the interesting stuff but the context for the interesting stuff, which is often incredibly boring.” In other videos, both John and Hank make attempts at being intentionally pedagogical, at “being a teacher,” offering both content and explanatory context, and they do eventually create two successful educational channels that ironically become incorporated into school curriculum; but for the most part, John’s attempts to create spaces for and to draw Nerdfighters into his well-loved practice of critical analysis remain focused on the stuff he finds interesting and rely

strongly on his personal enthusiasm. These choices, though, are largely grounded in an underlying awareness of the voluntary nature of YouTube as a learning space. They also allow him to build on the fact that Nerdfighters do not always enjoy school (or like their teachers), either because of the limiting structure of the learning or because of the social pressure that comes with being a nerd, whereas YouTube-based informal learning and the community of the Nerdfighters can make school-based experiences fun.

Regardless of the challenges to being educational and not just informational, then, John makes a conscious effort to teach and to engage the Nerdfighters in intellectual and critical conversations about books. His efforts are, not surprisingly, grounded in his personal love and appreciation for books, reading, and intellectual engagement, but also in the social potential to share those practices with his adolescent fans: “I love books. I love literature, and I love, um, I love talking about books with young people and trying to read critically together, and that’s something I really enjoy and find hugely fulfilling” (2008, “Vital Status Report from NYC”). As a result, he also finds the effort incredibly exciting. In drawing Nerdfighters into a community-based reading and discussion of Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, for example, he spiritedly proclaims: “It’ll be just like English class, only I will have the teaching power! I am the English teacher! I am mad with power! (2008, “Don’t Suck on That Bone”). In a later video, he again notes in a similar tone, “I’m gonna be totally English teachery about it! And I don’t care!” (2008, “OMFG CATCHER IN THE RYE!!!”). Of course, he does in fact care if the Nerdfighters enjoy the books and the act of reading them together and talking about them, even when he teasingly suggests otherwise: “right now, all of the world, teenage Nerdfighters are like, ‘augh, God, I hate that book!’ But I don’t care. I think we should read it anyway, and then you can tell why you don’t like it, and then I’ll tell you why you actually should” (2008, “Don’t Suck on That Bone”).

He makes similar comments when he proposes leading a group discussion of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; he acknowledges that his audience may have already read in school and disliked it, but ultimately asks to be given the chance to change their minds.

That he employs phrases like "I'll tell you why you should" also provides insight into the way that John playfully uses his position as authority figure in relation to reading and writing practices to undercut school-based learning and reinforce his own meaning-making practices. He is especially prone to drawing on his own authority when speaking about authorial intent.

Because John is both an author and a self-identified expert on matters of literary analysis, Nerdfighters frequently ask him questions related to authorial intent, especially in the context of school-based learning. His answers invariably suggest that authorial intent is largely irrelevant. In an early example of this kind of exchange, he quotes a Nerdfighter's question: "Do authors really put as much symbolism into their books as English teachers seem to think you guys do?" and then responds: "Yes, we really do, I promise. But the thing is, even if we didn't, it wouldn't matter because the reading experience would be equally rich with or without authorial intent" (2007, "Dec 18th: The Project Awesome and Question Tuesday!!!"). Even four years later, his answer to the question remains the same:

When teachers say, 'the author means...', do you really mean those things?
Yeah, probably, but in my opinion, teachers shouldn't say that because 1.) teachers aren't in the business of reading authors' minds, and 2.) and more importantly, what authors mean doesn't really matter, I don't think. (2011, "Question Tuesday! Paula Deen Riding Me (and critical reading)")

Then, in the first video for the educational CrashCourse channel, notably titled, "How and Why We Read" (2012), he literally addresses the issue: "Dear Authorial Intent... you don't matter." In repeatedly dismissing the assumed, often scholastically proscribed value of authorially created meanings in texts, John creates space for the value of personal interpretations that come from the reader. In this way, he suggests that the reader can be an authority, or at least can learn to

become an authority by practicing intellectual engagement and participating in discussions with both peers and informed experts. This suggestion, in turn, informs the many videos he makes modeling reader-focused critical analysis as a practice and justifying its value (videos which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter).

Oddly, in direct contrast to the above, John is not shy about providing insights into his own authorial intent in relation to his own novels. In fact, the videos are replete with details about how to read meaning into his various symbols and metaphors. Many of these instances emerge as part of his effort to engage with his audience over his writing process; often at the instigation of Nerdfighter commenters, he talks about original titles, altered plot points, and the extent to which his novels are auto-biographical or his narrators are versions of himself. He even explicates the symbolic meaning behind the two covers for *Paper Towns* and posts whole videos dedicated to the underlying meanings at work in *Paper Towns* and *The Fault in Our Stars*. In 2008, for example, he explains: “Paper Towns is a book about a bunch of people who are constantly mis-imagining each other because they’re thinking about one another as something other than a person” (“Vital Status Report from NYC”). In 2011, even before *The Fault in Our Stars* is published, he tells potential readers that “it’s the story of Hazel and Augustus and their attempt to come to terms with that soliloquy that Hazel has at the beginning of the book about how all of this will inevitably end in oblivion” (“Reading Chapter One of The Fault in Our Stars”). He also uses authorial intent to defend his novel *Looking for Alaska* against an accusation of pornography:

There is one very frank sex scene. It is awkward, un-fun, disastrous, and wholly unerotic. Hank, the whole reason that scene in question exists in *Looking for Alaska* is because I wanted to draw contrast between that scene, when there is a lot of physical intimacy but it's ultimately very emotionally empty, and the scene that immediately follows it, when there is not a serious physical interaction but there's this intense emotional connection... The argument here, is that that physical intimacy can never stand in for emotional closeness. And that when teenagers attempt to conflate these ideas, it inevitably fails. Hank, it doesn't take a deeply critical understanding of literature to realize that *Looking for Alaska* is arguing against vapid physical interactions, not for them. (2008, "I Am Not A Pornographer").

Notably, this defense assumes, if not a deep critical understanding, but an intellectually engaged reader who actively places scenes in relation to those they proceed and exceed it. Similarly, his explanation of *The Fault in Our Stars* assumes an engaged viewer who understands "that soliloquy" to be a reference to earlier in the video when John read the first chapter of the novel out loud and was engaged enough to remember it. In this way, even as the videos reinforce John's own position as authority over his own works, they also suggest his faith in his readers and viewers to be capable of understanding the deeper levels at work in his books and by extension other books. This faith in their ability, in turn, informs videos in which he communicates the value of the individual's meaning-making practices and the value of critical analysis generally.

Meaning-Making for Nerds

As noted above, in modeling critical analysis for his brother and his broader Nerdfighter audience, John frequently positions the reader as superior to the author. As part of that construction, he argues that once a book is written and published, possession of the content shifts from writer to reader. For example, in response to a question from a Nerdfighter, "do you think deconstructionism as a part of literary criticism takes something away from the author?", he replies, "maybe. But authors don't own books, readers do" (2008, "Question Friday"). This belief eventually codifies into a tagline that he tweets during an online discussion of *The Fault in*

Our Stars with his readers and that gets picked up as a value statement by his fans, who pass it around as visual fan-art on Tumblr: “Books Belong to Their Readers.”¹¹

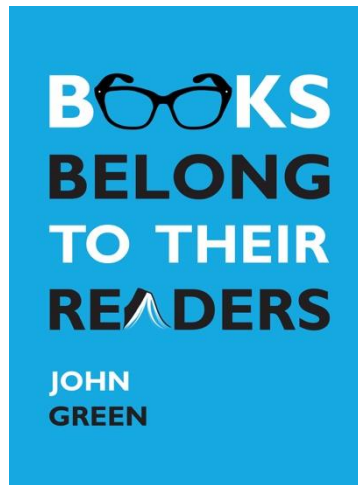


Image 7.11 Nerdfighter fan-art of John Green’s catch-phrase

The underlying value statement here similarly informs the Vlogbrothers’ modeling of creative engagement, as noted above. In the context of intellectual engagement, though, it is notable that John’s initial statement intimates that the act of critical analysis plays a role in that assumption of ownership over the text. In this way, John constructs critical analysis as an active practice, not simply a passive act of consumption, but an act that produces meaning and results in possession of that meaning and its source material.

As a result, he posts videos in which he actively engages his viewers and his fellow readers in the practice of meaning-making. He does not simply lecture (though he does plenty of that as well), he inscribes his personal practice in broader community social literacy practices, posting his personal interpretations and eliciting others’ thoughts via comments, forums, and response videos. At different times over the first six years, he employs this method in relation to a variety of novels, though he returns repeatedly to two of his favorites: *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Great Gatsby*. For example, in 2011, he asks Nerdfighter to participate in critical

discourse related to a reading of *The Great Gatsby*: “to what extent do you think Gatsby is a hero? I mean, I know he’s the titular character of the novel, but to what extent do you think his quest is heroic? And secondly, is your quest heroic?” (“*The Great Gatsby: Living the Dream in the Valley of Ashes*”). In this way he models the core practice, noting the possible difference between a titular character and a hero, and creates avenues for participation by providing a prompt. At the same time, he allows for responses to be personal ones; there is no suggestion here of a proscribed “right” answer regarding Gatsby’s heroism, and he is asking what the reader thinks. He also creates a space for intellectual engagement with the novel to inform personal reflection on the reader’s own life, a theme that will come up again later in reference to the function of metaphors in literature.

At the same time, in drawing his largely adolescent audience into this personal mode of engagement, he reinforces the underlying belief that teenagers and young adults are capable of meaning-making practices. In one of his more passionate rants, for example, he emphatically states:

Some people are gonna say that kids don’t have the critical sophistication when they’re reading to understand [the intent at work in *Looking for Alaska*]. And I have a message for those people: Shut Up and Stop Condescending to Teenagers! Do you seriously think that teenagers aren’t able to read critically? (2008, “I Am Not A Pornographer”)

In this way, he directly states the underlying faith in adolescent readers that is implied by videos in which he draws them into mean-making practices. In both places he demonstrates his commitment to teenagers’ ability to engage with critical discourse around metaphor. His defense of them, then, includes specific examples of their ability to understand literary meanings at work in fiction:

When they read George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, do they head out to the pig farms to kill all the pigs because they’re about to become communist autocrats? When they read *Huck Finn*, do they think that Huck should turn Jim in because the demented conscience of the community says so?

Notably, while this continued defense maintains his point about the intellectual and critical abilities of teenage readers, it also implies that they are capable of reaching the very “right” interpretations he otherwise suggests are unimportant and are able to resist “misreading” texts that might result from overly literal interpretative work.

So, even as he promotes a form of critical analysis grounded in personal meaning-making practices, he maintains a more conventional perspective on literature that includes correct and incorrect readings. For example, in response to the common suggestion that math has only right and wrong answers while literature has none, he irritably retorts, complete with wild gesticulations:

First off, there is often more than one correct answer in math, and secondly, NOT EVERY ANSWER IS EQUALLY CORRECT IN LITERATURE! I am a giant squid of anger! For instance, Hank, if you think that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a pro-slavery novel, you are wrong! You are as wrong as you are if you think that the square root of four is strawberries! (2011, “The Education Continuum WARNER CHILCOTTED”)

Notably, in making this response, he not only argues that readers can be “wrong;” he also reaffirms the role of authorial intent, in that scholars mostly agree that Mark Twain intended his novel to be an argument against slavery, and his own authority, in the emphatic assertion of what he conceives as the “right” reading. That John appreciates both the value of the personal response and the informed interpretation should not be read as inherently self-contradicting, though. Instead, by underscoring both personal meaning-making and informed reading as ways to engage intellectually with text, he ultimately models the complex relationship at the heart of the reader’s relationship with books and reading, one that he uses to inform his argument about the value of critical analysis as a whole.

Further analysis of John’s video about the purpose of critical reading reveals that the practice is not about “right” interpretations for their own sake. Instead, engaging intellectually

with the book allows the reader to engage intellectually with the deeper meanings of the world and the universe that the book represents in metaphor. As John overtly states:

What's important is that critical reading can be a way into thinking quite deeply about questions that are difficult and complicated, and not in some, like, boring, abstract way, like, "oh in *Moby Dick*, white is a symbol for nature's ambivalence to man," but instead in a concrete and totally interesting way, like, "nature's complete indifference to you, as expressed by the color white in *Moby Dick*, is something you had better get your head around, or else you're going to end up like Captain Ahab!" (2011, "Question Tuesday! Paula Deen Riding Me (and critical reading)")

In this way, a book's meaning holds personal meaning, personal implications for the reader that can be discovered through intellectual engagement. In other videos, John models the practice of critical reading to show how a story can hold personal meaning specifically to the teenage reader. For example, in answering questions about the relevance of Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* "to the average teenager's life," he admits that it may not in any literal sense but also explains that the story "is really about its group psychology, which is certainly important to teenagers, and it's also about the relationship between the machine and its cogs, which is something you are just figuring out when you are teenager" (2008, "Guys Love Giraffe Love"). It is this meaning-making experience that John ultimately argues contributes to the purpose of critical reading and its value to the reader. This personal meaning to the reader is arguably more important and more valuable than the meaning itself; and by focusing on the personal meaning, John intentionally constructs this form of critical analysis (i.e., concrete and interesting) in opposition to the form typically performed in schools, the "boring and abstract way" that only cares about the book's meaning divorced from the reader.

By positioning critical analysis as a way to think deeply about bigger questions, John also divorces the personal meaning of the text from authorial intent. As he notes in reference to his own authorial intent:

It doesn't matter if, when I was writing Paper Towns, I wanted the Great White Wall of Cow to reference the Great White Wall of Whale in Moby Dick. The Great White Wall of Cow and/or Whale isn't there for you to think about authorial intent, it's there for you to think about nature's seeming absolute apathy toward individual humans and what the heroic response to that apathy is. (2011, "The Education Continuum WARNER CHILCOTTED")

Again, the purpose of the book, its metaphors and allusions, and of intellectual engagement with those metaphors and allusions is not to be found in understanding their meaning for their own sake or as an insight into the meaning that an author may have intended. Instead, John argues, the purpose is found in the inspiration to grapple with broader social, philosophical, and global issues like apathy. Critical analysis therefore emerges as a practice learned by "practicing" to understand and interpret novels in ways that can be supported by the text and embedded in a broader social and cultural context that informs intellectual response and makes it richer, a point to which he returns when promoting intellectual engagement as a valuable form of learning and knowing about the world (as discussed at the end of this chapter).

The underlying value statement about the purpose of critical reading, meanwhile, can also be seen when John advocates for the practice in relation to math and to readers who, like Hank, may prefer math to literature. In the same video as that quoted above, for example, he argues that "the reason that reading critically, like reading for theme and metaphor and symbol is important is because those things are ways into the big, interesting questions, many of which are the same questions that math is trying to answer" (2011, "The Education Continuum WARNER CHILCOTTED"). This quote represents a longer, ongoing debate in the videos of both Vlogbrothers over the relative value of math and science versus literature and reading. Placing his promotion of critical reading's value within this context, then, functions as a part of John's larger effort to reach Hank-as-audience and the Nerdfighters who think like he does.

In one prominent example of this conversation, Hank makes the opening gambit and draws specific attention to their distinct personal interests:

John, you and I come from very different educational backgrounds...So I assume that we have lots of stuff to teach each other. I, for example, can teach you about concrete ways of explaining our world in a scientific way. And you can teach me that the big billboard in *The Great Gatsby* was, like, God or something. (2010, "Ecosystem Services 101 with Hank")

Notably, his reference to "concrete" ways of explaining the world predates, and perhaps inspires, John's reference to critical reading for personal meaning as a concrete way of explaining a book. At the same time, Hank's dismissive tone in giving an example of what John could teach (i.e., something he already apparently knows and does not care about) implies that, to him, critical reading bears no relationship to ways of explaining the world.

In his next video, however, John quickly moves to refute him, using language that echoes the value of a book's meaning as existing outside the book itself:

About that billboard, Hank. It isn't actually the billboard that's a metaphor for God... The metaphor for God is the disembodied bespectacled eyes depicted on that billboard...Anyway, what's interesting about the metaphor of the huge eyes is not the metaphor but it's implications. (2010, "Froghoppin' with Gatsby")

The rest of the video, then, provides a lengthy analysis of that metaphor and its broader social implications. Over the course of these and other math versus literature videos, John ultimately strives to attract Hank and their math-preferring viewers into the practice of critical reading by equating the fields' potential for intellectual engagement: "So math people, let me tell you that imaginary stories can be every bit as intellectually engaging as imaginary numbers. And literature people, I am here to tell you that set theory is every bit as fascinating and moving and beautiful as *The Great Gatsby*" (2011, "The Education Continuum WARNER CHILCOTTED"). He likewise concludes that both practices are important for the same reasons: for the enjoyment

of the practice itself and for the value the practice brings to understanding the world and our place in it.

Notably, then, the value of critical reading is also expressed in videos that feature John's personal love of the practice. As part of a reflection on Salinger's antipathy towards critical reading of his own novels, for example, John reminds his viewers: "you don't read a book to appease an author. You read a book because you want to. And it is my strong held opinion that a book becomes richer and more vibrant when we read closely and think hard about it" (2008, OMFG CATCHER IN THE RYE!!!"). Here John establishes both reading and critical reading as manifestations of personal choice; he chooses not to be "a reader who reads and runs" as Salinger would prefer him to be but chooses to engage intellectually with the books that he wants to read. At the same time, his personal opinion is that the practice of critical reading improves the reading experience more broadly, that the reader who engages enjoys a richer reading experience than the reader who runs.

Further evidence of this personal preference for intellectual engagement can be seen in his enthusiastic exclamations about critical analysis itself. As various previous examples have shown, John is not shy about performing overt displays of excitement and passion, and he playfully continues the tradition in advocating for and modeling critical reading as a community practice. As an introduction to a video in which he explicates the metaphors at work in *The Catcher in the Rye*, for example, he cheerfully announces: "Good morning, Hank. It's the hottest day of the year so far, and you know what summertime means. It means it's time for us to use our critical analysis skills to read with thoughtfulness and depth. Hoo-ha! Nerdfighters!" (2008, OMFG CATCHER IN THE RYE"). He then concludes the video with assurances for potential participants in further critical reading activities: "if you want to read the book, if you could read

the first half by, say like, Tuesday. Like say, to the end of chapter fifteen. And then we'll talk about it and then everyone on YouTube will be like, 'oh my god, critical analysis is so fun. It's like all the best parts of LisaNova plus all the best parts of Smosh!'" Notably in advocating for the fun of critical reading, he employs references to virally popular YouTube personalities who regularly entertain their audience with creative and hilarious video content. In this way, he suggests that his videos about critical analysis can be equally entertaining, or at least that he wants them to be, though his snarky tone reveals a self-awareness that the reality of that is unlikely.

John similarly performs his personal enthusiasm for the practice of critical reading in the way that he models the practice itself and in his resulting passionate interest in metaphors. For example, he posts a video in which he provides a lengthy explanation of *The Great Gatsby's* inscription, which he recites from memory; its source, which he eagerly reveals "doesn't exist!"; and its relation to the metaphors of the novel generally. He then closes the video by drawing the attention to the novel's famous metaphorical green light at the end of the dock, expounding: "God, I love the green light! It's my favorite metaphor in any book ever! Except maybe Holden's hunting hat" (2011, "THE FAULT IN OUR STARS"). Here John enacts his love of intellectual engagement in hopes of drawing his audience to participate in the fun of knowing. In this way, John's strives to have his personal practices become community practices and to have those practices valued in the community.

Reading for Empathy and Global Citizenship

At the same time, John posts videos in which he demonstrates that intellectual engagement with books is a practice that is already embedded in existing community values. As part of this, he models the practice of critical reading as informing the kind of social values and global

citizenship at the heart of the Nerdfighter community, often through the power of metaphor. To do this, he begins by drawing repeated attention to the function of metaphor to provide insight into the reader's personal life and personal experiences. In discussing the practice of analyzing metaphors, for example, he argues: "it's not so much about uncovering secret mysteries for the sake of uncovering secret mysteries; it's about using story as a way into thinking about our *actual lives* and how we're *actually living them*" (2011, "Question Tuesday! Paula Deen Riding Me (and critical reading)"). Similarly, in explicating the symbolic use of the color gold and the metaphorical green light as an "enchanted object" in *The Great Gatsby*, he notes: "symbols are enchanted objects, and yellow or gold is an enchanted color in this novel, but not just in this novel, but also *in our lives*, like golden opportunities, or a golden age, or golden youth" (*The Great Gatsby: Living the Dream in the Valley of Ashes*). In this way, John connects the value and function of metaphors with the broader value of finding personal meaning in books through critical reading. Embedding the function of metaphor in the lived reality of the reader, in turn, provides the foundation for using metaphor to think about broader social realities and the lived experiences of others.

Relatedly, in a longer example from a discussion of *The Catcher in the Rye*, he draws parallels between the metaphors at work in the novel and the lived experience of an adolescent reader specifically:

One of the reasons that metaphor and symbolism are so important to books is that they're also important to life. Like, for example, say you're in high school, and you're a boy, and you say to a girl, "do you like anyone right now?" That's not the question you're asking. They question you are asking is, "do you like me right now?" In the exact same way, on page sixty of *The Catcher in the Rye*, when Holden asks the cab driver what happens to the ducks in the pond when the pond freezes over, he's not asking about the ducks. He's asking about himself. What happens to me in the dead of winter, when the pond freezes over?" (2008, "OMFG CATCHER IN THE RYE!!!")

By associating the metaphor in the novel with a parallel metaphor from real life, John teaches his audience that metaphors are not relegated solely to the world of literature but are in fact facets of everyday personal communications, even if they are technically unaware of it. Another video, addressed to an adolescent Hank, reaffirms this implicit connection between metaphor and the lived experience of teenagers:

So Hank, you're 15, and like a lot of 15-year-olds, you feel that when you are forced to read books in English class and look for metaphor and symbolism and theme and all that stuff, you are sort of being tortured... Here's what critical reading does, Hank: It helps us understand what to think about, and it gives us the framework for how to think about those things. (2010, "Life Is Like Pizza")

In this way, John again preferences personal meaning in text to the kind of detached, abstract meaning-making typically practiced in schools. At the same time, he teaches his adolescent audience that engaging intellectually with metaphor helps the reader think deeply about personal experiences, including the adolescent experience, the unspoken/inexpressible emotional experience (e.g., existential fear), and the adolescent's emerging place in the world.

At the same time, John bridges personal meaning to be found in the text and its broader social insights and implications. As part of his longer explanation of the metaphorical billboard to Hank, for example, he acknowledges that understanding the bespectacled eyes of the billboard in *The Great Gatsby* to be a metaphor for God is not inherently interesting, yet he insists:

It is interesting to think about justice and fairness and the way that socioeconomic class shape our understandings of justice. And it's interesting to think of God as two huge disembodied eyes with glasses... No spoilers here, but if you've read *The Great Gatsby* and possibly even if you haven't, you might've noticed that life isn't always fair and sometimes bad people don't get what's coming to them. And that, in fact, wealth and social standing can significantly improve your chances of not getting what's coming to you. And it's a huge challenge to live in this unjust world without, to borrow a line from Nick, "closing out your interest in the aborted sorrows and the short-winded elations of men." Hank, I think in those disembodied eyes Fitzgerald is arguing that God is in the seeing business, but he's not in the doing business. I think the question of to what extent the universe or God is aware of, and interested in, the aborted sorrows and short-winded elations of man is a very interesting question. And we see people who haven't read *The*

Great Gatsby closely doing a poor job of thinking about this stuff all the time. (2010, Froghoppin' with Gatsby)

In this way, John uses metaphor to draw parallels with the reader's lived experience and current real-world discourse about justice and fairness. Reading, and more importantly critical reading, thus provides insight into that real world discourse and allows the reader to understand how that discourse functions. The video therefore strives to prove to Hank, and via Hank the Nerdfighters, that while he/they may dismiss the value of the metaphor in its abstract sense, as something that only functions within the novel, intellectual engagement with those metaphors informs intellectual engagement with the world in a social and global sense.

Notably, by 2011, there is evidence that Hank has embraced this perspective, as he posts a video in which he similarly engages in the practice of analyzing metaphors. He spends the entire video considering the question: "how, in fiction, are supernatural beings created? And what does that say about the people who write those stories and the people who are interested in those stories?" (2011, "Superhero Creation Myths"). He then traces the evolution of origin stories for vampires, zombies, and superheroes as they reflect general fears of science of their time. Though he never uses the word metaphor here, he implicitly invokes the concept by understanding supernatural creatures as functioning symbols of society's interest in and fears of science. He also implicitly reinforces the use of literacy metaphor as a window into understanding social and global issues: "it's nice to see that this entire shelf of science fiction here, in fact, allows me to learn more about us as humans." Notably, Hank's version of critical reading is grounded in his personal reading practices (e.g., science fiction) and informed by his personal intellectual interests (e.g., science). In this way, viewers learn that metaphors and their deeper implications are not restricted to the kind of canon-approved literature typically discussed by John.

Relatedly, critical reading and metaphor, as advocated by John, not only inform intellectual engagement with broad social issues, but also provide insight the experiences of other people, contributing to the development of empathy. As John explains a part of his defense of the study of literature: “that’s my answer to people who say that ‘all that English class stuff’ ruins books. All that ‘English stuff’ is Holden’s way into us, and our way out of ourselves” (2008, “The Catcher in the Rye, Part 2”). He then models this in reference to his own novels. In explicating *Paper Towns* and the characters’ mis-imagining of each other, for example, he notes: “here we are, stuck inside of our skin-encased enclosures, and it’s very difficult to imagine another person as they would imagine themselves” (2008, “Vital Status Report from NYC”). Novels, he goes on to suggest, allow the reader to both recognize that difficulty as part of their lived experience and find ways of imagining themselves out of that difficulty. In fact, John frequently speaks in both video and live events to the fact that reading is how readers get out of themselves. In a posted video recording of a live event in which he speaks about *Paper Towns*, for example, he explicitly connects the difficulty that the characters have in imagining Margo with contemporary political discourse and the difficulty of imagining others, as part of “a long rant about the importance of imagining the other with more complexity” (2008, “On Loving One Another or Dying”). In this way he models the empathic impulse at work in novels from the position of both author and intellectually engaged reader. Notably, the importance of “imagining others complexly” also becomes a core social value statement within the Nerdfighter community.¹²

More detailed evidence of this empathic impulse can be seen in the lengthy explication of Joyce’s *Ulysses* that John offers, a full transcription of which can be seen in the exemplar on the next page. As part of this analysis of Harold Bloom’s definition of nationhood, John unpacks the

So let me give you an easy to comprehend example of what I'm talking about from this famously incomprehensible James Joyce novel, *Ulysses*. . . So there's this Irish-Jewish guy Bloom, and he is sitting in a bar, and one of the guy's he's talking to says: 'But you know what a nation means?' 'A nation,' says Bloom, 'a nation is the same people living in the same place.' And then everybody starts to make fun of Bloom for his stupid definition. And then Bloom adds: 'Or also living in different places.'

But then, as all the characters in the novel are laughing at Bloom, the reader realizes that, you know, we don't have a better definition for what constitutes a nation. Or indeed what it means to have membership in any community. I mean, Bloom is in this weird in-between space because he is Irish but he is also Jewish, which many characters in the novel see as inherently un-Irish.

But ultimately we all wanna feel like we're on the inside of our communities, whether it's Ireland or the United States or a high school clique or Nerdfighteria. And the question of whether there have to be outsiders in order for there to be insiders turns out to be a really interesting and difficult and complicated question, which is explored at length in *Ulysses*.

And thinking about (as the guys at the bar clearly can't) what we really mean when we talk about these identifiers is a much better starting place for conversations about who is and is not American and who is of is not a Nerdfighter, rather than the current method of discourse, which is just to be like: 'ahhh! I am a giant squid of anger! I do not listen to you!'

Everybody is laughing at Bloom in that bar, but we should be the ones laughing at them. They think there is some easy, uncomplicated definition of Irishness. But in fact, Hank, the fundamental thing that all critical reading does is reveal to us that there are not easy definitions that distinguish 'us' from 'them'. Reading with an eye toward metaphor allows us to become the person we're reading about while reading about them. That's why your English teacher deserves your attention. Ultimately it doesn't matter is the author intended a symbol to be there, because the job of reading is to use stories as a way into seeing other people as we see ourselves. And when we do that we can look out at the world and see a giant endless set of beautiful variations. (2010, "Life Is Like Pizza")

Table 7.1 Exemplar: An Analysis of Nationhood in James Joyce's *Ulysses*

metaphor of the nation in direct relation to the reader's desire to belong, and notably to fan communities like Nerdfighteria: "ultimately we all wanna feel like we're on the inside of our communities, whether it's Ireland or the United States or a high school clique or Nerdfighteria" (2010, "Life Is Like Pizza"). He also notably concludes that: "the fundamental thing that all critical reading does is reveal to use that there are not easy definitions that distinguish 'us' from 'them.' Reading with an eye toward metaphor allows us to become the person we're reading about while reading about them." In this way, John not only provides a "easy to comprehend example" of critical analysis but models the practice of placing that analysis in the broader context of social and political discourse and of using the novel as a way to consider our relationship with other people in that context. Critical reading and intellectual engagement with books, therefore, inform an emotional engagement with other people and the world and thus inform real-world ways to engage in global citizenship and reduce worldsuck, the most important of all Nerdfighter social values.

John's advocacy and promotion of critical reading critical reading and intellectual engagement with books, meanwhile, reflect broader statements he makes about the value of learning generally that are similarly embedded into global citizenship and reducing worldsuck. For example, near the end of his video analyzing the metaphors at work in *The Great Gatsby*, he states: "I would argue that stupidity is born out of bad reading, bad teaching, and bad thinking" (2010, "Froghoppin' with Gatsby"). In this way, he connects the value of good (i.e., intellectually engaged) reading with good teaching (or good learning) and good thinking, all of which inform a broader functional social good. In a later video, he reinforces this connection between reading and learning in a way that includes formal education. As part of "An Open

Letter to Students Returning to School” (2012), in which he advocates for the value of a free high school education, he acknowledges:

If you’re anything like me, you’re going to spend a lot of time whining that 1.) none of this will ever be useful in your real life, and 2.) your teachers are stupid, and 3.) math is really hard, and you’ll never understand it, ditto physics, history is boring, French is just an endless series of ‘je ne sais pas’, literature is an impossible hunt for symbols, and physical education is an oxymoron.

He then presents a rebuttal that, like critical reading, embeds the value of the learning process in the lived experience of the learner:

Here’s the thing. When you watch the Curiosity rover land, it is far more moving and exciting if you understand the physics and the math and the history behind that moment. French is useful because the French do speak English but they pretend not to. And it’s not only literature that’s symbolic; all communication among people is symbolic, as is consciousness itself.

He constructs learning as both personally meaningful and globally (even universally) impactful.

Schools and being educated therefore serve a similar purpose to reading, as a pathway to intellectually engaging with the world in a knowledgeable way. This, in turn, allows readers/learners to participate in global citizenship and to reduce world suck via good reading, good learning, and good thinking. Reading and learning then inform the value structure of the Nerdfighters in ways that link personal practice to community practice as constructed and modeled by the Vlogbrothers themselves.

⁶ The practice of recommending books becomes so popular within the videos and with the Nerdfighter community that Nerdfighters have collated lists of recommended titles from across and provide access to them on other platforms, including Goodreads and LibraryThing.

⁷ By the end of 2012, the drive to create formal spaces for social reading and book discussion shifted to their new, intentionally pedagogical Crash Course channel and its series of videos on English Literature. As a result, no more Nerdfighter-specific book clubs were hosted on the vlogbrothers channel.

⁸ Notably, it was during one of these social writing sessions with Maureen Johnson and E.Lockhart that the beloved Nerdfighter game of adding “in your pants” to book titles was born.

⁹ During this time, John also contributes to an anthology of stories titled *Let It Snow* (2008) with friends and fellow young adult literature authors Maureen Johnson and Lauren Myracle, but this short story and associated book receive far less attention in videos.

¹⁰ This practice of categorizing people, and of recognizing that people self-identify, as “math people” and “literature people” is part of a larger contrast within the videos between math skills and critical analysis skills. The Vlogbrothers frequently comment about their seemingly oppositional academic leanings, and playfully tease each

other about which related skill set is ultimately more valuable, until John argues that math and literature are in fact mutually interested in the same broad ideas and are therefore equally valuable.

¹¹ (<http://perpetualthoughts.tumblr.com/post/27421555223>)

¹² <https://complexly.com/> “We are developing a rich idea of ourselves and the world.”

CHAPTER EIGHT: IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Introduction

With this dissertation, I sought to address anxieties about youth literacy raised by the advent of digital age technologies and to question the adversarial relationship between online and offline literacy practices that often form the foundation for those anxieties. As part of this, I hoped to create a more nuanced picture of the relationship between books and digital media and to understand social media's potential as a platform for promoting and celebrating reading and text-based literacy practices. In creating that picture, I endeavored first to construct a comprehensive, cohesive portrait of the Vlogbrothers' text-based literacy practices as embedded in and performed on a digital, networked, audio-visual platform, namely YouTube. I also considered how the Vlogbrothers' use online video to model literacy practices to their young adult audience and to engage their fans, the Nerdfighters, in collaborative and cooperative efforts that simultaneously create knowledge, exercise skills, and construct community values. With this final chapter, I place those practices and values in conversation with the existing scholarship on topics directly related to reading and literacy in order to answer the following research question:

RQ3: In what ways might community values and practices, as constructed and modeled by the Vlogbrothers, inform broader theories about the relationship between reading, writing, and new media, particularly as it relates to young people, learning, and literacy achievement?

This chapter focuses specifically on overlaps between the evidence discussed in chapters 4-7 and evolving theories about youth literacy and learning in networked spaces introduced in chapter 2. This chapter concludes this dissertation by drawing attention to those overlaps and to the implications of this research in relation to those theories. As part of that conclusion, I likewise

offer an overview of the limitations of this research in relation to both its evidence and its implications. I then close the chapter with an overview of potential future research projects, some of which could be used to address those limitations and broaden the context for analysis.

Implications of Research

In considering the implications of this research, this chapter draws attention to ways in which the findings outlined in previous chapters intersect with current theories about youth literacy and learning practices. This section focuses specifically on three core points of intersection: 1) print culture and literacy in a digital age, 2) informal learning in socially networked spaces, and 3) the negotiation of adult authority and youth empowerment in shared community practices. In addressing the first of these intersections, this section explores how the practices of the Nerdfighter community as directed and presented by the Vlogbrothers might mitigate concerns about digital media's negative impact on youth reading and writing. The second part describes how the Vlogbrothers' construct a community of learners that align with theories of Connected Learning and thus suggest ways in which fan communities can function as learning communities. Lastly, the section considers how the Vlogbrothers' negotiation of authority and empowerment adds complexity to the youth-adult relationship in informal learning communities.

Print Literacy in a Digital Age

Much of the anxiety about the impact of digital media on youth reading and writing practices has its foundation in broader concerns about the detrimental effect of digital culture on print culture, including theories of interest in and production of print media being actively displaced by digital alternatives. Yet this research suggests that online video does not necessarily contribute to the displacement of print media with digital media, as more pessimistic print

culture scholars predict. Instead objects of print culture are on constant display in the Vlogbrothers' videos and are central to both video content and personal practices. As noted in previous chapters, the Vlogbrothers make ready use of physical, printed books and draw attention to the material culture that produces them, to the point that they actively advocate printed books over e-books.

Alternatively, scholars writing about the shift from print to digital culture observe the advantages that digital media bring to the reading experience, drawing attention to its elasticity, interactivity, collaborative nature, and increased modes of narrativity. Yet in celebrating the value of the book, the Vlogbrothers prioritize the static text. Instead they reserve their excitement over interactivity and collaboration for their online participatory spaces, like forums, and as modes of engagement with an otherwise instantiated narrative, like fan fiction and other fan practices. In this way, the research suggests that instead of endangering print media, digital media can be used to create active and engaged participants in print culture.

At the same time, as described in the first two chapters of this dissertation, the advent of digital and social media has raised concerns about its impact on young people's reading and writing habits, with alarmists placing conventional literacy practices in direct opposition to online media use. In contrast to these anxieties, the Vlogbrothers use an online video platform to engage young people in sustained engagement with reading and to promote community-based writing practices. In this way, the research broadly suggests ways in which YouTube videos targeted at a young adult audience can, like young adult fiction, function as "a powerful form of literacy sponsorship, one that guides young people's reading interests and promotes engagement with certain notions of what it means to be literate" (in this case, a specific participatory version of print literacy) (Alexander 2017, 4).

More specifically, those concerned about youth reading practices in a digital age are concerned that digital media, particularly video platforms like YouTube, will distract young people from reading and will undermine voluntary pleasure reading habits. Yet reading research scholars like Paulette Rothbauer have noted that “if they are supported, teenagers and young adults will voluntarily read and actively read for pleasure” (2018, 106). Evidence of the underlying premise that young people will read actively and voluntarily can be seen in the many clips of and references to young reader-fans within the Vlogbrothers’ videos; whether fans of Harry Potter, John Green novels, young adult literature generally, or genre fiction like fantasy or science fiction, the Nerdfighters are, as a community, demonstrably active pleasure readers. Analysis of their videos, meanwhile, also suggests that the Vlogbrothers operate from an optimistic position similar to Rothbauer’s and attempt to provide the kind of support she advocates, both by modeling voluntary pleasure reading and by creating opportunities for young people to engage more fully in the reading experience. Online digital media, in turn, plays a central role in constructing, popularizing, and providing access to these forms of support.

One form of this online support for young readers manifests in the social reading practices of the Nerdfighter community. Current theories about youth reading construct it as a socially embedded practice in which motivation and engagement are enhanced by community ties. Research into connections between motivation and social reading suggest that “children who like to share books with peers and participate responsibly in a community of learners are likely to be intrinsically motivated readers,” and that social interaction operates as both a core motivation to read and as a function of loving to read (Guthrie 2000; Stommen and Mates 2004). Analysis of Nerdfighter practices, particularly reader-fan practices, as discussed and on display in the Vlogbrothers’ videos bear out this argument. Evidence suggests that individual

Nerdfighters come to the community as already motivated readers and reader-fans, but also that they are looking for ways in which to create social connections that allow them to acknowledge, celebrate, and share their reader identities and reader-fan practices. In their videos, the Vlogbrothers themselves model this acknowledgement, celebration, and sharing, which creates a sense of freedom within the Nerdfighter community to do the same. They similarly create and promote other socially networked spaces where Nerdfighters can celebrate and share their love of books and reading. In this way, reading becomes a community-embedded practice. This research thus suggests ways in which digital and social media can contribute to reading motivation by supporting young people's efforts to share and participate in a community of learners, allowing socially-embedded reading practices to transcend geographic restrictions in much the same way as other kinds of online fandom.

The Vlogbrothers' practices are in line with recent research into ways in which digital media is changing how young people find and engage with books. Marianne Martens (2016), for example, describes how socially networked spaces help youth bypass the (usually adult) gatekeepers who typically stand between them and knowledge of or access to books; as part of this disintermediation process, authors are able to communicate directly with their readers. The Nerdfighters take full advantage of this breakdown of barriers between content producers and consumers (Jenkins 2006), using the social mechanisms of YouTube and other interactive platforms to communicate directly with both Vlogbrothers. In relation to reading engagement specifically, they address John directly, regularly asking about the authorial process and the significance of authorial intent. John readily replies to their questions, and both he and Hank participate in discourse about the books, both with each other and with Nerdfighteria more broadly. In this way, digital media allows the Vlogbrothers and the Nerdfighters to "join the

living conversation” about literature as it manifests across videos, comments, forums, Twitter, and other social media platforms (Buehler 2009). This research thus suggests ways in which socially networked spaces can be used not just to motivate young people to read but also to motivate them to engage more completely with books, stories, authors, and the possible deeper meanings at work in what they read.

As part of the ongoing conversation about reading, the Vlogbrothers also model different approaches to reading engagement. In one sense, they privilege what reading scholars refer to as “aesthetic reading,” valuing the lived experience of the reader and emphasizing reading “embodied in the images, the sensations, the feelings, the changing moods of the reader” (Rosenblatt 2005, p. xxvii). Indeed, analysis of the Vlogbrothers’ videos offer a plethora of evidence of both brothers practicing aesthetic reading; the videos thus function as examples of the lived experience of readers, in which sensations, feelings, and moods are on regular display. Notably, though, evidence of emotionally engaged is inherently connected in the videos to the nerd-fan identity. The videos, therefore, offer evidence of ways in which digital video can be used to promote and celebrate aesthetic reading; but simultaneously, they provide the opportunity to consider connections between aesthetic reading and fan-reader practices, between aesthetic reading and unironic enthusiasm for books.

John, meanwhile, specifically takes the opportunities afforded by the YouTube platform to share his views on authorship and authorial intent and to advocate for alternative ways of engaging with books and the meaning-making process. John’s performed intellectual engagement with books therefore operates as an example of Rosenblatt’s theory of transactional reading, a highly personalized form of meaning-making from reading in which meaning comes from the reader rather than being “found” solely in the text. Evidence of transactional reading

can be seen in John's frequent advocacy against "right" interpretations decontextualized from reader response, as often practiced in schools, and for the idea that "books belong to their readers." In this way, John uses the YouTube platform to offer a unique form of support for young readers, valuing not just their ability to understand the complexities of texts but also their interpretations of those complexities. Combined with the above implications connecting reader and fan practices, this latter analysis supports reader-fan practices as a noteworthy subset of youth reading research, not just in the writing of fan-fiction or the creation of fan-art, but as a function of the meaning-making process distinct from classroom-based practices.

In creating spaces for the Nerdfighters to engage collectively in reading-fan practices and community projects online, the Vlogbrothers also operate at the intersection of text-based and more multimedia or transmedia versions of literacy. Their efforts therefore carry implications for the study of youth literacy beyond just reading. Contemporary literacy research, particularly in relation to youth practice, has focused on broadening the scope of the term to include more forms of content production (in line with increasing ways of appreciating youth participation). Definitions of literacy generally have shifted to focus less on written language and more on the languages of image and sound, to be less embedded in format and more informed by use and social context. In contrast to this, the Vlogbrothers are notably more traditional; in engaging their audience, specifically in creating participatory spaces, they often prioritize text (e.g., comments and forums). And they regularly position text and video in oppositional terms, often as if they have to choose which is more valuable. Even their initial experiment eliminates one in favor of the other, though in that case they choose video over text (even as in video they mourn the loss of text). In some ways, this could be read as a manifestation of the same adversarial relationship

between print and digital media that underscores fears that “visual, digital, or audiovisual media will replace reading and writing” (Jenkins 2009, p. 29).

Yet the Vlogbrothers also model transmedia and multiliteracy practices, and they clearly embrace the value of having the literacy skills that allow for participation in online video and social media platforms. In this way, the Vlogbrothers themselves embrace and practice the broader sense of literacy that informs contemporary research. Analysis of the videos and of community practices on display there thus bear out contemporary theories in which digital/audiovisual literacies and print literacies are cooperative rather than competitive. Notably, however, the Vlogbrothers’ videos do not reflect the extensional rhetoric that often grounds this broadening, cooperative model. They do not construct video as “writing” with pictures and sound (Williams 2008), they do not add other forms of media to the list of reading and writing to create a model of multiplicity (IRA 2012), and they do not argue that reading and writing function as foundational skills that allow young people to produce audiovisual media (Jenkins 2009). Instead, they embrace new media as a format and context in which to engage with writing in its traditional text-based form. This research thus suggests ways in which transmedia and multimedia practices can be used to promote and enhance reading and writing. Rather than scaffold from reading and writing to newer and seemingly more advanced literacies, online literacies create the foundation on which young people engage in new and potentially more advanced versions of writing (and reading).

At the same time, deeper analysis of these social writing practices suggests that the ultimate community value is participation itself rather than writing specifically. Writing and other media literacy practices instead emerge as ways to participate and to bridge the gap between content producers and consumers, allowing consumers then to become producers

themselves. In this way, the Vlogbrothers' videos and the Nerdfighter community reflect the values of the participatory culture in which they are embedded and reinforce the values and practices of convergence culture. By extension, they also provide evidence to support theories about the connection between literacy and participation in communities. Scholars of both historical and contemporary literacy practice note the function of literacy in creating avenues for full participation in civic identity, socioeconomic development, and global citizenship. This valuation is mirrored in the participatory rhetoric of the Vlogbrothers' videos, in which participation in social writing projects, forums, and other community endeavors inform the construction of the Nerdfighter fan identity.

Notably, in choosing to participate and produce content, the Nerdfighter community and the Vlogbrothers ultimately embrace Tumblr, a space where text, image, and video function as equals. Though the community's work on Tumblr falls outside the focus and timeframe of this research (and therefore becomes a subject for future research), allusions to the platform, and specifically to the fan-site EffYeahNerdfighters, in the videos are noteworthy because the site still actively functions, in contrast to the eventual demise and disappearance of forums MyPants and YourPants, the Nerdfighter Ning, and the omnictionary. In the context of this research, then, the continued use of Tumblr raises questions about the long-term viability of spaces created and promoted (though not ultimately controlled) by the Vlogbrothers that are more heavily text-based, especially once the Vlogbrothers themselves are not directly contributing or participating. This comparison suggests adult mentors have more success motivating young people to engage in short-term social writing projects (and even in research projects that collate text-based knowledge), but long-term content production is more successful if initiated by young people themselves as a manifestation of fan practices.

Informal Learning in (Fan) Communities

In crafting and promoting spaces where Nerdfighters can participate in shared literacy practices, the Vlogbrothers implicitly construct their fan community as a learning community. These spaces are, in turn, inherently interest-powered, production-centered, and openly participatory and, as such, exemplify the values of Connected Learning theories. As noted in Chapter 2, one of the core features of Connected Learning is its peer or relationship focus. Though the Vlogbrothers are technically older than most members of the Nerdfighter community and though they frequently operate as mentors, they simultaneously self-identify as peers, and as those interviewed in the Nerdfighter documentary attest, the community itself likewise thinks of them as peers. Notably, this peer relationship is grounded in the shared community identity as constructed by the Vlogbrothers; that identity, in turn, connects back to learning, as being a Nerdfighter (and a nerd) means having pride in being intelligent, in enjoying learning, and in engaging with the world in an informed way. In this way, this research suggests in which learning itself can function as a connection for further learning, a self-reinforcing model of learning and socializing.

Connected Learning theory itself focuses on learning that is academic and opportunity-oriented, maintaining “tangible connections” to the real world. That the Vlogbrothers promote an academically-oriented form of learning can be seen in their use of school-based rhetoric and their videos that engage with topics like math, science, literature, politics, history, and world events. At the same time, they ground this informed engagement with learning in real world contexts, drawing explicit connections between being informed/learned/skilled and being an active force for social good. Specifically in relation to reading and literacy, they draw similar connections between engaged reading, empathy, and global citizenship. This research thus suggests ways in

which community-based learning efforts, like Connected Learning, can be used not just for the benefit and empowerment of the learner (which is typically the focus) but also to broader global and social advantage. Interest in making a difference through social action, meanwhile, can serve to motivate forms of Connected Learning by drawing attention to learning as a path to tangible opportunities for civic engagement.

Connected Learning theory likewise maintains the value of interest-based learning. That the Nerdfighters engage in learning that is interest-based can be seen largely in the fact that all participation in learning, literacy, or research activities is voluntary; to research the history of Ivan the Terrible's library, for example, or to contribute to the philosophical discussion of the Evil Baby Orphanage or to participate in online book discussions necessitates an interest in the associated topic. In relation to books and reading, specifically, that mutual interest-based learning also functions in ways similar to passionate affinity spaces. According to Gee and Hayes, passionate affinity spaces require participants to value and respect the object of interest and the shared passion/interest motivates learning; evidence from the Vlogbrothers' videos suggest that the Nerdfighters share a common passion for and interest in books (or at least certain book) and are thus motivated to participate in learning practices related to them. At the same time, evidence suggests the Nerdfighters are also motivated by shared reading and writing practices, in which case they also operate like communities of practice, in which learning is socially situated and informs community identity. In this way, this research provides opportunities to consider connections between Connected Learning and other forms of informal, community-based learning. It likewise suggests ways in which online video can support informal learning communities, both in creating the community itself and in facilitating the learning that happens within them.

This research also offers other opportunities to broaden the scope of Connected Learning theories. Current Connected Learning theory focuses on learning done through adult sponsorship in structured and established environments, ones already associated with learning: schools, libraries, camps, clubs, and afterschool programs. The Vlogbrothers and through them the Nerdfighter community, though, offer the same elements as more traditional Connected Learning environments. The Vlogbrothers provide sponsorship in the form of mentorship and spaces that support a variety of interests. The Nerdfighter community likewise offers the shared practices and shared purpose that provide the backbone for collaborative production and joint projects and the sense of belonging that fosters participation. The Vlogbrothers then use their videos to promote connections across settings and online platforms. This research thereby suggests that Connected Learning does not need to be restricted to intentionally pedagogical settings but can alternatively be constructed in more informal spaces. It likewise implies that adults can function as sponsors outside the authority provided by institutional and program-oriented structure; instead sponsorship can be a function of practice embedded in the relationship with learners.

Notably, all the above implications inform a larger conclusion that can be drawn from the research presented in this dissertation. Analysis of video content in the context of contemporary theories about informal learning provides evidence that the Nerdfighters operate as a community of learners. Yet, as noted in the previous chapters, Nerdfighteria is at its core a fan community, made up of both fans of the Vlogbrothers and fans of being a fan generally. In this way, then, this research ultimately suggests ways in which fan communities can function as learning communities, and not just in relation to the object of fandom itself. While critical attention has been paid to fan practices, much of that work focuses on their interpretive practices, on the consumer-turned-producer, and on the ways in which practices inform participation in fan

communities. This research seeks to consider some of the same issues, but from the perspective of the fan object as active motivator of that interpretive practice, production, and participation. At the same time, it moves beyond fan interest in the fan object alone to consider how the fan object can motivate fans to be interested in and learn about other topics and to engage in tangential practices. This dissertation therefore presents studies of the practices of fan objects as a noteworthy subset of fan studies research.

Negotiating Adult Authority and Youth Empowerment

Within the context of research into online learning communities, the relationship between youth and adults commonly manifests in one of two ways: either adults serve as experts and authority figures who guide the learning experience (Ito, Chavez & Soep, Rheingold) or adults and youth function as amateur-peers in cooperative learning that mitigates age-based power dynamics (Gee & Hayes; Ondrejka). Yet in contrast to this essentially dichotomous framework, this analysis reveals evidence of the Vlogbrothers' inhabiting the role of both expert-authority and amateur-peer. They likewise actively negotiate a relationship with their fans that allows them to occupy both roles simultaneously: to be a Nerdfighter and to lead the Nerdfighters. In this way, this research suggests that within the environment of socially networked media at least, adults are able to craft a more complex and nuanced relationship with young people, especially in relation to learning and community values.

In contemporary theories about supporting youth learning in digital spaces, adults typically have “important roles to play in providing leadership and role models for participation;” and in relation to literacy learning specifically, they are “central to how standards for expertise and literacy are being defined” (Ito et al, p.350). Indeed, focused attention to the practical manifestations of these theories reveals that, despite claims of equal participation and

contribution to collaborative efforts, in many informal learning environments adults remain in positions of authority. They provide the structure and the skills and ultimately guide the learning experience, while youth provide content (usually their lived experience and youth-specific knowledge) and interest-focus. The Vlogbrothers, in turn, emulate this division, at least in part. In performing the role of mentor and de facto educator, the Vlogbrothers likewise provide the structure by crafting the online participatory spaces, and they model the skills and guide the learning through their video content. In this way, the Vlogbrothers' modeling operates in line with the practices of teachers, librarians, program directors, and other established educators.

Their embrace of authority and expertise, then, carries over from learning support into broader community guidance. As Lili Wilkison notes in her article on the Nerdfighters, the community maintains a top-down authority model in which the Vlogbrothers actively curate community values. Evidence of this can be seen not only in the way they direct activities and promote engagement but also in their many advice-giving videos. They also actively construct the literacy values that inform community reading and writing practices, as the analysis of the previous two chapters suggest.

Yet despite their evident pleasure in providing advice, guidance, and learning support, evidence also suggests that the Vlogbrothers would equally prefer be seen as peers. Within the videos, they regularly refer to themselves as part of the Nerdfighter collective in a way that an adult mentor in a more traditional informal learning setting would never do. And in opposition to scholars of youth culture, they do not construct young people as a class apart with unique "tastes, styles, and social concerns" (Palladino 1996, p.54), but instead draw attention to overlaps in their taste (e.g., certain books, films, and other pop culture media), in their "nerd" style (e.g., the shirts that are sold in the Nerdfighter store), and their social concerns (e.g. reducing

worldsuck). In this way, this unique relationship presented in this research complicates portraits of youth online media use for socialization and learning: that they prefer to engage in learning in youth-driven settings and prefer to spend time online with people they know offline” (citation). The relationship likewise complicates portraits of the relationship between fans and fan objects, offering a more nuanced image of the “illusion of intimacy” typically assumed to be fostered by social media networks (citation).

More notably, however, the Vlogbrothers openly acknowledge that their power, their ability to inhabit that position of authority, comes from the Nerdfighters themselves, rather than being situated in the Vlogbrothers’ age or experience. The Nerdfighters wield the ultimate power within the community because they watch the videos, they post the questions asking for advice, they follow the modeled practices, they participate in the learning experiences, and they embrace the community values. In this way, participation leads to youth empowerment, not by practicing skills that provide a foundation for later in life or by giving youth space in which to simply express their voice. Instead, evidence within the videos construction participation through the creation of online content that manifests in real change: by contributing comments, questions, and punishments that directly impact the content of videos, by reading books and writing blurbs, by writing the content that drives the forums, by engaging with challenges that move collaborative projects and games forward, and by making videos that help the Vlogbrothers raise money for charity and then liking the videos that determine where that money goes. Thus, this dissertation draws attention to a reality that the Vlogbrothers’ videos regularly reveal that teachers are nothing without students, mentors are nothing without apprentices, and fan objects are nothing without fans.

Limitations of Research and Implications

As described above, this dissertation provides evidence and analysis that hold a variety of implications for how researchers think about the relationship between youth literacy, learning, and digital media. Yet the research also has several limitations to consider that impact both the initial findings and related implications. These limitations stem from both to the overall scope of the project and the focus of the research.

In constructing this project, constraints had to be placed on the scope of the data that could be effectively analyzed. The approximately six-hundred videos incorporated in the project offered a vast amount of data and revealed a wealth of evidence. Ultimately, however, the project only covers the first six years of posted content to a YouTube channel that now spans more than a decade. And in the intervening years, the channel's content has shifted in its tone and focus as it moved from having a dedicated fan following to being a mainstream phenomenon to recently having less relevance and impact. This research could therefore not address ways in which modes of interacting and engaging with the audience changed after the rapid increase in the channel's and the Vlogbrothers' popularity. Similarly, the project could not investigate cross-platform or cross-channel value-construction, despite the fact that during the time-scope of the project the Vlogbrothers established new YouTube channels and adopted other platforms like Twitter and Tumblr as important means of communicating with their fanbase. Thus, this dissertation serves as a foundational study for further exploration, rather than as a definitive study of the Vlogbrothers social media content.

The project's implications, meanwhile, are also impacted by its focus on the Vlogbrothers' content and practices. The data includes only the spoken and performed content of the videos themselves, with occasional references to information posted by the Vlogbrothers

about the videos. The analysis therefore includes only what was seen or heard in the posted videos, with no corroborating evidence from videos or content posted by other Nerdfighters. As a result, conclusions about the breadth or duration of impact on the reading, writing, and literacy practices of the Nerdfighter community is limited. While some research has been done that studies Nerdfighter information practices (Waugh 2018), more research with this focus would provide a useful point of comparison in order to discover what Nerdfighters actually learn from the videos and what practices they actually adopt on a wider scale.

The project's focus also places limitations through its lack of diversity and its potential reification of certain underlying social inequities. The Vlogbrothers epitomize several forms of privilege through their age, race, gender, sexuality, and class. And the Nerdfighters, particularly those who make appearances in clips on the Vlogbrothers' channel, similarly represent a notably privileged group in terms of their race and class and in the access to books and technology associated with that class privilege. According to the first Nerdfighter census, completed in 2013, 49% of respondents identified as middle class, defined in the survey as: "I have enough money to occasionally buy something nice for myself but not regularly" (2013, CENSUS ANALYSIS!). Of particular note in relation to this limitation is the fact that this initial annual Nerdfighter census did not ask questions about most demographics, only about age and income.¹³ This selectivity of demographic data is problematic at best and denotes a certain blindness to privilege and diversity that manifests in the content of the videos at least through 2012. In analyzing books, for example, John selects only white male authors, reinforcing the lack of diversity already evident in the literary canon; and in offering romantic advice for LGBT viewers, he problematically states: "same advice, different pronouns" (2009, "In Which A Secret

Is Revealed”). In advocating for the value and impact of this research, then, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges inherent in the influence that the Vlogbrothers wield.

Potential Future Research

Much potential for future research exists in the sheer amount of data compiled for this project. In downloading the videos and transcripts for six years’ worth of posted content, I created an archive of material that can be coded for a variety of other community values and practices. Relatedly, the online fan archive from which the transcripts were sourced still exists, and while creating a downloadable JSON file is no longer an option, accessing transcripts could supplement current data and provide opportunities for research across channels or within a wider timeframe.

Placing the content of the Vlogbrothers’ videos in conversation with videos from their other channels, then, provides one avenue for future analysis. Specifically, I intend to code the performed and spoken content from videos posted to the Vlogbrothers’ CrashCourse channel, which is intentionally designed to be educational. This comparison could provide insight into how the Vlogbrothers practice pedagogy, especially in relation to contemporary professional research on teaching methods. At the same time, by placing current findings in conversation with videos specifically intending to teach English Literature, I can identify any overlapping themes and trace the potential influence of early video content on educational content.

Relatedly, I also intend to place the findings outlined in this research in conversation with John’s own novels, particularly those written during the years covered by the study. This research would allow me to use John’s comments about authorial intent, the writing process, and reader response as a context in which to analyze his novels. Given the centrality of books, reading, and the reader/author relationship to the novel *The Fault in Our Stars*, for example, the

videos potentially provide insight into how John crafted his young adult reader-fan characters. At the same time, by extending the timeframe of the research, I can also consider the impact of his increasing online fame on his writing process, especially related to the lengthy gap before publishing his next novel, *Turtles All the Way Down*, and the way he shared (or in some cases hid) his struggles to continue writing.

As noted in the previous section, further research could also test the impact of the Vlogbrothers' videos beyond the evidence seen in edited clips. As part of this research, I hope to design studies in which I survey or possibly interview Nerdfighters, especially those who were part of the initial audience, about their reading and writing practices. This would allow me to ground the research more thoroughly in the context of fan studies research and provide insight into ways that the Nerdfighters actively adopted community practices or how they potentially interpreted, reinvented, or even ignored those practices and related literacy values.

Potential further research also provides opportunities to confront and mitigate some of the limitations noted above, particularly into the problematic limits created by the Vlogbrothers' privilege. For example, further research would allow deeper analysis of the Vlogbrothers' advice-giving rhetoric, drawing attention to the centrality of the male, heteronormative, and college-educated experience to that advice. Other potential projects would place the John Green's content specifically in conversation content posted by other, more diverse voices from young adult literature, especially in relation to the construction of values around what youth read and what books get published for the young adult audience. Using the same methodology to study alternative voices in online and social media would provide a broader, possibly more nuanced picture of the ways in which digital media is used to influence the reading and writing habits of contemporary young people.

Conclusion

Engaging with the spoken and performed content of more than 600 YouTube videos, this dissertation sought to understand how networked digital media could be used to speak to a young adult audience about the value of books, reading, and writing. Using a thematic analysis that resulted in 48 codes and 7 themes, this study constructed a detailed portrait of two influential adult YouTube stars, the Vlogbrothers, focusing specifically on their online performance of literacy. It identified their personal literacy practices and analyzed how the online video platform of YouTube transformed those practices into modeling behavior for their adolescent fan-base. It then described how they celebrated those same practices within their fan community and how they created social, collaborative spaces and projects designed to engage their fans more fully in those practices. It also traced how those practices ultimately informed and reflected broader community values. This dissertation thus contributes to a more nuanced appreciation of how reading and writing can manifest in the context of social and digital media and calls for a reconsideration of anxieties that online media, like YouTube videos, will undermine adolescent literacy habits. At the same time, this dissertation contributes to ongoing research into how youth and adults collaborate to support learning and calls for further examination of the role of fan communities in providing broad-based learning opportunities. Lastly this dissertation provides insight into how influential adults can ultimately inspire communities of young people and the choices they make. All of which leads me to conclude with a phrase that encapsulates so much of what the Vlogbrothers encourage their fans to choose; as John says, in the face of inescapable oblivion:

“I choose Nerdfighting, and I choose books.” (2010, “You’re Gonna Die”)

¹³ More recent surveys resolve this oversight, including questions about ethnicity, gender, and sexuality that include a variety of categories and allow for multiple answers.

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APPENDIX A: NERDFIGHTER LEXICON

Table A.1 Select entries from the Nerdfighter Lexicon (<https://nerdfighteria.com/lexicon>)

PHRASE	DEFINITION
Accio Deathly Hallows	A song by Hank, which was featured on the front page of YouTube (when that was a thing) in July 2007. This greatly increased the number of subscribers to the vlogbrothers channel. Contains surprisingly accurate predictions about the plot of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. The wrock band Harry and the Potters have taken to encouraging Hank to play the song as often as possible.
Acronym	An abbreviation formed from the initial letters of other words and pronounced as a word. (e.g., PIN - personal identification number). Not to be confused with an initialism.
Agloe, NY	Agloe, NY - (n.) A “paper town” or “copyright trap” that became real when someone built a general store in the place it wasn’t. It was part of the inspiration for John’s third book, Paper Towns. Agloe, unfortunately, no longer exists.
Anglerfish	Otherwise known as the “Hanklerfish”, a symbol of Hank’s when John signed his 150,000 copies of <i>The Fault in Our Stars</i> , and also the subject of Hank Green’s song, “A Song About an Anglerfish”. These are often drawn in a distinctive cartoon-style way by Hank.
Books Belong to Their Readers	A saying John uses frequently, often abbreviated to “BBTTR”, meaning that the author has no more information about a book than the reader does, that is, what’s actually in the book. This also means that, ultimately, control of the characters and future plot is given to the audience/reader and they can interpret the story in any way that is consistent with the source material. This is perhaps a modernization, or a more accessible way of explaining Roland Barthes’s theory, ‘The Death of the Author’, and a book specific version of the idea that “there is no privileged perspective on art”.

Table A.1 (cont.)

PHRASE	DEFINITION
Brain crack	The phenomenon that occurs when you have so many ideas floating around in your brain that it kind of makes you crazy. A good way to get rid of them is to get them out into the world. An idea lovingly ripped from Ze Frank’s video by Hank.
Brotherhood 2.0	The name of the first year of videos on the vlogbrothers channel. In 2007, John and Hank decided to go one year without textual communication (sic). Instead, they would vlog to each other, each uploading a video every other day (except for weekends). The result? All of this.
Decepticon	Opposite of a Nerdfighter, AKA someone who frequently forgets to be awesome and increases worldsuck.
DFTBA	Don’t Forget to Be Awesome; the Nerdfighter catchphrase
DFTVA	Stands for “Don’t Forget to Vote, America,” an initiative by the Vlogbrothers and Harry Potter Alliance that encouraged people to take pictures of themselves doing the nerdfighter sign outside their polling place, or with their ballot. Not to be confused with DFTBA.
Dooblydoo	The description section of a YouTube video, also known to be the “about” section on YouTube videos for links and further information. E.g.: “links are available in the dooblydoo.” Coined by Craig “WheezyWaiter” Benzine.
Effyeahnerdfighters	A Tumblr blog dedicated to all-things Nerdfighteria. It is run by members of a Nerdfighter friend group called Catitude. Also known as FYNF.
Ellen Hardcastle	One of Hank’s albums, named after a Project for Awesome donor who then named her album after Hank Green.

Table A.1 (cont.)

PHRASE	DEFINITION
The Evil Baby Orphanage	A proposed solution to the philosophical question concerning the morality of traveling through time to kill political tyrants and mass murders (e.g., Hitler) when they are babies. Nerdfighters conclude that the babies should instead be kidnapped and raised in a dedicated orphanage to be good. The concept becomes fodder for lengthy forum discussions, a self-published card game, several creative writing projects, and a book proposal.
Fishing Boat Proceeds	A section on the American tax return which John wishes to have filled in at some point in his life. To date he has not. It is also the name of John’s Tumblr.
French the Llama	An exclamation one makes when completely and utterly excited (eg. “French the Llama! That’s awesome!”). The phrase came into an existence during the Project for Awesome 2010 when John didn’t know what FTL stood for. Kristen, a nerdfighter, told him that it was short for “french the llama.” John is trying to make this a “thing,” but according to Hank, he has not succeeded.
Giant Squid of Anger	What John becomes when an idea or attitude is completely ridiculous. This also happens to many other people on the internet, especially in YouTube comments. Portrayed by screaming and flailing.
Google Verb Meme	An internet meme popularized on YouTube by Hank and Michael Aranda in which you enter your name followed by a verb into Google and see what the suggested searches are.
Hank Green	One half of the vlogbrothers. Also known as the brother of the author, John Green. Majored in Biochemistry in college, now a YouTuber, entrepreneur, and musician. He is John’s third favourite band behind The Mountain Goats, The Mountain Goats, and in front of John’s fourth favourite band, The Mountain Goats. (See also Who the eff is Hank?)
Hanklerfish	1. (n.) An Anglerfish drawn by a Hank. Hank Green invented it and has drawn them on a portion of The Fault in Our Stars signature pages. The animal became associated with Hank because of his Song About An Anglerfish. 2. (v.) To draw a Hanklerfish.
Happy Dance	A dance which expresses happiness. The exact movements vary from person to person.

Table A.1 (cont.)

PHRASE	DEFINITION
Imagine Others Complexly	A theme throughout Nerdfighteria, including John’s novels, in which we are encouraged to imagine others deeply and complexly. It means recognizing that others are more than what they seem with many different facets and therefore more like ourselves that we ever imagined.
“In your pants”	A phrase added to the end of book titles with typically humorous results, a game credited to young adult fiction author Maureen Johnson. There is an ongoing challenge within Nerdfighteria to find the most hilarious/outrageous result. Inspired the name of various Nerdfighter forums spaces, including Your Pants and My Pants.
Initialism	An abbreviation as a word where you pronounce each letter. Eg. pronounced “D-F-T-B-A,” not “dift-bah”. Not to be confused with an acronym.
John Green	Half of the YouTube channel Vlogbrothers, father of Henry and Alice, husband to Sarah and brother to Hank. New York Times bestselling YA author of <i>Looking for Alaska</i> , <i>An Abundance of Katherines</i> , <i>Paper Towns</i> , <i>The Fault in Our Stars</i> and co-author of <i>Will Grayson</i> , <i>Will Grayson</i> and <i>Let It Snow</i> .
Lizzie Bennet Diaries, The	An Emmy winning modern-day vlog-style adaption of Jane Austen’s novel <i>Pride & Prejudice</i> . It aired on YouTube from April 9th, 2012 - March 28th, 2013. Hank Green is the co-creator and executive producer.
Made of Awesome	Emphasizes the goodness of Nerdfighters; when they do something which is particularly special, they will be described as “made of awesome.”
Nerdfighter	Someone who, instead of being made out of bones and organs and stuff, is made entirely out of awesome. How do you know if you’re a Nerdfighter? If you want to be one, then you are. (To clarify - a Nerdfighter does not fight nerds. A Nerdfighter fights for nerds.) Term coined after John played an arcade game called <i>Aero Fighters</i> in an airport in video. The font used in the game made the words “Aero Fighters” look like “Nerd Fighters”.

Table A.1 (cont.)

PHRASE	DEFINITION
Nerdfighteria	The collective online community of Nerdfighters; the official definition within the Nerdfighter lexicon is itself full of insider references: “Its exact location is not known (possibly <u>Winner, South Dakota?</u>), but contains within its bounds, if it has any (See <u>No Edge</u>), vlogbrothers and associated channels, <u>the Ning</u> , <u>Our Pants</u> , and anywhere where awesome is being done, and <u>worldsuck</u> is reduced.”
Nerdfighter Gathering	When Nerdfighters come together in a particular place to do a sundry of things together, such as visiting museums, ice-skating, or gathering in a park. John and/or Hank may or may not be in attendance. Find a gathering near you here!
Nerdfighter Lexicon	A comprehensive dictionary of Nerdfighter terms and language, collaboratively put together by dozens of nerdfighters. It is included on nerdfighteria.com as part of an orientation landing page for new and potential nerdfighters. (It’s what you’re reading right now! Ahh!)
Nerdfighterlike	1. (n.) A state of mutual attraction between Nerdfighters which can be platonic or romantic. 2. (n.) A song by Lauren Fairweather, covered by Hank and Katherine.
Ning, The	A Nerdfighter forum which used to be the main hub of Nerdfighteria. Now the location of the Nerdfighter chat and Nerdfighter groups.
Ningmaster	A moderator of the the Ning. John first created the term in this video.
No Edge	After learning that the universe probably has no edge, Hank began annoying John by repeatedly saying “Dude, No Edge”. Also mentioned in “The Universe is Weird”.
Nonexistent Nerdfighter Prize of the Day	Given in the way of recognition, or “shout out”, to someone who has caught John or Hank’s eye usually by exceptionally increasing awesome or decreasing worldsuck.

Table A.1 (cont.)

PHRASE	DEFINITION
Omnicionary	(n.) The Wikipedia-esque site used extensively by Radar, a character in John’s Paper Towns. 2. (n.) Hank claimed the URL omnicionary.com. It was a functioning wiki where nerdfighters collaboratively wrote stories, but the site was eventually deleted for unknown reasons. An archived version of the site is viewable here.
Pizza John	A popular Nerdfighter shirt created by nerdfighter Valerie Barr. A picture of John, from the 5 seconds he had a moustache, with the word pizza under it. John found it in a Facebook group entitled “John Green is Fat”. He wasn’t sure why he liked it, but he knew he wanted it on a t-shirt. Posters, socks, and occasional other merchandise (especially during the “12 days of Pizzamas” around Christmas-time), are available from DFTBA Records.
Project for Awesome	A charity event that has taken place every December 17 since 2007. Created by John and Hank, the Project for Awesome attempts to take over the YouTube homepage and fill it with videos about charity. Anyone who wishes can make a video about a charity of their choice and upload it to YouTube. For the 48 hours of the P4A, everyone likes, shares, and comments on these videos in order to raise money which will be given to select charities at the end of the event. In 2013, the P4A raised a total of \$869,171 which was then donated to twenty charities.
Puff Levels	A way to measure your current stress level, introduced by John. He would run his hands through his hair when stressed and make his hair incredibly tall and puffy. Therefore high stress = tall puff.
Punishment	If Vlogbrother rules are broken (i.e. a video is longer than four minutes, or failure to post the video on time), Nerdfighters may choose a punishment for the offending brother to perform which must be completed within 1 week. Wives have veto power.

Table A.1 (cont.)

PHRASE	DEFINITION
Puppy Sized Elephants	John asked evolution to make puppy sized elephants because they would have the evolutionary advantage of being adorable. In January 2008, he posted a video admitting that natural selection (through insular dwarfism) did in fact give us puppy-sized elephants... thousands of years ago.
Question Tuesday	The day that John answers real questions from real Nerdfighters. Rarely uploaded on Tuesday.
Read It First	Hank's braincracked idea for people to pledge to read the original books before consuming a movie-version. The website's tagline is "Don't let the movie ruin the book."
Secret Project	Super Secret Projects, often undertaken before one of the brothers' birthdays. The specifics of the projects are communicated via email after signing up to a Super Secret Mailing List.
Secret Siblings (Sister/Brother)	Nerdfighters that made video responses to John and Hank's videos back during Brotherhood 2.0 were called Secret Siblings. The logic goes that as the videos were sent between the two brothers, any other people who responded to them must also be their sibling, but their existence had been kept secret.
Shakespearean Insult	An insult created by William Shakespeare written in his works. Much better than the uninventive turkey twizzlers that masquerade as insults these days. Discussed by John and subject of the Hank Green song, "Undigested Lump".
Sidebar	The now-defunct version of the video description to which Hank and John pointed, usually in the incorrect direction, in most of their early videos. (See dooblydoo.)
So Jokes	1. (adj.) A phrase adopted by Nerdfighters to replace "so cool" e.g. "VidCon last year was so jokes!" or "Did you see the latest episode of Doctor Who? It was so jokes!". 2. (n.) Hank's first music album, full of funny and nerdy and basically awesome songs.

Table A.1 (cont.)

PHRASE	DEFINITION
Sparksflyup	An early YouTube channel owned by John, which was last updated in February 2008 and presently has 10 uploaded videos. John uploaded his first vlogbrothers video to this channel by accident, and his January 10th Brotherhood 2.0 video.
Thoughts from Places	A type of video that John and Hank make whenever they go places. The videos are generally serious, consisting mainly of montage footage with voice-over, and ask us to consider the world we live in more carefully.
Vlogbrothers	The name of Hank and John’s main YouTube channel. See A Brief History of the Vlogbrothers (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yk05_6Mf1GU)
Vlogbrothers Rules	The rules which govern how a vlogbrothers video is made. If the rules are broken, the offending vlogbrother is given a punishment by the other. As per the rules, videos must not be longer than 4 minutes; however, educational, musical, and montage videos do not need to adhere to this rule. Also, videos must be uploaded on schedule.
Winner, South Dakota	The geographical midpoint between John’s home in Indianapolis, IN and Hank’s home in Missoula, MT. Mentioned in several videos and Hank’s song Nerdfighteria Island.
Worldsuck	The Nerdfighter shorthand reference to global events and forces that contribute to people’s misery. It is the mission of Nerdfighters to “decrease worldsuck” through acts of kindness, fundraising for charities, and collaborative social action (i.e. “being awesome”).
Wrock	Pronounced just like the word “rock,” this is short for wizard rock, a genre of music consisting of songs about or inspired by Harry Potter, invented by Harry and the Potters. Hank is a wrock musician; sometimes called “wrocker”. A list of wrock bands may be found here.
YourPants	The first iteration of the revamped nerdfighter forums; it was overrun by hackers and spam, leading to the creation of Our Pants.

APPENDIX B: CODEBOOK

Table B.1 Alphabetical List of Codes with Exemplars

CODE	DESCRIPTION	EXEMPLARS
Adaptation	references to/act of adapting narratives from books to other mediums	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "“I ascribe to the belief that, in order to properly adapt a book into a film, you have to radically change, like everything about the book” 2. Video: "Introducing Lizzie Bennet"
Advice (Other)	giving advice about something not related to writing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Look, growing up is what you want it to be. We’re grown-ups now, and it’s our turn to decide what that means. Being silly is allowed. That’s not excluded by adulthood!" 2. Q; How do I gently tell a boy that I’m not romantically interested in him? A: I have exactly one piece of relationship advice. USE. YOUR. WORDS.
Advice about writing	giving advice about being or becoming a writer/getting published	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “whether you are writing for fun or for your job, writing requires discipline” 2. "What advice can you give to young writers? Read."
Authorial Intent	references to what an author means or does on purpose	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When teachers say, ‘the author means...,’ do you really mean those things? Yeah, probably, but in my opinion, teachers shouldn’t say that because 1.) teachers aren’t in the business of reading authors’ minds, and 2.) and more importantly, what authors mean doesn’t really matter, I don’t think. 2. , the whole reason that scene in question exists in Looking for Alaska is because I wanted to draw contrast between that scene, when there is a lot of physical intimacy but it’s ultimately very emotionally empty, and the scene that immediately follows it, when there is not a serious physical interaction but there’s this intense emotional connection
Authors as Friends	references to/act of socializing with other authors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “I write a lot with my friends Maureen Johnson and Scott Westerfeld" 2. "So Hank, one time many years ago when I still lived in New York, I was hanging out with my friends Cassandra Clare and Holly Black and they got into a knock down drag out fight on the topic of whether trolls are people."

Table B.1 (cont.)

CODE	DESCRIPTION	EXEMPLARS
Book as physical objects	interacting with a book as a physical object, distinct from content	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "I also like the flippability of books, especially non-fiction, where I can be like, 'oh what was that thing that I was reading last chapter, oh yeah yeah yeah yeah there it is.'" <li>2. *sniffs book* It still smells like my boarding school.
Book Clubs	references to/act of participating in book clubs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. We, you and I, and the Nerdfighters, whatever Nerdfighters want to participate, read a book. We read a book every two weeks. Two weeks is plenty of time to read a book. And then everybody writes a blurb. And the blurb has to be less than ten words, has to try to capture the essence of the book in a unique and interesting way. It could be humorous, it could be insightful, it could be exciting, it could be whatever you want it to be, as long as it's ten words or less. I guess it's the Nerdfighting Blurbing Book Club. Blurbing Book Club! <li>2. "Will you ever restart the Nerdfighter Blurbing Book Club?" Now, that's an idea.
Book Knowledge	expressions of knowledge of book content	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "I had to drive through Chicago, which has always been my favorite American city...A city as Carl Sandburg wrote 'under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs'." <li>2. "I've read Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars Trilogy like seven hundred times. As such, I know all about Mars's post-capitalist future"
Celebrity	talking about being famous or the famous	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I mean, there's being famous but then there's being famous to cool people. And right now, all the people who think we're cool are really cool. So that's way better than being famous with like everybody anyway." <li>2. "I'm not very fond of the word 'celebrity.' Like, I think the world would be a better place if the word 'celebrity' and the idea behind it ceased to exist"
Collaboration	references to/act of collaborating on written works	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "four YouTubers got together and helped the internet write a song" <li>2. "I think it's a really cool idea to try to crowdsource a book."
Comments	references to/uses of the comment section of the YouTube platform	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "the fact is that Nerdfighter comments on YouTube are generally so thoughtful and respectful that I am always kind of shocked when the non-Nerdfighters show up and they're all giant squids of anger" <li>2. "I think we should make videos more often. If people are interested in us making videos more often, you can leave a comment in the comments. You can just say, 'I would like you to make more videos more often.'"

Table B.1 (cont.)

CODE	DESCRIPTION	EXEMPLARS
Communities	references to the function and value of communities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "In the contemporary world where things fall apart and the center cannot hold, you have to imagine a community where there is no center." 2. "what it is, is this marvelous weird undefined new thing called online community that doesn't have any structure and it doesn't have any rules and no body knows how it works it's a whole new way for people to organize themselves and be active and give and care about each other."
Coordination	use of social media platforms to create and organize projects	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "while we are on tour, we're going a thing called Nerd Cache, where we leave, uh, buttons, bags of buttons, in places. You can only find out about that by following us on Twitter" 2. "I'm changing the rules for the second blurbing book club a little bit, because it was so hard to find everybody's blurbs. Instead of posting a blog post, there is a specific topic in the forum where you can post your blurbs. Don't post anything besides blurbs in there so we can keep it all straight. Post your blurbs and maybe a little bit of a description about your blurb if you want, but no like discussion back and forth or else it will just get as confusing as the blog posts were."
Critical reading, purpose of	references to the value and purpose of critical literary analysis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What's important is that critical reading can be a way into thinking quite deeply about questions that are difficult and complicated" 2. "you don't read a book to appease an author. You read a book because you want to. And it is my strong held opinion that a book becomes richer and more vibrant when we read closely and think hard about it"
Cross-platforms	practices that move across different social media platforms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Video: "27 Part Video" 2. "I was actually able to collaboratively write this song using etherpad...people just filled stuff in."
Display	reference to displaying or organizing books, including visuals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "that's where I keep my books around the house. We don't have lots of stacks of books in random places because, whenever we need a bookshelf, we just buy one" 2. "these are all my graphic novels. My Hunger Games is currently loaned out. Down here we got Terry Pratchett books. Mars Trilogy books, Neil Gaiman books."

Table B.1 (cont.)

CODE	DESCRIPTION	EXEMPLARS
Emotional response	expression of emotion in relation to books/reading	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Guess what came in the mail! Did you guess that it's the gigantic dictionary of last words of famous people? Because if not, you guessed wrong! Oh my god, oh my god, oh my g-o-o-od!" 2. "There was a young Nerdfighter in Indianapolis, Indiana who went to get that book you signed, and she recorded her experience, and she was very excited...I want to say that I am in no way making fun of her. I'm a little bit in awe of her actually...You may want to turn down your speakers a little bit."
Empathy	referencing empathy or the act of placing selves in others' shoes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "it's nice to see that this entire shelf of science fiction here, in fact, allows me to learn more about us as humans." 2. "Reading with an eye toward metaphor allows us to become the person we're reading about while reading about them."
Expertise	establishing special knowledge or insight (or lack thereof)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "having both attended college and watched the movie Animal House, I feel like college is one of my fields of expertise." 2. I am here to solve your problems! "How do I best confront the urge toward Nihilism?" Well, not that kind of problem. Your smaller problems.
Fan identity	spoken or performed references to being a fan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "I love LeGuin. I am a LeGuin fan. I've got a whole shelf of LeGuin over there" 2. what's important is that we got a call before the movie started. And it was you, John, calling to tell us Neil Gaiman had posted a link to brotherhood2.com on his blog. HOO HA! There's not much better than having someone who you're a big fan of be a fan of something you're doing.
Fan-Art	creative practices connecting fan and reader identities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "it's so fun when I make something up, and then someone else makes something up about the thing I made up" 2. "I made a Valentine for Katherine that I kinda want to share... just in case there are any Jane Austen nerdfighters out there.

Table B.1 (cont.)

CODE	DESCRIPTION	EXEMPLARS
Gatherings	references to/attendance at offline community meet-ups	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Then the people start to show up, and there are a lot of them. They wear my face on their torso, or Doctor Who shirts, and they bring book cakes, and they have things I wrote tattooed on their bodies, sometimes in borderline inappropriate places, all of which is amazing and beautiful and also of course completely terrifying 2. "Part 3: nerdfighter gatherings. Hank, nerdfighters that live in or around the Bay area should go to an awesome nerdfighter gathering on October 10. Nerdfighters are getting together for a fundraiser for Sean Ahmed's Uncultured Project.
Harry Potter	references to Harry Potter – the novels, the fans, the fan-related art	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 'Cause I need Harry Potter, Like a Grindylow needs water. And as Saturday approaches my need grows! Oh Accio Deathly Hallows, Incendio Book Sales Embargoes, It'll be like phoenix tears on a broken nose." 2. "I would like to invite the Nerdfighters into My Pants to come and give their opinion on why they think that Harry Potter is such a gigantic phenomenon."
Input	feedback provided to the vlogbrothers, via comments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Nerdfighters: the beard, should I keep it or shave it? Vote in comments." 2. "I need your excellent punishment suggestions in comments, and if you have time, I'd love it if you read through all the comments with me and thumbs up the ones you like the most"
Interaction	use of social media platforms to facilitate community communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "I think it's time for the Brotherhood 2.0 to have a forum. Because the comments are getting really confused, and there's so many of them." 2. "I can't find nerdfighters who live in my area." You should look on Facebook and in the Ning and in Your Pants (context is everything), because there are a lot of location-specific nerdfighter groups.
Links	references to/use of hyperlinks in the information section of video	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "there's a link to get Anna and the French Kiss by Nerdfighter Stephanie Perkins in the doobly-doo" 2. "the only way we'll know where to go is if you go to eventful.com, and there's a link in the sidebar, as you might imagine."
Meaning-making	references to/act of finding meaning in books and stories	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. But authors don't own books, readers do" 2. : "to what extent do you think Gatsby is a hero? I mean, I know he's the titular character of the novel, but to what extent do you think his quest is heroic? And secondly, is your quest heroic?"

Table B.1 (cont.)

CODE	DESCRIPTION	EXEMPLARS
Metaphor	references to metaphors or symbols in books	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. One of the reasons that metaphor and symbolism are so important to books is that they're also important to life. Like, for example, say you're in high school, and you're a boy, and you say to a girl, "do you like anyone right now?" That's not the question you're asking. The question you are asking is, "do you like me right now?" 2. "how, in fiction, are supernatural beings created? And what does that say about the people who write those stories and the people who are interested in those stories?"
Nerd identity	spoken or performed references to being a nerd	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Oct. 30th: My Name is John Green. And I'm a Nerd." 2. "Nerds like us are allowed to be unironically enthusiastic about stuff"
Nerdfighters as readers	references to the Nerdfighter reader identity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "I think that a large percentage of our fan base are book readers" 2. "I mean I was surprised last December when Nerdfighters proved that they could take over YouTube, but I didn't think we could take over the New York Times' Best Seller List!"
Ownership	references to owning or collecting books	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "it can become kind of difficult to find places to put all of them." 2. QJ: How many books do you own? AJ: Around 1300.
Play, with book	interacting with physical books for recreation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Video: "Brotherhood 2.0: January 15" Battle of the Books 2. Maureen Johnson just had a fantastic invention idea: the e-book for the Wii. I want to go to page 39 now. (John uses his Wii remote to simulate flipping through pages of a book) Ya! Ya! Ya!
Play, with content	interacting with book content for recreation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I was trying to think to myself who do I really admire who wears makeup? First thing that came to my mind was Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of The Hunger Games. In the opening ceremony of the Hunger Games, they talk a lot about her fashion, and she's totally into it....So I wanted a cool look, nice, dark, smoky District 12 look, and this is what I'm going for, and if I had ever put on makeup before in my life, I think that it would have been really awesome. 2. Can you give you give me a lol books summary of a Jane Austen book? Mah Famlee gotz klass, But no Moneez, I can haz husband?
Professional writing, act of	performed act related to being a professional writer or author	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "'for the next week or so I'm going to be editing, like 14 hours a day, and it's going to be very stressful" 2. "I've been working a lot. My wonderful editor at Dutton, Julie Strauss Gabel, sent me back the edits for Paper Towns."

Table B.1 (cont.)

CODE	DESCRIPTION	EXEMPLARS
Projects (replace activities) p.10-12	community-based cooperative efforts, via links	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "You have the opportunity to do something pretty amazing. But we're gonna need a lot of Nerdfighter help to do it. If you go to nerdfighters.com right now, or click the link in the sidebar, you'll find a sign-up" 2. "Nerdfighters, if you are interested in helping, guidetonerdfighting.com. Link in the doobly-doo."
Reader-fan practices	practices connecting reader and fan identities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "there are several groups of made-of-awesome Nerdfighters around the country who are inserting little notes into my books in bookstores, telling potential readers to come to Nerdfighter gatherings" 2. Video: "What Did You Think of Paper Towns!"
Reading, Act of	reading aloud, literal performance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "I'm commencing a project to read James Joyce's entire Ulysses to you out loud thirty seconds at a time starting now. (Reading from the book)." 2. "I just started reading Maureen's which is the first in the book, unlike on the cover. And you are correct, that means that it's time for some Hank Green fast talk and book reading. "The Jubilee Express" by Maureen Johnson, chapter one."
Reading, Reference to	direct references to reading as a practice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "this morning, I was sitting in bed, reading a book with my wife," 2. "I'm trying to read 50 books in 2012. And so far, I've read two great ones. First, The Art of Fielding by Chad Harbach."
Reading, Visual References to	visual components that imply the performance of reading	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. bookshelves as backdrop 2. physical books displayed in videos
Recommendations	references to/act of recommending books	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. So, if you're looking for a good book, here's one. I think it actually has a lot to say about Nerdfighting, and in several different ways. 2. Video: "Nerdfighter Book Recommendations: A Gift Giving Guide for Nerdfightastic Readers."

Table B.1 (cont.)

CODE	DESCRIPTION	EXEMPLARS
School-related rhetoric	references to school-based reading or learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "you may think you hate math, but you don't hate math. You hate the way you were taught math" 2. Our second stretch...is the "Teacher! Please call on me! It's me! I know the answer! I do! Ah! Call on me, teacher!" You feel it right in there. You feel that? I know I look good. I know. So do you. And the other side! "Why don't you call on me? It goes so much faster if you just call on the smart kids! You only call on the dumb kids! It takes forever to learn anything! Please call on me!" Alright! Good stretch!"
Sharing written works	reading their own or each other's written work	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "I'm gonna read from my new book Paper Towns which comes out on Thursday." 2. Hank, that's the first page of my zombie apocalypse novella which will never be published, not because I dislike zombie apocalypse novellas but because mine is BAD. That's by far the best page of it, it gets much worse from there.
Social reading	references to/act of reading together	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "you know what summertime at the beach means. It means it's time to slather on the SPF50 and read some great literature together." 2. "If you wanna read with me, I'm currently reading The Lathe of Heaven"
Social writing	references to/act of writing together	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "I think we should discuss that and everything else in this video and any other topics you find interesting in the first fifteen chapters over at the Ning, where I have started an official 'let's talk about Holden Caulfield and The Catcher in the Rye' thread" 2. during the P4A, Nerdfighters commented on YouTube videos more than 200,000 times; no joke. And that meant a lot of CAPTCHA codes, some of which sounded like made-up words, that Nerdfighters then invented definitions for. UGH For which Nerdfighters then invented definitions! PWND! So Hank, here are a few entries from the Nerdfighter CAPTCHA dictionary: *Comilinkta- The euphoric state in which a Nerdfighter can comment on fifteen videos in one minute. *Nipyhat- A little hat, you put on your nips, to keep 'em warm. *Rapito- The speed at which Nerdfighters comment. *Brucula- Vampire Brussels sprouts.
Teaching	references to being a teacher or to the act of teaching	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "Often when we try to learn about something with Nerdfighteria, whether it's like quarks or The Catcher in the Rye, we see comments in which people are like, "aw, I wish you were my chemistry teacher!" or "you would make a great English teacher," and I'm always really flattered by that, but unfortunately it's completely untrue." 2. "right now, all of the world, teenage Nerdfighters are like, 'augh, God, I hate that book!' But I don't care. I think we should read it anyway, and then you can tell why you don't like it, and then I'll tell you why you actually should".

Table B.1 (cont.)

CODE	DESCRIPTION	EXEMPLARS
Transmedia	practices that employ both text and video media content	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Video: "I Know (A Song in Ten Words)" 2. "“when I get stressed out, I like to play ‘google auto-fill one again proves that people are weird”"
Writer identity	spoken or performed references to being a writer or author	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "You are Hank Green, you are twenty...uhh...six? You are a web designer and environmental activist and writer. My name is John Green. I’m 29. I’m a writer" 2. "Hank, a couple months ago I did a video that was about, like, a day in the life of a writer. And it was me, and Scott Westerfeld and Maureen Johnson, hanging out in a hotel room and writing. And that was really fun. So I thought I would do a follow up called A Day in the Life of a Writer, uh, Who Doesn't Have Any Friends."
Writing, Reference to	references to writing as a practice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "riding around on a road trip is a really great time to write songs, and I have started to write several of them on this road trip" 2. I'm thankful that I get to write the books I wanna write, when I wanna write them, for the people I wanna write them for.

Table B.2 Thematic List of Codes with Descriptions

THEME	CODE	DESCRIPTION
Performance	Reading, Act of	reading aloud, literal performance
	Reading, Reference to	direct references to reading as a practice
	Reading, Visual References to	visual components that imply the performance of reading
	Book Knowledge	expressions of knowledge of book content
	Writer identity	spoken or performed references to being a writer or author
	Writing, Reference to	references to writing as a practice
	Sharing written works	reading their own or each other's written work
	Professional writing, act of	performed act related to being a professional writer or author
	Advice about writing	giving advice about being or becoming a writer/getting published
	Advice (Other)	giving advice about something not related to writing
	Expertise	establishing special knowledge or insight (or lack thereof)
	Celebrity	talking about being famous or the famous
Participation	Links	references to/use of hyperlinks in the information section of video
	Projects	community-based cooperative efforts, via links
	Comments	references to/uses of the comment section of the YouTube platform
	Input	feedback provided to the vlogbrothers, via comments
	Coordination	use of social media platforms to create and organize projects
	Interaction	use of social media platforms to facilitate community communication
	Transmedia	practices that employ both text and video media content
	Cross-platforms	practices that move across different social media platforms

Table B.2 (cont.)

THEME	CODE	DESCRIPTION
Reading Communities	Nerdfighters as readers	references to the Nerdfighter reader identity
	Fan identity	spoken or performed references to being a fan
	Reader-fan practices	practices connecting reader and fan identities
	Communities	references to the function and value of communities
	Gatherings	references to/attendance at offline community meet-ups
	Harry Potter	references to Harry Potter – the novels, the fans, the fan-related art
Social Literacies	Social reading	references to/act of reading together
	Recommendations	references to/act of recommending books
	Book Clubs	references to/act of participating in book clubs
	Social writing	references to/act of writing together
	Authors as Friends	references to/act of socializing with other authors
	Collaboration	references to/act of collaborating on written works
Emotional Engagement	Nerd identity	spoken or performed references to being a nerd
	Emotional response	expression of emotion in relation to books/reading
	Book as physical objects	interacting with a book as a physical object, distinct from content
	Ownership	references to owning or collecting books
	Display	reference to displaying or organizing books, including visuals
Creative Engagement	Play, with book	interacting with physical books for recreation
	Play, with content	interacting with book content for recreation
	Fan-Art	creative practices connecting fan and reader identities
	Adaptation	references to/act of adapting narratives from books to other mediums

Table B.2 (cont.)

THEME	CODE	DESCRIPTION
Intellectual Engagement	School-related rhetoric	references to school-based reading or learning
	Teaching	references to being a teacher or to the act of teaching
	Authorial Intent	references to what an author means or does on purpose
	Meaning-making	references to/act of finding meaning in books and stories
	Critical reading, purpose of	references to the value and purpose of critical literary analysis
	Metaphor	references to metaphors or symbols in books
	Empathy	referencing empathy or the act of placing selves in others' shoes