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Shaina Gwynn Robbins

Brigham Young University - Provo

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Faithful to the Fans: Audience Influence on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and Transmedia

Adaptation Fidelity

Shaina Gwynn Robbins

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Carl Sederholm, Chair
Francesca Sborgi Lawson
Jane Kathleen Gardner Hinckley

Department of Comparative Arts and Letters
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

Faithful to the Fans: Audience Influence on The Lizzie Bennet Diaries and Transmedia Adaptation Fidelity

Shaina Gwynn Robbins
Department of Comparative Arts and Letters, BYU
Master of Arts

New forms of digital storytelling directly challenge conventional notions about adaptation by allowing for increased audience participation. Fans today exercise unprecedented levels of influence over how beloved stories are adapted. According to Thomas Leitch, fans have historically influenced certain adaptations by calling for increased fidelity. He refers to these adaptations, which resist the inevitability of infidelity to an unusual degree, as “exceptionally faithful.” Though rare, these efforts at fidelity are typically the result of fan demands. Ultimately, these seemingly faithful adaptations are more faithful to fan expectations than to their original texts.

Scholarship is needed on the extensive influence of what I call “fan faithfulness,” particularly in new transmedia adaptations that directly empower fans. This paper seeks to shed light on the problem by first placing itself within the current scholarly conversation on fidelity and then exploring the historical relationship between fan demands and faithfulness. Traditional Jane Austen adaptations, which have so often been exceptionally faithful, will form the cornerstone of this analysis, as will The Lizzie Bennet Diaries, a 2012-2013 serialized YouTube adaptation of Pride and Prejudice. In direct and immediate response to audience demands, this series altered its characters and storylines to accord with fans’ belief that Jane Austen was a feminist and that her books echoed that feminism. As The Lizzie Bennet Diaries’ dedication to Austen’s feminist themes powerfully shows, new transmedia storytelling allows fans unprecedented power in demanding fidelity and deciding what that faithfulness means.

Keywords: adaptation, fidelity, transmedia, Jane Austen, The Lizzie Bennet Diaries
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Introduction

New forms of digital storytelling directly challenge conventional notions about adaptation by allowing for increased audience participation. Fans today exercise unprecedented levels of influence over how beloved stories are adapted. According to Thomas Leitch, fans have historically influenced certain adaptations by calling for increased fidelity. He refers to these adaptations, which resist the inevitability of infidelity to an unusual degree, as “exceptionally faithful.” Though rare, these efforts at fidelity are typically the result of fan demands. Ultimately, these seemingly faithful adaptations are more faithful to fan expectations than to their original texts.

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Fidelity Scholarship and Fan Faithfulness

In the study of adaptation theory, fidelity is a complex term. Contemporary scholarship unanimously and correctly argues against using fidelity as a standard of adaptation quality.
Technical fidelity proves illusory and even impossible to achieve, given the inherent dissimilarities of literature and film. Referencing what he calls the “automatic difference” between the novel and film, Robert Stam says:

The shift from a single-track, uniquely verbal medium such as the novel, which ‘has only words to play with,’ to a multitrack medium such as film, which can play not only with words (written and spoken), but also with theatrical performance, music, sound effects, and moving photographic images, explains the unlikelihood – and I would suggest even the undesireability – of literal fidelity. (Stam 56)

Film and text each offer unique opportunities and limitations for expressing ideas, emotions, and storylines, and adaptations fare best when they play to their unique strengths.

Since literal fidelity proves so impossible to achieve, critics have often instead debated whether an adaptation captures the “essence” of a work. As early as 1948, André Bazin claimed, “Faithfulness to a form, literary or otherwise, is illusory: what matters is equivalence in the meaning of the forms” (Bazin 20). But scholars have also denounced this approach, arguing that faithfulness to the spirit of a work proves just as elusive as fidelity. Robert Stam contends that within a work, “it is assumed, there is an originary core, a kernel of meaning or nucleus of events that can be ‘delivered’ by an adaptation. But in fact there is no such transferable core: a single novelistic text comprises a series of verbal signals that can generate a plethora of possible readings” (Stam 57). Stam and other theorists have instead called for an intertextual approach that examines the relationship between not only the original text and the adaptation, but also other adaptations and various interpretations of the original.

Too often, concern for fidelity arises out of a misguided but common assumption that literature has greater value than film. Brian McFarlane has suggested that the disappointment
audiences and critics often express about fidelity results from “the ingrained notion that the
written word not merely preceded but (invariably) outranked the audio-visual moving image”
(McFarlane 18). Similarly, Stam suggests that “literary elitists” hold to an “assumption that the
cinema inevitably lacks the depth and dignity of literature” (“Beyond Fidelity” 59).
Furthermore, scholars have questioned the loaded terminology used to discuss fidelity. “The
language of criticism dealing with the film adaptation of novels has often been profoundly
moralistic,” Robert Stam has famously argued, “awash in terms such as infidelity, betrayal,
violation, vulgarization, and desecration, each accusation carrying its specific charge of outraged
negativity” (Stam 54). For an adaptation to step in anyway away from the original becomes,
dialectically, a moral transgression, verbally akin to breaking marriage vows.

When, then, and in what way is it appropriate to discuss fidelity? Thomas Leitch warns
against the trap of obsessing over fidelity even as it is disavowed (Leitch 20). The “fidelity”
discussed in this paper is not fidelity in its traditional sense, however. Rather than scrutinizing
the ways in which various adaptations replicate and diverge from their original sources, I instead
seek to understand what I’m calling “fan faithfulness,” or how adaptations aim to accord with
audience perceptions of fidelity to certain aspects of a text. In reality, fan faithful adaptations
prove no more faithful than other adaptations, but they do try to give the appearance of fidelity.
True fidelity remains as elusive as ever, given the differences between film and literature. Fan
fidelity, which I define as an effort to appear faithful to the aspects of an original work that most
resonate with fans, is typically fictional; nevertheless, it appeals to fans, who control the
financial success of adaptations. Brian McFarlane has argued, “No one is suggesting that
viewer-readers will not have opinions about whether they prefer the film or the novel. Opinions,
though, are private reactions that don’t necessarily forward the discourse about film and
literature” (McFarlane 27). Although McFarlane suggests that audience opinions are of little importance in terms of adaptation theory, those privately held opinions matter deeply to adaptors. As a result, they should matter to adaptation scholars. Adaptors, especially those adapting classic or bestselling works, increasingly rely on fan support in the box office. As a result, they aim for fan faithfulness, a perceived fidelity to the aspects of a work that fans care most deeply about. This has become increasingly true in the age of social media, with new transmedia storytelling enhancing to a startling degree fans’ power to influence adaptive practices. An adaptation need not remain faithful to the original, but to succeed financially, it must appear so to as many fans as possible.

Exceptionally Fan Faithful

Some adaptations, typically those based on books with large, loyal, and vocal readership, aim for an unusually high level of perceived fidelity, what Thomas Leitch calls “exceptional fidelity,” and what I would call “exceptional fan faithfulness.” Using the examples of Gone with the Wind and The Lord of the Rings, Leitch devotes a chapter of his book Film Adaptation and its Discontents to understanding why filmmakers occasionally devote themselves to fidelity in this way. As 1000 plus page novels, both Lord of the Rings and Gone with the Wind were unlikely options for highly faithful film adaptations, and the filmmakers did make some concessions. As in nearly all novel adaptations, both films cut or combined minor characters, eliminated non-essential scenes, and amplified certain aspects of the original. Nevertheless, David O. Selznick, Gone with the Wind’s producer, and Peter Jackson, The Lord of the Rings’ producer, director, and primary screenwriter, approached their projects with a near reverence for the original novels; both Selznick and actor Orlando Bloom, who played Legolas in The Lord of the Rings franchise referred to their respective adaptation’s source novel as “the Bible” (Leitch
128-33). For Selznick this meant absolute fidelity to Margaret Mitchell’s original language. Though frequently used out of order, every piece of dialogue in the film comes directly from Mitchell’s novel. For Jackson, faithfully creating Tolkien’s world onscreen was more important than recreating dialogue or every aspect of plot from the novels. This fidelity in representing Tolkien’s characters, creatures, and magical lands drew not only from the original Lord of the Rings trilogy, but also from supplementary materials like The Silmarillion, the History of Middle Earth, and the appendices to The Return of the King.

In spite of the different forms of fidelity the two projects emphasized, the reason behind their exceptional efforts was the same - both projects were based on novels with enormous, devoted fan followings that could demand a high level of fidelity on their own terms. Margaret Mitchell’s novel quickly became popular upon its publication in 1936, and Selznick immediately bought the rights. He initially intended to make a film of average length and budget, which would have required significant cuts from the storyline. When Gone with the Wind became the bestselling book in the United States for two years running and won the 1936 Pulitzer Prize, however, his commitment to fidelity increased. He said, “People simply seem to be passionate about the details of the book…I don’t think any of us have ever tackled anything that is really comparable in the love people have for it” (Leitch 238). Mitchell herself was scared away from participating in the adaptation process by her fans’ fervor, saying her “life wouldn’t be worth living” if fans felt she was responsible for any deviations from the book (Leitch 128). In an effort to retain as much of Mitchell’s original story as possible, Selznick’s film became the longest and one of the most expensive to date. The producer knew, however, that such fidelity would be rewarded with high tickets sales from devoted, pleased fans. He certainly wasn’t wrong, as Gone with the Wind stands as the highest grossing film of all time when adjusted for
inflation. As Leitch perceptively declares, “The primary motive for fidelity in most widely known adaptations is financial, not aesthetic” (Leitch 128). Ultimately, Selznick was faithful to Mitchell’s book because fans wanted fidelity, and fans buy tickets.

Jackson’s intended audience was quite different from Selznick’s, but no less devoted. Though not a contemporary bestseller, *The Lord of the Rings* was a fifty-year-old classic of fantasy literature with a wide following. Its large and enthusiastic fan base had a level of influence unavailable to Mitchell’s fans thanks to the Internet. As Leitch described, *The Lord of the Rings* had a “vast network of fans ready and eager to comment on the ongoing production on Tolkien Web sites, message boards, and blogs. The filmmakers’ awareness of such powerful surrogates surely helped keep them steadfast in their dedication to the goal of fidelity” (Leitch 143). He further explained that the production company behind *The Fellowship of the Ring* actively encouraged this activity, often using online, interactive features to make fans feel like they were part of the production process and that their viewpoints mattered:

The making-of slant of New Line’s publicity empowered viewers following the progress of the production online and often commenting on it on message and discussion boards as active collaborators in the filmmaking process. It was as if absorbing and understanding studio-fed information about the film’s production and registering their reactions in a public forum made them consultants on the film. (Leitch 146)

Perhaps most tellingly, the extended edition DVDs include a twenty-minute-long list of the founders of various *Lord of the Rings* clubs in the credits, thereby demonstrating the influence that fans had on the adaptation.

The production histories of *Gone with the Wind* and *The Lord of the Rings* indicate how fans may exert influence over ideas of film fidelity and how that influence began to increase with
the advent of online message boards. In the late 1930s, *Gone with the Wind* enthusiasts who wanted to see their favorite characters, storylines, themes, and lines from the book could perhaps write to MGM or even to Selznick himself. Ultimately, though, their participation was limited to reading in newspapers about the production process, which was widely publicized, and then voting with their pocketbooks after the movie came out. Their ticket purchases and their recommendations to friends were their ultimate way of expressing their approval. The knowledge that fans expected a faithful adaptation unquestionably influenced the way Selznick and the production team behind the film approached *Gone with the Wind*, but in an indirect way. For *Lord of the Rings*, Peter Jackson maintained a similar awareness of fans’ obsessive love for Tolkien’s works. In addition, New Line’s online media campaign and message boards throughout production gave fans a new platform to call for fidelity. This interactive promotional strategy hints at the unprecedented levels of power that would be given to fans a few years later in new, inherently interactive, transmedia storytelling.

Filmmakers still retain the right to ignore fans’ calls for fidelity, but they take a risk in doing so. Though none of the *Star Wars* films are adaptations, they have still provoked intriguing questions about the nature of fidelity within contemporary popular culture. Both Henry Jenkins and Siobhan O’Flynn have discussed how George Lucas’s decision to change film content in VHS, DVD, and Blu-ray releases of Episodes 4, 5, and 6 sparked fan outrage, outrage which continues to be vividly expressed on the Internet. On Wikipedia and a wide variety of other online sources, fans have meticulously noted every change made between the original films and the rereleased versions. Reflecting on the controversy, O’Flynn remarks: “What is most striking about the extreme negative responses by fans to his changes…is that they reveal the depth of fan loyalty to the original releases and the perceived value of a fidelity to that original
content and experience that Lucas, though the creator, is seen as having betrayed” (O’Flynn 190). Fans see the franchise’s very creator as having been unfaithful to his stories, but Lucas’s response has hardly been sympathetic: “My movie, with my name on it, that says I did it, needs to be the way I want it” (Curtis). The blowback against Lucas’s changes to the originals and the widespread criticism of Episodes 1, 2, and 3 were not enough for him to give in to fans’ demands for fidelity. Instead, he backed away from the movie business, eventually selling Lucasfilm to Disney. Disney’s newest iteration in the Star Wars franchise, The Force Awakens, has broken box office records, arguably because it maintains the elusive fidelity fans are looking for. With her mysterious parentage, good heart, and incredible power, Rey’s story consciously echoes that of Luke Skywalker. In addition, the new film brings back beloved characters like Leia, Han, and Chewbacca. It even features a new, adorable robot sidekick, the new generation’s R2D2. As Ty Burr of The Boston Globe has said, “Don’t tell anyone, but the movie’s more of a remake than a reboot” (Burr).

In just these few examples, it becomes clear that fans eager for faithful adaptations (and even sequels or rereleases) have historically exerted influence over producers and directors. They hold the power of the purse. By buying or not buying movie tickets, by recommending a film to a friend or dissuading them from seeing it, they wield enormous influence over moviemakers. In this way, fans have always had influence over the filmmaking process and have indirectly agitated for fidelity. In the digital age, where individuals with an Internet connection can post their opinions for thousands to see instantly, this influence becomes more direct. Fan faithfulness requires adaptors to determine which aspects of an original matter most to fans, and to then highlight and even exaggerate those characteristics. Even as fans call for faithfulness, it is a perceived rather than actual form of fidelity.
Faithful to the Janeites

With no fewer than seventy Austen film, television, and YouTube adaptations having been made since MGM’s *Pride and Prejudice* premiered in 1940, there can be no question of the continuing popularity of Austen’s works as a source for adaptation. Today, Austen devotees, who refer to themselves as “Janeites,” are among the most populous and devoted fandoms in the world; nevertheless, Austen’s popularity has not always been so intense. A brief examination of the history of the most significant Austen adaptations and their levels of fidelity quickly reveals that the fidelity of Austen adaptations corresponds directly with Austen’s general level of popularity. Before her popularity spiked in the 1970s and then exploded in the 1990s, Austen adaptations were relatively uncommon and made without particular concern for or understanding of Austen fans. As her works became more popular and widely read in the last fifty years, though, adaptors showed increased interest in adapting her works faithfully. Though they initially struggled to understand which forms of fidelity mattered most to audiences, adaptors in the mid-1990s finally hit on a formula of fan fidelity that appealed directly to even Austen’s most ardent admirers. The popularity of the 1995 adaptations of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, both of which accorded with fan demands for fidelity, sparked an Austen Renaissance that continues to this day, with more than 40 Austen adaptations having been made in the last twenty years. As Austen has moved from being simply a respected author to being a cultural touchstone, adaptors have become increasingly concerned with and effective at responding to fan demands for fidelity, laying the groundwork for highly interactive adaptations like *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*.

The first film adaptation of an Austen novel, MGM’s *Pride and Prejudice*, premiered in 1940 and made little effort at fidelity or fan fidelity. By then, the first wave of Austen
enthusiasm had been in bloom for roughly 70 years, and she was firmly established as a popular author with critics and general readers. Nevertheless, the positive public opinion of *Pride and Prejudice* at the time could in no way compare to the enthusiasm for a current bestseller like *Gone with the Wind* or with the public Austen mania that occurred in the late twentieth century. Indeed, the film was in many ways responding to the desires of *Gone with the Wind* fans rather than those of *Pride and Prejudice*; moving the storyline to the 1830s, the film used large bonnets and hoop-skirted dresses more reminiscent of the American Civil War era than the British Regency. The film captured some of Austen’s playfulness and satire, while drastically altering setting and plot. More than striving for fidelity or fan fidelity, it aimed to shore up British and American relations in the midst of World War II by softening the aristocratic feel of Austen’s world and the snobbery of her characters (Troost 76-77). Audience fervor was simply not strong enough to induce filmmakers to aim for fan fidelity. Though the film fared well with critics, it was a financial loss in the box office.

As Austen’s popularity grew in the last quarter of the twentieth century, adaptors showed new interest in presenting her stories faithfully, but they failed to achieve fidelity in the ways that mattered to fans. A 1971 version of *Persuasion* produced by Granada Television and a 1972 BBC adaptation of *Emma* aimed for absolute fidelity to Austen’s world, a trend that continued throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Meticulous attention was paid to recreating Regency style costumes, hairstyles, and even posture. In addition, these adaptations presented the English countryside, aristocratic houses, and even dining room table settings with careful historical accuracy. Linda Troost has noted that fidelity in these areas led to infidelity in areas that were probably more important to fans, saying, “The disadvantage of such authenticity, however, is that the objects and possessions can become disproportionately important, displacing characters
or ideas” (Troost 80). Fidelity to the historical era trumped fan fidelity, and it backfired. Troost explains that these adaptations “lack sparkle” and that they were “accurate, authentic, and slightly dull” (Troost 79). Audiences agreed, and the adaptations never earned widespread popularity.

Up to this point, Austen adaptations had not been primarily focused on pleasing Austen fans and remaining faithful in the ways they wished. Since Austen scholarship and popularity had not yet reached the intense levels they would in decades to come, the 1940 Pride and Prejudice had little financial incentive to remain faithful to Austen’s plot or dialogue. It could simply benefit from the cultural cachet of adapting a literary classic without worrying too much about fan backlash over perceived infidelity. Beginning in the 1950s, but particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, the BBC dominated Austen adaptations. Since the broadcasting company could rely wholly on government funds, producing Austen adaptations ranked its educational and cultural value as highly as entertainment. Because of this, the adaptations aimed for fidelity, but not fan fidelity.

In the mid-1990s, Austen adaptation changed drastically by finally aligning with fan expectations for fidelity. As is typically the case with exceptionally faithful adaptations, financial concerns prompted this responsiveness to fans. As Linda Troost notes, in the 1990s, “the BBC expanded its mission beyond providing education and culture to a nation – it now needed to be financially self-sufficient. And television companies discovered that there was money to be made in selling British Heritage to overseas markets” (Troost 82). Suddenly, BBC Austen adaptations like the 1995 Pride and Prejudice miniseries were aiming for fidelity not just for educational and historical purposes, but for commercial ones. That same year, Sense and Sensibility, the first big budget Hollywood adaptation of an Austen novel since 1940, also
premiered. Having cost $16 million to make, it too relied on audience support to recoup expenses. For the first time, Austen was popular enough and the adaptations were costly enough that pleasing fans was immensely important. Fans had the status to demand fidelity and to define what it meant. When both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* were enormous critical and financial successes, the power of fans to demand fidelity was reinforced, and nearly every adaptation since has aimed to imitate the triumphs of the 1995 adaptations.

Thomas Leitch has identified three forms of perceived fidelity in the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* that positively affected the miniseries’ enduring popularity with both fans and critics: fidelity to Austen’s dialogue, fidelity to her world, and fidelity to her romantic storylines (Leitch 172-173). These same characteristics apply equally in the 1995 *Sense and Sensibility*. Other theorists have argued that fidelity to Austen’s progressive social views marks a fourth component that audiences expect in a fan faithful adaptation. The effectiveness of fidelity to these four components makes sense, given that the popularity of Austen’s novels has generally been attributed to these very same components. In 2014, *The American Conservative* named Austen’s literary style, her social commentary, and nostalgia as the source of her continued status (Mattix). The *Wall Street Journal* has credited her universal themes, her humor and wit, and her romantic, fairytale like endings (Alter). *The Stylist* points to her timeless love stories, her idealized Regency world, her “sly wit and cynicism,” and her feminist themes (“Jane Austen: An Influential Woman”). *The Guardian* suggests that her “playful style,” her romantic plots, and themes that “have hardly become anachronistic” contribute to her ongoing esteem (Clark). Dialogue or style, nostalgia, romance, and timeless social commentary – again and again these act as the major appeal factors in Austen’s literature. Beginning with *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* in 1995, nearly every Austen adaptation has thus aimed for apparent
fidelity in these four areas. In reality, an emphasis on these factors often breaks with Austen’s original novels, but for fans, it constitutes fidelity.

As Leitch notes, fans often equate fidelity to Austen’s dialogue with fidelity to Austen herself (Leitch 172), much as the fans and creators of Gone with the Wind did in 1939. Unlike Gone with the Wind, however, Austen adaptations since the mid-1990s have only maintained dialogue that sounds faithful to Austen, without consistently quoting the novels. BBC’s 1995 Pride and Prejudice uses some of the novel’s dialogue, but more often uses lines created by screenwriter Andrew Davies to mimic Austen’s rhythm and pace while remaining accessible for modern audiences. Sense and Sensibility used similar methods of condensing Austen’s dialogue and altering it into modern language that still sounds historical. Emma Thompson, the star and Academy Award-winning screenwriter for Sense and Sensibility, wrote that she found the novel’s language “arcane” and aimed to make it more comprehensible while still retaining Austen’s unique voice (Thompson 252). Consider the following exchange from Thompson’s screenplay between Eleanor and Marianne:

ELINOR. You must change, Marianne. You will catch a cold.

MARIANNE. What care I for colds when there is such a man?

ELINOR. You will care very much when your nose swells up.

MARIANNE. You are right. Help me, Elinor.

This conversation never occurs in Austen’s novel, but the humor, coupled with an inverted noun and subject structure (“care I”), mimics the author’s unique rhythm and wit. Audiences demand fidelity to Austen’s dialogue and they generally think they have received it in adaptations since the mid-1990s, but, as Linda Troost summarizes, “It sounds like Austen, but it isn’t Austen” (Troost 85). For the fans, however, it is Austen.
Part of the difficulty in recreating Austen’s tone lies in the indirect form of discourse she favored and the lively, but unidentified voice of her narrator. Adaptations often sidestep this problem by placing the narrator’s words, such as the legendary “truth universally acknowledged” line from *Pride and Prejudice*, into the mouths of her characters. Another strategy, notably used in Miramax’s 1996 film adaptation of *Emma*, uses complex voiceover narration to recreate the feel of Austen’s original. As Hilary Schor has argued, “What is more characteristic of Austen than that voice we love to call hers, the voice of the narrator coming in to tell us what to think?” (Schor 330). The narrator’s words only mimic Austen’s tone, rarely using her exact phrasing, but, just as in the characters’ dialogue, it sounds enough like Austen to appease fans’ desire for faithfulness.

In addition to apparently faithful dialogue, fans responded positively to the apparently faithful presentation of Austen’s world in the 1995 adaptations and their descendents. These adaptations prominently feature lush estates and grand houses in a more exaggerated way than Austen ever does because fans want a version of Regency England heavily filtered through nostalgia. Timothy Corrigan explains, “Within a contemporary climate of political violence and social multiculturalism…these comfortable images of a literary past often present a therapeutic nostalgia for ‘traditional’ national values, while at the same time marketing those values to foreign audiences as a self-contained, stable, and unified vision of another culture” (Corrigan 37). This image of an unblemished past is inaccurate, given that the Regency was ushered in by the insanity of England’s king and that the era was marred by the Napoleonic wars, wide class disparities, and the subjugation of women and minorities. Nevertheless, a perception of an elegant and peaceful Regency England remains an important appeal factor for Austen readers. As a
result, adaptors in the past two decades have aimed for fan faithfulness to an idealized historical past.

Austen provides scant detail about the physical environments of her novels, but in the last twenty years, period adaptations have displayed an obsessive interest in beautifully depicting the English countryside and aristocratic housing. William Galperin has noted that most adaptations feature homes far grander than those Austen described, displaying “A nearly-fetishistic delectation in the upscale and traditional environments where the narratives take place” (Galperin 355). In the case of *Sense and Sensibility*, the film both exaggerates the grandeur of Norland and the poverty of Barton Cottage. Every modern Austen adaptation has also used what Thomas Leitch has called “quasi-period music,” which, though composed today, sounds as though it could have come from the Regency era (Leitch 176). In addition, the films utilize beautiful costumes and hairstyles that appear consistent with Regency culture while still conforming to modern trends. The influence of modern tastes is immediately apparent in contrasting the tight curls of the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* or the 1996 Miramax *Emma* with the loose waves of their respective 2005 and 2009 counterparts. At first glance, these adaptations seem highly faithful in their representations of setting, music, and costumes, yet closer evaluation reveals that they are in fact faithful to contemporary audience tastes and expectations.

Emphasis on romance stands as the final area of adaptation fidelity that Leitch identifies as being vital to fans. As with other areas of faithfulness, however, this fidelity is more perceived than actual. In an effort to highlight the romance in Austen’s stories, the adaptations alter Austen’s male leads. Linda Troost points out that the 1995 *Sense and Sensibility* fleshes out the novel’s heroes, making Edward Ferrars more charming and turning Colonel Brandon into “a Byronic hero to die for” (Troost 83). Interestingly, the Jane Austen Society of North America
reportedly criticized the choice of Hugh Grant, who they felt was too attractive to play Ferrars (Kroll). The 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* invents scenes with Darcy, creating a greater sense of his internal conflict and change. Leitch describes this technique as allowing viewers to “watch him falling in love with [Elizabeth’s] humor, wit, and ebullience” (Leitch 177). The films also highlight the physical nature of the romantic relationships, something Austen never does. *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, features Darcy in a bathtub and, famously, emerging from a pond in a white shirt. These changes were intended to appeal to “a very specific audience – late twentieth-century Western female spectators” by “construct[ing] a model of masculinity far removed from Austen’s in its emphasis on physicality and emotional expression” (Aragay and Lopez 211). Other adaptations, including both 1996 *Emma* adaptations, the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice*, and the various BBC Austen adaptations of the early 2000s follow suit by making their heroes more emotional and physically appealing and inventing romantic moments between the leads. Since the mid-1990s, Austen adaptations have built on the successes of the 1995 Austen adaptations by maintaining exceptional fidelity to the romantic aspects of Austen’s stories, even exaggerating them beyond fidelity. Once again, apparent faithfulness in accordance with fans’ wishes proves more important than literal fidelity to Austen’s text.

Other critics have identified a fourth form of apparent fidelity that has resonated with fans – a faithful representation of Austen’s progressive social critiques. Linda Troost explains that recent adaptations incorporate “a larger and more complex picture of a novel’s world than even the novelist may have considered and thereby [allow] modern viewers a safe arena in which to explore difficult ideas that still have relevance,” such as feminism, class, and authority (Troost 87-88). This becomes first apparent in *Sense and Sensibility*. Emma Thompson worried that the story focused too much on “a couple of women waiting around for men” (Gay 90-110), and thus
emphasized female relationships and empowerment in her script. The 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* also addresses feminist concerns by allowing Charlotte Lucas a monologue to explain her choice to marry Mr. Collins. Rather than portraying Elizabeth’s friend in a light that would seem mercenary to modern viewers, the film carefully presents her as a woman acting out of desperation because of the constraints of her time.

Though modern Austen adaptations frequently addressed the complex social issues Austen critiqued, the most popular adaptations have done so subtly. For some viewers, Patricia Rozema’s 1999 adaptation of *Mansfield Park* pushed too far in its efforts to remain faithful to Austen’s social criticisms. Rozema’s film conflates Fanny with Austen herself, turning the timid heroine into a writer with biting wit. Rozema, likely influenced by the criticism of Edward Said, also plays up the underlying theme of slavery in the novel. Where Austen merely hints that the Bertrams’ wealth comes from slavery, Rozema makes it a central focus of the film. Though critics praised Rozema for her insightful and modern take on Austen’s novel, fans reacted negatively. The film made less that $5 million in its box office run, a paltry showing in comparison with *Sense and Sensibility*’s $43 million earnings, *Pride and Prejudice*’s $38 million (2005), or even *Emma*’s more than $22 million. Troost explains, “There is no denying that Rozema’s film trampled on the protocol of Austen adaptations by introducing a heavy-handed political message and, therefore, had some trouble finding an audience. Those who loved the heritage aspects of *Pride and Prejudice* recoiled from the stark grittiness of this film; those who liked stark grittiness tended not to watch costume drama” (Troost 86). Thus, for fans, it appears that fidelity to Austen’s social critiques, though desirable, must nevertheless be softened in nostalgia for the world she lived in.
Virtually every period adaptation of Austen’s works since 1995 has aimed to please her fans by highlighting Austen’s dialogue, providing nostalgic depictions of Regency England, emphasizing romantic plotlines, and exploring Austen’s socially progressive views in subtle ways. Fans perceive this four-part strategy as defining fidelity to Austen, even though it often in fact causes the adaptations to break with the original novels. William Galperin’s insightful analysis is helpful in understanding this apparent paradox. In addition to being faithful to certain aspects of Austen’s plot and dialogue, successful modern adaptations aims for fidelity “to an idea or ideal of Austen, in which fidelity and infidelity are at times difficult to parse” (Galperin 352). These adaptations seek to honor fan demands for adaptations that are faithful to an alleged “essence” or “spirit” of Austen.

When the adaptations are unfaithful to Austen in one respect, it is because they are trying to be faithful in other respects that are more important to fans. These infidelities “cannot be dismissed as indulgences or inaccuracies. Rather they are attempts to rectify problems and to smooth out inconsistencies in the novels by way of saving Austen from her less felicitous or, as the adaptors seem to feel, less-than-Austenian tendencies” (Galperin 352). He continues, “And so the liberties that the film[s] take with the novel are not liberties. They are efforts to keep faith with the book” (Galperin 353). Galperin makes the important point that popular culture has tended to idolize Austen, depicting her as a perfect author of flawless works. When adaptations try to maintain fidelity through infidelity, it is often an attempt “to render ‘perfect’ or uncomplicated what is necessarily imperfect and in fact a real mess” (Galperin 354).

Galperin’s argument provides a useful framework for understanding why adaptors so often aim for fidelity to an “essence of Austen” in dialogue, nostalgia, romance, and social commentary even if it means unfaithfulness in other respects. Nevertheless, he ignores the
primary reason why they seek this fidelity in the first place – to please and appease Austen’s intense fan base. As the technically faithful, but emotionally flat adaptations of the 1970s and 1980s show, literal fidelity is less important to audiences than fan faithfulness. They want the appeal factors of Austen’s novels presented to them in uncomplicated ways. Fans want an adaptation that feels faithful to Austen’s dialogue, mise-en-scène, romance, and social commentary, even if faithfulness in those areas is illusory or leads to other forms of infidelity. Since 1995, adaptations that appear faithful in these ways have proved remarkably lucrative, further encouraging adaptors to aim for what audiences perceive as fidelity. Because they hold the power of the purse, Austen fans have always had the power, albeit indirectly, to decide what fidelity to the author’s work means. Fidelity to their perceptions proves more important and plausible than the impossible goal of fidelity to Austen’s work.

The Feminist Fan Fidelity of The Lizzie Bennet Diaries

Though all adaptors ultimately aim for audience support in the box office, the creators of The Lizzie Bennet Diaries were unusually dependent on fans. As a YouTube adaptation with absolutely no advertising or marketing, the series relied entirely on word of mouth to gain viewers. Initially, the only monetary return for the web series came through YouTube ads, merchandizing, and affiliate marketing. Though funding for the series was incredibly low when compared with a traditional film or television adaptation budgets, writers, producers, actors, and the crew still required payment. Kate Rorick, one of the writers for The Lizzie Bennet Diaries, said, “When we started we wrote the initial three months as a piece, because initially we weren’t sure whether we were going to have more than three months” (Wiles, Glick, Dunlap, and Rorick). Thus, without studio backing, the very existence of the show required a solid viewing base.
For the creators, simple viewership statistics were unsatisfactory measures of the series’ success. In addition, they wanted to see high levels of engagement with the adaptation. Rachel Kiley, one of the main writers for the series, has argued, “Giving fans something to invest in and a world to immerse themselves in is how you make your audience really care. And if they care, and they’re passionate about your story and your world, they’ll share it with other people, and that enthusiasm becomes contagious and spreads to others” (Kiley, Dunlap, and Bushman). Green echoed Kiley’s sentiment, saying, “My goal is viewership and level of engagement. That’s what excites me. And with those things come profitability. I don’t like to expect any of that, though. I just try to figure out what people enjoy and make that. And not only enjoy, but become dedicated to. When that happens, there are some benefits both monetary and nonmonetary” (“Lizzie Bennet Diaries Interview”). Engagement, measured largely through social media interaction, as well as viewership became the benchmark for the project’s success.

Because of their dependence on fans, the creative team behind The Lizzie Bennet Diaries felt immense pressure to meet fan expectations for an Austen adaptation. Bernie Su, who with Hank Green first conceptualized The Lizzie Bennet Diaries and then served as executive producer and head writer, said of developing the series,

Going in…the pressure was big…I don’t know how much pressure the audience thinks we put on ourselves, but I put a lot of pressure on myself. I was like, this is my mother’s favorite story. This is one of the great stories of all time. And if I’m going to adapt it into a new format – it better be great. If it’s not great, it’s not because I didn’t try. If I fail, I fail, fine. But I am going to give it everything, and analyze, and hyper-analyze, and bring the right people along with me, get the right team, do my due diligence, cast
correctly, look at every line as much as I can; even the tweets, even the transmedia. (Su, Interview with Marama Whyte)

Even more tellingly, Hank Green, when asked if he worries that Austen would disapprove of the adaptation, replied, “Well, she’s well and dead so I don’t really think about her (probably wrong of me, but it’s how I feel.) What does scare me is Jane Austen fans hating me for it” (“I am Hank Green, co-creator, executive producer, and occasional writer for *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*”).

This pressure to please fans in many ways focused on fan fidelity, but fan fidelity takes on a different form in a non-period Austen adaptation. Modernizing adaptors need not worry about depicting a beautiful Regency world steeped in nostalgia because the story is now set in the modern day. Similarly, a modern setting frees adaptors from recreating Austen’s distinctly Regency dialogue. Ashley Clements, who starred as Lizzie in the series, said, “I think there’s a freedom in the fact that we are not period, we are not doing something where you would expect to hear dialogue from the book. A lot of people’s frustration with the 2005 adaptation – I hear a lot about the proposal scene. He doesn’t say his beautiful speech, he just goes, ‘I love you,’ which is much less eloquent. But in 2012/2013, you wouldn’t expect all of that, so there’s a freedom” (Clements). The creators were freed from the need to recreate Austen’s idealized world or unique dialogue, which opened up many creative options for the adaptation.

In spite of the freedoms a modernized adaptation allows, it also proves restricting in other ways. Without nostalgia or Austen’s dialogue to garner audience support, fidelity to Austen’s romance and her social commentary becomes inordinately important in a modern adaptation. These two areas prove problematic in a contemporary setting. Though Austen’s novels are undeniably romantic and socially progressive, especially in terms of the feminism of her day, a
straight translation of those same stories to the twenty-first century would seem neither progressive nor romantic to fans. With this in mind, the creative minds behind *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* altered Austen’s characters and plot to maintain fidelity to her feminism and thus to modern perceptions of romance; they were unfaithful in an effort to remain faithful in the ways fans cared about most. In this manner, fans exerted a traditional form of indirectly influencing the fidelity of an adaptation.

As the creators developed the series, a devotion to fan perceptions of Austen’s feminist themes became a means of resolving problematic aspects of her novel. In a wide variety of interviews and question and answer sessions, Green and Su have been quite open about their belief in Austen’s feminism and their commitment to honoring it onscreen. Green has said, "Lots of scholars have argued that Austen and her contemporaries actually were writing subversive, feminist novels, but that they had to hide those themes under a veneer to make them more acceptable. I agree, I think that Jane Austen was an important figure in the fight for equality for women that continues today. Powerful women should, of course, exist in fiction just as they exist in reality ("Interview #2 – Lizzie Bennet Diaries"). Because of their belief in Austen’s feminism and their belief that fidelity to that feminism would appeal to fans, the creators of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* always intended to emphasize it in their modernized adaptation. In this way, fans exerted the same indirect influence in favor of fidelity that they have always had. Out of necessity, the producers and writers had a rough outline of their adaptation storyline mapped out before filming ever began, and they had a clear idea of some of the feminist updates they would make to Austen’s story. In addition, about a month’s worth of material was filmed before any videos were uploaded to YouTube, meaning there was automatically a delay in receiving audience feedback. Because of this, the show’s creative team
had to, at least initially, guess at which feminist updates fans would deem faithful to their perception of Austen.

In mainstream American culture, a plotline about single women looking for husbands to save them financially would seem decidedly anti-feminist. A straightforward adaptation of any of Austen’s novels into modern society might seem, as Emma Thompson worried about in adapting Sense and Sensibility, like a group of “women waiting around for men” (Gay 92). Other modernized Pride and Prejudice adaptations like Bride and Prejudice or the 2003 independent film Pride and Prejudice sidestep this difficulty by setting the story in modern India and Mormon Utah, both marriage-centric, sexually conservative cultures. In these adaptations, Lalita and Elizabeth are far less marriage-focused than their peers, making them seem like feminist role models in a relatively uncomplicated way. Orlando Seale, who played Darcy in the 2003 adaptation, said, “You have to be quite careful where you set it because most societies no longer share the same social morals as the societies did about which (the novel) was written…This preoccupation with finding the right partner for life, and the rush to get married – it’s a very important theme in the novel, and very important, obviously, in this community” (Taylor). Simultaneously maintaining fidelity to Austen’s storyline while still remaining faithful to fans’ belief in her feminism becomes relatively simple in these translations of Pride and Prejudice.

For a fan-faithful, feminist adaptation of Pride and Prejudice set in non-conservative American society, the lives and struggles of the female characters had to be changed. Women in Austen’s time of necessity lived at home and had limited education and no opportunities to procure money outside of marriage and inheritance, a fact of 19th-century society that she criticized. In The Lizzie Bennet Diaries, the Bennet and Lu parents struggle with debt and
housing worries, and the daughters have hefty student loans. Lizzy, Jane, and Charlotte worry repeatedly about finances and employment, but in spite of these worries, they view education and work, not marriage, as the cure for their money problems. In fact, Mrs. Bennet acts as the only character who emphasizes marriage over career, and she stands as an object of ridicule. Career thus replaces marriage as the ultimate goal, with a healthy romantic relationship as a happy, but not wholly necessary, side note.

This emphasis on careers over relationships becomes apparent when Ricky Collins makes his proposals to Lizzie and later to Charlotte. Rather than proposing marriage, as he does in the novels, he makes an offer of employment at his start-up tech company, Collins and Collins Incorporated. Lizzie refuses the offer and later criticizes Charlotte for accepting it and “throwing away her education to play second fiddle to Ricky Collins.” Lizzie yells, “He wants your help making corporate videos, bad reality TV, and pointless commentary vlogs. This job is a waste of your time and your talent. You’re throwing away your dreams.” In today’s world, marrying a ridiculous man solely for the security of a moderate income wouldn’t make any sense for an educated, capable woman like Charlotte. The idea of accepting a less than ideal job or working with a silly boss for salary, however, makes perfect sense to modern viewers living in a recession job market.

In doing this, The Lizzie Bennet Diaries breaks significantly from Austen’s original plot, instead maintaining fidelity to her perceived feminism in a way that resonates with fans. Various members of The Lizzie Bennet Diaries’ creative team have expressed pride in the way the series shifts the focus away from marriage and onto women living productive, meaningful lives. Ashley Clements, who starred as Lizzie, said,
I’m proud of a lot of things about The LBD, but perhaps most of all the strong female characters. Despite the fact that in the source material these women can’t aspire to more than marriage, our story gave them all more than just love lives. They have aspirations for their careers and educations, they have complex relationships with friends and family, and they struggle to understand themselves and their place in the world. This includes some pretty fantastic romance, but I’m very proud that these characters can be role models beyond that. (Clements and Gordh)

Bernie Su echoed those sentiments, saying, “With this series, I knew we couldn’t make it all about marriage. Let’s bring in education, and career, and dreams, and these grander things in life. It really was important to me to pass the Bechdel test, and not have all the girls fight over guys…I feel like I can give voice to what I’ve seen women experience regarding racism and sexism” (Su and the Cast of The Lizzie Bennet Diaries).

Even when it retains Austen’s romantic plotlines, The Lizzie Bennet Diaries alters those stories in harmony with fan’s feminist expectations. This is especially apparent in Jane’s relationship with Bing Lee. Just as she does in the book, Jane quickly falls in love with Bing, but he ends up leaving her with no warning or explanation. When Bingley returns at the end of Pride and Prejudice, Jane immediately accepts his proposal without reservation. In contrast, Jane initially refuses to reconcile with Bing when he returns and apologizes for his behavior, instead insisting that they stay friends. She ends up receiving a job offer with higher pay and a more impressive title at a firm in New York, and she accepts with no hesitation. She doesn’t even tell Bing that she is leaving and he finds out by watching Lizzie’s videos. She cuts him off when she thinks he is going to ask her to stay, telling him that would be incredibly selfish for him to do. He instead admits he has dropped out of med school and asks if he can go with her to
restart their relationship. In effect, Jane and Bing have reversed roles. She is in a position of financial security, and he is not. She holds the power and he seems fully willing to fall into the relationship, dissolving his own identity in the process. Jane won’t allow it, however, gently but firmly telling him “No. I’m sorry. That’s too much. You can’t.” She ends up relenting a little when she learns that he has looked into career and internship possibilities in New York, but she still maintains authority in the situation. Ultimately, she agrees to the idea of him moving to New York, but only conditionally. “If we do this,” she says, “It wouldn’t be coming with me. You would get your place and I would get mine. That would be the first rule. I’m going for my career, for my life.”

In The Lizzie Bennet Diaries, no one has to rescue Jane. Early in the series, she seems sweet, beautiful and a little weak, a potential damsel in distress ready to be rescued by Bing Lee. By the conclusion, however, the series creators, unlike Austen, have elevated her character from victim to heroine. Jane’s overall storyline follows the same structure of Pride and Prejudice, but in the concluding chapters she shows new backbone and independence in her work and especially in her relationship with Bing. Modern views on feminism complicate Jane and Bingley’s relationship, making it seem antifeminist and unromantic if translated directly to a modern setting. Instead, fidelity to fans’ feminist interpretation of Austen requires alterations to her romantic storylines.

The writers of The Lizzie Bennet Diaries planned these alterations to the Pride and Prejudice storyline early in their creative process, keeping fans’ interest in Austen’s feminist themes in mind. Other changes to Austen’s characters and storylines resulted from direct audience feedback on social media. Thanks to the inherently interactive, social media-launched approach of the series and the fact that episodes aired very shortly after being filmed, fans had an
unprecedentedly direct way of communicating their views on the series and its fan fidelity or infidelity to the creators of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Jay Bushman, a writer for the show, explained that the writing team liked to “keep one eye on the internet to see what the fans were doing and how they were reacting, in case we need to adjust something” (Kiley, Dunlap, and Bushman). Jenni Powell, a writer for the series, described how the production schedule for the series allowed for unusual responsiveness to fan critiques:

> For one example, we shot one day a month for *Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, and we would shoot 8 episodes in a month. So we would shoot a month of content, be releasing that content, and then we’d shoot the next month and be releasing that content. So we had a very quick turnaround. Part of that was to keep the transmedia fresh, so the writers could respond to how the audience was reacting, because it was such an interactive show (Powell).

Similarly, Bernie Su said, “We don’t want to shoot too far ahead because we want to be adaptable” (Su and the Cast of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*). Thanks to this streamlined, almost real-time production process, the creative team could respond quickly to audience feedback. Most notably, the writers and producers found that fans on social media pushed for even greater fidelity to their perception of Austen’s feminism, and they criticized the show when it fell short of modern feminist ideals. The creators in turn responded to these critiques by altering scripts or future story developments.

The most significant changes made in response to audience feedback related to Lydia and Lizzie’s relationship. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen portrays Lydia as a selfish and unprincipled fifteen-year-old. In *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* Lydia initially seems quite similar to her literary counterpart. Loud, brash, promiscuous, and irresponsible, Lydia constantly uses slangy party girl terms like “Whuuuuut” and “Holla” that emphasize her immaturity. Playing up a
simultaneously cutey and rebellious image, she refers to herself as being “totes adorbs.” Her behavior also defines her as a party girl. A college freshman, she skips classes and ignores homework to party instead. Though underage, she openly drinks to the point of blacking out, and she and Lizzie both imply that she is the most promiscuous of the Bennet sisters.

Austen was content to leave Lydia unredeemed, a cautionary tale against poor female education and a foil for Lizzie’s acceptable forms of rebellion, and it seems that the creators of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* may have been willing to do the same. Fans refused to accept that role for Lydia, however. Hank Green stated in a Reddit Q&A, “I was surprised that people took to Lydia so quickly. It really changed how we saw the character and what we wanted to do with her.” He added, “Lydia’s increased role in the show has entirely been due to viewers’ reaction to her” (“I am Hank Green, co-creator, executive producer, and occasional writer for *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*”). Fans liked and identified with Lydia, played by Mary Kate Wiles, far more than Green, Su, and the other creators of the series expected. In response to audience’s empathetic reaction to the character, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* offered an increasingly nuanced portrayal of Lydia, showing the pain, shame and insecurity behind her choices.

Lydia’s interactions with Lizzie early in the series drew a particularly spirited response from fans, resulting in a gradual overhaul in the characters’ portrayal. In only the second video of the series, Lizzie refers to Lydia as a “stupid, whorey slut,” prompting a firestorm of negative viewer feedback. Commenters on YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr promptly called out the character and the series creators for slut shaming, to the point that Bernie Su addressed the matter on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* website. Su apologized for Lizzie’s words and said he would remove the “stupid whorey slut” phrase if he could. He goes on to say, “The LBD team have definitely been making adjustments to future episodes regarding this matter” (Su).
From that point on, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, in keeping with fans’ demands, carefully shows the motivations behind Lydia’s unwise choices. Whereas the novel depicts her as a shameless flirt, the series explains that comparisons with her capable sisters have left Lydia insecure and in need of attention. She repeatedly bursts in on Lizzie, Charlotte, and Jane, suggesting that she feels left out. She even jokingly applies to be Lizzie’s sidekick, but her jokes imply a deep level of insecurity. When Jane and Lizzie stay together at Netherfield, Lydia’s loneliness comes to the forefront, and she struggles to befriend her quiet cousin Mary. Later, when both of the older Bennet sisters leave town, Lydia’s dismay is obvious. In addition to feeling isolated, Lydia has been deeply hurt by Lizzie’s sarcasm and criticism. Even as Lizzie claims to have helpful intentions, her criticism of Lydia actually reinforces and provokes harmful behavior. By repeatedly calling her sister out as a slut, a drinker, and a partier, she seems to tell Lydia that is all she can be, and Lydia believes it.

Lydia reacts in anger and embarrassment by rebelling even more viciously, and fans continued to express love and concern for the character. She launches her own series of videos, which initially act as an outlet for her angry rants against Lizzie. As they continue, though, the videos allow for an even more complex view of Lydia than has been shown up to this point, a view that differs markedly from Austen’s portrayal of the character. Lonely, insecure, and knowing that her sisters would never approve, Lydia turns to George Wickham for comfort. George treats her with what seems to her to be kindness, when in reality he is employing the rhetoric and behavior of an emotional abuser. In a shameless money grab, he posts a website promoting a sex tape he has made of the two of them. Rather than condemning Lydia for her relationship with George, as Austen does, YouTube viewers identified with Lydia and applauded *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* for its honest portrayal of emotional abuse.
Fan criticisms also guided the development of Lizzie’s character and her relationship with Lydia. One commenter, gremlinowl who identified as a “somewhat strong feminist” condemned Lizzie’s slut-shaming of her little sister. Gremlinowl went on to explain, “I understand it’s Lizzie who’s speaking, and she is highly judgmental, but I always read her as being a forward looking feminist in the book, whereas she seems somewhat less so in this series.” Bernie Su responded, “You will see us adjusting Lizzie’s choice of words and actions in dealing with [Lydia].” He continued,

As for the modernization of Lizzie as a forward thinking feminist, I can totally see that interpretation. As a man, I don’t know if I have the right to say that Lizzie will fill that forward feminist archetype, but I will say that she’ll continue to be idealistic, vocal, and forward thinking. One thing I will add for our Lizzie is that though she is beloved for being those things, our Lizzie can’t be beloved 100% of the time with everything she says and does. (Su)

Interestingly, gremlinowl’s comment that Lizzie is “highly judgmental” provided the perfect way of explaining Lizzie’s poor behavior in future videos. Bernie Su described the backlash over Lizzie “being very abrasive,” and said, “Clearly that criticism hit [Hank], so were going to talk about it. But she represents the “prejudice” side of the story, and she’s also a vlogger. Good vloggers have opinions” (Su and the Cast of The Lizzie Bennet Diaries). In Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth is generally an excellent judge of character, with the exception of George Wickham and William Darcy. As The Lizzie Bennet Diaries went on, the writers and actors exaggerated Lizzie’s tendency to misjudge people and to come to conclusions based on her emotions rather than reason. Instead of softening Lizzie’s image to make her a feminist role model, the show’s creators instead emphasized Lizzie’s tendency to enforce gender norms for
her sisters and to misjudge people more generally. Even more significantly than Elizabeth does in *Pride and Prejudice*, Lizzie falls short of feminist ideals, making her eventual realization of her faults all the more dramatic. Though it may seem surprising that Green, Su, and the rest of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* chose to present Lizzie in an unflattering light, it was ultimately a clever means of preserving the feminist themes Austen fans demanded. With the next several episodes already filmed and twenty-two episodes already written, it was too late to undo the slut-shaming aspect of Lizzie’s character. Instead, exaggerating Lizzie’s flaws and depicting her as a poor judge of character who imposes harmful gender norms on her sisters makes her eventual feminist transformation more dramatic and emphasizes sisterhood.

In responding to fan concerns, the series ends up prioritizing the sisters’ relationships with each other over their romantic relationships. As a result, Lizzie’s change of heart, her moment of realization that, “till this moment I never knew myself,” becomes far more dramatic than in the novel (Austen 137). She realizes that not only has she misjudged Darcy and Wickham, she has misjudged nearly everyone around her, especially her sister. Ashley Clements said that as the series went on, it became clear to her and Bernie Su that

Lizzie can’t just get together with Darcy and have learned her lesson with him and have everything be sunshine and rainbows if she wasn’t going to come through and learn to see her sister in another way. It’s a relationship she’s had her whole life, and without learning to alter her prejudices about her own sister, the story wasn’t going to feel complete for me, then Lizzie’s growth was never going to feel complete. (Clements)

Lizzie’s remorse is not for failing to trust Darcy and thus protect Lydia, but for failing to trust Lydia herself. After learning about the sex tape, Lizzie finally watches Lydia’s videos. In tears, she says of her sister,
I don’t know that girl. It’s like my sister is a person I’ve never met. And then I thought about it, and how could I not have seen her when she was standing right in front of me. Sometimes I feel so clever and rational and appropriately analytical about the world around me. I’m a grad student! It’s what I do! What I’m supposed to be skilled at doing – communicating and acknowledging that people do not fit into nice neat little boxes all wrapped and tied up with string. But here we are. My name is Lizzie Bennet, and I’m out of tools for this.

Lizzie finally recognizes that she has misjudged Lydia and, more generally, that she has overestimated her own powers of judgment. More drastically and far more often than Austen’s Elizabeth, Lizzie makes judgments based on emotion rather than reason. As an extension of these judgments, she has actually acted to limit the agency of those around her, especially her sisters. Her change of heart at the end of the series is thus even more transformative than the one depicted in *Pride and Prejudice*. By exaggerating Lizzie’s flaws and thus her final transformation, the creators were ultimately responding to fan demands by highlighting and building on, rather than undermining, Austen’s feminist themes.

In order to remain true to Austen’s feminist themes in response to viewer criticisms, Su and Green also redeem Lydia, making her one of the series’ heroines. When Lydia learns (long after her sisters do) that George plans to sell their sex tape, she reacts in shock and becomes visibly distressed. Finally realizing the depth of Lydia’s pain and insecurity, Lizzie and the rest of the family reach out to her. Though still quiet and damaged by what she has experienced, Lydia begins to create a new life for herself. She sheds her party girl persona, begins attending classes consistently, and indicates that she is going through counseling. Unlike her equivalent in
*Pride and Prejudice*, Lydia sees through Wickham, leaves him, returns to her family, and begins anew, saved by herself and by her healthy family relationships.

In addition, Lydia’s social redemption comes not through Darcy, but through a fellow victim, Gigi. As with Lydia’s character, fans immediately took to Gigi’s character, and the series creators made sure to expand her role in the series. Whereas Fitzwilliam Darcy hunts through the streets of London for Wickham and bribes him to marry Lydia, in the web series, Gigi digitally tracks down George, contacts him by web video, and insists that he take down the video. George lies and says the video was stolen and that he is hiding out. Gigi demands that he tell her where he is, and he refuses. In order to accept the call, however, George downloaded one of the Darcys’ apps and accepted its terms of service. In this way, the Darcys are able to find George and take down his website. Once again, in response both to fans’ love for a character and their insistence on Austen’s feminism, the series creators altered Austen’s story. Fan faithfulness remained their guiding principle.

In its evolving portrayal of Lydia and Lizzie, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* directly responded to viewer feedback. This is not to suggest that fans rewrote *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. In one unprecedented moment, the creators had to break the fourth wall and ask viewers to cut back on their participation. Tech savvy fans actually tried to hack into the website counting down to the release of Wickham’s sex tape, and Su and Green had to ask them to stop for the sake of the storyline. In this way and by making the final calls on what to include and not include in the series, the creative team behind the series did place limits on fan interaction; nevertheless, the series empowered the fans in exceptional ways to shape the storyline and to determine what a faithful modernized adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* would look like.
As a result of this new level of audience participation and influence over fidelity, fans and critics praised the series. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* won an Emmy for Original Interactive Programming, a first for a YouTube series. It also won Streamy Awards for Best Writing, Best Drama, Best Actress, and Best Interactive Program, as well as a Producer’s Guild Award nomination for Outstanding Digital Series. A wide variety of print and digital publications applauded the series for its interactive storytelling, with *The Guardian* calling it the best small-screen Austen adaptation (Welsh). Fans have been similarly impressed, as viewership indicates. The first episode, “My Name is Lizzie Bennet,” has been viewed nearly 2.5 million times on YouTube, and most episodes have between half a million and one million views. This compares with rating statistics for moderately successful television shows, a particularly impressive feat for an online series with almost no marketing apart from a few interviews with newspapers and digital publications. Laura Spencer, who played Jane, said, “There was no outside plugging of the show aside from actual devoted fans who were just sharing the show constantly with their friends and then those friends would share with their friends, and it just became this largely shared thing and it continues” (Spencer). Fans determined the series’ success.

The creators of the series insist that its success stems directly from audience engagement; indeed, they measure their success by how engaged fans have been. Jay Bushman, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*’ expert for all things transmedia, argues that shows and brands claiming to value online engagement, “Don’t actually want engagement – they want metrics that indicate engagement.” He goes on to say, “My biggest piece of advice to foster quality engagement would be to listen to what the audience seems to want, help create the conditions to bring it about, and then get out of the way” (Bushman). Alexandra Edmunds, another member of the production team said, “My personal mission is to reduce the space between fan and creator. I
want fans to be empowered to know that they are also creators” (Dunlap, Bushman, Edwards, and Shaw). Edmunds and her colleagues viewed *Lizzie Bennet Diaries* fans not just as a passive audience, but as co-creators in the transmedia experience. As co-creators, engaged viewers thus had a right to determine what faithfulness to *Pride and Prejudice* meant. Fidelity to their conception of Austen became more important than fidelity to Austen herself.

**Conclusion**

The production history of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* demonstrates not only an unusual concern for audience engagement, but also for honoring fan concepts of fidelity. The producers, writers, and actors who created the series empowered their audience to decide what fidelity to Austen meant in a modern adaptation. The social media based nature of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* provided viewers with an unusually direct way of interacting with the series’ production team, and the team responded to these fan requests in their writing. Fans called for their own version of fidelity to Austen, which most often resulted in changing her characters and storylines to better maintain her apparent feminist themes. As the transmedia experience played out across a variety of social media networks, the producers and writers honed in on audience commentary, displaying an unprecedented concern for fan fidelity.

This ever-increasing responsiveness to viewer concepts of fidelity requires a better understanding in adaptation theory of how fans shape adaptations and of the driving forces behind fan participation. Although I do not explore the reasons behind intense fan involvement here, other scholars including Henry Jenkins, Katherine Larsen, Lynn Zubernis, Matthew Hills and Siobhan O’Flynn have opened the dialogue on fan culture. With this paper I instead focus on what I call fan faithfulness, an effort by adaptors to appear faithful to the aspects of an original text fans care most about. I then extend that focus to transmedia fan fidelity, the
exceptionally responsive form of fan faithfulness that serialized internet adaptations allow for. Though reaching unparalleled levels in transmedia retellings, fan faithfulness is hardly a new phenomenon in exceptionally faithful adaptations. Traditionally fan faithful adaptations, while not able to benefit from the immediate audience feedback a transmedia adaptation allows for, succeed through prescience about audience expectations and by imitating the characteristics of successful, similar adaptations. Austen adaptations for the past twenty years have aimed for profitability by achieving perceived fidelity to the author’s dialogue, romance, mise-en-scène, and social commentary. Though these adaptations actually depart significantly from Austen’s works in those very areas, they appear faithful to many fans and are thus popular and profitable. Other hit adaptations like *The Lord of the Rings* or *Gone with the Wind* have used similar strategies. Whether in new, highly responsive and interactive transmedia adaptations or in more traditional retellings, exceptional fidelity has never been about faithfulness to an original text. Ultimately, exceptional fidelity is fan fidelity.
Works Cited


