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# Immersion vs. Engaged Interactivity in *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre*'s Storyworld; Or What We Can Learn from Paratextual Traces

KATE FABER OESTREICH\*

**ABSTRACT** This paper uses *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre* (Nessa Aref and Alysson Hall's 2013–2014 transmedia adaptation of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, hereafter *AoJE*) to explore the impact of characters' social media accounts on user interactivity and immersion. *AoJE* employs the powers of social media to create a modernized and fully-fledged storyworld, yet the users' overall experience is undermined by the very strategies meant to facilitate engaged interactivity. When social media posts become sites where users not only actively seek additional content but also 'read' traces of other users' interactions with the content, those traces function as paratextual commentary, creating dialogic metaphors. In *AoJE*, the characters' social media accounts demand that users remain in a near constant state of metalepsis by accepting and even inverting several previously accepted ontological binaries: character/actor, reader/writer, passive/active, immersive/interactive. The effort required by users to interact successfully with the various platforms additionally underscores the difficulty of consuming (and prosuming) a story that unfolds over multiple platforms, especially once the social media components no longer exist in the immediate present.

**KEYWORDS:** *The Adaptation of Jane Eyre*, *Jane Eyre*, social media, world-building, interactivity, immersion

Charlotte Brontë wrote her most famous novel, *Jane Eyre* (*JE*), in just under one year and sent the finished manuscript to Smith, Elder and Co. on August 28, 1847, hoping that, unlike her perennially rejected *The Professor* manuscript, *JE* would be favorably received. William Smith Williams, the literary reader at Smith, Elder and Co., read the manuscript first before passing it on to the publishing firm's owner, George Murray Smith, who recounts that 'The story quickly took me captive' (Lee 87, 88), devouring Brontë's manuscript in one day—even cancelling a dinner appointment with a friend—so immersed was he in the storyworld Brontë had created (88). Williams and Smith floated several editorial changes to Brontë for which she thanked them—conceding to change the novel's title from *Jane Eyre: A Novel* to *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*—yet tactfully rebuffing all other suggestions, as 'my engagements will not permit me to revise' (Margaret Smith 86). Her refusal to amend the text effectively fast-tracked publication, and two months after Brontë submitted the manuscript for consideration, Smith, Elder and Co. released 500 print copies of the novel ('Charlotte Brontë'). *JE* was an

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immediate success, and in 176 years it has never gone out of print. Subsequent readers' desires to immerse themselves in Jane's narrative may be best dramatized in Jasper Fford's *The Eyre Affair* (hereafter *TEA*), in which the protagonist, Thursday Next physically penetrates the novel and 'unfettered by the rigidity of the narrative' (67) joins forces with Mr. Rochester to protect the fidelity of Jane's story. Since Thursday and Rochester collaborate outside of Jane's knowledge—and thus cannot be included in Jane's first-person autobiography—*TEA* is able to rewrite parts of Brontë's tale that modern readers take umbrage with (such as why Jane would even consider marrying Rochester given that he had also proposed marriage to Blanche Ingram, tried to trap Jane in a bigamous marriage, and perhaps contributed his wife Bertha's suicidal plunge from the roof). Within *TEA*'s storyworld, *JE* had formerly ended with Jane accompanying St. John Rivers to India. But Thursday's immersion in the novel revises the ending, enabling Jane and Rochester's marriage. *TEA* dramatizes readers' desires to immerse themselves *in* and engage *with* *JE*'s narrative, and via this engagement, improve the narrative for themselves and the characters alike.

The first adaptation of *JE*, John Courtney's *Jane Eyre or The Secrets of Thornfield Manor*, opened at London's Victoria Theatre in January of 1848. Brontë herself was hesitant to attend. She prophesied in a letter to Williams that 'all would be wofully [sic] exaggerated and painfully vulgarized by the actors and actresses . . . What . . . would they make of Mr. Rochester? . . . of Jane Eyre?', eventually demurring, 'Could I go quietly and alone, I undoubtedly should go' (Margaret Smith *The Letters* 25). She confessed to Williams, though, that 'it would interest me to hear both your account of the exhibition and any ideas which the effect of the various parts on the spectators, might suggest to you' (25). While Brontë could not countenance the thought of being watched by other audience members and could not bear to participate publicly in the adaptation's social, communal experience, she hinted that it would be more than acceptable for Williams to attend—almost as her avatar—to experience the play and report back on the audience's reactions.<sup>1</sup> Since then, *JE* has been adapted and revised scores of times—into silent films, sound films, radio programs, television, and theatre. A thorough review of every adaptation would reveal an endless array of excisions, revisions, extensions, and additions, highlighting myriad conflicts between adaptors' urges to remain faithful to Brontë's storyworld and to realize their own.

Courtney brought *JE* from the page to the stage. In this article, I will focus on a twenty-first-century transmedia adaptation that moves *JE* from the page to multiple platforms simultaneously: Nessa Aref and Alysson Hall's *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre* (*AoJE*). According to Dudley Andrew, adaptors 'borrow' 'material, idea, or form of an earlier, generally successful, text. [. . .] hop[ing] to win an audience for the adaptation by the prestige of its borrowed title or subject' (30). But *AoJE* does not just try to win an audience; the narrative invites the audience *into* the storyworld. Because the series unfolds on social media platforms, users are able to respond and react to the story, and, importantly, they can be seen *socially interacting* with 'the characters' and each other as they do so. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon succinctly defines adaptation as 'repetition without replication' (149). The title of Aref and Hall's *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre* primes its audience to expect not only a repeat of the beloved novel's major components, but also—because the title is an antimetabole of Brontë's *Jane Eyre: An*

*Autobiography*—something new and innovative. *AoJE*'s highly allusive—yet revised—title reminds us that for any adaptation, the trick is to stay close—but not too close—to its source. *AoJE* transcends Brontë's original text in several ways (contemporizing the narrative and resetting it in Canada, for example). But the most significant feature of the adaptation is how it expands *JE* beyond a mono-medium storyworld and into a transmedia environment, one that attempts to leverage the interactivity inherent in social media in order to create an even more immersive experience for the user.

I argue, however, that the very strategies *AoJE* employs to facilitate this public engagement actually undermine the overall experience of the extended storyworld and users' ability to become immersed in it—especially as time passes and users must engage with 'old' content. To this end, I apply critical theory on storyworld-building, interactivity, and immersion to close readings of users' paratextual traces on *AoJE*'s YouTube episodes and *AoJE*'s characters' social media accounts. I contend that although these paratextual traces—such as digital 'Table of Contents', view counts, numbers of followers, likes, comments, and time stamps—may initially contribute to user engagement (as hoped by the series' creators), they hinder future users' ability to sustain immersion (and positively receive the series) in the years following the original release. In doing so, I hope to help deepen the conversation around transmedia storytelling, not only to praise what strategies work well in the short-term but also to highlight cautionary examples of how well-intentioned attempts to generate user interaction can thwart the immersive experience in the long run.

#### TRANSMEDIA STORYWORLD BUILDING

In a 2011 blog post entitled 'Transmedia 202: Further Reflections', Henry Jenkins articulates a seminal definition of transmedia storytelling as 'a process where integral elements of a fiction get *dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience*. Ideally, each medium makes its own *unique contribution* to the unfolding of the story'. In the first half of the definition, Jenkins stresses systematic dispersal over 'multiple delivery channels', calling attention to why—unlike in an analogue book or film—digital narratives like *AoJE* favour serialization, rolling out content created in multiple mediums on staggered dates and on specific platforms. Jenkins also underscores the work involved in 'creating' or writing the storyworld, identifying subjectivity as one of the seven principles of transmedia storytelling and emphasizing that 'transmedia extensions may . . . show us the experiences and perspectives of secondary characters' to 'provide[] backstories and insights into the large cast of characters . . . [and] tap into longstanding readers [sic] interest in comparing and contrasting multiple subjective experiences of the same fictional events' ('Revenge'). On 28 February 2013, the date of their first YouTube episode, the *AoJE* team also posted their first tweet (@TheAoJEOfficial), eventually rolling out ninety-five episodes and seventeen social media feeds, thirteen of which were allegedly penned by specific characters. By expanding *JE*'s fictional world across multiple platforms and social media accounts, several supporting characters stepped outside of Jane's first-person narration and voiced their own perspectives on events, fulfilling Jenkins's dictum that 'a simple adaptation may be "transmedia", but it is not "transmedia storytelling" [if] it is simply re-presenting an existing story rather than expanding and annotating the fictional world' ('The Aesthetics').

Jane's YouTube episodes, which clock in at just under eight hours, aim to recreate a complete, modernized adaptation of Brontë's story—even of the period after Jane runs away from Rochester and lives amongst the Rivers siblings, which adaptors usually severely truncate or excise entirely. *A07E*'s storyworld then extends the plot with thirteen individual characters' feeds across seven different platforms, including 8tracks (Liz [Brontë's Elizabeth Reed]), Instagram (Jane), Pinterest (Grace Poole and Johanna [Brontë's Georgiana Reed]), Tumblr (Jane), Twitter (Jane, Grace, E.D. Rochester [Brontë's Edward Rochester], Blanche Ingram, Adele, Diana Rivers, and Mary Rivers), and YouTube (Jane), plus Blanche 'writes' a noninteractive website hosted on Wix.<sup>2</sup> Each character's online presence fleshes out their characterization beyond what was contained in Brontë's original text. And their posts often highlight their desires to fashion and publicly promote carefully curated identities on social media. Johanna's—one of *JE*'s shallowest characters—Pinterest reveals an obsession with US, British, and European travel destinations on the cheap, implying that she has aspirational dreams.<sup>3</sup> But her posts' titles, like '10 Most Instagrammable Places in Amsterdam, Netherlands' hint that her wanderlust is more about flaunting her travels on social media than it is about appreciating different cultures (@johannareed12). On Twitter, 11-year old Adele posts witty factoids about Canada, Russia, outer space, and animals, just to name a few, such as 'Newfoundland: First place in Canada explored by Europeans. Last place to become a province. #Irony. #1949 #VikingsGotThereFirst' (@AdeleCRochester), underscoring how a good education has broadened her horizons and sharpened her wit. According to her web site, Blanche is 'especially vocal about women's issues. Openly referring to herself as a feminist, Blanche has made apoint [sic] to participate in SlutWalk every year and has a strict policy with her modeling agency to never photoshop [sic] her weight' ('Profile'). Blanche's strategic promotion of her feminist ideals is undermined by sloppy proofreading and humble bragging. These rhizomatic tangents help to reposition the storyworld away from the protagonist, seemingly granting the minor characters agency in their own characterization, crafting a version of themselves for public consumption.

In traditional novels and film adaptations, authors and directors devise a linear path for their readers and viewers to follow, creating stories that follow a predictable narrative arc—exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. This tried-and-true storytelling formula does not allow for the narrative complexity of transmedia storytelling, and as Regina Schober notes, 'Cultural production is increasingly understood along the lines of self-organizing network dynamics instead of a linear and more or less stable . . . processes with clear-cut creator-recipient dualisms' (32). In 'Transmedia Narratology and Transmedia Storytelling', Marie-Laure Ryan posits that when implementing a structure wherein the standard narrative arc does not reign supreme, then 'transmedia storytelling is a misnomer—the phenomenon should be called transmedia world-building' (40). In other words, transmedia narratives—like the world—are replete with supplementary and even contrasting perspectives, details, and stories that augment and may even contradict the primary narrative. Ryan argues that there are two ways content can be distributed in a storyworld. The first is 'the parts fit together into a whole, and this whole is more than the sum of its parts' (40). Ryan cautions that this model may frustrate users if they are forced to discover every segment of text in order to reassemble the narrative arc. While similar to a detective story, this model

tasks the user, rather than the narrator, with tracking down various strands in order to figure out and ‘solve’ the narrative. *AoJE* does not follow this model. For example, in ‘Ep. 54: Happy Holidays’, which was posted to YouTube on 25 December 2013, E.D. promises to take Jane and Adele—who in this adaptation is the legitimate, mixed-raced progeny of E.D. and his wife, Beth (Brontë’s Bertha)—on vacation to Banff (Aref and Hall). ‘Banff’s right next door to me’:D’, @piedathemokona comments, ‘maybe I’ll see you guys?’. While the trip to Banff is never again mentioned in the YouTube episodes, users who follow the characters’ social media accounts will discover additional details about the vacation—such as Jane needing ski lessons—on Jane’s Twitter posts. *AoJE* characters’ social media accounts enable *AoJE* writers to drop Easter eggs about the characters, but these social media extensions do not provide crucial plot points, fulfilling Jason Mittell’s condition that content on additional platforms should ‘effectively accomplish the goal of rewarding viewers who consume them and not punishing those who do not’ (272). Under this model of never-ending rewards, the storyworld seems similar to an addictive substance: ‘People are willing to look for information in many documents and across multiple platforms because they are so in love with the storyworld that they cannot get enough information about it’ (Ryan ‘Transmedia Storytelling’ 4).

*AoJE* seems a better fit with Ryan’s second model, wherein ‘many components are held together by a common frame, which we may call a storyworld’ (‘Transmedia Narratology’ 40). In this model ‘the bigger elements [aka, Mother Ship] must generally be consumed before the smaller ones because they provide a broad background upon which the smaller elements can be built’ (40). For example, in the sole video uploaded by Thornfield Exports, ‘Ep. 1: A New Age of Aluminium’, several users comment along the same lines as @beth1930 that

For those who are confused about why Jane thinks she’s fired, it [sic] because of of [sic] a reference Rochester made to her video. He said ‘Careful Jane... You can’t go racing around corners like some sort of crazed maniac’ which is a reference to episode 10.... Jane says... he was ‘racing around corners like some sort of crazed maniac’. Therefore,... Rochester has seen her videos and everything she has filmed secretly.

Since I watched the series years after it was rolled out in real time, I only discovered Thornfield Exports’s illuminating episode because I was following the outline provided on the ‘Story’ page on the official *AoJE* Wix site. At first, I was perplexed as to why it was not included in Jane’s YouTube Playlist of episodes. But, of course, because it is outside of Jane’s storyline, it should not have been included there. At the risk of sounding like a luddite, I did not discover *AoJE*’s Facebook page until years after I had watched my first *AoJE* episode, as *AoJE*’s digital ‘Table of Contents’, the ‘Transmedia’ page on their Wix website, does not list the Facebook page. The ‘Transmedia’ page only lists *the characters*’ transmedia accounts. *AoJE*’s Facebook page is linked via the Social media widget icon at the bottom of the *AoJE* Wix website’s homepage; therefore, *AoJE* provides all of the necessary links to all of the strands, creating a world-like experience in its breadth and complexity. After I followed the link and discovered *AoJE*’s Facebook page, I finally understood that users who participated during the initial rollout were notified on Facebook on 7 September 2013 to watch ‘Ep. 1: A New Age of Aluminium’. As a middle-aged academic, it is important that I not judge this lack of ‘easy-to-find’ promotion from

my perspective, as young audiences often wish to locate content on their own, eschewing anything they perceive as representing adult morality/marketing interests, preferring to identify new ‘content and share their discovery through their own channels’ (Redvall 155). *A07E* leverages this generation’s preference to great effect. Users who watched Thornfield Exports’s video when it was rolled out were thrilled to have access to more than Jane’s limited perspective: @SayyadinaHeresy enthuses, ‘This is genius! Wow! . . . I love the creativity of this version! It also shows us much more Rochester, which is awesome’; @EleanorHucklesby raves, ‘I am geeking out over the levels of transmedia used in this adaptation. What a great video!’; and @FabberJaxxer gossips, ‘apparently they (or Grace through her twitter) are trying to convince everyone that this was just a prank, just an act, a comedy if you like, to save face (the tweets are quite hilarious)’.

*A07E*’s carefully laid out extensions provide additional, complementary information about the ‘primary’ narrative chronicled in the Jane’s YouTube episodes (a.k.a. the Mother Ship), illustrating that their transposition of Brontë’s storyworld into transmedia storytelling is an example of top-down convergence with the aim to ‘broaden markets and reinforce viewer commitments’ (Jenkins *Convergence Culture* 18). In addition, *A07E*’s storyworld adheres to Siobhan O’Flynn’s observation that the various strands of a digital adaptation must ‘together comprise an integrated, interconnected narrative whole, though they are encountered separately’ (181). The *A07E* team leveraged these additional strands to ramp up user engagement and interaction with additional tales that augmented Jane’s first-person videos.

## INTERACTION

*A07E* is also an example of bottom-up production, featuring opportunities for users to interact with, add to, and help ‘produce’ the storyworld. *A07E*’s Facebook page’s ‘Introduction’ widget states that series is ‘an Interactive Modernized Online Adaptation’, the word *interactive* implying that users cannot experience the storyworld in full if they only *consume* content. Thomas M. Leitch argues that ‘the primary lesson of film adaptation[is] that texts remain alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten and that to experience a text in all its power requires each reader to rewrite it’ (12-13). Leitch builds on Roland Barthes’s elucidation between texts that are ‘lisible’ (readerly) and those that are ‘scriptible’ (writerly), the goal being ‘to make the reader no longer a consumer but a producer of text’ (4). Although Leitch is specifically referring to wholesale adaptation of an entire text, his use of ‘alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten’ and ‘requires each reader to rewrite it’ could be seen as an apotheosis of digital storytelling. Web 2.0 platforms empower readers to add onto and thus contribute to expanding the storyworld with each and every trace of their digital interactions. In order to get the most out of a transmedia adaptation, one must be open to new reading experiences, recognizing (and even creating) fresh connections while also appreciating the ultra-modern potential to interact with the narrative through bodily actions, not just clicking links but also, for instance, clicking evaluative ‘like’ and ‘dislike’ icons and typing comments. One can assume that users who gravitate to *A07E* are at least pro social media, as *A07E* actively encourages their users to be less consumers (i.e., persons who only ‘read’ digital content) and more prosumers (i.e., persons who engage with digital content, preferably involving a combination of alphabetic, audio-visual, and code-dependent writing modes—such as ‘likes’ and comments).

In ‘Beyond Myth and Metaphor’, Ryan sets up two pairs of strategic modes of interactivity: internal/external and exploratory/ontological. The internal mode aligns with traditional forms of interactivity, namely a reader identifying with a character and experiencing that character’s world from a first-person point of view. In the external mode, users can either ‘play the role of a god who controls the fictional world from above or . . . conceptualize their own activity as navigating a database’ (595). On the exploratory side of the exploratory/ontological binary, users survey the text but do not impact the narrative. In contrast, on the ontological side, users interact with the text by making ‘decisions’ that ‘send the history of the world on different forking paths’ (596). As Ryan argues in *Narrative vs. Virtual Reality*, ‘Interactivity transposes the ideal of an endlessly self-renewable text from the level of the signified to the level of the signifier. In hypertext, . . . the reader determines the unfolding of the text by clicking on . . . hyperlinks[] that bring to the screen other segments of text. Since every segment contains several such hyperlinks, every reading produces a different text’ (5). *AoJE* users engage in all four types of interactivity: internal (users identify with, though not as, characters), external (users do not become a character in the storyworld), exploratory (users seek out the various strands of the transmedia storyworld to gather information), and ontological (users leave behind verbal and digital ‘traces’ that impact future users’ experiences of and within the storyworld). Ryan also outlines two prominent narrative metaphors in computer storytelling: 1. the diegetic metaphor, which ‘presupposes the existence of a narrator or storyteller addressing an audience’ with the computer as storyteller and users as the audience, and 2. the mimetic or dramatic metaphor, in which the ‘narrative comes into existence not by being told but by being enacted . . . the computer is not a storyteller but a character who interacts with the user in such a way that the user will regard their interaction as a story’ (584).

I would like to extend Ryan’s above models by pairing a fifth mode with a third metaphor: the paratextual mode and dialogic metaphor. Interacting with *AoJE*’s transmedia storyworld means that users not only ‘create’ the story by selecting from an array of hyperlinks to click and strands to follow but also by engaging textually, leaving behind verbal and iconographic paratext that may also *shape the narrative for the users that come after*. In ‘Five Modes of Transtextuality’, Gérard Genette posits that transtextuality has five modes that encompass ‘all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts’ (1). The *paratextual* mode includes ‘a title, a subtitle, intertitles; . . . marginal, . . . terminal notes; epigraphs; illustrations; blurbs, book covers, dust jackets, and many other kinds of secondary signals’ (3). On *AoJE* social media sites, paratextual traces include view counts, numbers of followers, likes, comments, and time stamps, all of which create ‘a commentary, official or not, which even the purists among readers, those least inclined to external erudition, cannot always disregard as easily as they would like and as they claim to do’ (3). Dialogic is defined as ‘the interactive nature of dialogue, in which multiple voices, discourses, etc., coexist, responding to and engaging with each other; (sometimes) spec. (of a literary text)’ (‘dialogic’). And social media or ‘websites and applications which enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking’ (‘social’) reveal how these paratextual traces—or dialogic metaphors—reinforce or threaten the transmedia storyworld’s diegesis. Paratextual traces, such as users’ asynchronous conversations *with* and *about* the narrative—conversations that exist along the periphery of each social media site, including



the original YouTube episodes—create dialogic opportunities that transcend Ryan’s metaphors in novel ways with instructive results.

The *Ao7E* team provides a ‘Transmedia’ page with links to the characters’ social media sites in order to help users locate the characters’ thirteen social media feeds that extend the storyworld rhizomatically.<sup>4</sup> In 2013, *Ao7E*’s creators were building their storyworld on several relatively new, online platforms: YouTube (launched in 2005), Twitter (2006), Wix (2006), Tumblr (2007), 8tracks (2008), Pinterest (2009), and Instagram (2010). Aref and Hall, therefore, counted on users already understanding—or at least being willing to learn—the protocols available to them via each of the platforms. And if the audience understood the protocols, then they would interact with the narrative. Take, for example, when @PenGirl91 posted the first comment on the first episode, enthusing ‘Another classic book adaptation? AWESOME! This seems really cool and I look forward to seeing what you guys do with this:’. Jane Eyre the character replies, ‘Thanks:) I’m a nursing student—so all this media stuff is really new to me’ (@TheAOJaneEyre). Although Jane demurs that she is ‘a nursing student’ and ‘all this media stuff is really new to me’, @PenGirl91 clearly understands that this is ‘another classic book adaptation’ involving a team of content creators and actors (‘you guys’). From the very first episode, the Mother Ship’s comments section establishes a tension: @PenGirl91 is writing to the team of creators and actors, but Jane resists by remaining in character.

When a transmedia storyworld is built to encourage users’ participation, issues of sharing and even relinquishing control become evident. Karin Fast and Henrik Örnebring highlight how in productive interactivity, there exists ‘the balance between *emergent* (i.e. unplanned, contingent, organic) and *planned* (i.e., strategic, coordinated) aspects of transmedial entertainment’, blurring the ‘consumer/producer distinction, where fan-produced transmedial material exists alongside officially sanctioned industry texts’ (637). Even when the creators invest time into planning both the storyworld and the ways in which fans can interact, there will inevitably arise ‘contradictions, disjunctions and transformations’ (639). On Apr 28, 2014, Shipwrecked Comedy—perhaps best known for their comedy series, *Edgar Allan Poe’s Murder Mystery Dinner Party*—uploaded a parody video, entitled ‘Bertha’s Attic Song - Disney Princess/Jane Eyre Parody’ set to the tune of ‘When Will My Life Begin’ from Disney’s *Tangled*, a hybrid of emergent/planned content wherein Shipwrecked Comedy collaborated with the *Ao7E* team to extend their storyworld. In the video, Sinead Persaud as Bertha—one of *JE*’s best known characters but whom *Ao7E* did not cast—holds up a sketch of *Ao7E*’s Jane, stabs a voodoo doll with *Ao7E*’s profile logo of Jane’s head attached to it, and then Alysson Hall (as Jane Eyre) appears at the end of their video, surrounded by props signalling that she is sitting in the *Ao7E* apartment that she shares with the Rivers siblings, clearly spooked that Bertha knows about her, though not vice versa (Persaud, Kuang, and Persaud). According to Soochul Kim in ‘Rethinking Transmedia Storytelling in Participatory Digital Media’, ‘parody videos account for a very significant portion of the diffusion and public interest in original content through meme video’, which ‘is a good indicator of the diffusion of original content and the active interaction between content and the audience hidden in the background’ (5679, 5680). At the time of writing, this video has garnered 47,423 views, and 2.1K likes, illustrating a more positive reception than the *Ao7E* episodes ‘Ep. 84: Fallout’ (20,616 views/594 likes) and ‘Ep. 85 Diane Says’ (21,201/467 likes) that immediately proceeded and followed the release of ‘Bertha’s

Attic Song’. Nevertheless, comments like @TAB8811’s show the ‘hidden’ audience’s recognition of and affection for how Shipwrecked Comedy’s parody builds on *AoJE*’s storyworld: ‘The best part of this for me was the fact that this was specifically a cross-over with *AoJE*. I loved the sketch at 1:11 and the ending clip. Perfect!’. Indeed, the parody video functions as paratextual commentary and dialogic metaphor, reinserting Bertha/Beth into the conversation.

While *AoJE* did not cast or create a social media account for the Bertha/Beth character, her ghostly presence is integral to the plot of *AoJE*’s Mother Ship and planned extended storyworld.<sup>5</sup> A week after Shipwrecked Comedy released ‘Bertha’s Attic Song’, Grace Poole—whom *AoJE* promoted from being Bertha’s drunken caretaker to E.D.’s personal assistant—shows up at the Riverses’ apartment to explain to Jane that Beth Mason (i.e., Bertha from *JE*) was E.D.’s wife and Adele’s mother but recently ‘died of an overdose’ (Aref and Hall ‘Ep. 87: Mischance’). @mmskid60’s comment generated the most likes and comments, asserting that ‘Grace [is] the unspoken hero in all of this. Who knew she felt enough affection for Rochester or Jane to feel that she should pursue Jane to reconcile the broken couple [sic]’. ‘Ep. 87: Mischance’ involves one of *AoJE*’s biggest climaxes: Beth’s suicide and news of Rochester’s disfiguring accident, yet the episode only garnered 28,559 views and 640 likes. Significantly, in 2021 YouTube removed dislike counts from videos, a decision which YouTube’s CEO, Susan Wojcicki admits was ‘controversial’, as ‘dislikes helped [viewers] decide what videos to watch’.<sup>6</sup> By installing the ‘Return YouTube Dislike’ extension, it is possible to see that only 12 users disliked the episode; therefore, it appears they did not—on the whole—feel sufficiently moved to interact and illustrate their approval.

Unfolding *AoJE*’s storyworld over multiple social media accounts provides layer upon layer of information, from the content itself, to view counts, followers, comments, the presence or absence of ‘likes’, etc. These likes, follows, and comments on the content build “‘emotional capital’ or “‘lovemarks’” to [illustrate] the importance of audience investment and participation in media content’ (Jenkins *Convergence Culture* 169). When social media posts become sites where users not only actively seek additional content but also ‘read’ traces of other users’ interactions with the content, those traces function as paratextual commentary, creating dialogic metaphors. In addition to comments, likes, and dislikes, I will next explore how paratextual traces on these social media sites may enable us to gauge the users’ immersion in and engagement with *AoJE*’s storyworld.

## IMMERSION VS. ENGAGED INTERACTIVITY

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon emphasizes that all storytelling modes provide immersive experiences: ‘the telling mode (a novel) immerses us through imagination in a fictional world; the showing mode (plays and films) immerses us through the perception of the aural and the visual . . . the participatory mode (videogames) immerses us physically and kinesthetically [i.e., the senses]. But if all are, in some sense of the word, “immersive”, only the last of them is usually called “interactive”’ (22-23). Transmedia users—like video gamers—engage physically and kinaesthetically to virtually ‘move’ forward, backward, between, and amongst multiple platforms by, for example, clicking links, switching between browser tabs, and making or responding to other users’ comments. Therefore, an important consideration becomes: Does interaction via social media platforms augment users’ immersion in transmedia storyworlds? Or does interactivity—seeking information

across multiple platforms and then actively engaging in a dialogue with that information—hinder users’ immersion? In this section, I will provide examples that illustrate how *AoJE* users’ physical and kinaesthetic interactions leave paratextual traces that crucially move beyond the physical and the sensory into the intellectual and emotional realms, indicating the success or failure of users’ immersive experiences.

Over the last 176 years, readers who become immersed in the *JE* codex, even those reading the book today, have little to no knowledge of how other lay readers felt about the text. Nor can they interact with the text, other than perhaps muttering under their breath, gasping, slamming the book shut, or writing marginal notes—all primarily for their own satisfaction. After the *AoJE* creators moved Brontë’s storyworld into the twenty-first century and leveraged the affordances of social media, the significance of both characters’ and users’ engagement *with* the content becomes immediately visible to users themselves as well as all subsequent users. Janet Murray notes in ‘Virtual/reality: How to Tell the Difference’ that ‘Creating an interactive medium that sustains the experience of immersion takes more than technological iteration; it takes iteration on the conventions of participation to cue the interactor on what they can expect to do and how they can go about doing it’ (22). One particularly novel ‘convention of participation’ within social media sites is that fans can feel hailed to communicate directly with the characters. For example, the exchange in Screen Capture 1 and Screen Capture 2 illustrate that @DeBelle77, @enchantedsocks, and @explaaaain are moved to join a conversation that E.D. is having on Twitter with Jane, picking up on his suggestion that Jane needs ‘worthy socks’, by addressing E.D. as ‘you’ and offering up recommendations on where to purchase the ‘best weird socks’:

←
**Tweet**

**Jane Eyre**  
@eyrequotes

...

The socks from movie night. The apple didn't fall far from the tree.  
@Pilotsthoughts @AdeleCRochester ow.ly/i/3WgZM

10:15 PM · Dec 8, 2013

4 Retweets 35 Likes

💬
↻
♥
🔖
↑

**Elffriend Forever** @DeBelle77 · Dec 8, 2013

...

@eyrequotes Awwww!

💬
↻
♥
🔖
↑

**Elffriend Forever** @DeBelle77 · Dec 9, 2013

...

@eyrequotes What movie did you watch?

💬
↻
♥
🔖
↑

**E.D. Rochester** @Pilotsthoughts · Dec 10, 2013

...

@eyrequotes We're going to have to get you some worthy socks for you so you can join in our photo next time

💬 4
↻ 2
♥ 26
🔖
↑



These users have moved beyond Murray Smith's concept of immersion from 'Imagination and Narration' that 'we might be said to imagine *ourselves in the situation* (as distinct from imagining *being the character in the situation*)' (79). Instead, these users understand the characters' feeds as a liminal space where the characters exist as real people (not actors). The users give the characters advice on what to *do within the narrative*, rather than giving the actors advice on how to *act within the narrative*. E.D. does not tweet back to @DeBelle77, @enchantedsocks, or @explaaaain nor does he present Jane with socks in a subsequent episode. In 'Reaching Young Audiences Through Research', Eva Novrup Redvall recounts that the transmedia team of *SKAM/Shame*, a Norwegian transmedia teen drama, worked '24/7' (157) to read users' online comments and incorporate their feedback into the narrative. Redvall implies that this niche transmedia storyworld targeting 16-year-old Norwegian girls achieved international success because 'if you want to reach young audiences, you have to take them seriously' (144) by both listening and responding to their social media interactions.

Murray concedes that 'immersion is a delicate state that is easily disrupted. Our sense of a boundary between the real and the liminal world, the "fourth wall" of the theater, the TV or movie screen' (18) helps us attain and sustain immersion in illusion. In *AoJE's* case, each platform's interface functions as this boundary, and each user interaction with a character's post or tweet constitutes a breaking of the 'fourth wall'. Metalepsis, as originally defined by Genette, is 'any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a meta diegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse' (*Narrative Discourse* 234-35). As Kamilla Elliott observes, 'metalepsis does not change one thing into another but destabilizes the identity of both' (296) and 'Figured as a bridge, metalepsis spans a gap, but even as it does, it questions the need for its bridging by revealing the "always already" affinities between what it bridges'

(297). Metalepsis, therefore, describes movement between separate ontological dimensions within a narrative; this metaleptic twoness seeks to liberate one from formal hierarchies. This is not a new phenomenon. As Ryan observes in *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, ‘the narrative style of the eighteenth century maintained an ambiguous stance toward immersion: on the one hand, it cultivated illusionist effects by simulating nonfiction narrative modes (memoirs, letters, autobiographies); on the other, it held immersion in check through a playful, intrusive narrative style that directed attention back and forth from the story told to the storytelling act’ (4). Drawing on this heritage, the narrator of Brontë’s *JE* directly hails the reader thirty-two times—such as in one of the novel’s most famous lines: ‘Reader, I married him’ (399). The first-person narrator’s direct addresses force the reader to *perceive themselves being pulled out of immersion*—being compelled to switch from reader to interlocutor—even if just for a moment before diving back in, forcing a ‘reconciliation of interactivity and immersion’ (Ryan *Narrative as Virtual Reality* 307). In the twenty-first century, *AoJE*’s characters’ social media accounts ask the user to remain in a near constant state of metalepsis by accepting and even inverting several previously recognized ontological binaries: character/actor, reader/writer, passive/active, immersive/interactive.<sup>7</sup> Since *AoJE*’s characters move between ontological states (actors portraying fictional characters and—allegedly—actors posting in-character to social media), the audience must also move between ontological states (users immersed in the characters’ storyworld and users interacting with characters in the storyworld). According to Ryan, when readers are asked to engage with this type of metafiction, ‘the cost . . . is an ontological alienation of the reader from the fictional world’ since a text ‘cannot offer both experiences [immersion and interactivity] at the same time’ (284).

One can imagine the transmedia team’s debates over how much or little the characters should respond (or not) to users’ attempts to engage in reciprocal conversations with the characters. They surely had to weigh how much to discourage participation that would hijack the narrative’s goals vs how much to encourage communication to promote grass-roots enthusiasm and engagement. While fans do not expect responses in parasocial exchanges with celebrities, they may once immersed in an ‘interactive storyworld’ where the celebrities are also metaleptically characters with social media accounts. Instead of mirroring social media in the traditional sense—in other words, enabling two-way, reciprocal connections—*AoJE* users’ paratextual traces on the characters’ social media feeds appear to be more parasocial, or ‘designating a relationship characterized by the one-sided, unreciprocated sense of intimacy felt by a viewer, fan, or follower for a well-known or prominent figure (typically a media celebrity), in which the follower or fan comes to feel (falsely) that they know the celebrity as a friend’ (‘parasocial’). For example, on Twitter, after Blanche posts about ‘ugly cry[ing]’ until she ‘puke[s]’ (presumably because E.D. has broken her heart), she then tweets that Warren Danton, her and E.D.’s friend from their schooldays at Harvard, is ‘funny smart and handsome’, implying she has quickly rebounded (@RoyalBlanche ‘Friends’, ‘Warren’). A Twitter user with the handle @raquelbevington begs to know, ‘did you and Warren hook up!?!?!’. Blanche never replies. Similarly, after Blanche posts a link to an image of Warren climbing a tree to pick an apple (@RoyalBlanche ‘Lazy Saturday’), @EldawenEmileia tweets back that same day: ‘@RoyalBlanche Please tell Warren that as a fellow tree-climbing adult, he’s my hero’. Although Blanche does acknowledge other *characters*’ tweets, she does not respond

to @EldawenEmileia or any other messages left by fans. Users' comments on E.D.'s and Blanche's tweets come to 'feel false' because the ensuing silence underscores that they are 'not friends' and thus unworthy of a conversation. Which begs the question: How immersed can one become in the storyworld's interactive 'game' when each friendly attempt to start a dialogue, each unanswered post is a reminder of a *lack* of reciprocity? At what point does a non-responsive character start to seem like an NPC (nonplayer character)? According to Murray, 'interactive environments demand more explicit partnership than just the willing suspension of disbelief; they become real through the "active creation of belief" by inducing and satisfying specific intentional gestures of engagement' (25). Perhaps this is why—despite the revelatory nature of E.D.'s and Blanche's tweets, a mere 764 and 428 users, respectively, are moved to follow their Twitter feeds. Eventually, perhaps, even a dedicated fan will fail to leave a 'lovemark' when their attempts at starting a conversation are always unrequited.<sup>8</sup>

While each follower may at first *appear* to be an indication of a user's successful ability to sustain metaleptical immersion in and engagement with the transmedia storyworld and hit that follow button, I contend that instead of signalling a meaningful connection, 'following' a character's social media page is more akin to applauding an actor's performance. It would involve a lot of heavy lifting to quantify how many users read, viewed, or even commented on the content for each of the above social media sites, but the data provided on followers by each of the social media platforms quickly reveal how many of *AoJE*'s users were moved to 'follow' the characters' feeds. This list of *AoJE*'s social media accounts is arranged in descending numerical order according to the number of followers that felt moved to 'hit that subscribe button':<sup>9</sup>

Official *AoJE* sites:

1. The Autobiography of Jane Eyre, Facebook (2.1K followers)
2. AoJE Production Videos, YouTube (@aojeproductionvideos3922, 1.63K)
3. Autobiography of J.E., Twitter (@TheAoJEOfficial, 1,222)
4. Thornfield Exports, YouTube (@ThornfieldExports, 1.42K)

Individual characters' sites:

5. Jane, YouTube (@TheAOJaneEyre, 14.2K)
6. Jane, Twitter (@eyrequotes, 1,546)
7. E.D. Rochester, Twitter (@Pilotsthoughts, 764)
8. Adele, Twitter (@AdeleCRochester, 700)
9. Grace, Twitter (@ExpThornfield, 637)
10. Blanche, Twitter (@RoyalBlanche, 428)
11. Jane, Instagram (Eyrequotes, 294)
12. Diana, Twitter (@DianimalRivers, 187)
13. Mary, Twitter (@MarzipanRDawg, 173)
14. Liz, 8tracks (LizMousikē, 131)
15. Grace, Pinterest (@thornfieldexp, 128)
16. Johanna, Pinterest (@johannareed12, 117)
17. Jane, Tumblr (eyrequotes, Tumblr does not provide 'follow' functionality)

As the above list of followers for each character's account suggest, *AoJÉ*'s users additionally appear to be less interested in awarding 'lovemarks' to the social media accounts, preferring to 'follow' the more 'passively' immersive YouTube content. Because quantifiable proof of user engagement is clearly displayed on each page, users likely find themselves evaluating the series itself based on the quantity and quality of paratextual 'praise' or 'lovemarks' each character's feed has attracted. As of the time of this writing, *AoJÉ*'s first episode has been viewed 179,066 times, but only 1.6K viewers were sufficiently motivated to 'like' it (less than one percent). Combined, *AoJÉ*'s YouTube episodes have been viewed a whopping 3,127,149 times, yet only 14.2K users subscribed to the channel (less than half of one percent). Nevertheless, the 14.2K followers of the Mother Ship series seems massive when compared to the meagre one hundred seventeen followers of Johanna's Pinterest account.<sup>10</sup>

The underlying strategy behind *AoJÉ*'s transmedia presence seems to be that the greater extent to which characters exist on social media, the more human and 'real' the characters will appear. But perhaps the gaping deficit between the web series views and social media accounts' 'follows' reveals a special resistance to accepting the conceit that the characters are real persons, that their accounts merit an *always already* non-reciprocal emotional validation signified by a user's 'follow'. Following a character's social media page does not indicate an immersive, interactive experience as much as it signals critical appreciation. In a transmedia storyworld, even if everyone—from the writers to perhaps even actors—becomes a communicator, contributing to conversations that reward the users' comments and 'lovemarks', users' inability to switch repeatedly from immersion to engagement and then back to immersion detracts from their ability to remain immersed and engaged over time.

#### AFFECTS OF PARATEXTUAL DIALOGIC NARRATIVE ON ENGAGEMENT

Although *AoJÉ*'s Mother Ship retains the original novel's major plot points, *AoJÉ*'s social media posts radically adapt the text's *medium*, which can be seen as 'an expression of fitness' (Schober 35) for early twenty-first-century's mania for interactive digital media. The interactive transmedia storyworld creates opportunities for myriad alterations to Brontë's original text through audience interaction, of which a few dozen illustrative examples are provided above. In 'Adaptation and New Media', Michael Ryan Moore builds upon media historian Lisa Gitelman's delineation that protocols reflect "'a vast clutter of normative rules and default conditions"' of media use . . . . Protocols are important because they suggest that media limit audience engagement while simultaneously responding to audience agency' (181). Historically, audience members are not motivated to interact with characters during or even after watching a film. There are barriers in that the medium is not only unidirectional but also far removed from the production schedule. The audience members recognize that the actors' participation in the filmic event occurred months or even years before. But *AoJÉ* characters' social media accounts function as an invitation to engage with a production as it comes into being. The conceit was that *AoJÉ*'s videos and posts were recently produced—that week or perhaps even that day; and that the users that participated during the original release schedule were already 'in the house', one could say, having access to a 'comment' text box imbued with the promise that their posts will be read—by other users as well as

the metaleptic actors-cum-characters—and could elicit a direct response from either, hopefully both.

Transmedia storytelling highlights how immersive and engaged protocols for audience members and creative teams are not static, but morph under pressure from changes in technology, creating a blurry line as to when production begins and ends. There is a new expectation for not only users but also content creators to consume and prosume beyond the production schedule. Yet *AoJE*'s characters stopped posting to their social media accounts the moment their character's usefulness within the Mother Ship ceased: for example, @RoyalBlanche (25 Nov. 2013), @PilotsThoughts (29 Feb. 2014), @AdeleCRochester (27 May 2014), @eyrequotes (29 May 2014). While users do still infrequently post to *AoJE*'s accounts, paratextual traces illustrate that the overwhelming majority of users' comments are from 2013 and 2014, when the transmedia components were originally being rolled out; therefore, the promise that *AoJE* would be 'Interactive Modernized Online Adaptation' seems only to hold true temporarily for the finite time of the storyworld's unfolding between 28 February 2013 and 21 June 2014. It is deeply ironic that *AoJE*'s attempts to enhance users' engagement through social media interaction result in decreases in users' abilities to remain both immersed and engaged, especially after June of 2014. Murray states, 'As soon as we stop participating, because we are confused or bored or uncomfortably stimulated, the illusion vanishes' (25).

At this point, we might be tempted to ask, if this transmedia adaptation was not unequivocally successful in providing users interactive and immersive engagement, why should we care? Indeed, unlike Pemberley Digital's *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012–13) and Rebecca Shoptaw's *Middlemarch: The Series* (2017), no major newspapers covered the series, and—it seems—only one other scholarly article has discussed it.<sup>11</sup> In 'Jane Eyre's Transmedia Lives', Monika Pietrzak-Franger observes that in *AoJE* 'the young-adult context of the videos and the pseudo-interactivity they encourage all offer a sense of proximity and intimacy that appeals to adapters of the first-person narration in *Jane Eyre*', yet refrains from offering an either a positive or negative opinion, neutrally concluding that 'through the engagement of multiple media platforms it [*AoJE*] offers a transmedia experience to its audience – an experience for which issues of gender, authorship, authenticity and affect are of prime importance' (246, 247). Despite the paucity of scholarly criticism, user comments like 'Just wanted to say that this web series has made me start reading the actual original book itself- and I've never read a classic for fun before. All the applause for this beautiful adaptation. It really serves its purpose!' (@ChloeMaySommer) show that *AoJE* should not be overlooked, as it does help viewers and readers discover (or rediscover) the original source material. The quality of *JE*'s nineteenth-century mono-medium storyworld inspired Aref and Hall to create *AoJE*'s twenty-first-century transmedia storyworld, and the mere fact that *AoJE* is online may inspire future viewers who would otherwise have no desire to (re)read *JE*'s codex. Despite its very real limitations, *AoJE*'s over 3 million views highlights how in the twentieth-century, transmedia adaptations are a force that scholars can ignore only at our own peril. 'In the age of the Web 2.0, with proliferating ecosystems of creative user-generated retellings', Schober states in 'Adaptation as Connection', 'for every re-telling of a story there is a niche audience for which this particular adaptation is an "important," and therefore "successful"'



adaptation' (37). Strikingly, the *A07E* team created the first half of their transmedia adaptation's content on their own dime before creating an Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign that raised \$11,176 Canadian dollars. *A07E* producers were surprised that the 'crowdfunding campaign [gave] their fans something to rally behind (other than the show itself)' ('The Autobiography'). Their experience is an example of twenty-first-century enthusiasm for spontaneous pay-it-forward events, and years later, audiences continue to benefit from those original donors, having unlimited free access to the content. It is now easier and quicker to generate buy-in for a transmedia adaptation of Brontë's work than it was for her to market original analogue content—in no small part because the proposed adaptation was of a familiar (and still popular) nineteenth-century text *as well as* a twenty-first-century enthusiasm to see what kind of avant garde product could be accomplished with the relatively newly unleashed powers of the internet. We continue to be enamoured by the possibilities of new storyworlds and mediums.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Williams did attend the play, though his letters to Brontë recounting his experience have been lost. See Karen E. Laird's chapter, 'Upstairs, Downstairs: *Jane Eyre's* Transatlantic Theatrical Debut' for her thorough examination of Brontë's extant letters, written in response to Williams' lost epistles.

<sup>2</sup> Only Suzannah-Maria Ramirez Gonzalez (Angie Lopez), Warren Danton (Lucas Blaney), Simon James Rivers (Lucas Hall), and Rose Oliver (Ranae Miller) do not get social media sites.

<sup>3</sup> Johanna also less frequently posts on locations that in 2012 were safely exotic yet non-Western, such as Egypt, Croatia, Thailand, Bora Bora, Vietnam, Norway, Japan, Finland, Iceland, Guatemala, and Costa Rica.

<sup>4</sup> The existence of these two pages implies that discovering the storyworld's extensions involves copious work, for both the transmedia team and user. There is no way for *A07E* creators to ensure that their fans can even find—let alone follow—all of the nodes of the storyworld, as it unfolds over multiple platforms, outside the purview of each individual platform's algorithms. Engaging with *A07E* now, a mere decade after its release, is even more complicated because of dead links and error messages such as, 'storify.com's server IP address could not be found'. The Storify platform, which was meant to organize posts over multiple platforms, was used by the *A07E* team to curate specific posts, presumably those integral to navigating the narrative, but after Storify ceased to exist in May of 2018 these portions of the narrative have disappeared into the digital ether (Heater).

<sup>5</sup> An uncredited actor portrays Beth in Ep. 52, in which Beth creeps into Jane's bedroom as she sleeps, dons Jane's wedding veil, and blows out Jane's candle.

<sup>6</sup> Wojcicki also concedes that people dislike videos for many reasons, including some that have nothing to do with the video' because 'attacks often targeted smaller creators and those just getting started'. In 2013, Aref and Hall—as well as most of the crew and actors—were Canadian undergraduate students, and, thus, perhaps vulnerable to such attacks.

<sup>7</sup> Unlike novels or even films, the social media feeds inevitably incorporate the actors' bodies and identities, especially the major characters': Jane Eyre (Alysson Hall), Grace Poole (Patricia Trinh), Adele (Juliet McLaughlin), E.D. Rochester (Adam J. Wright), Blanche Ingram (Alissa Hansen), Diana Rivers (Elna May Chidley), and Mary Rivers (Emily Henney).

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, one of the few characters that does not get a social media site is Suzannah-Maria Ramirez Gonzalez (credited as Angie Lopez, now Xavier Lopez). It seems like creating an account for Suzannah-Maria, who plays one of the maids in E.D. Rochester's residence would have facilitated an upstairs/downstairs conversation. Suzannah-Maria exploits her outsider status within the narrative—she taunts Jane by pretending to speak only Spanish; therefore, she could have safely provided a node where users could gossip with an insider/outsider character, driving up engagement without destroying immersion, as their conversations with Susannah-Maria would never threaten the main plot.

<sup>9</sup> The number of followers listed here were last verified on February 28, 2023. It is important to note that some of the platforms list the complete number (e.g., 1,222) while others round off the number (e.g., 14K).

For authenticity, I listed the number as displayed on each platform. While the *AoJE* team also created Wix websites for Thornfield Exports and Blanche Ingram, analytics for these types of sites are visible only to the administrators, emphasizing that their websites are outward facing promotion, rather than interactive social media sites.

<sup>10</sup> And if we compare the above numbers to Pemberley Digital's ground-breaking *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* characters' Twitter accounts, there is a clear deficit in the *AoJE* audience's appreciation of their storyworld: Lizzie Bennet (23.7K followers), William Darcy (14.9K), Lydia Bennet (13.3K), Jane Bennet (13.3K), and Gigi Darcy (12.6K).

<sup>11</sup> Most of *AoJE*'s coverage has been online via fan websites, such as TV Tropes, Silver Petticoat Review, Open Culture, Fandom, Archive of Our Own, and (the) Absolute.

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