Deconstructing Austen Cybertexts:
How *Pride and Prejudice* became *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

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Introduction

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries (hereafter referred to as LBD) debuted on YouTube in April 2012 with a video featuring a twenty-four-year-old Elizabeth "Lizzie" Bennet speaking directly to the camera ('My Name is Lizzie Bennet - Ep. 1', 2012). That video marked the beginning of Lizzie's year-long story, which re-imagined and re-worked Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, by distributing the narrative across multiple media platforms. Originally released as a serial narrative from April 2012 to March 2013, Lizzie's story started with that first YouTube video before expanding to include four additional video channels (belonging to some of the narrative's secondary characters), thirteen interconnected Twitter feeds, several Tumblr blogs, Facebook profiles, and numerous interactions between characters on various social media networks. Initially developed for its Internet audience by Hank Green and Bernie Su, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* narrative as a whole was a collaborative effort by a team of writers and editors. Margaret Dunlap, Rachel Kiley, Kate Rorick, and Anne Toole joined Su in scripting the YouTube videos, while Jay Bushman and Alexandra Edwards managed and edited LBD's various social media accounts ('Team', 2017). In 2013, the LBD production team won a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Creative Achievement in Interactive Media - Original Interactive Programme ('65th Emmy Awards Nominees and Winners').[1]

Currently, LBD serves as a case study for an ongoing research project being conducted in the Department of Media Studies at Maynooth University. This project explores how the interactive and participatory elements of digital narratives such as LBD contribute to the digital reading experience, proposing that readers engage with a digital text in a way that is fundamentally different from engaging with an analogue text. This paper offers an overview of LBD's structure and key features, which highlight the various narrative paths and perspectives that allow readers to navigate through the narrative according to their own choices, thus creating a highly individualised experience that deepens their connection with the text and their overall sense of immersion in LBD's fictional world. The paper will conclude with the proposed trajectory for this research project and the key research questions being considered.

LBD Structure and Features

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries unfolds primarily on YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr, with other social media networks and platforms contributing smaller parts of the story. During the narrative's initial release in 2012, Lizzie's older sister, Jane, for example, featured her interest in fashion on the online community Lookbook, whereas secondary character Gigi Darcy used the now-closed music network, This is My Jam, to share favourite songs and lyrics. The result of having the LBD story distributed across these different networks and websites is the creation of what Marie-Laure Ryan calls a 'storyworld', in which the individual pieces of a story

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[1] In April 2017, the production team behind LBD announced it would re-release Lizzie's primary videos in real time to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the narrative. The re-release began on 5 June 2017.

combine to form a more complete narrative experience (2015). By placing Lizzie's storyworld within the digitally-focused twenty-first century, LBD updates Austen's novel while still maintaining a degree of faithfulness to Austen's original book. In the first YouTube video, for example, Lizzie's first words to her audience are a recitation of *Pride and Prejudice*'s opening sentence: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife' ('My Name is Lizzie Bennet', 2012; Austen 2012: I.1).

The creation of the LBD storyworld, with its multiple connected (but independent) media platforms, also allows the narrative to function as a cybertext. Defined by Espen Aarseth in his seminal 1998 monograph, a cybertext is a text in which its mechanical organisation is a fundamental part of a reader's literary exchange with the text, and which actively invites readers to make specific choices about how to navigate through that text:

> ...when you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed. (Aarseth, pp. 1-2)

LBD encourages readers to move through Lizzie's storyworld at their own pace and according to their own preferences as readers. Each choice they make is a deliberate action that results in a specific version of the narrative, which may differ from another reader's version depending on the decisions they have made. For instance, some readers may choose to view only Lizzie's YouTube videos, while others may interact with characters and fans on Twitter and Tumblr. Additionally, a reader's navigation through LBD may not necessarily be the same each time, as she may choose to make different decisions each time she engages with the narrative. One reader may choose to consume individual elements of the narrative in chronological order, while others may prefer to jump between different narrative paths, moving backwards, forwards, or across the media platforms.[2]

These components that comprise LBD's storyworld on the different media platforms are often referred to 'transmedia'. In a 2007 post on 'Transmedia Storytelling 101', media scholar Henry Jenkins defines transmedia storytelling as a process 'where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience' (qtd. in Ryan 2015, p. 2). While Lizzie's YouTube videos act as the primary narrative for the overall story, the other elements (such as the tweets, the blog posts, the social media interactions, etc.) play an important role in supplementing and complementing the primary narrative to present a much more comprehensive and immersive storyworld and reading experience. For example, many of the transmedia elements give the narrative's secondary characters a chance to 'speak' for themselves. Lizzie's point of view dominates most of the narrative through her videos, her Twitter feed, her blog posts, and other social media updates. In particular, Lizzie's videos feature her speaking directly to her audience; this diary-style structure makes it difficult to include some of the secondary

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[2] This ability to read the narrative in a non-chronological order is primarily a function of LBD currently existing as a mostly complete story. During LBD's initial, serialised release in 2012 and 2013, skipping forward was not always possible as the story was still unfolding in real time.

characters in a natural way.[3] Lizzie's first-person perspective is also limited and biased. Austen's novel is titled *Pride and Prejudice* for a reason: Lizzie is not always a reliable narrator. By allocating specific transmedia elements to characters other than Lizzie, LBD can include their point of view into the overall narrative and storyworld.

One of the best illustrations of this comes from Lizzie's younger sister, Lydia. In Austen's novel, Lydia plays a crucial role in creating conflict at the climax of the novel's plot, but Austen's narrator does not provide readers with insight into Lydia's motivations or thought processes. In LBD, however, Lydia has her own YouTube channel and Twitter feed, through which her own story and perspective of shared events unfold as she expresses her ideas and opinions independent from Lizzie. This not only allows Lydia to speak for herself, but it also gives readers the option of consuming the additional material from Lydia's perspective to create another layer of meaning to their experience with the story. Moreover, when Lizzie mentions offhand that she is not fully aware of the events in Lydia's life, readers may have the sense that they know more about the story than the main character. This gives them the chance to 'inform' Lizzie about Lydia and feel immersed in Lizzie's storyworld, engaging with the story as if it were unfolding in the real world, in real time.

Additionally, the transmedia elements allow LBD to include a number of features in the narrative that help distinguish it as a uniquely digital version of Austen's novel. Those features include a robust online fan community, 'digital breadcrumbs' that offer links to Austen's story, and opportunities for interactivity and participation. The development of the fan community, for example, began and continues to expand on Tumblr. As a platform that allows users to post content in a variety of formats, Tumblr acts as a hub for LBD fans because readers can easily share and circulate text posts theorising about the story, image posts of original fan artwork, or GIF sets of key moments from Lizzie's videos. Moreover, Lizzie, Jane, and Lydia's own Tumblr blogs frequently highlight and promote readers' content, which demonstrates a degree of connectivity between the narrative (through its characters and writers) and its readers, strengthening readers' sense of connection to Lizzie's storyworld.

That connection is also strengthened by the presence of 'digital breadcrumbs', or little hints or nods to well-known plot points from Austen's novel. These digital breadcrumbs foreshadow plot points that either have not yet appeared in a video or will not appear in a video at all. Early in the narrative, for instance, Bing, Caroline, and Darcy exchange messages over Twitter while attending a wedding:

> **@bingliest:** @wmdarcy put your phone down and go dance with somebody.
> **@wmdarcy:** @bingliest not likely.
> **@that_caroline:** @wmdarcy nice catch! #awkward
> **@bingliest:** @wmdarcy I take it back. you should definitely stay off the dance floor.
> ('A Wedding' 2012)

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[3] These characters, including Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, and Darcy, are present on the page from the earliest chapters in Austen's novel, but due to the first-person diary style of Lizzie's videos, LBD needed to find a way to integrate them into the story naturally. Thus, LBD came up with the idea of 'costume theatre', in which Lizzie uses a recognisable costume piece (a hat, a bowtie, etc) to offer an exaggerated depiction of these characters. These costume theatre depictions act as a performance of identity on screen, in which readers come to know the depicted characters through Lizzie's portrayal of them. At the same time, costume theatre also often highlights Lizzie's prejudices since she represents these characters according to her own opinions and biases.

From the text of the messages, readers can deduce that Darcy caught the garter and then danced with someone. Shortly thereafter, in one of Lizzie's videos released after the Twitter exchange, readers find out that Lizzie was also present at the same wedding, caught the bouquet, and thus was the person dancing with Darcy ('Snobby Mr. Douchey—Ep. 6' 2012). Those familiar with *Pride and Prejudice* would be able to recognise Lizzie and Darcy's dance as their infamous first meeting. That meeting is a crucial part of the narrative, as it sets the tone for what will become an adversarial relationship, but as previously explained, Lizzie's videos have a first-person diary-style structure, and therefore readers do not have the opportunity to see Darcy's reaction to the meeting. With the transmedia elements on Twitter, however, LBD is able to present Darcy's perspective on those events, offering an alternative point of view and contributing to the creation of a larger, more in-depth 'interactive storyworld' that allows readers to fully immerse themselves in the narrative (Swallow Prior, 2013).

Perhaps most importantly, however, LBD's transmedia elements incorporate aspects of interactivity and participation into the narrative. As Marie-Laure Ryan points out in a 2015 article for the *Storyworlds* journal, 'when people love a story and its world, they will want more and more [elements] that add substance to the storyworld' (p. 16). In creating Lizzie's storyworld, the LBD production team deliberately chose digital media platforms that would provide readers with that substance by allowing them to leverage the specific functions of those sites to interact and participate with the narrative's characters and each other. These functions, sometimes known as technical affordances or sociotechnical affordances, prompt certain behaviours on the part of readers (boyd, 2005, pp. 10-11). YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr, for instance, all have sharing tools that encourage users to circulate existing content to their own friends and followers. LBD readers can share Lizzie's videos to other social networks or even email or embed a direct link to a specific video. Twitter and Tumblr facilitate sharing through the retweet and reblog tools, respectively. These platforms also enabled a degree of interactivity between LBD's characters and readers during LBD's initial release in 2012 and 2013. For example, Lizzie often replied to reader comments left on YouTube and even incorporated reader questions into the narrative through special question-and-answer videos, while Twitter's mention function (the '@ reply') allowed LBD characters to communicate with readers in real time. These elements—the sharing tools, the commenting function, and the mentions—provide readers with a method of participating in the LBD story that helps facilitate 'the feeling of being counted', or an experience that is ultimately fulfilling and satisfying for the reader (Coleman, 2014, qtd. in Papacharissi, 2014, p. 25). By engaging with the readers through the narrative's media platforms, the LBD production team reinforces their connection to and immersion in Lizzie's story, and provides them with the sense that their contributions matter to the larger storyworld.

Looking Ahead

As the structure and features of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* seem to indicate, the experience of reading the LBD narrative is highly individualised depending on the choices each reader makes, and therefore differs significantly from the experience of reading Austen's original novel. As previously stated, this research project will consider how the participatory and interactive elements of LBD, and the reader's engagement with them, contribute to a different, digital reading experience. Furthermore, the project will investigate how those elements might contribute to new understandings of literature in digital spaces and new ways of thinking about what it means to be a literary text. Existing research from Zizi Papacharissi, Frank Rose, Marie-

Laure Ryan, and others suggests that digital narratives such as LBD may 'connect people [and readers] in ways that make them feel like their views matter', through their various interactive and participatory elements (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 32). In doing so, these narratives create an immersive narrative experience that encourages readers to lose themselves in Lizzie's fictional world (Rose, 2015, para. 6).

Following an in-depth critical analysis of LBD (with reference to Austen's novel), this research project will conduct a qualitative survey with LBD readers to understand their reading experiences and their engagement with LBD's transmedia and interactive elements. The survey results will help frame a series of semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with a smaller sample of readers as well as members of LBD's production team. The analysis of the survey and interview data will seek to discover how the specific methods of participation and interactivity in LBD might influence, affect, or alter a reader's experience with the overall narrative. As Rose points out, 'the Internet has redefined our expectations from stories' (2011, para. 22) and therefore updating classic analogue texts like *Pride and Prejudice* for the digital media environment may open new avenues of research in the study of narrative and story.

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