

Podcasts and Convergent Digital Media, pt. 2

“Genre Goes Digital”

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In 2013, only eight years after its inception, the podcast had surpassed one billion subscriptions from iTunes, which had in turn facilitated over eight million podcast uploads. But while the popularity is unquestionable, it remains difficult to place podcasts within new media studies. This roundtable considers the podcast alongside other popular forms, such as web series and online television, and makes connections between a wealth of newly framed textualities, serialities, publics, informal distribution patterns, fan cultures, histories and aesthetics. This burgeoning terrain invites us to question how academia can scrutinize podcasts as part of a genealogy of convergent digital media. As these forms rapidly move to the center of popular culture we ask: How have these objects of study developed their own patterns of consumption and distribution? What types of commercial models are being implemented or even newly formed? Are these new media and their distribution subject to forms of censorship? What types of informal or formal social spaces are resulting from this technology?

“Born digital” romances do not fit neatly within conventional genre classification and analysis heuristics. These texts and their producers slip between labels. As well as being multi-platform and multi-modal, they are often simultaneously amateur and professional, conventional and experimental, and engage old and new media at the same time.

The phrase “born digital” gives us a way of connecting a disparate collection of romantic stories, all of which were first produced online and distributed via social media and/or digital markets. The born digital label encompasses transmedia projects like *The Lizzie Bennett Diaries*, a retelling of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* in form of Twitter accounts and YouTube vlogs. It can also apply to works by traditional romance authors like Courtney Milan, a popular writer who left traditional romance publishing in order to self-publish. For the moment, however, I want to focus on artist and author Ngozi Ukazu and her web comic *Check, Please!* (<http://omgcheckplease.tumblr.com/>).

In *Check, Please!*, Ngozi Ukazu repurposes Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube to produce a transmedia project about two hockey players falling in love. Launched in 2013 and still ongoing, *Check, Please!* tells the story of Eric Bittle, Jack Zimmerman, and exploits of the Samwell College men’s hockey team. The project is primarily available on two platforms: Tumblr and Twitter. Bittle, the comic’s protagonist, is an active vlogger and Twitter user. His Twitter account is designed to run in parallel with the events in the comic and fans are able to Tweet and interact with Bittle there.¹ While there is no actual video incorporated into the project, the comic itself is often designed to appear as an update to Bittle’s vlog.

¹ Currently, the Twitter account is being updated but this content is locked so that readers can’t see it. This is due to a mismatch between the Twitter and Tumblr story timelines.

Check, Please! remediates YouTube and is designed to work with Tumblr and Twitter's interfaces. Each update is easy to share and spread across social media. Ukazu regularly posts extras to keep audiences engaged and attends a range of art, comics, and fan conventions where she sketches and sells art. In 2015, Ukazu launched a Kickstarter campaign to support a print edition of *Check, Please! Year One*. Within a month, she raised \$74,000. In addition to the print edition, Ukazu also sells two *Check, Please!* zines. One zine, *Huddle*, is marketed as 18+ and includes art and fan fiction from three well-known fan artists/authors. Finally, readers are able to financially support Ukazu and access exclusive content via her Patreon site where she earns roughly \$4,000 each month. As the project spreads online and in print, it engages a range of niche and general audiences. These include media fandom, hockey fandom, and a variety of comic and romance readers.

Check, Please! is one example of a transmedia story that relies on social networks and digital markets to reach readers. *Check, Please!* is also a romance, but what kind? Do we call it a webcomic, a multi-part graphic novel, a queer romance, a young adult romance, a fan project, or all of the above? Is Ukazu an amateur, professional, or fan artist? In the context of media convergence, all these labels seem to apply. Or, more accurately, all of these labels can be applied, depending on the disciplinary context in which *Check, Please!* is studied.

Popular genres like romance have always been marked by cross-media adaptation, intertextuality and cyclical shifts. Despite this, we tend to study genre in discrete contexts. For example, one popular romance project might focus on romantic comedy films from the early 2000s, another on a specific line of Avon romances from the 1980s. Obviously, there are practical reasons for this approach. To get the scholarly work done, we must set boundaries around our objects. However, narrow genre taxonomies emphasize sameness and convention. Contemporary scholarship must adapt these methodologies to better understand the cross-media flows of popular genres and the broader cultural conversations these genres are engaged in.

Today, media convergence amplifies genre's mobility, shifting features, and hybridity. Digital production technologies blur the boundaries between genre categories. These technologies enable producers and audiences to circumvent traditional production and distribution routes. In the process, genre conventions are challenged and industry production practices upended. In this environment, we need to conceptualize romance beyond categories like the romance novel or the rom-com. The movement of audiences, texts, and creators across platforms requires us to consider the ways popular romance genres work at both micro and macro levels. We need to study popular genres both within and beyond media-specific categories. A project like *Check, Please!* can only be understood using an updated model of genre, one that addresses the intersecting tiers of production, distribution, and reception found in today's convergent media culture.