Creating a Genre: How *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* Brought Classic Literature to Youtube One Vlog at a Time

by Anna McGill

In 2012, when respected Youtubers Hank Green and Bernie Su announced a modern adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* in Youtube's signature vlog format, online adaptations of literature were essentially unheard of. Two and a half years, 100 episodes, and a wildly popular immersive social media experience later, *Lizzie Bennet* has established itself as the best standard of a new genre: classic vlogature.

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries
A Pemberley Digital Production
Created by Hank Green and Bernie Su
April 9, 2012-March 28, 2013
100 episodes
2-8 minutes per episode
Youtube Channel (and search term): *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*
256,787 Subscribers (to date)

Though I have come to love different adaptations and to respect Elizabeth Bennet's literary peers (such as Jane Eyre and Emma Woodhouse), in high school my initial 16-year-old response to *Pride and Prejudice* was apathetic at best. When handed one of England's most famous classic romance novels, my response was essentially "So what?" Why should I care about these girls not really that much older than myself, dithering on about who they were going to marry like so many high-schoolers squabbling over who they'd be holding hands with during Friday's game. Therefore, when respected Youtuber Hank Green made the announcement in 2012 that he and producer Bernie Su were producing *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, a modernized adaptation of Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, over multiple media platforms and primarily through video blogs, I didn't know what to think. However, once I started watching and getting sucked into the world of Lizzie Bennet, I was hooked.

Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is one of our society's most beloved romances. The novel addresses the lives of the Bennets, an upper-middle class English family in the early

19th century, as they attempt to find suitable husbands for their five eligible daughters. The story is told from the perspective of the Bennets' second daughter, Elizabeth. She is a strong-willed and independent young woman living in a time when those characteristics were not thought of favorably (and could, as her mother feared, prevent her from acquiring the aforementioned suitable husband). Throughout the course of the novel, Elizabeth and her sisters (particularly Jane and Lydia, the eldest and youngest Bennet daughters, respectively) meet a varied cast of suitors, ranging from the grasping George Wickham to the pompous Mr. Collins to the sweet Mr. Bingley to the passionate Mr. Darcy himself. *Pride and Prejudice* tells the story of Elizabeth's and Mr. Darcy's developing relationship, a study in miscommunication, and ends with Darcy professing his love for Elizabeth so poetically that even the most stoic reader may tear up. To date, Austin's most famous work has been adapted countless times into many different formats, including at least 18 film and/or television adaptations, none of which had ever really appealed to me—that is, until *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* was released.

  The Lizzie Bennet Diaries is a refreshing update of Austin's classic story. The narrative is primarily told in video blogs (vlogs) on Youtube, ranging in length from about two to eight minutes. Vlogs, essentially, are composed of one person (sometimes two or three) talking directly to a stationary camera, allowing the "vlogger" to maintain a one-sided conversation with the audience. In a departure from the third-person omniscient narration

Charlotte Lu (Julia Cho), Lizzie Bennet, Lydia Bennet, and Jane Bennet on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

of the novel, the narrative of the vlogs is explicitly from the perspective of Elizabeth "Lizzie"

Bennet, who is played masterfully by Ashley Clements. Lizzie provides her viewers with

necessary exposition, and other reimagined *Pride and Prejudice* characters form a revolving cast

of guests on her vlogs, following the arc of the story. The creators of the show avoided my

"squabbling high-schoolers" issue by placing the characters in a slightly older age bracket.

Lizzie, for instance, is a 24-year-old Mass Communications graduate student (buried in student

loan debt and living at home) at the start of the series, and her younger sister, Lydia (Mary Kate

Wiles), is 20. She also has an older sister, Jane (Laura Spencer), whose age is not given. Lizzie

Lizzie with the infamous shirt, Episode 1, "My Name is Lizzie Bennet"

only has two sisters in this adaptation, though *Pride and Prejudice*'s other Bennet sisters, Mary and Kitty, do make cameo appearances in the series as a cousin and a cat, respectively. The premise of series is that the videos are a thesis project, following Lizzie through her last year of

graduate school as she reflects on her own life and the lives of those around her. The main

characters include mainly her sisters Lydia and Jane, as well as other familiar characters such as

William Darcy (Daniel Vincent Gordh), Bing Lee (Christopher Sean), Ricky Collins (Maxwell

Glick), and George Wickham (Wes Aderhold). Episode 1 ("My Name is Lizzie Bennet") begins

with Lizzie complaining about her mother, who has taken bemoaning her daughters' singleness

to new heights by creating t-shirts prominently featuring the famous introductory line of *Pride*

and Prejudice, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good

fortune must be in want of a wife." Over the course of 100 main episodes clocking in at two to eight minutes each, the series chronicles life-changing events, including Lizzie's famous relationship with Darcy, leading up to the final episode, "The End."

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries manages to maintain the delicate balance of modernizing the story in such an involved format that even the strictest Pride and Prejudice lover would not be disappointed. Of course, modernizing a classic romance novel to fit into a world of video blogging requires some changes. The LBD (a popular fan abbreviation) is set in southern California rather than England, with a diverse cast reflective of the area. Also, some of the challenges the characters face in Austin's novel simply do not carry the same weight today, so they were updated in a manner that, at least in my opinion, still suits the spirit of the story. One excellent example of this is the way the creators handled Lydia Bennet's storyline. In Austin's Pride and Prejudice, the worst thing 15-year-

Lydia Bennet and George Wickham (Wes Aderhold) on The Lydia Bennet

old Lydia could do for her reputation (and therefore her life) is to run away, unchaperoned, to live with deceptively charming Mr. Wickham, dooming her to a life of an unhappy marriage to an unsuitable husband (and that was the best case scenario). Obviously, in 2012, when national divorce rates hover around 50% anyway, the danger had to be updated; therefore, the modern George Wickham creates a website counting down to the release of a sex tape he and Lydia have made. Not only does this update and all the others serve the practical purpose actually

modernizing the story, they had the added benefit of creating (equally dramatic) situations that are far more relatable to a modern audience.

In 2012, the idea of adapting a classic novel as a Youtube series was unheard of, much less the whole immersive experience that *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* became. The universe of the *LBD* included in-character Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Tumblr and blog posts in addition to the weekly vlogs posted to *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* Youtube channel. The website counting down George Wickham's release of Lydia's sextape was even actually online (at lydiabennettape.com), until Darcy saved the day by paying to have the site taken down. Additionally, several spin-offs were created to provide access to other parts of the story that were out of Lizzie's reach in the narrative vlog format. The primary spin-off, The Lydia Bennet (found on the Youtube channel of the same name), chronicles Lydia's story arc when she cannot be on the main vlogs, such as when Lizzie is away. The characters even do "Q&A Videos" at different times throughout the series, answering real questions from viewers as they would at whatever moment the video was taking place during the story.

As someone who likes to get totally absorbed into a series, all this content was ideal. Apparently I'm not the only person who thinks so, because the series' popularity skyrocketed online in late 2012, forming a massive community of fans who frequently created and

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries fanart by Tetra-Zelda on Deviantart.com

added their own "fanart" to the LBD universe. This art included videos, music, gifs, digital and physical painting, and anything else you can imagine that was inspired by and supplementary to the official content of the story. The ability to interact with the characters outside of the weekly videos creates a close-knit and powerful fan community. That power was demonstrated when the *LBD* launched a Kickstarter (a crowd-funding platform) to fund the creation of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* DVD sets (featuring all the video content created for the series, bonus featurettes, bloopers, and commentary), and fans met the initial pledge goal of $60,000 in less than six hours.

The Lizzie Bennet Diaries has received critical acclaim as well, winning a total of six awards, including an Emmy for Outstanding Creative Achievement In Interactive Media--Original Interactive Program (2013). *LBD* also won Best Interactive/Social Media Experience at the 2nd International Academy of Web Television Awards (2013). Between two years and 10 nominations at the Streamy Awards (which recognize excellence in online video), showrunner Bernie Su won Best Writing for a Comedy and the show won Best Interactive Program in 2013. In 2014, Ashley Clements won Best Female Performance in a Drama Series, and *LBD* won Best Interactive/Social Media Experience.

Personally, I thoroughly enjoyed *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, watching with bated breath as the episodes aired, waiting for the first, inevitable Dizzie kiss along with (seemingly) the rest of the Internet. (Dizzie is the fan couple name for Lizzie and Darcy, a la "Brangelina.") I followed the characters' Twitter feeds raptly and was inspired by their fashion blogs. However, for me, the most significant element of my love for *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* was explained best

Darcy and Lizzie in Episode 60, "Are You Kidding Me!"

by the show's co-creator and executive producer, Hank Green, in his video on the *Vlogbrothers* Youtube channel called "Introducing Lizzie Bennet": "It's pretty, you know, honestly dangerous because it's very different from the way that any other fiction story has been told before… I consider it to be an extremely exciting experiment." It takes a lot of tenacity to try something no one has ever done before, and the *LBD*'s success is a testament to the passion and care of its creators. As someone who loves literature and online video, I am grateful for the risks the show took with modernizing and telling this story in totally unprecedented ways. I sincerely believe that by doing so, the *LBD* will be remembered as setting the standard for a new type of storytelling.

In conclusion, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* was truly the first of its kind, making way for a whole new way to experience literature: a fully immersive and interactive online program. It has generated a whole genre of similar book-enactment video series, including two "sequel" series produced by Pemberley Digital, *Emma Approved* (2013) and *Frankenstein, M*D (2014). These series were based on Jane Austin's *Emma* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Other similar series were Vervegirl TV's *Carmilla* and Jane Eyre's *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre*. *LBD* is a wonderful, faithful, and critically acclaimed modernization of one of the most beloved romance novels of all time, and has daringly set the stage for many exciting new things. For that alone, it is definitely worth the watch. Two thumbs up.

Emma Woodhouse (Joanna Sotomura) and Alex Knightly (Brent Bailey) in Pemberly Digital series *Emma Approved*