

Serial Fiction Podcasting and Participatory Culture:

Fan Influence and Representation in *The Adventure Zone*

Technology journalist Frank Rose, in his book *The Art of Immersion* (2012/2011), argues that we are entering a third age of the Internet. The first of these began with the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1991, which ‘made the Net accessible to ordinary people’. The second was marked by a ‘cornucopia of participation (blogs, wikis, social media) known as Web 2.0’ (Rose, 2012/2011: 7). The third, into which we are now transitioning, is an artistic era: ‘The future beckons, but we’re only partway through inventing it. We can see the outlines of a new art form, but its grammar is as tenuous and elusive as the grammar of cinema a century ago’ (8). As the uses and affordances of new media become better understood and experimental online formats find their footing, this artistic era is beginning to be evidenced in forms of storytelling which take advantage of the contemporary technologies at hand. One example of this is podcast fiction, a format which draws heavily upon established media, radio fiction programming in particular, but which utilizes the unique capabilities associated with the digital file format and online distribution and consumption. Podcasts such as *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-present), *The Truth* (2012-present), and *The Message* (2015) have acquired large audiences, and certain programs have achieved syndication with media giants American Public Media and National Public Radio. Despite the recent surge in the popularity of podcasts, little scholarly attention has been placed on the format, except to discuss it as merely a continuation of radio programming or a part of a transmedia landscape for texts which are centred in more established media such as television and film. Typically released in serialized instalments, podcast fiction creators have the advantage of being able to receive feedback from fans directly through social media, and to draw on a wealth of paratextual fan-made content created and distributed on online platforms. This digital environment can be especially valuable in giving voice to those of

historically marginalized gender, sexual, and ethnic identities, and, for creators who are proactive in understanding the diversity of their audiences, there is the opportunity for fiction which is highly representative and inclusive.

One of the most successful examples of this can be found in the podcast *The Adventure Zone* (2014-present), the first foray into fiction from the McElroys, a family of prolific podcasters and online content producers who have a devoted following of fans. *The Adventure Zone* is an extensively participatory work of fiction, which utilizes the unique affordances of releasing a story serially in podcast form and having fans within easy reach on social media. More than this, *The Adventure Zone* shows how new media tools can be utilized to tackle the imbalance of power dynamics in culture, especially given the generally poor track-record of the science fiction and fantasy genres in this regard. This article takes *The Adventure Zone* as a case study which demonstrates the affordances of new media technologies in the production and distribution of cultural texts, using analysis of both its central narrative and paratextual elements.¹ Through discussion of the output of the podcast’s creators and the fandom of the series, this article hopes to demonstrate that *The Adventure Zone* and similar works signal the beginnings of a powerful new era for the production and distribution of serialized fiction, distinguishing themselves from their mass media predecessors in their manifestly participatory culture. While Rose’s perceived artistic age is surely still coming into focus, *The Adventure Zone* stands as a remarkably successful harbinger of what may be to come.

THE ADVENTURE ZONE AS NEW MEDIA FICTION

The Adventure Zone is not just an example of how new media fiction can become successful through engagement with its fan community, but also shows how new media tools can be utilized to tackle the imbalance of power dynamics in culture, especially given the generally

poor track-record of the science fiction genre in this regard. This article takes *The Adventure Zone* as a case study of the affordances of new media technologies in the production and development of cultural products, using analysis of both its central narrative and paratextual elements. *The Adventure Zone* is a collaborative, serial adventure-comedy podcast created by and starring brothers Griffin, Travis, and Justin and their father Clint McElroy. Originally devised as a filler-episode for Griffin, Travis, and Justin’s weekly comedy podcast *My Brother, My Brother, and Me* (*MBMBaM*, 2010-present), the popularity of the group’s storytelling dynamic led to *The Adventure Zone* becoming a regular series, with a new episode every two weeks. The first complete story, titled the ‘Balance’ campaign, began in December 2014 and concluded in August 2017 after sixty-nine episodes. Narrated and with additional voices by Griffin, the story follows the adventures of Magnus, a human fighter played by Travis, Taako, an elven wizard played by Justin, and Merle, a dwarven cleric played by Clint. The story sees the characters explore a fictional world to find and secure ‘grand relics’, items of huge destructive power. On this quest, the characters complete several shorter story arcs, such as solving a murder-mystery on board a train and competing in an illegal motor race, before discovering that they are interdimensional explorers whose memories have been erased by a mysterious creature known as the “voidfish.” Drawing from a range of influences, the series presents an eclectic and vividly realized world with a narrative combining puerile humour, high-tension thrills, and heart-breaking sincerity. The series is loosely based on the classic table top roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), and as such could be considered part of a subgenre of podcasts called ‘actual play’, along with popular series such as *Pretend Wizards* (2014-present), *Friends at the Table* (2014-present), and *Acquisitions, Inc.* (2016-present). Playing within their interpretation of the *D&D* fifth edition game rules (which determine the abilities of their characters and how they can operate within the fictional world), the story is shaped by Travis, Justin, and Clint

providing creative responses to Griffin’s narrative prompts. After describing what they would like their characters to do, the players roll dice to determine how successfully these actions are performed. As one journalist puts it, however, *The Adventure Zone* is not just ‘four people playing *D&D*. It’s four people collaboratively telling a story, with *D&D* as a skeleton’ (Best, 2017). Beginning with the story included in the *D&D* starter set, ‘The Lost Mine of Phandelver’, *The Adventure Zone* soon took on an original and compelling life of its own.

Something that makes *The Adventure Zone* distinct among actual play podcasts is its swift development from a typical Tolkien-esque fantasy to an original, intricately-crafted science fiction epic. The development of the podcast was largely the work of Griffin, who led the project as the ‘game master’ (GM), writing the campaign and guiding his familial collaborators to unfold the story in real time. From the halfway point of the campaign, Griffin also wrote and recorded an extensive soundtrack. This addition increased the immersive power of the storytelling, as Evan Minsker (2016), journalist for the online music magazine Pitchfork, writes: ‘even if they’re unassuming as standalone songs, [Griffin’s] simple bits of music began to make a huge difference in how the show’s narratives came across’. In a typical display of the show’s creative attention to detail, the campaign’s finale included in its soundtrack the repetition of musical motifs heard much earlier in the series, linking returning characters to their original appearances and emphasizing the dramatic impact of narrative resolutions. This technique shows how the creators have made use of the podcast format, which allows the audience to access past episodes instantly online, to offer rewards for repeat listening and information that might then be shared online in fan communities. This is only one of several ways, however, in which the story is built to harness the strengths of the podcasting format.

NEW MEDIA FROM OLD

The podcast medium combines the conventions of broadcast radio with the digital recording and distribution of audio pioneered in the late twentieth century. A portmanteau of Apple’s ‘iPod’ music player and the word ‘broadcast’, the term ‘podcast’ entered the mainstream vernacular around 2004 (Breslin et al., 2009: 127). As podcast creators need only a microphone and computer to produce and distribute content, the medium saw early popularity due to its ease of access. As one instruction book for making podcasts claims:

What blogs are to newspapers, podcasts are for radio, deconstructing the strict order of the mass-media marketplace. Where radio and audio production have been rarified [sic] professions in the mass media era, the relentless march of Moore’s Law has brought the tools and distribution networks that made those mass media expensive to experiment with and compete in to a generation known as podcasters. (Mack and Ratcliffe, 2007: 30)

In addition to this accessibility, the medium possesses several characteristics which distinguish it from traditional media. As opposed to scheduled radio broadcasting, for which fans of a show need to ensure they tune to the correct station at the correct time, podcasting benefits from being able to target listeners via subscriptions on podcast download software and from being available at any time ‘on demand’. These two qualities are hallmarks of digital media content distribution, which provide a dependable audience for the creator and convenience for the consumer. Rather than requiring a cumbersome stereo or radio wave-receiving device, podcasts can be downloaded in a digital audio format such as MP3, carried in one’s pocket, and then listened to without a live connection, making them suitable for listening while travelling or in remote areas. Indeed, podcasts are made with the assumption that they will be listened to on a mobile telephone or portable digital audio player such as an iPod, often being plugged directly into the ears of the listener with earbuds, meaning the

listening experience has the potential to feel markedly more personal and intimate than a radio broadcast. As podcasters themselves tend to be well-known in the industry but seldom pre-eminent, world-famous celebrities, they might be described by the idea of ‘closeness through distance’ defined by Matt Hills (2010):

Subcultural celebrities can be said to possess a quality of imagined ‘closeness through distance’ for their fans, by which I mean that these celebrities, just like more generalized or ubiquitous examples, exist as objects of knowledge for fandom largely through their mediated performances and promotional/publicity materials [...] [but] are far more likely, at some point, to have embodied, social interactions with their fans. (235-6)

Podcasters are increasingly becoming subcultural celebrity figures and having such interactions with fans, with events such as 2017’s Seattle PodCon featuring several notable podcasters and with podcasting performances gaining a foothold at other fan events such as San Diego Comic Con. The invitations to closeness made by the medium’s practical application and subcultural celebrity figures means that it is likely that listeners feel a close connection to the podcasts and that they will expect their opinions to be heard by the teams behind such podcasts. The features described here can be attributed to a broad range of podcasts, including non-fiction and talk shows. Podcasting’s widespread popularity as a medium for entertainment fiction is still a recent phenomenon, however, and its specific advantages are the subject of much experimentation and discussion. While *The Adventure Zone* utilizes this emergent technology, it accordingly draws heavily upon storytelling in established media forms.

Being a *D&D* campaign, the trajectory of the podcast cannot be fully anticipated by Griffin, but otherwise, with its combination of voice acting, narration, and musical soundtrack the series resembles radio fiction programming, at least on its surface. In a recent

lecture, Travis (Ohio Media School Columbus Campus, 2017) remarked that the series is ‘a lot like old radio dramas, I mean it’s not new’. Episodes of *The Adventure Zone* quickly established their structural formula in a way that drew upon its radio drama influences, but subverted these conventions through metatextual references and the incorporation of intertextual, transmedia ideas. From the second episode, the podcast opens with a collection of clips from the story so far, introduced with the phrase, ‘Previously, on *The Adventure Zone*’. The clips segment reminds listeners of details which may have been forgotten in the two weeks between episodes, but also functions as a comfortably familiar convention for listeners of serial radio programming. These clips are followed by Griffin, his voice electronically disguised, reacting to the events of the story so far, and ending with an exuberant exclamation of the show’s title. The disembodied voice of this unexplained character sets the tone of mystery and intrigue for the story to come, and frequently introduces metafictional humour, such as in one typical opening: ‘If our heroes can’t stop this runaway train I’m going to have to find a new podcast to introduce. Is [the Peabody-awarded podcast] *Serial* hiring? It’s *The Adventure Zone*!’ At the close of the campaign Griffin reveals that this voice belongs to a character in the story, a voidfish named Junior who has the power to either erase stories or to disseminate them instantly to everyone in the world. This act of dissemination is termed, significantly, ‘broadcasting’ (The Adventure Zone, 2017e). ‘I thought it would be cool if the podcast was kind of the story [told within the story]’, Griffin explains, ‘I dig that kind of shit in basically all forms of media, this idea of [...] metanarrative, [...] and so, like, I kind of wanted to take a stab at that’ (The Adventure Zone, 2017g). This revelation demolishes the fourth wall, bringing the podcast medium and the listeners into the narrative of the story. In the fiction of the story, the podcast itself is being told by Junior, and Junior’s audience is both the inhabitants of the fictional universe and the podcast listeners. This metatextual technique shows the creators utilizing the format of radio

broadcasting in new and unexpected ways, resulting in a deeply immersive narrative which encourages the listener to feel themselves a part of the fictional world.

Formal elements of the podcast, including occasional Foley work (improvised sound effects) and Clint’s radio patter gained from decades of experience as a local radio entertainer, exhibit *The Adventure Zone*’s connections to broadcast radio. The series has particularly clear roots in popular science fiction shows, which originated with radio theatres such as *Dimension X* (1950-51) and *X Minus One* (1955-58).² Besides referencing the format of radio, however, *The Adventure Zone* frequently draws upon the language and content of science fiction film and television. The show’s title has echoes of Rod Serling’s television series *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64), and to describe story components the McElroys reference texts such as *Doctor Who* (1963-present), *Akira* (1988), and *The Matrix* (1999). The show’s theme tune and much of its incidental music are by electronic music pioneer Mort Garson, whose recordings have accompanied science fiction classics *Quantum Leap* (1989-93) and *Beware! The Blob* (1972), as well as pivotal moments in the history of science, such as CBS coverage of the Apollo 11 moon landing (McLellan, 2008). Scenes in the story are often staged from the perspective of a ‘camera’, with Griffin using terms such as ‘shot’, ‘montage’, ‘freeze frame’, and ‘camera pans’ to direct the listeners’ imaginations (The Adventure Zone, 2017b, 2016a, 2017f, 2017e). Although playing a table top game, the McElroys also employ the language of video games to explain the plot and their objectives, with such terms as ‘save point’, ‘K/D [kill/death] ratio’, ‘boss rush’, and texture ‘pop-in’ (The Adventure Zone, 2016b, 2016c, 2017a).³ These examples of the show’s transmedia intertextuality show the McElroys drawing upon a cultural knowledge shared between themselves and their audience, and using these established ideas to develop the new format and language of serialized podcast fiction. Rather than simply using the existing structures of conventional radio programming, they create a Frankenstein-like patchwork of media

references that constitute a radical new framework for digital storytelling. As Friedrich A. Kittler (1999/1986) says of Thomas Edison’s invention of the gramophone, he ‘only needed to combine, as is so often the case with inventions’ (27). Likewise, the development of the podcasting format fits predictably into the tradition of media development, building the new by creating a subversive amalgam from the old. Where the podcast treads significantly new ground from mass media, however, is in its use of the affordances of new media to more closely engage with its audience.

PARTICIPATION

As the reach of the series increased alongside its complexity and sophistication, a community of fans grew around *The Adventure Zone*, giving the podcast their listening time, their creative attentions, and, though the podcast is free to download, their money. Fans, including many creative professionals, began producing a staggering quantity of fan art, fan fiction, animations, zines, and other media, types of materials that Jonathan Gray (2010) describes as ‘audience paratextuality’ (143). Such paratexts suit a variety of purposes: according to Gray, they may ‘facilitate resistance to the meanings proffered by media firms through their own texts and paratexts’ (144), contribute to ‘meaning construction’ and its circulation, and serve as ‘additions to the [fictional] world’ (145). Communities such as *The Adventure Zone*’s forum on the website Reddit exhibit the vast quantity of fan activity and discussions, from fiction speculating on the characters’ lives beyond the podcast, to art depicting memorable moments in the story, to pictures of ‘cosplay’ (a portmanteau of ‘costume’ and ‘play’, referring to dressing as a fictional character), to diatribes lambasting Griffin for his story choices. A meticulously detailed digital encyclopaedia about the show’s fictional world is maintained by fans, and volunteers are working together to transcribe every episode using Google Docs. Live performances of *The Adventure Zone* have sold out venues across the

United States, including a show at the colossal San Diego Comic Con in 2017. Through collaboration with fans the series has led to considerable philanthropic endeavours, with nearly \$165,000 raised for the charity Facing Hunger in initial sales of a fanzine’s first volume alone (Raley and Pietsch, 2016), and with ‘name-your-price’ sales of Griffin’s soundtracks on the Bandcamp website raising tens of thousands for organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Centre. A graphic novel adaptation of the podcast is forthcoming from First Second Books in 2018, and preorders have already topped Amazon.com’s ‘Literary Graphic Novels’ bestsellers list. At the conclusion of the Balance campaign Clint ended his 42-year career as a popular local radio disc jockey to devote himself fully to the series, stating that ‘[*The Adventure Zone*] has not stopped growing yet, [...] and it has gotten to the point that if I am going to help the boys in whatever limited capacity I can to grow this, I have to have the time to do this’ (quoted in Lavender, 2017). At the time of writing, *The Adventure Zone* has yet to achieve the medium’s primary accolade, topping the iTunes podcast chart, but it nonetheless is consistently one of the service’s most-downloaded comedy podcasts.

These facts indicate that while *The Adventure Zone* has a niche audience as a podcast, and while podcasting audiences as a whole are still far smaller than those of broadcast television or terrestrial radio (Pew Research Centre, 2017), *The Adventure Zone* benefits from the strong support of a loyal fan base. The podcast is distributed by the independent Maximum Fun podcast network, in a manner similar to broadcast syndication, but while this certainly improves the show’s visibility it remains a product which must be sought out by consumers through personal recommendations or internet searches. Rather than relying on the established broadcast mode of distributing audio content to a passive listening audience, the close relationship between the McElroys and their audience exemplifies a shift in

contemporary culture towards a more deliberately participatory form of audience engagement.

Participatory culture is defined by pioneering media scholar Henry Jenkins as referring ‘to the properties of the culture, where groups collectively and individually make decisions that have an impact on their shared experiences’ of media. ‘Participation’ is distinct from ‘interactivity’ in that we ‘participate *in* something; we interact *with* something’ (emphasis in original; Jenkins et al., 2016: 12). Rather than offering predetermined interactive choices, *The Adventure Zone* is a text that is doubly participatory, developed in real-time in conjunction with the players through the unpredictable decisions made during the game of *D&D*, and affected by the reactions of fans through online feedback and audience paratexts.

A criticism made by some fans is that Griffin mishandles the balance between storytelling and allowing the players, Travis, Justin, and Clint, to play the game spontaneously and creatively. One fan, in a Reddit post about the later ‘Amnesty’ campaign (2018-present) titled ‘Griffin, please loosen your grip!’ wrote, ‘In my humble opinion, Griffin is a little too controlling as a GM – it often feels like Griffin wants to direct a screenplay, more than support a collaborative storytelling experience’ (ahoustonfloyd, 2018). While *The Adventure Zone* may well be more controlled than a typical table top roleplaying game, and arguably more so than other actual play podcasts, it is certainly far less so than typical radio dramas. In contrast to scripted actors, the players of *The Adventure Zone* were often able to make considerable participatory contributions to the Balance campaign, resulting in major changes to Griffin’s planned story.

In a climactic moment towards the end of the campaign, for instance, Magnus’s soul is pulled from his body towards the ‘astral plane’, a parallel dimension containing the souls of the dead. In their intermittent spin-off discussion podcast about the series, *The The Adventure*

Zone Zone, Griffin revealed he had prepared a detailed plot arc to take place in the astral plane (The Adventure Zone, 2017c).⁴ In an unexpected moment of gameplay, however, since nicknamed ‘arms outstretched’ by fans, both Justin and Clint spontaneously choose to have their characters use magic to leave their own bodies and, with spectral arms, pull Magnus’s soul back to safety. ‘Arms outstretched’ became a favourite moment for the fans and the McElroys themselves, and is one of the defining instances of the show’s gleeful unpredictability. Other contributions were more innocuous but perhaps equally important to the show’s popularity. Early in the series, when searching for a non-player character (a character played by the GM, abbreviated as NPC) to give them directions, Clint suggests they might find Tom Bodett, the Motel 6 spokesperson known for the phrase ‘we’ll leave the light on for you’ (The Adventure Zone, 2015a). Griffin accepts the suggestion and populates the town with multiple ‘Tom Bodetts’, who later return to help in the campaign’s final battle. Bodett himself tweeted fan art of his avatar’s appearance, with the tongue-in-cheek caption, ‘In this audio hellscape called #thezonecast [the social media hashtag for *The Adventure Zone*] 1000 clones of me have saved the world. The clones do bear a striking resemblance’ (Bodett, 2017). Moments such as these demonstrate how impulsive decisions and offhand comments made by the players in *The Adventure Zone* are crucial in developing a dynamic participatory story and contributing to the popularity of the show. Players of *D&D* cite this kind of cooperative and unplanned storytelling as one of the strengths of the game: ‘there are few things more geared to the lovely nature of collaborative storytelling. ... [It’s] about what you, the player, bring to your character and how you affect the events as they unfold. This makes you the co-creator of the very reality you inhabit’ (Birth.Movies.Death, 2017). As the participating players are reacting to the story and making decisions in real time, recordings inevitably run for several hours and Griffin reports that ‘I edit, like, a shit-ton out’ (The Adventure Zone, 2017g). This is another way in which the podcasting format shows its

strengths, in that the McElroys are able to play through and record each instalment for several hours without the pressure or cost of a studio environment, and to edit these recordings down prior to release. Even once released, episodes are of considerable and variable length, typically between one and two hours, which would also make airing them as part of a broadcast radio schedule impractical. What this results in is a narrative that feels as though it is being created at the moment that the audience is listening, with impromptu jokes and impulsive responses that complement the reactions of the listeners.

While the McElroys’ game of *D&D* would thus be a lively, collaborative storytelling venture merely by virtue of its mechanics, making it publicly available online and in a serial format invites a whole new layer of collaboration from its fan base. Rose (2012/2011), building on the work of Jenkins, stresses the importance of the internet in facilitating participatory culture. He terms participatory cultural products that involve the internet ‘deep media’, which is distinguished from the ‘mass media’ of film and television by its immersive qualities. According to Rose, deep media is ‘inherently participatory—not just interactive, in the sense that it responds to your commands, but an instigator constantly encouraging you to comment, to contribute, to join in’ (2-3). *The Adventure Zone* is replete with such instigative stimuli. In an early episode of the podcast, Griffin addresses his audience directly, promising that ‘we can make you guys part of the adventure’ (The Adventure Zone, 2014). Writing about the podcast’s audience collaboration, journalist Katelyn Best (2017) remarks that, while ‘gamified storytelling isn’t new, that extra layer makes this podcast new media in the truest sense of the term—a kind of fiction that simply couldn’t have existed in the pre-social media dark ages’. Anticipating their audience’s desire to contribute to the story, Griffin’s invitation encouraged a wealth of audience participation. This would manifest in unobtrusive ways, such as in the naming of NPCs for fans who had used the show’s hashtag, ‘#TheZoneCast’, on Twitter. As online-culture website The Daily Dot reports, ‘gestures like

this made the listener feel like they were part of the show, and they often were’ (Umbro, 2017). Participation often manifested, however, in more consequential contributions to the story. For example, fans were asked to email suggestions for items that could be stocked in the ‘Fantasy Costco’, an in-game store at which the players shop for supplies. By the fiftieth episode, Griffin reported having received thirteen-hundred suggestions of items to be stocked in the store (The Adventure Zone, 2016d). Many of the fan-suggested items became instrumental to the plot, and perhaps none more so than the ‘Flaming Raging Poisoning Sword of Doom’, devised and drawn by a listener’s eight-year-old son. Initially priced by Griffin at the prohibitive amount of sixty-thousand gold pieces, Justin had Taako cleverly manipulate the Fantasy Costco salesperson to sell the sword for a fraction of the price, shocking Griffin and creating another fan-favourite moment. Initially not intended by Griffin to be used by the players, the sword came to serve a vital function in later episodes. These examples show how the format of podcasting can be suited to creating a participatory and engaging story, but it can also afford creators assistance in handling sensitive ideas.

THE INTERNET AS A TOOL FOR ENABLING INCLUSIVITY

The genres of science fiction and fantasy are in general justifiably notorious for failing to offer inclusive worlds which represent society’s diversity, or even of the diversity of their fan base. Adilifu Nama (2008) writes of the overwhelming racial imbalance he witnessed as a young science fiction fan: ‘I wanted to see more black people [...] across the genre. To the contrary, I found that in the vast majority of science fiction television shows and films, black people were, until quite recently, absent or extremely marginal to the narratives’ (2).

Traditionally male-dominated genres, the portrayal of women in these genres often leans heavily on sexist clichés. Non-heterosexual and trans characters tend to be similarly absent or poorly represented, with some series even changing the rare examples of such characters into

cis-gender heterosexuals for big-screen adaptations.⁵ While British and American science fiction and fantasy in particular remain dominated by creators and characters who are white, male, cis-gender, and heterosexual, audience pressure coupled with receptive producers desirous of more representative fiction is beginning to change this.

The McElroys have revealed that they closely follow the discussions of *The Adventure Zone* fans on Internet platforms such as Twitter and Reddit, and they have even solicited advice via social media for certain planned plot developments. For example, Travis reached out to listeners asking how to appropriately introduce a trans character, Taako’s long-lost sister Lup. Griffin reported that they got ‘a shit-ton of feedback and [...] it was all super, super helpful’ (The Adventure Zone, 2017g). Access and a constructive relationship with fans made this possible, and avoided the podcast potentially alienating a section of its audience. The willingness to reach out and learn from listeners, moreover, contributed to the McElroys’ reputation among fans as inclusive and sensitive storytellers. By seeking out perspectives beyond their own, the McElroys are making use of the Internet’s collaborative networking potential, utilizing what Pierre Lévy (1997) terms the ‘intelligent community’ of the ‘knowledge space’ (215). Online spaces such as forums and social media platforms allow users to ‘harness their individual expertise toward shared goals and objectives’: ‘What we cannot know or do on our own, we may now be able to do collectively’ (Jenkins, 2006: 27). Crucially, the coming-together of a multitude of voices makes online knowledge spaces uniquely suited to enhancing users’ appreciations of diversity, as Lévy writes:

‘Through their interaction with diverse communities, the individuals who animate the knowledge space are, far from being interchangeable members of immutable castes, singular, multiple, nomadic individuals undergoing a process of permanent metamorphosis (or apprenticeship)’ (17)

While the four co-creators of *The Adventure Zone* may be personally unfamiliar with experiences many trans people share, digital technology means that they are able to use their listeners as a resource for shaping their storytelling decisions.

The McElroys write on their Tumblr blog that *The Adventure Zone* ‘is what it is because of the feedback our listeners have given us, full stop. It has made this project better, and us better, and all [we] can promise is that we’ll keep trying our hardest to do, and be, better’ (theadventurezone, 2017). The Internet is a key tool for making this relationship possible, allowing immediate feedback directly from fans after episodes are released, providing a record of conversations between fans, and permitting the creators an opportunity to follow up on fan feedback. While fans have been using the Internet to network since at least the premiere of *The X-Files* (1993-2004; Chin, 2013: 87), it is the McElroys’ proactivity in listening to diverse voices from their online fanbase that sets this producer-fan relationship apart. Fans of *The Adventure Zone* are shown that their responses are important to the creators, and are welcomed into a participatory environment where they can influence the future of the podcast. The success of the show’s attempts at developing an immersive story can be seen in how fans refer to characters as though they know them personally, and discuss the plot as though they were events in their own lives, as can be seen in their descriptions of the show: ‘*We* knew at the very beginning that *we’d* be coming home with [the grand relic] the Gaia Sash ... between *our* party and [the NPC] Hurley’ (emphasis added; Holliday, 2016). Examples such as this show how technology and a receptive creative team have fostered fan participation, but the serialization of the podcast is also a key contributor.

The punctuated instalments of serialized fiction allow many opportunities for audiences to participate. In the nineteenth century, the process of serializing fiction in periodicals ‘changed the structure of stories’, leading to techniques such as ‘cliff-hanger endings’ which retained audiences, and, more significantly, prompting writers to craft their

stories according to the ‘readers’ reactions’ (Rose, 2012/2011: 90-1). Subsequently, ‘serial television programs and films’ frequently became ‘vulnerable to paratextual influence’ such as fan fiction and discussions (Gray, 2010: 43). These same ideas can be found in how the McElroys construct the serialized narrative of *The Adventure Zone* and ensure listeners’ concerns around sensitive matters are heard. While the participatory affordances granted by serialization are not new, they are, nonetheless, reinforced by the new media technologies that allow fans and creators to interact almost instantaneously. As Jenkins writes, ‘The digital did not make fandom more participatory, but the digital did dramatically expand who got to participate in the fandom’ (Jenkins et al., 2016: 17). Technology is vital in the participatory culture surrounding fiction like *The Adventure Zone*, both in linking creators and fans and in creating and sustaining the fan networks themselves.

As Griffin frequently reminds listeners, ‘we have never paid to advertise [*The Adventure Zone*] at all and the only reason that it has the following that it has [...] is because [fans] reached out to people’ (The Adventure Zone, 2017f). Indeed, besides short promos during other podcasts on the Maximum Fun network, *The Adventure Zone* has been popularized primarily through word-of-mouth (or, more specifically, ‘share’ buttons online). Membership of the Maximum Fun network has allowed the podcast to benefit from the MaxFunDrive, a pledge drive that allows individual donors to funnel funds towards the shows they choose. This means that the podcast has been targeted towards its audience, and its audience has then been able to directly support the continuation of the podcast. Whereas in other media such as television a show might fail to find its audience before being cancelled, or a show that has an enthusiastic but niche following might not survive due to insufficient viewing figures, podcasts like *The Adventure Zone* benefit from finding their audience online and receiving its support directly, all with a fraction of the overhead required in traditional broadcast mediums. The podcast distribution format is representative of what Jenkins, Sam

Ford, and Joshua Green (2013) call ‘spreadable media’: ‘an emerging hybrid model of circulation, [...] one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined’ (1-2). *The Adventure Zone* has grown and acquired its loyal, global audience as a result of the efforts of its fans, and, accordingly, this makes fans partially responsible for the podcast as a phenomenon. This is one of the reasons why the McElroys are committed to the idea of representation, of making disparate groups of their fan network feel heard and included. As Travis remarks, ‘I love my listeners. [...] It’s much more of a collaborative effort, instead of just me, high on a hill, throwing podcasts down’ (Ohio Media School Columbus Campus, 2017). This collaborative effort between the digitally networked fan community and the podcast creators manifests in a number of ways, but one particularly noteworthy way is in the show’s fan-made paratexts.

FAN PARATEXTS

The McElroys have long embraced the show’s audience paratextuality, by re-blogging fan art, videos, and music to the show’s Tumblr page and their personal Twitter accounts. Taking the view that ‘if we don’t say it, it’s not canon’, the McElroys have welcomed any fan interpretation of the show’s characters or plot that fills-in the gaps left by the podcast (Ohio Media School Columbus Campus, 2017). Such creative fan endeavours are often staples of fantasy and science fiction franchises, given the ‘subversion of human norms at play within these genres, along with already fluctuating boundaries between what is possible and what is not’ (Leavenworth, 2015: 40-1), but is also greatly aided by the particular qualities of the podcast medium. Griffin remarks that the variety of visual interpretations in the audience’s paratexts displays a ‘pretty singular benefit to [podcasts] being an [...] audio-only medium. [...] This medium doesn’t have, like, these canonical visual takes [...] [so, in fan texts,]

nothing is wrong, everything is permitted’ (The Adventure Zone, 2017c). The ‘canon’ referred to by Travis and Griffin here refers to the central narrative of *The Adventure Zone* as recorded in the podcast episodes (and *The The Adventure Zone Zone*), in which any details of the characters and plot are generally considered by fans to be foundation for audience paratexts and interpretations. The absence of a visual element to the canon allows for any number of interpretations, and the availability of the podcast in digital format online makes it available for fans to easily sample and mash-up the audio into new content and distribute it to others. The many fan interpretations of the story include suggestions of characters’ appearances and backstories, imagined interactions or romantic relationships not mentioned on the podcast, and ideas to tie together unresolved plot threads, among many others.

A prominent example of fan speculation centres on the relationship between Taako and Kravitz, a bounty hunter for the Raven Queen who is essentially the story’s Grim Reaper. This relationship was tentatively approached on the podcast at first, and later, after an enthusiastic reception from fans thankful for the inclusion of a love story between two central male characters, became a major element of the story. After Taako and Kravitz’s first date in episode fifty, Justin was asked if the two had planned a follow-up date. He responded: ‘I don’t know, it wasn’t on the show, it’s up to you. [...] My part is done. [...] I don’t want to fill in the grey areas where other people can, like, hang out and do whatever’ (The Adventure Zone, 2017c). Relinquishing some control over the narrative and leaving this to the fans to decide for themselves meant that a lively sub-community developed within the fandom, loosely grouped together under the portmanteau hashtag ‘#Taakitz’. The lack of resolution added to the tension of the story, retaining listeners who wanted to hear how the relationship progressed, and providing a powerful narrative reward when Taako and Kravitz eventually kissed in the campaign’s finale. A wealth of fan-made Taakitz content can now be found online, including animated shorts, fan art, and prose. The McElroys are keen to allow this

kind of space for fans to become a creative part of *The Adventure Zone*'s worldbuilding enterprise, by contributing to the podcast's 'fanon', or fan canon (2017g). Maria Lindgren Leavenworth (2015) writes that fan fiction, of which the paratexts of Taakitz are examples, may 'stem from a wish to refuse the canon's limits and have more of the same story' (43). Fans desirous of more Taako and Kravitz content besides that provided by the canon of the podcast could find this in the fan community, in browsing websites like Tumblr, DeviantArt, and Archive of Our Own,.

Besides simply providing more of the same story, however, these sites also allow space for paratexts which radically reimagine or subvert the podcast's narrative. A common example of this can be found in 'shipping', the imagining of romantic relationships which do not appear in the series itself. As with Taakitz, *The Adventure Zone*'s shipping paratexts make use of portmanteaus to indicate the characters being shipped, such as 'Johavi' (Johan and Avi), 'Davenchurch' (Davenport and Merle Highchurch), and 'Lupcretia' (Lup and Lucretia). On the fan fiction website Archive of Our Own, which, at the time of writing, has 3,689 fan-made works in the category for *The Adventure Zone*, stories can be filtered or searched by these portmanteaus, as well as further refined by sexual content (setting age guidance on a scale between 'General Audiences' and 'Explicit: only suitable for adults') and type of pairing ('M/F' for male and female, 'M/M', 'F/F', 'Multi', etc.). 'Hits', the number of times these stories have been visited by browsers of the website, are recorded for each work, with the most popular story having been read well over 17,000 times. Many of these works of fan fiction build their narratives in an 'AU', or alternate universe, from the podcast canon, such as with one story straightforwardly described by its author as follows: 'it's the adventure zone and they're gay and they go to a boarding school. [I don't know] what [more to] tell [you]' (eghed, 2017).

While communities such as this clearly provide a space for diverse interests and perspectives, they also have the potential to undermine other fan paratexts or even the positive examples of representation in the canon text itself. One fan, for example, writes:

wonderful fanships ships [sic] like lu.pcretia and lupr.en were made to *increase* the amount of gay representation in [*The Adventure Zone*] [...] taako however, is *in* a gay relationship, with kravitz, explicitly and canonically. Therefore, taako/barry (and all other taako fanships like taagnus and bradko) weren't made for representation – they were made for '*fun*' [...] there is a difference between people enjoying their representation harmlessly, and people straightup [sic] fetishizing gay relationships because they see it as a kind of game. (Emphasis in original; judgement-booty, 2017)

This post, at the time of writing, has 321 'notes' ('likes' or 'reblogs' by other Tumblr users expressing their support or agreement). The erasure of Taako and Kravitz's relationship, privileged in the fandom for its presence in the canonical narrative, is thus an example of how shipping paratexts can potentially create friction between fans who are invested in the story for different reasons. Derek Johnson (2007) suggests that such interpretive disagreements are typical of fandoms, writing that 'ongoing struggles for discursive dominance constitute fandom as a hegemonic struggle over interpretation and evaluation through which relationships among fan, text, and producer are continually articulated, disarticulated, and rearticulated' (286). The competitive 'struggle' discussed by Johnson might align with *The Adventure Zone* fandom in certain cases, but it is worth noting that disagreements are somewhat rare in this fan community. Rather, fans typically report that the fandom is unusually harmonious and accepting, especially for a cult science fiction or fantasy series. This may be because, in contrast to examples cited by other fan studies scholars in which producers struggle to control the activities of fans (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Johnson, 2007; Chin,

2013), the creators of *The Adventure Zone* strive to ensure that fans feel their concerns are heard, considered, and, if necessary, addressed. Rather than seeking to silence and unify ‘divergent interests within a community’ to create a ‘hegemonic interpretive consensus’ (Johnson, 2007: 287), the McElroys instead urge fans to accept the simultaneity of differing perspectives: ‘As far as I’m concerned,’ Justin writes on his Twitter, ‘every single interpretation of these characters is just as valid as any other forever and ever amen’ (McElroy, 2016). As the McElroys are afforded a privileged position by the fan community in determining the story’s canon, the expression of such sentiments is accordingly reflected in a majority of the interactions between producers of the audience paratexts.

FAN ACCOUNTABILITY

The prominence of a romantic relationship between two central male characters is one of multiple examples of how the McElroys have sought to create an inclusive and diverse story world. As reported on the website *The Mary Sue*, a pop culture magazine with a focus on diversity and women’s representation,

Amidst a nerd culture that’s often exclusionary or downright hostile to women and minorities, the McElroys are willing to apologize when they’ve unwittingly done wrong by a particular group of listeners. When fans complained that the untimely death of a gay couple could be seen as an instance of the ‘bury your gays’ trope, Griffin promptly introduced another queer romance. (Best, 2017)

The gay couple in question are Hurley and Sloane, two NPCs encountered by the players who are ‘worth the price of admission all by themselves, rich with history and personality that you can practically see expanding outside the limits of the quest at hand’ (Kaiser, 2016). At the end of the ten-episode story arc in which they appear, Hurley and Sloane give their lives to

deliver a grand relic to safety, transmogrifying themselves into the roots of a cherry tree in the process. The ‘bury your gays’ trope (also known as the ‘dead lesbian’ cliché) is a tendency in fiction for gay characters, on the rare occasions when they appear, to meet with an unnecessarily premature and grisly death (Millward et al., 2017: 20). Many fans who had been invested in Hurley and Sloane’s relationship were hurt by the use of a cliché that writes characters of underrepresented identities out of ongoing stories, and were quick to point out this trope to Griffin. Having previously been unaware of the bury your gays trope, Griffin apologised to listeners and made changes to the story to rectify the situation. As he explains, ‘I think doing anything that has a big enough audience these days becomes a lesson in empathy. [...] I like having that relationship with our audience’ (quoted in Lewis, 2017). In response to the objections raised by fans, Griffin brought Hurley and Sloane back in the campaign’s finale as ‘dryads’, a *D&D* race of magical tree spirits rooted in Greek mythology, and gave the characters the positive ending to their story they had earlier been denied (The Adventure Zone, 2017f). Such changes have largely been positively received by the fan community, many of whom see Griffin as ‘constantly, fixating-ly [sic], and unflaggingly [bringing] the question of morality to the centre of the story’ (Birth.Movies.Death, 2017).⁶ Examples such as this demonstrate the participatory affordances of the serialized new media format, allowing audiences to interact with creators while the story is ongoing and for any decisions that work to the detriment of the producer-fan relationship to be addressed.

With certain issues, such as with choices over characters’ skin colour in the graphic novel adaptation, there was no such convenient solution. Early concept art by the project’s cartoonist Carey Pietsch saw Magnus, Taako, and Merle all as white characters. A backlash followed at the lack of diversity among characters that had been imagined by fans in so many different ways, with Carey herself receiving extensive online abuse from angry fans. When early page-proofs were later released by First Second, it was apparent that Merle was to be

reimagined with darker skin and that Taako was to have blue skin. A further backlash followed, noting that Merle’s redesign was ‘problematic’, given that ‘he has a backstory where he was, more or less, a deadbeat dad’, a stereotype sometimes made of African American men, and that Taako’s blue skin, as an elf, made the representation uncomfortably similar to the ‘anti-Semitic connotations’ of green-skinned elves. The McElroys posted a response the next day, outlining how each of the choices they had considered meant alienating a part of their fan base. Should Taako, whose name was chosen in the heat of the moment as a joke to sound like ‘taco’, have been made a person of colour (POC), potentially seeming to make light of Mexican cultural identity? Should Magnus, a character who is a ‘more physical, more aggressive, less intellectual member of his team’ have been made a POC, potentially playing into racist stereotypes? The McElroys’ response takes the criticisms into account, but shows them unable to find a completely satisfying solution to the problem:

The solution the whole team landed on for this graphic novel is imperfect. It has disappointed some people, and it is going to continue to disappoint some people. But there is no non-disappointing solution. And that’s not First Second’s fault, and it certainly isn’t Carey’s fault. It is completely because of the rock and a hard place that we’re positioned between, and all because of our failure to establish a solid foundation for these characters and their identities when we started this show. And for that, we’re so, earnestly, deeply sorry.

(theadventurezone, 2017)

While the solution is admittedly imperfect, the McElroys’ response gained them strong praise on Twitter from the fan community. Professional comics colourist Mickey Quinn, for instance, herself a participant in the fan art community, tweeted: ‘Y’all are doing a great job, as always. Carey too!!!’ (Quinn, 2017). While unable to find a solution that was satisfactory

to all, the McElroys’ willingness to listen and communicate with their audience demonstrated the value they place on the relationship, solidifying the loyalty of the fan base.⁷

While the online community has allowed fans to feel closely involved and to share ownership of the imagining of the fictional world, it has also led to some negative effects. The McElroys report ‘some instances of in-fighting between members of the community who take umbrage with one another’s disparate interpretations of these characters’ (theadventurezone, 2017). Their constant availability online meant that the McElroys were barraged with messages from certain fans attempting to ‘correct’ their method of playing *D&D*, to which Travis quipped, ‘we love 99% of you [listeners]’ (The Adventure Zone, 2015b). The inclusion of elevators in what otherwise seemed an agrarian and pre-technological story world became one such contentious issue with certain fans, prompting Griffin to defiantly and gleefully include elevators in the rest of the campaign as often as he could. On another occasion, pre-empting any fans who might object to his imagining of the physics involved in an attack, Griffin half-jokingly remarked to listeners, ‘if you’re a science-minded person, I’m not interested in it’ (The Adventure Zone, 2015c). Towards the end of the campaign, Travis revealed that he ‘used to look through the Reddit [forum for *The Adventure Zone*]. I don’t anymore, not because I begrudge anybody posting on Reddit, but it started to bleed into, like, the decisions I made and I wanted to remove myself from that’ (The Adventure Zone, 2017c). Acknowledging the inevitability that some fans may be always be disappointed by the producers’ creative decisions, Griffin remarks that ‘a certain number of people telling you what they want is, like, eventually that’s just going to become kind of too big to listen to’. In these ways, the participatory culture of digital media formats such as podcasts shows one drawback: being constantly available to one’s fans and privy to the paratexts of that fandom can, in some instances, risk overpowering the creative vision of the storytellers themselves. Achieving a balance between appreciating the diversity of

enthusiastic fan-made content, taking constructive criticism regarding sensitive issues, and being exposed to unconstructive negativity from fans has apparently proved a challenging aspect of *The Adventure Zone*'s participatory ambitions. It is their efforts towards this, however, that fans of the series so often cite as what makes it unique, and, for Griffin, ‘we have become the podcasters [...] we are because of listening to folks’ (Woodland Secrets, 2017).

CONCLUSION

As fiction podcasting is still a recent phenomenon, there is an urgent need for studies which analyse its functions and advantages in order to develop a critical language for this emerging form. Podcasting is rarely the focus of scholarly analysis, and when it is mentioned it tends to be discussed merely as a digital form of traditional radio programming or contextualized as part of a broader transmedia landscape, due in part to its early adoption by fans as a means of transmitting discussions about ongoing series in other media. Increasingly, however, podcasting is becoming a venue for fiction in its own right, offering serial fiction new affordances for creating dynamic and engaging fictional worlds. In contrast to traditional broadcast media forms, serial fiction podcasting has the advantage of access to and a resultant closeness with its audience. As we have seen with *The Adventure Zone*, a participatory culture facilitated by online fan communities on social media and a receptive creative team can lead to highly constructive producer-fan relationships, and works which can be representative of a diverse audience which includes voices typically underrepresented in popular culture. Acknowledging the limitations of their own experiences, the McElroys’ use of the knowledge communities from their broad listenership means that the story has become far more inclusive, offering a degree of empowerment to minority cultural perspectives which are seldom heard by producers working in other media. The success of this can be seen in the

warm tributes of the global fan community to the Balance storyline, ranging from written accounts of personal connection, to extensive fan art, to audio-sampled YouTube videos and animations (see, for example, Best, 2017; Birth.Movies.Death, 2017; Enlow, 2017; Umbro, 2017). As one website (Enlow, 2017) reports, ‘this show means something. It means something beautiful and wonderful and powerful to me and so many, people who don’t get to see themselves in media at all, let alone fantasy’. The way the McElroys embrace the new media affordances of the podcasting format makes the series a highly original and daring work, which signals a shift away from the impersonality and remoteness of mass media and bears lessons for the emerging artistic phase of the Internet heralded by Rose. What this era will look like may still be unclear, but a number of recent podcast fiction series, including *The Adventure Zone*, offer lessons in how participation might be harnessed as part of creating representative cultural works in the digital age.

Endnotes

1. Examples from the central text and its audience paratexts are chosen for the importance placed upon them by both the podcast creators and the fandom. The creators have discussed these examples in occasional discussion episodes titled *The The Adventure Zone Zone* and in interviews with outside publications. The fandom has focused substantial attention on these examples on social media platforms, and particularly Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit. After observing the discussions of fans on social media since the beginnings of the podcast, I requested input directly from fans on Reddit as to what examples from the series should be included in an article on this subject, and used this feedback to further inform my choices.
2. Andrew Milner (2012) suggests that this form of science fiction has ‘become extinct’ (68), but it might be more accurate to say that the form has simply migrated from old to new media as part of what Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983) describes as the ‘convergence of modes’, in which a ‘single physical means’, such as a personal computer, can ‘carry services that in the past were provided in separate ways’ (23).
3. A ‘save point’ is a moment in a videogame to which players can return if the player-character is killed or otherwise fails in an objective. ‘K/D ratio’ refers to the number of non-player-characters killed versus the number of times a player-character has died, and is most often associated with ‘shoot-em-up’ game series such as the *Call of Duty* franchise (2003-present). ‘Boss rush’ refers to a climactic battle in which multiple challenging enemies, or ‘bosses’, must be fought in quick succession. Texture ‘pop-in’ is a term which describes the delay in which a texture (such as the appearance of an object or building) is rendered by a game’s graphics engine.
4. Initially a joke referencing discussion shows for cult series, such as *The Walking Dead* (2010-present) discussion show *Talking Dead* (2011-present), there are currently three

episodes of *The Adventure Zone* available for download. These are released in the same podcast feed as regular *The Adventure Zone* episodes. In their discussion podcast, Griffin, Travis, Justin, and Clint typically discuss their reactions to the events of the story so far, their hopes for what is to come, and interactions they have had with the fan community. They also request that listeners send in questions about the series, from which a small fraction are chosen to be answered. The McElroys emphasize in these episodes that their selection of discussion topics is determined by what can safely be added to the central narrative of the series without giving away Griffin’s planned plot developments or infringing on the paratexts of the fandom.

5. For example, the comic book characters Mystique, Constantine, Catwoman, Harley Quinn, Wonder Woman, Batwoman, Deadpool, and Iceman have all had their non-heterosexual identities downplayed or erased altogether in being adapted for television or film.
6. I have outlined the broad strokes of the issue here, but it is worth noting that several fans, including fans identifying as gay or lesbian, have written on discussion forums that they felt the outcry over the bury your gays trope was excessive or that this might not even have been an instance of the trope at all. Fans are, nonetheless, generally unanimous in their approval of Griffin bringing Sloane and Hurley back in the series finale.
7. Louisa Ellen Stein (2017) writes of similar controversy over casting for a theatrical tour of the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale*. Given that fans had been afforded ‘the opportunity to define the visual transmedia landscape of *Welcome to Night Vale* in paratexts, many insisted on the inclusion of people of colour in the visual representations of the main characters’, leading several roles to be recast (82). This recasting of actors shows that *Welcome to Night Vale* made similar efforts to respond to what they felt were

important fan concerns, though Stein emphasises that a clear divide between fan interpretations and ‘official’ representations persists in this case.

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