

Audience Generations: Millennials, “Becomers,” and Beyond

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In the network society, “television” is hardly just on television anymore. Yet still we describe things in the recognizable terms of the television industry, as shows released all at once across streaming services are still comprised of episodes bundled into seasons, etc. Before the phenomenon of streaming changed the way we watch, however, YouTube in its infancy became the home for subversive serialized storytelling in ways that reached out farther to a newer participatory culture. Virally successful in the late 2000s yet still worthy of critical exploration, YouTube weblog series like *lonelygirl15* and *Marble Hornets* play on the tropes of television by enacting and upending them. This play keeps fans in constant tension with their viewing experiences in order to draw them in to the series’ seeming authenticity through alternate reality game experiences. I argue here that the audience generation of our participatory culture wants more “reality” from their media, which these paranormal weblog series provide by mimicking and deconstructing the expectations of television to merit interaction from audiences that television on its own could never garner.

Lonelygirl15 and *Marble Hornets* break the rules of form which television plays by to reinforce “real” audience participation. A television show follows the logistics of schedule orders, having a certain number of episodes each season which run for a roughly similar amount of time, premiering at set times. But these weblog series heighten the uneasiness of their paranormal premises by releasing as many episodes as need be at varying length and at any time. The series work outside of the televisual concept for serialized storytelling in ways that nod to and yet subvert it. *Lonelygirl15* premiered on YouTube passed off as just any other random YouTuber’s weblog, with entries that could last one minute, two, or several. These varied lengths resemble actual weblog running times, and therefore convinced people for months that main character Bree was a real person sharing her life online. As the entries’ content got stranger, involving a cult called the Order, people were drawn in more by its temporal playfulness and had to have more. Would Bree release another video tonight? That lack of time constraint or schedule plays quite sinisterly in *Marble Hornets*, a much creepier series. As Jay investigates his friend Alex’s film project gone wrong, he runs afoul of a supernatural horror being called the Operator. His journey leads audiences through tense suspense, dreadful imagery, and jump scares galore. What heightens that tension and terror is that one entry may be thirty seconds, and the next may be eight minutes. Viewers can never trust the series to follow a formula that helps them know what to expect. Both series in fact defy expectations handed down for television as they play off them.

These weblog series especially subvert television storytelling tropes through alternate reality game experiences. Alternate reality games are interactive narratives which unfold through transmedia storytelling using the real world as their platform. These series use the real world by presenting themselves as indistinguishable from it, never revealing their fiction. At least, in *lonelygirl15*’s case, not until it had to. Despite the series’ transmedia story reinforced by a fake Myspace page for Bree at which she actually replied to fans who messaged her and more, a widely documented search for the truth behind the series united skeptical fans and journalists at the Los Angeles Times and other papers. Once *lonelygirl15* was outed as a hoax, it kept up its dedication to its own “reality” even as it expanded its production value and scope. Meanwhile, *Marble Hornets* cultivated its own alternate reality through transmedia elements, even beginning as that element itself. Based on the horror meme Slenderman created as its own hoax on the Something Awful forum, the series added an expansive story to the original image. Then as the YouTube

series unfolded, a character within the plot of the series cultivated his own YouTube channel where he posted disturbingly cryptic response videos tied into the plot. *Marble Hornets* similarly remained faithful to its world through an intentionally rough and shaky camera aesthetic. All of these elements complement the Internet as a medium through which we may blur fact and reality, as opposed to the more cultivated fictional packages we expect from television.

Lonelygirl15 and *Marble Hornets* indicate how the audience generation of our participatory culture seeks to interact more directly with their media. Though both were subsumed by the larger entertainment structure, as Bree's actress turned her gig there into a television career and *Marble Hornets* was made into a (bad) movie, what they started on YouTube presents a way for new media to play at television while imagining beyond it. Deconstructing television's tropes while benefitting from them, these weblog series create a recognizably new "reality" for viewers to be a part of.

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