

Social Media Narrative:
Issues in Contemporary Practice

hosted by The Rutgers Camden Digital Studies Center and Judy Malloy
and the Rutgers Camden DSC Class in Social Media Narrative:

Lineage and Contemporary Practice
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Transcript: Jay Bushman



Jay Bushman

November 16, 2016

Thanks for having me as a part of this important conversation. I'm Jay Bushman. I'm a writer, producer and transmedia storyteller — even though “transmedia” continues to be a problematic, divisive term, I continue to use it because I haven't found a better one.

Social media has been a major part of my storytelling toolbox since I first started using Twitter in 2007. I did one of the first Twitter novels, *The Good Captain*: <http://jaybushman.com/The-Good-Captain>. But I soon found that social tools felt more effective when used to express strong character voices—for dramatic storytelling rather than prose fiction. That approach has fueled my work ever since, through a variety of projects culminating in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a modern multiplatform adaptation of “*Pride and Prejudice*” that I worked on as Transmedia Producer and staff writer.

But we're not here to just toot our own horns, but to discuss issues in contemporary practice, and there's a major issue that I run into again and again, that I continually look for new ways to solve, and that I haven't cracked yet: replayability. For all of the immediacy and power of social media, these tools are all relentlessly realtime; they are optimized for the new, the now, the latest. They are extensions of the blog dynamic of reverse chronology, which is a problem if you are trying to tell linear stories like I usually do.

There are limited toolsets — thank Zod for Storify — that can help in some cases, but they are usually limited to small scale compilations, or to single platforms. They do not scale for multi-voiced, multi-format, multi-platform stories. For example, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* sprawled across 35 individual social accounts on a dozen platforms. Social platforms are already not great at helping you find something that happened last week, last month or last year, and its almost impossible to find an old story if the pieces of it are spread across multiple sites.

Our solution in that instance was to create an archival list of links in chronological order: <http://www.pemberleydigital.com/the-lizzie-bennet-diaries/.../>. This is barely functional, however, and provides a terrible audience experience for consuming the story. It also does not help with the handful of fictional websites we incorporated into the story; state changes throughout the story are not reflected by the final version of a website.

I should also add at this point that I am not a coder; I imagine it would be possible to custom-build an application to replay content of this type, but it is beyond my ability—and the commercial projects I've worked on do not see the need to spend resources on this.

As an attempt to address this, I started a company a few years ago. The Horizon Factory aimed towards building an easy-to-use authoring system to compile multiple kinds of media—video, audio, text, graphics, social and interactive—into an mobile, tablet and/or SmartTV app that would serve as a single package, a sort of multiplatform version of a DVD box set. I'm sad to say that earlier this year we shut the company down, as we were unable to find the right investors.

I have to admit that I find myself moving away from social as a primary tool in my storytelling. Not only do replayability issues hamper the ability to find an audience, but the platforms are evolving to become more and more hostile towards these kinds of endeavors. Twitter, my first social media love, has become almost unusable in the past few years as they decided to focus on becoming a celebrity broadcasting tool. YouTube has become gamed towards their top-tier creators and make it almost impossible for new projects and entries to be discovered. Social media in general has become optimized for personalities over content, requiring continuing, never-ending streams of content to “build a brand.” But I'm not interested in building brands or creating a never-ending stream of content—I tell stories, and stories need endings. And endings are anathema to social platforms as currently constructed.



What is "The Lizzie Bennet Diaries"?

Meet the groundbreaking transmedia serial that re-invented Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" for connected audiences.
Winner of the 2013 Emmy...
vimeo.com|By JayBushman

Comments



Jay Bushman Caveat: I live and work in Hollywood, so the logic, imperatives and business realities of mainstream commercial storytelling are all in the water that fills up my particular fish tank.

November 16, 2016 at 7:41pm



Chris Rodley Hi Jay! I apologize for starting with a very-blatantly-tangential question. I spent a lot of time on Twitter fooling around with fragments of not-quite-there creative ideas. This was one, and I'm very keen for your expert opinion as one of the world's foremost Austen modernizers (huge fan of LBD by the way): <https://twitter.com/chrisrodley/status/793925315529539584>

November 17, 2016 at 5:03am



Jay Bushman Thanks, Chris! I'm not sure Lydia or Kitty would even bother to vote. 😊

November 18, 2016 at 11:28pm



Judy Malloy Welcome to Jay Bushman, Transmedia Producer and a staff writer for The Lizzie Bennet Diaries, the first YouTube-distributed series to win a Primetime Emmy Award (for Outstanding Achievement in Original Interactive Content).

Visit <http://www.narrabase.net/socmedianarrative.html#jay> for more information about Jay!



November 16, 2016 at 8:06pm



Judy Malloy Hi Jay, Great to see you here! One of the pleasures of preparing the Syllabus for Social Media Narrative was rerunning almost all of the episodes of the Lizzie Bennet Diaries.

November 16, 2016 at 8:09pm



Jay Bushman Thanks Judy. I would be remiss if I didn't say that for all the narrative and social innovation we build into the project, it goes nowhere without our incredible actors and a brilliant writing staff that I was privileged to be a part of

November 16, 2016 at 8:11pm



Judy Malloy Hi Jay,

Something I'd like to emphasize in your post is the difficulty of archiving real time social media in a way that conserves the vitality and spirit of the original.

Earlier this semester, I asked my students to write a World Model (in the Interactive Fiction sense) in 20 tweets. One of the major issues -- one that I know you have confronted -- was whether to post

in sequential order, so that the audience saw the whole (interspersed with other tweets) initially in sequential order or to post in reverse sequential order so that the whole appeared on their own Twitter page in sequential order. The possibility of writing in such a way that it did not matter in what order the tweets were read was also suggested. Each student made a different decision of how to do this, each taking into account their own vision of what worked best for their narrative -- and sometimes suggesting to the reader that they begin at the bottom in a final tweet. On the whole, I think they all worked, even though for many students, this was not an expected part of the exercise.

But this -- not to mention that Twitter deleted his second character -- was a simple problem compared with what a student in another class faced when he chose to tweet two different characters simultaneously. Here, a hand-created HTML site was able to represent the work, but it was difficult to convey the energy of the performative action with which this work was created.

One of the best solutions I've seen in student work was to film the screen action, including the actual writing of the social media posts, so that the viewer saw the text appearing..

And certainly the vimeo you created and linked in your statement is very effective. I had a hard time taking a screen shot because it moved so fast, but the very speed of your work conveys the energy of The Lizzie Bennet Diaries.

November 17, 2016 at 5:08pm



Remove

[Zack Zampino](#) Hi Jay, welcome to the panel!

I was wondering; with The Lizzie Bennet Diaries, were there any benefits to developing a series online as opposed to a traditional media production?

November 18, 2016 at 5:21pm



[Jay Bushman](#) Loads. For one thing, most traditional media production companies wouldn't touch a show like LBD. Its too far outside the realm of what they usually do.



[Judy Malloy](#) Hello Jay!

Thanks for joining us. It was a pleasure to have you here!

Given that the "Final Projects Ideas and Crits" topic just went up on our Rutgers Camden DSC class on Social Media Narrative, it's a good time to look at the Emmy-winning The Lizzie Bennet Diaries in terms of why they work so well.

To begin with, in this memorable work of social media narrative that utilizes deceptively homespun vlogging both as a medium and as content, the medium really is the message. And, as Ricky Collins

mansplains to Lizzie, "The key to success is content, content, and content"

Indeed, one of my favorite episodes is episode 25 "VidCon Interruption"

<http://www.pemberleydigital.com/episode-25-vidcon.../> -- in which Lizzie, (Ashley Clements), usually shown vlogging in her bedroom, appears in a corridor of the Southern California web video conference Vidcon, and her cousin Ricky Collins (@maxwellglick) unexpectedly enters the screen -- transforming the churchy original into a salesman-suited principal in a web video company, who in his words ("due to my calculating choice of career path I have yet to achieve my doctoral degree) is "plunging into the lush progressive frontier of online video."

In terms of innovative social media-based fanfiction, I also like how LBD changes the landscape dominated look and feel of English countryside portrayals of Pride and Prejudice into selfie dominated screens, where closeted in her bedroom in the Bennet home, Lizzie relates the incidents in her life -- vlogging live to an Internet audience.

Lydia (Mary Kate Wiles) and Jane (Laura Spencer), who regularly appear in Lizzie's bedroom, are so entrancing that they have replaced the classic BBC versions in the minds of many. Japanese, Irish, German, Spanish actor, Sean Christopher, plays the wealthy Bing Lee who is studying to be a doctor; Mr Darcy (Daniel Vincent Gordh) is the starchy-sexy manager of Pemberley Digital.

And importantly, the potential for transmedia in social media narrative is brilliantly illustrated in transmedia episodes: "Darcy Follows Lizzi" (on Twitter); Lydia and her cat Kitty appear on Tumblr and Facebook, and the interactive role of the audience when the work initially aired was an integral part of the production.

There are 100 or so short episodes of LBD. Just as I turn to Facebook or Twitter at certain times, often in social media moods, I watch episodes of LBD at random. Some might debate the value of this, but I think it is important for social media storytellers to look at the medium -- and the potential of the medium -- in many different ways.

Thanks Jay! Many good wishes for your future endeavors.

November 27, 2016 at 10:29am · Edited