

*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries: A Web Series Analysis*

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On April 9, 2012, the pilot episode of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* premiered on its dedicated YouTube channel. In its year-long run, it would ultimately become the first web series to ever win a Primetime Emmy Award, and arguably transformed the way in which web series and transmedia are created and consumed (McNutt, 2014). A modern take on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, *Lizzie Bennet* followed the life of the titular Lizzie through her vlogs, eventually expanding to include the lives of her best friend and sisters after "rich, single guy" Bing Lee moves to town .

The pilot episode of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* reached 1.6 million viewers by 2014 (one year after its ending), and now boasts double that amount today (Buenneke, 2014). The series totalled to 100 "official" episodes (although there is some controversy in disregarding other content as unofficial, when they too are short web clips), adding up to almost 160 episodes when considering Lydia's vlogs, the Q&A videos, and bonus content (McNutt, 2014). Most episodes range from two to four minutes. Each episode is supplemented with transmedia elements, such as character Twitter and Tumblr accounts. Almost all of the content still exists on curated YouTube channels, while the rest can be found on curated Facebook pages.

The reasoning behind using YouTube (and more importantly, YouTube communities) does not seem that far-fetched when one considers that one of the series' co-creators (the other being the now Peabody-award winner Bernie Su) was Hank Green of the YouTube channel Vlogbrothers. Vlogbrothers was created by Hank and his brother John in 2006, and by the time that *Lizzie Bennet* ended, the Greens' channel had surpassed one million subscribers and maintained a devoted YouTube community, known as the Nerdfighteria. Many commenters in

the early *Lizzie Bennet* videos reference their “Nerdfighter” status as being a central reason for their initial viewing.

Beyond using this pre-existent fanbase, many of the techniques implemented by *Lizzie Bennet* ironically comes from a Vlogbrothers video entitled “How to Vlog: From the Vlogbrothers” (Andersen, 2013). The idea, then, was to use transmedia effectively by engaging with fans through a myriad of platforms (as the Vlogbrothers were already doing in real life) and craft a story solely confined within the idea of a multi-platform Internet vlog. This allowed the creators to reach viewers outside of their pre-established fan base, as many fans discovered the series through rabbit holes on Twitter, Tumblr, and other platforms on which pieces of the story lived (McNutt, 2014). Jay Bushman, who is credited by *LA Weekly* as the leader of the transmedia efforts, discussed the nuances of implementing multiple platforms: “We had to keep the different audiences in mind... We had to make sure everything in the social sphere was reiterated in the videos” (as quoted in Buenneke, 2014). In other words, when considering the role of transmedia, it is important to decide which part is considered the central media to which you want to attract the majority of your audience.

In the case of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, the central narrative exists on Lizzie’s YouTube channel in the form of her vlogs. Each vlog begins with Lizzie introducing herself, and introducing the topic of discussion for the day. However, each video is derailed by some kind of interruption, from her sisters or friends barging into the video, or Lizzie getting news regarding action taking place off-camera. The content is all confined to the web-cam set-up, so every plot point must be explained either through Lizzie (or one of the other central characters, who begin to take control of parts of the narrative) or take place in front of the camera in order for the

viewer to see it happen. Lizzie also gets her friends to help her recreate action on-screen, while many characters (such as Charlotte, who inputs her own viewpoint while editing Lizzie's videos) take umbrage with the way in which Lizzie portrays certain events, establishing Lizzie as an unreliable narrator.

While this set-up can lead to some formulaic or awkward moments, such as Lizzie broadcasting a very personal fight between herself and Charlotte after Charlotte repeatedly turns off the camera, the effect it has on the viewers is well worth some off-moments. Many of the reviews, including that from *The Guardian* that declared *LBD* the best adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* of all time, reference how personal and real the vlog-style episodes feel (Welsh, 2013). The viewer feels personally involved in the woes of Lizzie Bennet (who as a character actually does not shy away from being dislikable at times) and perhaps even more so to the carefully modernized plotlines of her sisters and friends. Lizzie's aforementioned unreliability as a narrator, as well as the subtle ways the writers were able to convey background storylines (most notably Lydia's) creates a deeply developed world within a very short episode span.

This is only amplified by things such as the Q&A videos, or character Twitters to which concerned viewers could send advice for the protagonists. The fourth wall in *Lizzie Bennet* is more of a narrative subjective than an absolute truth, in which the characters are actively addressing a fictional audience, while a very real audience is engaging with fictional characters as though they were real. The real audience has some feeling of control, as they are able to roleplay as the fictional audience within the series, but the story remains fictional and pre-determined. On the flipside, the audience remains very real as a viewership tally, and it was actually due to fan-pressure that Lydia's YouTube channel was made in order to give her

character more screen time and development (McNut, 2014). It is this careful balance that led to the active fandom that ended up forming around the series.

Even once the series was over, its legacy and its fans continued to leave their mark on Internet-based content. The creators launched a Kickstarter campaign to raise money to release DVDs of the series, and met their goal of \$60,000 within the first day (they ultimately raised over \$462,000 total) (McNut, 2014). Books such as *The Secret Diary of Lizzie Bennet* were also extremely successful, despite the fact that *Lizzie Bennet* was an adaptation of a book originally. However, the role of transmedia cannot be denied, as later in 2013 the same team came out with another Austen adaptation, *Emma Approved*. While still maintaining multiple platforms, *Emma Approved* was notably much less participatory than *Lizzie Bennet*, and fans made their opinions known through low viewership and less than great reviews of the series, whereas the viewership on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* actually continues to grow at a fairly stable rate to this day (*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, n.d.).

Overall, *Lizzie Bennet* works in its simplicity. Most of the work has to be done during the writing stage, in order to make the impossibly clever seem natural within the web-cam set-up. The second step is maintaining the content housed on more participatory platforms, which allows viewers to feel more connected to the characters and story. The final product is a compelling modern adaptation of one of literature's most beloved properties, and a shining example of how to properly employ transmedia and multiplatform storytelling within a web-series.

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