

The Empathetic Author in the Internet Age: The Victorian Serialized Novel and the Internet Serial as Social Experience

Serialization is a publishing practice that has endured in different forms since its rise as the dominant publishing model in Victorian England. Though not by any stretch of the imagination the dominant method of novel publication today, serialization remains present in modern print culture largely as a product of the Internet. In this paper I will argue that three Internet-based forms of serialized fiction—serialized long-form prose (hereafter shortened to *web serial*), the *quest*, and the *web comic*—share several elements with Victorian serial novels. The two contexts share, first, a social community of readers founded around the serial text, and second, direct contact between author and reader. The divergence between modern and Victorian serialized texts lies mainly in the purpose with which the author-reader relationship is manipulated. I will use the term “reader anxiety” to refer to any suspense or tension produced in the reader, the exact nature of which will vary across contexts. In Victorian serials, reader anxiety is necessary for commercial success. While the desire to create suspense for the reader remains in modern serials as well, direct contact with readers is often used to subvert some forms of reader anxiety for the sake of a more enjoyable reading experience.

The differences in how Victorian and Internet-based serials form author-reader relationships and encourage or subvert reader anxiety stem in part from the different print cultures from which each originate. In the Victorian context, serialization was the primary model of publishing utilized by the most popular authors of the era, whereas in the context of Internet self-publication, authors use serialization as a means of disseminating subversive work with little prospect of commercial publication. From these vastly different print cultures come

vastly different purposes for serialization, and in turn, vastly different social experiences for author and reader.

THE VICTORIAN MODEL OF SERIALIZATION

Beginning with the publication of the *Pickwick Papers* in 1836, serialization became the popular mode of novel publication. Never before had time been an element of novel writing, yet with the *Pickwick Papers* and subsequent serials, time became an inextricable element of Victorian print culture (Allen 36). Serialization transformed the expectations the public had of the novelist, their expectations of the text, and the reading experience itself. Publication in periodicals transformed the English novel as, for the first time, novelists came to be defined as businesspeople, more similar to journalists than artists (Delafield 102). There was no guarantee that a magazine which picked up a novel for publication would not drop it again: that depended upon the popularity of each installment with the magazine's readers. Serials might be dropped by one magazine and picked up in another, or rushed to a finish in twelve issues instead of twenty due to flagging popularity (Allen 40).

The integration of the reader's appeasement into the process of not only novel publication but the act of writing itself disrupted England's print culture in the mid-19th century. Genres shifted: novels published in magazines appealed intentionally to the magazine audience. According to one Victorian reviewer, "serial novels should be a 'conservatory, so to say, of light, and flowers, and perfume, added to a room, into which you may step at pleasure'" (Allen 37). Some Victorians had the opposite preference, and were frustrated by the sentimentality of serial novels. Henry James protested that Anthony Trollope was "inartistic" and "took a suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, make-

believe” (quoted in Delafield 119). Phrased another way, James took issue with the commercialization and monetization of novel writing. Yet commercialization was the natural result of a mode of publication in close communication with readers about what they wanted in a novel while that novel was still being written.

Middlemarch, a later experiment with the serial novel, is a good example of how money influenced its publication. Unlike its predecessors, *Middlemarch* did not publish in a magazine, but in eight half-volumes, and therefore was free to publish bi-monthly, rather than according to a strict monthly schedule (Payne 122). The reasons for this experiment were, first, an attempt “by the Leweses and Blackwood to escape the power of Mudie’s and other lending libraries, which were by 1871 exacting large discounts on large orders” (Payne 122); second, an attempt by Eliot to sell advertisements in the end-pages; and third, an attempt to increase the likelihood of the novel being reviewed multiple times, which would in turn increase sales (Payne 122).

This business-like approach to novel writing is mirrored in how Victorian novelists interacted with the public. For the first time, novelists were not only businesspeople, but celebrities, a shift in persona fostered by the advent of the public reading. The question of the novelist identity is again raised: John Forster, Dickens’ biographer and critic, finds fault in the public reading. He writes:

“It was a substitution of lower for higher aims: a change to commonplace from more elevated pursuits; and it had so much character of a public exhibition for money to raise, in the question of respect for his calling as a writer, a question also in respect to himself as a gentleman” (Payne 146).

Dickens’ choice to do public readings for profit attracted criticism, but it also created “the new trend towards novelist worship” (Payne 149) which would endure for decades: “George Eliot’s

fans [would rush] up to kiss her hand in the same St. James Hall where Dickens delivered nearly all his London readings” (Payne 149). With serialization, the novelist identity became that of a celebrity, but, notably, a celebrity whose status existed at the whim of the reader. If the author did not treat their writing like a commercial good, they were likely to have their status revoked.

THE VICTORIAN SERIAL NOVEL AS A SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

The close relationship between serialization and commercialization in the Victorian context is a key concept one must keep in mind in the discussion of how the Victorian model of serialization existed as a reading experience inherently more social than volume publication, and which depended heavily upon the cultivation of reader anxiety.

Victorian readers approached serialized novels differently than they approached novels read in volume. There was a certain level of intimacy between reader and text that serialization produced. In “The Serialized Novel,” Catherine Delafield writes, “Readers liked the serialization aspect as something ‘friendly,’ the characters regarded as companions almost” (119). The novel, when read in installments over a long period, can understandably be considered a companion—much like a friend, the novel is reencountered regularly, and its next visit anticipated. Further, readers interact with the serial novel over a longer span of time than they would interact with a volume novel; the time waiting in between installments is not time during which the novel is forgotten or set aside, but time during which the reader is engaged imaginatively with the text. In *Serialization in Popular Culture*, Rob Allen confirms that, “According to critics such as Wolfgang Iser, [temporal delay] led to a deeper imaginative engagement with the novel, especially in terms of readers spending more time imagining

possible resolutions to unanswered questions” (35). With the text left half finished, readers naturally engage longer with the text, musing over how it will be resolved.

We are given to understand that this level of engagement was a relatively new phenomenon with the advent of the serial novel. Thomas Arnold in 1839 wrote the following about how his students engaged with serialized texts:

“The works of amusement published only a few years since were comparatively few in number; they were less exciting, and therefore less attractive; they were dearer, and therefore less accessible; and, not being published periodically, did not occupy the mind for so long a time, nor keep alive so constant an expectation; nor, by dwelling thus upon the mind, and distilling themselves into it, as it were drop by drop, did they possess it so largely, colouring even, in many instances, its very language and affording frequent matter for conversation” (quoted in Allen 34).

Rather than read a book all at once, ruminate upon it for a short time, and then occupy their minds with other pursuits, readers of serial novels were instead led to ruminate upon the text during the intervals in between installments and renew their interest again with each weekly or monthly addition.

Arnold importantly makes mention of *conversation*: not only was the personal experience of reading changed by serialization, but the social experience of reading was changed as well. Benedict Anderson terms this experience “imagined community” (Allen 34). Readers of serials, by nature of reading in installments, had in common the experience of long term imaginative engagement, and as a result, “disruption opened a space for a community of readers to discuss, debate and judge the tantalizing possibilities of what might happen next” (Allen 35).

The experience of reading a novel is therefore transformed from a solitary experience to a social experience in which readers are aware of their own reading experience as something that is not fixed, but that changes with each installment. At the end of each installment, there is the possibility for satisfaction or dissatisfaction with its resolution. Readers and critics could, if they were dissatisfied (or anxious that they might soon be), address their desires to each other, or, in many cases, to the author directly. Not only was the Victorian reading experience a social experience between readers, but a social experience between reader and author. Charles Dickens, whose manipulation of reader anxiety will be covered in more detail shortly, delighted in the letters he received imploring him to spare his characters unhappy fates: “After the publication of the thirty-fourth number of *Master Humphrey’s Clock*, he was ‘inundated with imploring letters recommending poor little Nell to mercy. Six yesterday, and four today (it’s not 12 o’Clock yet) already!’” (Allen 40).

The serialized novel greatly influenced the Victorian reading experience, transforming a solitary activity into one of “constant ‘conversation’ and shared ‘expectation’” (Allen 35). Victorians also commented upon how serialization transformed reading from a leisure activity into a source of anxiety. George Eliot even complained of this shift, despite the fact that as a serial writer herself, she contributed to it. She terms the constant forward motion of society *eagerness*, and complains that “Even idleness is eager now—eager for amusement: prone to excursion-trains, art-museums, periodical literature, and exciting novels” (Allen 35). With the serial novel, the previously leisurely and satisfactory experience of reading is inherently unsatisfactory—rather than a passive (idle) activity, it is an active (eager) activity as the reader ruminates on, converses about, and worries over the text. Reading has become, according to Eliot, “a frenzied consumption of commodities produced for ‘amusement’” (Allen 36).

As much as serialization impacted the experience of reading, so too did serialization impact the experience of writing. Two elements, first, correspondence between reader and author and second, the commercial nature of magazine publication each combined to create a print culture where the desires of the consumer came to be reflected in the content of the novels being produced, creating an “evolution based on customer demand” (Delafield 95). The competition for readers led to more sensationalist fiction like Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (Allen 35) and the sentimentalism that Henry James despised in Trollope. At the advent of the serial novel, not only genre but intellectual property was borrowed in hopes of cashing in on the best-selling trends. Dicken’s *Pickwick Papers* was given an unauthorized serialized sequel called *Pickwick Abroad* by G.W.M. Reynolds, and Reynolds was not the only imitator (Allen 36).

Above all else, the reader’s interest in the text was integral to assuring that the text would be completed. Authors began to use the interruptions inherent to the form as a means of keeping the reader’s interest in the sea of competing novels—all published on the same day of the month (Allen 37). Direct address to the reader became a necessary tool for the author to shape the reading experience and moderate reader anxiety over the fate of the characters. Like the reader’s letters to Dickens pleading for Nell’s life, direct address to the reader was a way for the author to plead for the reader’s continued interest. One example is Dickens’ request that the reader “Pause you who read this” at the end of one installment of *Great Expectations*; the reader of the serialized text has no choice but to pause, but recognition by the author prevents this reality from being disappointing. Rather, the reader’s experience is guided by Dickens’ request that they consider whether they, like Pip, can pinpoint a moment when their lives first began to be bound by a “long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers” (Allen 38). This manipulation of suspense

implies that Pip's acquaintance with Miss Havisham will be important later in the narrative without revealing whether the consequences will be positive or negative (Allen 39). Most importantly, direct address influences the reader's after-reading experience only if they are reading the serial in installments. Allen notes that readers today do not have to follow Dickens' instruction to pause and consider themselves in relation to the text: "the publication method specific to weekly serialization enabled a specific, and exclusive, set of effects based on enforced temporal delay" (39). A contemporary reviewer commented on this manipulation of suspense, writing, "Every week almost, as it came out, we were artfully stopped at some juncture which made suspense count the days until the next number appeared" (Allen 39).

The author's motivation to build up an engaged (even anxious) reader base—through a sensationalist or sentimental genre, by manipulating the end of each installment to create the most suspense for the reader, or by addressing the reader directly—originates in the pressures of magazine serialization. Allen credits Kathryn Chittick for the idea that after the *Pickwick Papers*, "the importance of time influenced novels at every level, from the form and content of each daily, weekly, or monthly installment to the material traces of periodical publishing rhythms that remained in later volume editions and as a result of imitators attempting to copy Dickens' serial novel format" (36). Reader anxiety and how it is manipulated, therefore, must be considered in a commercial context. Direct address from the author to the reader demands further engagement as the installment draws to a close; cultivating anxiety as to whether Pip's meeting of Miss Havisham will be a chain of iron or of flowers is the clearest cut path to ensure the greatest number of readers will buy the next issue of the magazine, and in turn, buy the lifespan of the serial piece by piece.

THE INTERNET MODEL OF SERIALIZATION

The Internet has presented a unique transformation upon serialization in that it has increased the accessibility of authorship. Essentially, anyone with Internet access can cheaply purchase a domain name and start publishing their work in installments. With the Internet, we see the removal of the magazine as mediator of serialized fiction. Serialized fiction—web serial, quest, or web comic—is delivered directly from author to reader. Internet serialization implies amateur status, as serial fiction published over the Internet is usually gratis. Yet through tools like Patreon, a subscription service where readers pay a monthly fee for access to bonus content by the writers and artists to whom they subscribe, and Kickstarter, a fundraising service which straddles the line between pre-order and donation, Internet culture is gradually adapting to admit the many forms of Internet serialization as valid forms of publishing.

The first form is the most familiar, and is sometimes adapted into print, much the same way Victorian serials published in magazines were later published in volume. *Web serial* refers to any prose fiction published in installments over the Internet. One popular example is *The Martian* by Andy Weir. Weir started publishing chapters on his website in 2009 and made the finished version available as a free e-book (Garratt par. 3-5). In 2012, Weir made it available on Amazon for the Kindle, and in the span of three months, he sold 35,000 copies (Garratt par. 5). In 2014, he sold *The Martian* to Random House and the film rights to Fox. Weir's story is unusual, but not unheard of. *Cracked* writer and novelist David Wong also had his start as a novelist through the web serial: his novel *John Dies at the End* had 70,000 downloads before it was bought by Thomas Dunne Books (Meier 3). Web serials, being similar if not identical to the typical novel format, travel across the line between Internet publishing and traditional publishing with relative ease.

Antlers, Colorado by Marnie Silverman is one example of how the typical web serial operates. Silverman publishes installments of approximately 1,700 words twice a week (Personal Interview), a pace that has allowed *Antlers, Colorado*'s readership to grow slowly over the course of two and a half years. Silverman reports the serial currently has 146 subscribers (Personal Interview). Though the serial is free to read, Silverman gives readers the option to donate through a service called Ko-fi. Ko-fi puts a "Buy me a coffee" button on a given web page, allowing readers to click the button and donate several dollars to Silverman's Paypal. Essentially, it is a digital tip jar.

Though similar, the web serial and the traditionally published novel are not identical, as *Antlers* reveals. *Antlers* eschews the traditional structure of a novel. Rather, there are eight distinct plots spanning about 210,000 words (Silverman, Personal Interview) across 136 updates, not counting the seven podcast episodes for the *Antlers* side story *The Stag*. These plots are organized by chapter, though perhaps comparison with Middlemarch's "books" would be more apt: the longest chapter is 33,000 words (Silverman, Personal Interview). Each chapter has an epilogue and an "intermission" before the next chapter begins, and the intermission presents another point of divergence from the traditionally published novel. Unlike the rest of *Antlers*, the intermissions are interactive. Silverman uses a program called Twine in order to create a reader-led reading experience that cannot be reproduced in print to nearly the same effect. The closest relative would be the "choose your own adventure" book. Twine creates hyperlinks out of certain words on the webpage, and when the reader clicks the links, they are directed to a new page, usually elaborating on the specific word clicked. In the case of the intermission between chapters six and seven, clicking the phrase "the bartender" directs to:

“The last bar you were at, in Kansas, the bartender asked if you were a queer. You broke his nose and knocked out three of his teeth before security tossed you out. Didn’t even get to drink your margarita. Waste of good money” (Silverman, “Smoke and Mirrors”). Clicking “money” then redirects back to the rest of the story. The circuitous reading experience is unique in that it asks the reader to reorient themselves in the midst of interruption— interruption which the reader themselves elects by clicking the link. Between the eight separate plots and the web-dependent intermissions, *Antlers* is a clear cut example of the new print culture of the Internet.

Another degree of separation away from traditional publishing is the *quest*. The quest form is a middle ground between prose and comics. The format of each update is one image and adjacent text. The image is similar to, but not interchangeable with, a traditional comic panel. Speech balloons and others elements of traditional comics are largely absent. Instead, context for the image is provided in the adjacent text, which includes description, dialogue, the protagonist’s inner thoughts, and, most importantly, conversation. The quest is unique in that it is a collaborative effort between the author and the anonymous readers. Through host websites like Tgchan, which are designed for author-reader interaction, the author posts an update, the reader responds with a question or a direction for the protagonist, and the author chooses from among the reader responses what the protagonist will say or do.

For example, in Ira Prince’s quest *Acid Soup*, Prince introduces the protagonist, Lowry, with an illustration of her sitting in her apartment with her boyfriend, whose head is a malfunctioning computer (*Acid Soup* no. 663996). Readers then ask questions such as, “Who else is around you, besides emoti-boyfriend?” and make suggestions for what Lowry should do next, prompting her to “find some kind of computer person expert and convince them to fix him”

(Prince, *Acid Soup* no. 664011). Prince then responds directly to these prompts. Prince illustrates Lowry looking out her apartment window down on the city below and in the adjacent text gives the readers some options for people Lowry can visit: Sweat, an angel, Ne, a thief, or Lowry's ex and his new girlfriend (*Acid Soup* no. 664036). Readers also prompt for information that may not be relevant to advancing the plot, but reveals which character details readers are curious about. For example, one reader prompts, "Nice scar, how'd you get it?" to which Prince writes, "Woke up with it the morning after one of our break-ins" (*Acid Soup* no. 664046). Thus, Prince mediates what the reader wants to know with what the author is willing to reveal and when.

The necessity of reader participation to the form necessarily means the author must transform the writing process. The author must consider the value of interactivity to the reader. Prince states:

"Questers will get frustrated if they feel like their choices and suggestions have no impact on the plot, or that they're being unfairly punished for those choices. An example I use is that if you give them door A and door B with no further context, and then severely punish the character after the readers choose to open door B, that's not valuable interactivity" (Personal Interview).

This does not mean that the reader is in complete control of the character, however. Prince still decides what suggestions would be out of character for Lowry to take. Consensus among readers is likely to sway Prince to one particular course of action, but "Outside of majority rule...[Prince] typically [picks] things that are the most in-character, the smartest, or sometimes the most amusing/charming" (Personal Interview). Prince also notes that for quests, the writing must accommodate pauses for the reader to respond—more "points for interaction and question-

asking and decision-making” (Personal Interview) than would naturally occur in any other kind of narrative. When a narrative is as dependent on an engaged audience as the quest is, keeping to a strict schedule is important. Prince explains, “If a reader checks your thread¹ enough times and is disappointed to see that it still hasn’t updated, eventually they’re going to stop checking altogether” (Personal Interview). Above delivering updates quickly, regularity is most important to keep readers returning to the message boards.

It goes without saying that web comics also benefit from regularity in update schedule. Web comics typically follow a once, twice, or three times a week update schedule. Each update is composed of one page of multiple panels, like in print comics. The amount that can be communicated in one page varies, but on the whole, what a comic artist can communicate in two pages a week is one or two complete ideas. One page of *Paranatural* by Zack Morrison, for example, features a conversation between several middle school students. One character, Johnny, corrects Ed on another character, RJ’s, personal pronouns. In twelve panels, Johnny shares, first, that RJ uses they/them pronouns “Thanks to some edu-taining lyrics and a zine hurled into the audience” (Morrison, *Paranatural* 5.187) at a punk concert, and second, that RJ swore a vow of silence “t’only use their voice for that which is truly metal” (5.187). Within this page is a complete idea regarding RJ’s backstory, which has been in the making for the better part of a decade since the character was first introduced in the comic. The next page features a new idea: Johnny and his gang don’t know what to do with their energy now that they have decided not to bully Ed, and by the end of the page, they have decided a course of action. Moving at this slow pace means regular and frequent updates are a necessity to the web comic form.

¹ Thread: “An individual set of chronological posts is called a [thread]. A quest may start and finish all in one thread—this would be referred to as a one-shot—or, like most of my [Prince’s] quests, might consist of multiple threads that serve as separate chapters” (Prince, “quest tutorial”).

Contrasted with Middlemarch's bi-monthly 100 page installments, web comics typically offer only about eight pages, or eight distinct ideas, per month. Seriality, therefore, is exponentially more apparent in web comics, quests, and web serials than in Victorian serials. Rather than ending with a complete chapter, or even, in Eliot's extreme case, a complete 100 page "book," this niche of Internet serial publication updates in brief installments which leave the reader in suspense to a greater degree. Each page of a web comic may complete its "idea," but it has nowhere near the degree of fulfillment as a complete chapter. The slow pace at which the story progresses in web serials, web comics, and quests means that these stories take years to reach their completion. *Antlers*, *Colorado*'s run of twice weekly updates took nearly three years to reach completion, beginning in August of 2014 and ending in May of 2017. *Acid Soup* and *Paranatural* are still ongoing; *Acid Soup* began in August of 2015, while *Paranatural* has been ongoing for Morrison's estimate of seven or eight years (Morrison, "Paranatural is like seven...").

THE INTERNET SERIAL AS A SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

The prolonged serialization of web comics has led to discussion in web comics communities about how the author and reader should interact—specifically, what the reader has the right to be told by the author going in. For a comic with a seven to eight year run, questions arise: what is a "spoiler" versus what is information that will affect a reader's decision to continue reading the comic? This conversation has been especially prominent around the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ characters; namely, do LGBTQIA+ readers have a right to know whether the comic will introduce Queer characters in the future, or is it bad form to advertise

Queer representation when that representation will take years to become established in the comic? Morrison muses over the issue on his Twitter account, writing:

“I’m definitely going to put more they/them characters and spirits in paranatural [sic] and other stuff I make...binary trans² characters too! That’s been the plan for a while...I felt bad about the idea of promising something that wasn’t gonna show up for a significant chunk of time because I’m moving at Webcomics Miles Per Hour, but since I get a lot of people asking all the time I’d rather ask for patience w/ the plot unfolding than leave y’all wondering if there’s gonna be trans characters 4 another year or smthing [sic]” (“Have deliberately used...”).

“Webcomics Miles Per Hour” is of course a tongue in cheek jab at the slow pace of web comics due to their seriality. One commenter on Morrison’s post agrees and adds: “Getting people on the same page beforehand helps relieve tensions both ways. Beats the hell out of the print comics standard of ‘wait and see ;)’” (Spacetwinks). This addition is of especial importance in understanding the mindset of today’s Internet serials. What this commenter terms the “tension” of not knowing whether a piece of media will include diverse representation or not is one form of reader anxiety. Importantly, however, it is a form of reader anxiety distinct from the anxiety of, say, Victorian reader Henry Crabb Robinson, who wrote in his diary that “this form of publication [serialization] put too great a strain on his nerves and that he would rather wait for the volume edition” (Allen 39). Victorian reader anxiety is a response to suspense, which Victorian novelists manipulated purposefully to ensure the sale of the next installment. In Internet serials, reader anxiety exists in two camps: anxiety over what will happen next, but also the “tension” of whether or not the narrative will meet certain expectations.

² *Trans* is popular shorthand for transgender; *binary* refers to male or female genders, as opposed to nonbinary genders (neither male nor female).

Social media such as Twitter is a means of mediating that reader anxiety. Like Morrison's announcement that he has plans for more transgender characters in *Paranatural*, Fisher Van Kirk, author of the web comic *Godsblood*, uses Twitter to share character details that may not appear in the comic—or at least not for a long time. Van Kirk writes, “Rivinie was that kid who knew she was trans the moment she could process gender” (“Rivinie was that...”), while “Barlowe experimented as a young adult, and settled into dudehood in his mid-twenties” (“Barlowe experimented as...”). The character Washa, meanwhile, “has been a gender enigma since time immemorial and doesn't care about pronouns or presentation in the least” (Van Kirk, “Washa has been...”). In just three characters, Van Kirk explores a spectrum of transgender experiences. Extra-textual communication between author and reader here satisfies the reader's desire to see themselves in comics without the author having to structure the comic around sharing this information as quickly as possible.

Besides easing the reader anxiety of LGBTQIA readers, extra-textual communication also serves to address the reader anxiety particular to a mentally ill readership. Prince uses Twitter as a platform to speak to new readers of *Acid Soup* about potentially triggering content. They write: “If you're a new reader and need to know about specific kinds of content ahead of time, feel free to ask” (Prince, “The post was made...”). In the preamble to the quest, Prince also gives a generalized warning: “Because it deals with trauma and abuse, acid soup [sic] contains many themes and scenes that could be upsetting or triggering to some readers. among [sic] the more prominent themes are physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; blood, gore, and violence; and self-harm” (“ACID SOUP is an interactive webcomic about ptsd...” par. 4). This form of reader interaction is common to serial publication.

Antlers, Colorado takes a similar approach. Rather than offer a general warning or the offer to chat one on one about the content of the text, Silverman heads updates with a “Content warning.” Not every update has one, only those that Silverman deems most likely to harm the well-being of readers with depression, anxiety, PTSD, etc. One example reads, “This update contains detailed descriptions of violence, body horror, and gore” (Silverman, *Antlers* 8.16). Another reads, “This update contains mentions of gore and self harm” (Silverman, *Antlers* 8.13). What is important to glean from these warnings is that their purpose is not to undermine suspense for the average reader, but to undermine what is understood to be a negative form of reader anxiety, explicitly for the benefit of mentally ill readers. *Acid Soup*, for example, which describes itself as “an interactive webcomic about ptsd, identity, and finding yourself (whether you want to or not)” (“ACID SOUP is an interactive webcomic about ptsd...” par. 1), warns readers specifically of content that may trigger PTSD flashbacks—thus the warning that the story contains “physical, sexual, and emotional abuse” (par. 4).

Content warnings for the benefit of mentally ill readers and promises in advance that LGBTQIA characters will make an appearance in the text both serve the same purpose: to mediate reader anxiety specifically for the well-being of marginalized people. This way of conceptualizing the author’s duty to the reader is unique to Internet communities where both author and reader are likely marginalized themselves. In the case of *Acid Soup*, Prince speaks to the influence their own experience with trauma had on the text (Prince, “Acid soup is...”); author and reader are often members of the same (Queer, mentally ill) demographics, and with that in mind, the print culture of warning for content to which mentally ill readers in particular may be sensitive follows, logically—as does heralding content which LGBTQIA readers are hard pressed to find in print books.

For amateur authors, Internet serials are a welcome medium free from the gatekeepers of traditional publishing. There is no agent, editor, publishing house, or magazine accepting or rejecting manuscripts. For web serials like *The Martian*, one can see how it was marketable to both online and print readers; *The Martian*, featuring a heterosexual, in all ways typical protagonist, is uncontroversial. For *Antlers, Colorado* a web serial about a polyamorous bisexual psychic with Generalized Anxiety Disorder (Silverman, Personal Interview) and an equally Queer cast of supporting characters, the mainstream marketability is questionable. On this topic, Publishers Weekly writer Dick Donahue cites Raphael Kadushin, Senior Editor of University of Wisconsin Press, who says, “Books in general are being more and more tightly categorized, and it’s getting much harder for gay-identified writers, unless they have a proven track record, to get signed because publishers see the gay market as something that’s shrinking and marginalized” (par. 8). Young Adult author Malinda Lo compiles data from 1969 to 2011 showing that, “Even as the number of LGBT YA novels has risen somewhat steadily, with a few dips along the way, less than 1 percent of all young adult novels have LGBT characters” (Volsky par. 1). It is in this context of traditional publishing that (mostly) young writers and artists find themselves today.

While in the Victorian context serialization was the mainstream form of publishing, being the form of choice of Dickens, Trollope, Gaskell, Eliot, and countless more, in today’s context, serialization is reserved for the unambitious or the countercultural. *The Martian* was always intended to be a modest undertaking. Weir explains that he had no ambitions for the novel: the story of an astronaut stranded on Mars was, more than anything else, an opportunity for Weir to solve engineering puzzles for his own entertainment (Garratt par. 3). Weir prefers a career in software; writing is a hobby (Garratt par. 9). Meanwhile, some of the most beloved Queer media

today is published not through Random House, but through the Internet, where readers form small, but enthusiastic, communities.

Perhaps because of this, Internet serialization features an unusual closeness between author and reader that contrasts with the author-as-celebrity model which had its beginning in Dickens and Eliot, and which has persisted in print culture today. Prince clearly speaks on friendly terms with the average reader and welcomes direct interaction. Prince posts to their Twitter, “Who volunteers to kick my FUCKING ass if I don’t update acid soup tonight” (“Who volunteers to...”), which, casual in tone, addresses readers and friends alike on a public forum. Prince welcomes readers into their inner sphere, at least semantically; the reader of this tweet is offered the impression of intimacy with the author, even if actually responding would be inappropriate. Yet there are instances where closeness between the author and reader isn’t an illusion produced by social media, but the reality. The quest format itself necessitates interaction between author and reader, but even beyond that, Prince says things like “let me know if u need content warnings before you start” (“@larghydan np...”) to one specific new reader and “feel free to ask” (“The post was made...”) to their new readership in general. Prince also implies that they are involved in communities of discussion of *Acid Soup* when they tweet: “Y’all I’m telling u rn³ anytime someone reads acid soup and livetweets⁴ it, or when ppl tweet abt updates, I Die Continuously” (“Y’all I’m telling...”). Prince clearly reads and appreciates reader reactions to their work, and by sharing this fact with the readers, Prince opens a line of communication, encouraging readers to keep sharing their thoughts publicly.

³ Right now

⁴ To livetweet, meaning to post on Twitter one’s reaction to a piece of media as one reads/watches, rather than after the fact. Intended to capture an emotional reaction to certain events in the story as they happen, voice predictions, etc.

In some cases, fans become friends—again, because the fans of the work tend to be in the same age, sexuality, and gender demographics. In the case of *Antlers*, *Colorado*, readers who interact with Silverman through social media and strike up a rapport often become friends. The population of the invitation-only Skype group chat where Silverman talks about work in progress, shares character-inspired playlists, and teases possible outcomes is a mix of friends made through the web serial and friends from other areas of life. Silverman states, “Cain and Rae I met through *Be Calm* fandom, but we didn’t start talking until *Antlers*” (Personal Interview). Another member of the group chat, Cal, came to read *Antlers* through a friend, and then started talking to Silverman about it (Personal Interview). Other members of the group chat are friends from various online roleplaying groups over the years. The group chat isn’t an *Antlers*-specific community, though *Antlers* helped to build it. Rather, it is a space for members to share equally about their creative endeavors, or make conversation they think the other members will appreciate based on similar interests. Cain celebrates that they just finished their first commissioned piece of art (“Welcome to Hell” 29 Apr 2017, 5:48 PM EST), Rae exclaims that they love Lup, a character from the podcast *The Adventure Zone* (28 Apr 2017, 6:14 PM EST), and Silverman shares character information about a new project that will follow *Antlers*, saying jokingly, “He’s that jock who brings a guitar to every party” (28 Apr 2017, 2:15 AM EST). The chat is simultaneously a community of friends and a community of fans, though fandom is not a one-way street. Another member, Blake, shares their Twine game titled “Alraune,” which operates on the same software Silverman uses for *Antlers* intermissions (19 Apr 2017, 11:50 PM EST). Cal, Cain, Blake, Rae, and Silverman all discuss the work supportively as a community of readers and authors who play different roles at different times.

CONCLUSION

One can see in Victorian and modern day contexts that serialization inherently places the author and reader closer together. In Victorian serials, the author writes to keep the reader in a state of “readerly desire” (Allen 40), an acknowledgment of the reader’s influence over the text; the reader similarly takes on a one-sided correspondence, penning the author letters imploring them to take one course or another. While not an intimate relationship, the author and reader are in communication with each other as the text is composed, which cannot be said for volume publishing. Internet serials, in contrast, take full advantage of this line of communication, only made more pronounced by the ease of correspondence of the Internet, and form communities—not just the “imagined communities” of Victorian serials but real, measurable communities in the form of Twitter posts and Skype chats.

When the author exists in a community with the reader, the text is necessarily altered in new ways. Even for *The Martian*, which crossed the line between serialization and traditional publishing, the text was initially built by a community of readers with science and engineering knowledge who conversed with Weir, made corrections to his sometimes faulty science, and whose collaboration resulted in one of the most accurate pieces of science fiction to date (Garratt par. 4). In web serials, the text can be transformed by intimate knowledge of what the readership wants to see. As Silverman was planning Chapter 8 of *Antlers, Colorado*, she decided to integrate a character some readers would already be familiar with from the online roleplay Vantage Point, which Silverman moderates. For most readers, Dallas Campbell-Myszkowski is just another character, yet he might not have made his way into *Antlers* without Silverman’s relationship to a number of her readers in a community context. The influence of the reader on the quest, meanwhile, speaks for itself: the reader and author are literally collaborators—if not

quite equal collaborators—on the outcome of the story. And in web comics, while the reader may not have such a direct influence on the text, one can see how the time it takes to compose a story which only updates with two to three pages per week creates a different standard for author-reader communication; in this case, the author-reader relationship is not collaboration that results from community, but communication that results from empathy.

Empathy is what makes the world of Internet serialization unique. Rather than celebrate “readerly desire,” authors commiserate with and aim to deliver “readerly satisfaction”—though suspense is still an important element in any serialized fiction. Silverman is very clear that “Having an audience...that reads it update to update...makes me want to make it more suspenseful and end updates on cliffhangers” (Personal Interview). Yet some things are advertised up front in order to decrease reader anxiety. Silverman advertises on Web Fiction Guide that *Antlers* has “a cast of diverse, LGBT protagonists” (“Antlers, Colorado”). Morrison advertises that more transgender characters will be introduced within the next year. Prince and Silverman both caution readers about potentially upsetting content, with special focus on content that might be harmful to people with PTSD. This empathetic relationship is entirely unique to Internet serialization, and comes as the result of commiseration between marginalized author and marginalized reader. Authors who fill a very specific niche—say, LGBTQIA speculative fiction—may or may not find traditional publishers willing to take up their work, and some work, which relies on the Internet to support Twine games and interactive quests, cannot be gracefully transplanted into print. Readers who have interest in niche LGBTQIA speculative fiction are, in the same vein, unlikely to find very much of what that are looking for in print. Both reader and author exist in small communities to begin with, making community building that much more fluid between them, and explaining the empathetic connection between the two.

It follows logically that Queer serial authors, who are themselves frustrated with mainstream “wait and see ;)” responses to queries for Queer representation, will not replicate that behavior with their readers. In kind, mentally ill authors or authors who exist in communities with mentally ill readers choose the accessibility of their texts over reader anxiety.

While Victorian serial authors transformed the unique relationship between author and reader into celebrity, serials today transform the author-reader relationship into one of community and even collaboration, a relationship which encourages authors to look out for the well-being of their readers rather than cultivate a purely material “readerly desire” to buy the next issue. Art is created very differently, and in more innovative forms, like the Twine game, or the quest, when it exists outside of mainstream markets and concerns itself only with satisfying niche markets: from persnickety engineers to bisexuals to readers with trauma. From all this, we take away that empathy is the Internet serial’s key component, setting it apart in the history of English language literature.

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