

PAPER TOWNS AND VIRTUAL BOOKS: RESHAPING THE READING EXPERIENCE  
THROUGH ONLINE COMMUNITY

By

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To Nerdfighteria

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	4
ABSTRACT.....	6
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	8
2 CREATING BROTHERHOOD 2.0 ON WEB 2.0.....	14
3 READING VIA AFFINITY SPACES IN A PARTICIPATORY CULTURE.....	29
4 TRANSTEXTS IN A CONVERGENCE CULTURE .....	42
5 CONCLUSION.....	59
WORKS CITED.....	62
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	65

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School  
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The increasing presence of interactive Web 2.0 platforms online has helped to give rise to both participatory and convergence cultures. Separated by fuzzy lines at best, Web 2.0, participatory culture and convergence culture have all influenced the production and reception of reading materials, especially in the realm of adolescent literature. Today's teenagers have grown up in the internet age and are instinctually familiar with the possibilities offered by this technology. Using young adult author and vlogger John Green and his online fan community as a case study, it is possible to begin to understand what role such interactivity has in developing the future of the reading experience.

The community, called "Nerdfighteria", embraces multiple Web 2.0 sites in order to house all of their conversations and creative endeavors. They also turn to each other when embarking upon informal educational pursuits, such as discussing classic novels in an online forum, and rely upon one another for the kinds of critical thinking and analysis that is usually encouraged in a classroom setting. Members of Nerdfighteria also turn to each other and work together to create a communal reading experience by sharing images, text, and music inspired by or related to a particular novel with one

another through blogs. The result of all of this is a dramatic increase in the role of a community of readers in the development of the reading experience itself, placing Green's fans on the forefront of the technological transformation of novels. Today's teens are not waiting for a publication press to show them the future of reading, but are instead forging ahead and determining that future for themselves.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The struggle to understand and codify the role of the internet in relationship to traditional media models has led scholars and marketers to identify three major terms to describe different facets of the phenomenon: Web 2.0, participatory culture, and convergence culture. When, in 2003, Tim O'Reilly organized the "Web 2.0 Conference," he helped to popularize the phrase "Web 2.0" and establish it as a new wave in conceptualizing the internet. For O'Reilly and Battelle, Web 2.0 has come to stand for the use of online platforms that are "harnessing collective intelligence" ("Web Squared"<sup>1</sup>). It relies not just upon the existing hyperlinks between documents but on the links and information that a platform's users can provide. Then there's the five-part definition of "participatory culture" put forth by Henry Jenkins and his co-authors in 2006, which emphasizes the need for a low barrier of entry for those desiring to share their work and a multi-level relationship between users ("Confronting the Challenges"). Also in 2006, Jenkins published *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, which describes "convergence culture" as characteristic of an increasing blurring of the lines across media and between producer and consumer.

These concepts are, of course, necessarily interconnected. A Web 2.0 platform like the user-edited encyclopedia Wikipedia succeeds because of the rise of participatory culture, in which users believe that their contributions are worthwhile. Evidence of convergence culture is also littered throughout the emergence of the online encyclopedia, with ordinary users performing much the same function as professional editors would have previously in a printed encyclopedia. Thanks to the enduring popularity of these and other developments, participatory and convergence culture are

no longer possibilities of the future but are realities of the current moment. But our understanding of these realities and their impact upon older forms of media, such as literature, is complicated by the fact that these movements have not taken hold in the same way across the board. Sites like YouTube®, Vimeo®, and Hulu® have provided free and easy-to-use means of both accessing video content from traditional media developers and sharing amateur attempts at video production. An equivalent, or even parallel, version of accessing print literature from existing publishers (even electronically) and creating amateur-written print and electronic literature, however, has not emerged in any major way, leaving consumers used to remixing, creating, and adapting other media to squabble with publishers over both access to and the form of literary content.

The tenuous relationship between major publishers and their online readers takes a special toll on the youth demographic. Today's youths, at least in the developed world, make up the first generation to grow up entirely in the age of widespread internet, and they are coming of age right alongside the concept of Web 2.0. To readers accustomed to a non-linear, hyperlinked model of interaction, the primarily linear reading experience presented by a printed novel can be at times frustrating and unrewarding. In *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*, Kimberley Reynolds notes that the lack of adaptation to new literacies demonstrates a deficit in children's literature, and she advocates for the arrival of "transtexts" and "transliterature" — texts that "combine elements from fixed prints and different media" — as a way to help combat this stagnation (155). Reynolds is arguing for a literal convergence here, pulling different kinds of media together into one place. Literary

publishers have been among the last to get onboard with interactive opportunities offered by new media, with eBooks gaining popularity but still being very much in their infancy. Even the most successful eReaders go to great lengths to mimic the form and reading experience of a hard copy of a novel.

Young readers are not content with the standard producer-consumer models, however, and have begun to create new approaches to reading and understanding literature. Web 2.0 has been a huge boon in this development, allowing readers to connect and interact with each other on a variety of platforms that grant them the chance to realign their reading experience with their own interests and desires. Social network sites such as Facebook® and Twitter® foster a sense of community through discussion that mimics in-person communication while maintaining the hyper-mediated model of the internet. Readers aren't alone in their pursuit of these conversations, as authors have taken to the internet to connect with their readers and market their texts — often doing both at once. This connectivity nurtures a mutually beneficial relationship in which readers feel a connection with the authors, increasing their fondness for authors' works, while authors develop a dependable, loyal audience. Authors who seem to have the most successful online experience are those that come at this experience from an angle beyond just marketing, however, by truly valuing the participation that a network such as Twitter® provides to both sides.

There are a few leading examples of young adult (YA) authors taking to the internet in a way that transforms the reading experience, each participating in a different way. Maureen Johnson (*13 Little Blue Envelopes, Suite Scarlett*) has a devoted following to her quirky and creative Twitter® account, while Scott Westerfeld (*Uglies*,

*Leviathan*) posts periodic blog entries that engage with topics related to his novels. Jackson Pearce (*Sisters Red*), who with only two published novels is still relatively new to the scene, posts YouTube® videos multiple times a week on topics ranging from her books to her travels. (Both Westerfeld and Pearce are on Twitter® as well, but they do not use it as creatively as Johnson does.) Each is helping to change the long-existing relationship between readers and authors, but the reach of each is still rather limited. By contrast, John Green has cultivated a significant presence across multiple platforms. He is not just a bestselling author, but he is also a massively popular YouTube® vlogger with a top-tier Twitter® account. He also has accounts on Facebook®, VYou® (a video-based question-and-answer site), and Reddit®, among others, in addition to the content he posts to his personal website. As a result of this extensive online presence, Green is perfectly situated to serve as a case study of potential changes that readers and authors have already started to face as Web 2.0, participatory culture, and convergence culture combine to influence the nature of reading now and in the future.

As an author, Green has achieved major commercial and critical success. His debut novel, *Looking for Alaska*, won the Michael L. Printz Award and *An Abundance of Katherines*, his second novel, was a Printz honor book. *Paper Towns*, *Let It Snow* (co-written with Johnson and Lauren Myracle), and *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (co-written with David Levithan) all appeared on *New York Times* Bestseller lists. As a vlogger, he has manned a YouTube® channel called “Vlogbrothers” in conjunction with his brother, Hank, in which they regularly post videos on topics ranging from public policy to philosophy. These videos have gained a sizable following in the years since they began, with well over 400,000 people subscribing to their videos. According to the Vlogbrothers’

YouTube® channel, they have also reached over 100 million views of their videos, and rank among the Top 100 Most Subscribed YouTube channels of all time.<sup>1</sup> Each of their videos averages in the ballpark of 150 thousand views within a few weeks of upload. He has accumulated over 1 million followers on Twitter® as well, all of which combines to give him an unusually broad spectrum of ways to ensure that his voice is heard. It also means that his fans exist across multiple media and his interactions with them can adjust accordingly.

To that end, this project will take up Green's online interaction with his readers in an attempt to understand the implications of the reading and publishing model that his work embodies. Chapter 1 will consider the way that Green and his fans understand and manipulate the tools presented to them through Web 2.0. The online homes that the community makes for itself shape the communication that it has with Green, and the chapter will take a close look at how, exactly, the platforms the community has chosen function. Chapter 2 will consider Green's work in terms of the participatory culture that he has created, considering the learning environment that emerges when he discusses literature with the fans. Later, Chapter 3 will consider his texts within the purview of convergence culture. By expanding the search for the transtexts that Reynolds describes to include the increasingly prominent cooperation between professionals like Green and the amateurs that make up his audience, it becomes clear that lines between media, and between producer and consumer, are being disrupted like never before. Green is positioned as a potentially significant figure in both traditional and new youth-oriented media, and his work's relationship to Web 2.0, participatory culture, and

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<sup>1</sup> "Channel" is the term YouTube® uses to refer to a user's profile page. The Vlogbrothers' channel can be found at <http://youtube.com/users/Vlogbrothers>.

convergence culture may well help direct developments in the transition of YA literature into its online future.

## CHAPTER 2 CREATING BROTHERHOOD 2.0 ON WEB 2.0

When Tim O'Reilly launched the "Web 2.0 Conference" in 2004, he helped to launch the term "Web 2.0" into widespread public discourse. The term signifies a then-new grouping of programs that had made the transition from software-heavy operations to lightweight, online applications. According to O'Reilly and his co-author John Battelle's 2009 white paper, Web 2.0 is "all about harnessing collective intelligence" ("Web Squared", 1). Users are not given a static product in Web 2.0 but rather applications that evolve and improve as users interact with them. O'Reilly and Battelle explain that sites such as Wikipedia®, Facebook®, and Google® "depend on managing, understanding, and responding to massive amounts of user-generated data in real time" ("Web Squared", 1). This ability to manipulate user-generated data is integral to the success of a Web 2.0 site. Facebook® is just an empty shell without users to input their information and bring it to life, while Google® adjusts its search results according to the prior selections of users making similar searches. Although O'Reilly lays out a detailed seven-point list of attributes that make up Web 2.0, overall it can be summarized as encompassing sites that function as relatively open systems that adapt to the user rather than closed systems that make the user adapt to them.

Some critics have challenged uses of the term "Web 2.0", accusing it of being a marketing term with little substance behind it.<sup>2</sup> And it is easy to understand why, as a quick search for the term on Amazon® turns up numerous guides to successfully jumping onboard the Web 2.0 bandwagon. Dismissing the term outright, however, risks leaving behind a potentially useful way of understanding similarities of the most

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<sup>2</sup> See, among others, Tim Berners-Lee in a 2006 interview with developerWorks.

prominent sites in play at the moment. At its core, Web 2.0 is about viewing these internet services as an adaptable platform rather than a finalized product. What this means varies drastically from site to site, as Wikipedia® gives users the opportunity to read, edit, and create informational articles according to their interests, needs, and knowledge while Amazon® expands the shopping experience with lists, guides, and reviews. The ultimate goal for each website or application does not dictate whether it fits under the Web 2.0 umbrella; the way it goes about achieving this goal does. Web 2.0 sites are platforms built to support the expressions of their users and build a web of information out of these expressions. Of course, if Web 2.0 sites adapt to the ways that users express themselves and their priorities, then they are also subject to manipulation as users find new and unexpected ways to make the platform work on their behalf.

This prospect brings us back to John Green. As mentioned in the Introduction, Green runs, in cooperation with his brother Hank, a highly successful YouTube® channel called “Vlogbrothers”. Originally begun as a one-year-long project under the title “Brotherhood 2.0”, Hank Green posted the first video in the series on January 1, 2007.<sup>3</sup> In the video, Green lays out the primary rules they would be following, as they had decided to forbid communicating with each other via text for the duration of the year. As Hank explains it, there would be, “No more instant messaging, no more emailing, only video blogging. And possibly phone calls”. He goes on to describe the details more fully, informing John that, “Starting on January 1st, today, I will send you a video blog. Tomorrow you will reply to that video blog. We will continue like this until the year is up. If one of us fails to send a video blog on a weekday there will be certain punishments.

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<sup>3</sup> The parallel between Web 2.0 and Brotherhood 2.0 may not be accidental. Each represents a new version of an existing scenario.

The punishments will be outlined later”. The brothers posted their videos to YouTube® and maintained their own site, Brotherhood2.com, as the year progressed. The title card in their videos hailed “Brotherhood 2.0” as a “whole new kind of Brotherhood”, one mediated entirely through new media.

The plans for the challenge, in the early days, were largely developed as time passed. Aside from the basic rules that Hank set forth on the first day, facets were adopted and adapted from video to video. Exceptions to the posting rule were added for holidays or birthdays, or when either brother was sick. John proposed that they could create small challenges for each other from time to time in addition to any punishments that they might face for failing to comply by the rules. Later, they imposed a four-minute time limit on their videos in an effort to keep them brief and compelling. The punishments for failing to upload a video or breaking a rule to which Hank alluded in the first video developed into humiliating or disgusting but mostly harmless tasks such as eating an entire McDonald’s Happy Meal® that had been put through a blender — though both men’s wives had (and still have) veto power over any punishment.<sup>4</sup> Most of these rules remain in place for the current incarnation of their vlog, announced at the end of 2007, though they have returned to textual communication and have adjusted to a less frequent posting schedule.

The choice of YouTube® as the platform to support their videos is not an accidental one. Less than two years old at the time the project began, the video sharing site had already embraced many of O’Reilly’s list of Web 2.0 attributes. YouTube®

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<sup>4</sup> Hank’s wife Katherine has appeared in many videos. John’s wife has chosen not to be filmed for the project, and as such has been given the nickname “The Yeti”, given that viewers know she exists but only ever get tiny glimpses of her presence.

needs users to create its content, and provides a slick interface for making sure that it happens. In their excellent survey of YouTube®, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green cite the relatively low technical knowledge requirements for using the site, the ability to link up with friends or subscribe to favorite content providers, and the ease of sharing videos as some of the primary reasons that YouTube® took off (1).<sup>5</sup> Users can also tag videos, search through them, and comment, rate, and “like” videos as they see fit. YouTube® functions as a platform for expression and individuality while filtering the information users provide to create a more personalized experience, placing it squarely within the Web 2.0 paradigm. Users are shown videos they might like based on previous video views and ratings, with reactions to these recommendations teaching the system how to better anticipate potential interests. YouTube® has also made the site’s boundaries highly flexible, allowing a user to watch a YouTube® video without being on the site at all.

The ease with which users can embed videos from YouTube® into other websites has made this change in context possible, and was a feature that the Greens used regularly throughout their first year of vlogging. Each video that they produced was embedded into Brotherhood2.com in the style of a blog entry. Much of their conversation with viewers in the first year took place there, where they had to self-moderate comments from viewers. These comments numbered in the low teens in early months but regularly exceeded 100 by the end of the year as the channel grew in popularity. For the first year, then, the brothers took advantage of the platform YouTube® made available to them but recontextualized it on their own platform. The

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<sup>5</sup> These reasons also form the basis of understanding YouTube as a site of participatory culture, a thread that will be picked up again in later chapters.

fluidity of Web 2.0 sites is what makes this nuance possible. YouTube® does not need to restrict its content to its own borders to obtain the necessary information for its algorithms because it can track views elsewhere. Since 2008, the Greens have used the YouTube® site as the home of their project and have hosted conversations in YouTube® comment threads, deciding to work within the confines of the platform as presented to them.

These confines are not just related to the production and sharing of the Vlogbrothers videos, however, as the functionality and productivity of YouTube® also influence the content of their videos. Since YouTube® has enabled high definition (HD) video uploads and HD cameras have seen a significant price drop, the aesthetic quality of videos uploaded by the Greens and other prominent YouTubers has seen a major uptick. Where the earliest videos in Brotherhood 2.0 are dark and almost grainy, recent videos are brightly lit with crisp lines. In order to keep up with creative precedents set by other vloggers, such as Ze Frank or Wheezy Waiter, John and Hank regularly rely upon fast-paced editing through jump cuts, and have also experimented with green screens, image overlays, and other advanced techniques. This leads to a shared production culture across the leading YouTubers. Just as sites like Wikipedia® are policed by users to ensure each other's accuracy, YouTubers react and respond to each other's videos in order to make the best videos possible. Between outside technology and the ease of use that a Web 2.0 platform such as YouTube® provides, amateur vloggers are now able to create videos with professional-level production values.

Certain aspects of the system crafted by YouTube® also influences the content of the videos produced by vloggers. Henry Jenkins asserts that the formulation of

YouTube® videos hews closely to the vaudeville form, citing a tendency to play directly to the audience, an emphasis on spontaneity and reality in acts, and a “grab bag” of public interests in performances kept short and to the point (“YouTube and the Vaudeville Aesthetic”). These qualities are largely endemic to the system within which the vloggers are working. Videos are being made in an environment with nearly immediate feedback from an audience with diverse interests, where authenticity has always been a buzzword. In the case of the Vlogbrothers, they make videos on topics bouncing from reality television to the space program, keeping them under their four-minute limit and tightly editing them to eliminate unnecessary pauses and interruptions. Both brothers speak to their viewers at times, hoping for approval or other reactions, and John in particular works to increase the “realness” that Jenkins mentions, filming while driving in parking lots to give the viewer the illusion of traveling with him. That this vaudeville-esque approach occurs across many YouTube® channels speaks to an awareness on the part of not just the Vlogbrothers but the site’s users as a whole. By keeping track of what other users are doing and what viewers expect, users create something of a genre specific to the platform. Vlogging may not be vaudeville precisely, but it is a style similarly built from the tools at hand.

YouTube® is not alone in being integral to the success of the Vlogbrothers, however, as other Web 2.0 platforms such as Tumblr® and Ning® have come to play a major role in cultivating an audience for them. The community’s growth since its inception has forced them to spread beyond their small, specific starting platform. The community itself first began early in Brotherhood 2.0 when, in the video from February 1, John Green comes across an arcade game called “Aerofighters” in an airport. He

purposefully misreads this as “Nerdfighters”, provoking a discussion in the videos and in comments as to whether Nerdfighters would fight against nerds or be a group of nerds fighting for something. Not long after this, the Green brothers and their viewers decide that Nerdfighters are people “made entirely of awesome” and who “fight against World Suck” (“How to Be a Nerdfighter”). “World Suck” covers a multitude of topics, from poverty and the prevalence of malaria to ignorance of world affairs and the rules of grammar. The call to fight against “World Suck” functions similarly to a mission statement, as in and amongst all their jokes and conversations, they are aware of a need to work towards something bigger than YouTube®. This shared goal helps to form a tight-knit community out of an otherwise loosely connected group of viewers, and this community relies upon social network sites to maintain these ties.

Social network sites are among the most prominent examples of Web 2.0 due to the fact that their users share, direct, and maintain content according to the roles available to them within the site’s structure. Nichole Ellison and danah boyd define this category of sites as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (211). These sites do not necessarily have to be about social networking, a difference that boyd and Ellison point out is not one of semantics but of purpose. Social network sites allow for offline relationships to be augmented by the online experience, while social networking implies the development of new social connections. Thus, members of a social network site may use their profile and connections to other members to reflect their current relationships instead of

seeking out new ones, or they may use them entirely to find new people. Sites such as Facebook® tend to encourage the former, with scalable privacy settings meant to ensure one's ability to restrict personal information to those one already trusts, while dating sites are almost singularly dedicated to forging new bonds. Nerdfighters are largely interested in the latter, and the framework provided by a given social network site helps to guide its users to a particular kind of interaction, as in the case of Nerdfighters on YouTube®.

Despite its primary function as a video-sharing site, YouTube® also fits squarely within boyd and Ellison's definition of a social network site, as it offers its users a profile page in the form of each individual's channel and grants them opportunities to make and evaluate connections with other users. The channels are customizable, allowing users to change the backgrounds, select what personal information they would like to include, and decide which videos they would like to feature. The much-maligned video comments on YouTube® also promote social interaction by allowing users to connect through a shared interest in a given video, even if most often the connections are obscured by discord.<sup>6</sup> As mentioned earlier, users can also subscribe to channels that they find interesting, and find and link up with friends. The primary focus of all of these tools is video management, as they help members keep track of the videos and YouTubers they enjoy, but they also mimic the functionality of other social network sites. The Vlogbrothers take advantage of these options by changing the background of their channel homepage at least once a year and supporting their friends by linking to other

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<sup>6</sup> YouTube® is famous for low-brow, insult-based comments that do little to build a useful discourse. For a more thorough consideration of the kinds of deliberation possible within the platform, see Aaron Hess's article "Resistance Up in Smoke: Analyzing the Limitations of Deliberation on YouTube".

channels. Nerdfighters comment on their videos, make video responses, and subscribe to each other's channels all in an effort to support one another. But given the secondary nature of these tools, the Greens and Nerdfighters have had to move beyond just YouTube® to craft a well-supported community.

Ning®, a platform that allows users to create individual social network sites according to niche interests, has housed “Nerdfighteria” (the term chosen for the community as a whole) for years. “The Ning”, as it has been referred to in Vlogbrothers videos, features individual profiles where users can live chat, blog, upload photos, and participate in forum discussions. Initially run primarily by Hank, much of the day-to-day work on the site has since been delegated to volunteers from the community, known as “Ningmasters”. Ningmasters keep Nerdfighters updated about their particular area of expertise through regular updates to the homepage. Some Ningmasters, including those who are in charge of books and images, post entries anywhere from once a week to once a month with information and opinions based on recent occurrences within the Ning. The Images Ningmaster, for example, scours blog entries from users and compiles the most interesting images into a single image roundup. Ningmasters serve for a pre-set length of time, and are then replaced by a new group of appointees based on informal applications. Not only does this allow Hank to delegate much of the work that would otherwise keep him occupied with the upkeep of the site, but it also increases the self-regulation for Nerdfighters that participate in the site. John or Hank occasionally pop in to post a blog entry, but the site is largely their own. Of late, the

forum on The Ning has been supplanted by “Your Pants”, a forum custom created by the Greens and a few prominent Nerdfighters.<sup>7</sup>

The other social network site that has played a significant role in the construction of Nerdfighteria is Tumblr®. Not unlike YouTube, Tumblr®’s social network functionalities are generally secondary to its primary goal of being a user- and follower-friendly blogging platform. Unlike Blogger® or WordPress®, two of the leading blogging sites, Tumblr® encourages users to engage in conversation with other bloggers. Users have a homepage where they can “follow” other tumblrs and receive suggestions based on existing connections. Hewing to the remix culture that makes up much of Web 2.0, Tumblr® allows users to “like” and “reblog” each other’s entries, making it possible to easily add to or argue with them. As a result, when EffYeahNerdfighters.com launched in September 2009, it became an aggregator of all Nerdfighter-related content posted to Tumblr®. By accepting submissions and reblogging entries from fellow Nerdfighters, the site has been able to pull together quotes, images, videos, frequently asked questions and other media and information all in one place. Eff Yeah Nerdfighters is a collaborative effort, with 19 authorized contributors as of February 1, 2011, and has been referenced in various Vlogbrothers videos.<sup>8</sup> As of 2011, a link to the site has been added to the header on the Vlogbrothers YouTube® channel, effectively giving them official sponsorship.

Taken individually, the way that John Green, his brother, and the Nerdfighter community make use of these three social network sites is nothing new or unusual.

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<sup>7</sup> The name comes from a long-running joke on the channel, and is a reference to the original forums at Brotherhood2.com, which were called “My Pants”.

<sup>8</sup> Found at <http://effyeahnerdfighters.com/contributors>.

Factions of fandoms have long been found in a variety of different locations according to the needs and interests of particular fans. Web 2.0 makes this not only possible but easy, as various websites take a multitude of approaches to providing and showcasing content for and by their users. Often, once a fan has found that they prefer the conversational style at, say, Television Without Pity® over that of LiveJournal®, they will stay primarily at their one chosen site. Crossover does occur, but it's not necessarily expected. What is fascinating about the spread of Nerdfighteria across the internet, then, is that Nerdfighteria has spread as a community. The most active users across the three major sites (YouTube®, The Ning/Your Pants, and Eff Yeah Nerdfighters) are often the same users. In fact, the Nerdfighters who run Eff Yeah Nerdfighters are the ones behind the creation of Your Pants. As a result, these sites have all been built to strengthen the community overall, rather than splinter it into ever smaller groups. When YouTube® did not allow for enough personal communication, they set up The Ning, and when The Ning made it difficult to keep track of creative works within the community, they made Eff Yeah Nerdfighters. They stretch the platform afforded to them by each site as much as they can, before finding another offering from Web 2.0 that will supplement their existing locations.

The inherent risk written into the DNA of any Web 2.0 system is the possibility that user-generated data might be in some way manipulated by the users themselves, and it is a risk that only increases with a community such as Nerdfighteria that is so exceedingly well-organized. A website like Wikipedia has to trust its users not to edit articles with incorrect information, and when that trust fails the site has to rely upon other users to correct the error. Within Nerdfighteria, John and Hank Green have

spearheaded a number of projects that rely upon a group effort to outsmart the data-tracking algorithms sites like YouTube® have in place. Such manipulations are not malicious, but instead tend to focus on improving the community's circumstances in ways big and small. In one small example, Hank Green made a video where he wondered why, when typing the phrase "Is Hank Green" on Google®, Google® did not have any predictions for what search he might be making. (He had already demonstrated that Google® offered possibilities such as "Christian", "gay", and "fat" for the search "Is John Green".) Nerdfighters then began to work together, regularly searching for the phrase "Is Hank Green awesome?" until Google® learned the search and added it to its predictions. Such a project is of no consequence in the long run, but it does indicate the unique cross-platform positioning that Web 2.0 sites have made possible. This project could not have been organized on Google®, the site Nerdfighters were trying to manipulate, due to its lack of a discussion element, and instead regular updates were posted at Eff Yeah Nerdfighters. The project required more than one platform to be successful, indicative of the more fluid boundaries between platforms that Web 2.0 has made possible.

The manipulations of the tools Nerdfighters have used to build their community are not always so inconsequential, though. Quite often they are tied to their goal of decreasing World Suck and used to bring attention to real-world issues. O'Reilly and Battelle have indicated that, five years after the coining of the term Web 2.0, internet platforms have the opportunity to move from cyberspace into real life, employing their user-created content in a push for good. As they explain, "With more users and sensors feeding more applications and platforms, developers are able to tackle serious real-

world problems. As a result, the Web opportunity is no longer growing arithmetically; it's growing exponentially" (1). They call this "Web Squared". Their rush to coin this term on the five-year anniversary of the first conference seems much more indicative of a marketing ploy than their initial use of Web 2.0, not least because their article ends with a list of ways that businesses can embrace Web Squared. Despite the problematic nature of the term, however, the larger concept of using Web 2.0 to have an impact on the real world can certainly be found within Nerdfighteria. Nerdfighters have made many forays into attempting to solve problems facing both their community and others. John and Hank have started selling bracelets to support the This Star Won't Go Out Foundation, in honor of sixteen-year-old Esther Earl, a Nerdfighter who died of cancer. They have also embraced the promise of new media, with Nerdfighteria being the primary supporter of the "experiment in community" that is the Uncultured Project, in which Shawn Ahmed attempts to alleviate poverty by using YouTube® to connect donors with those they help.

But neither of those projects is a true manipulation of the platform in a way that touches the real world, unlike the Project for Awesome. First done in December of 2007 as a way of celebrating the success of their year-long project and using their new fanbase for the benefit of others, the Project for Awesome operates primarily by tricking the algorithms YouTube® uses to calculate popularity. Each year, the brothers and their viewers create videos about worthy charities and upload them to YouTube® on the same day. They then spend the entire day watching, rating, and commenting on the videos, inflating the numbers on these videos to make information about these charities rank in the most viewed, most discussed, or most favorited charts for that day. The

community focuses on just one or two videos at a time, hitting them as a group to have the most impact. In addition to the official Project for Awesome YouTube® channel, Eff Yeah Nerdfighters helps to pass along information about the videos in real time, telling Nerdfighters when to change to a new video. Each year the project has grown, and in 2010 YouTube® came fully on board, organizing a live show with major YouTubers and featuring certain videos on the home page. In addition to simply raising awareness through the videos, the Greens combined with other YouTubers and authors in 2010 to create raffles to raise money for charities including Save the Children and Partners in Health. The raffles succeeded, raising over \$100,000 in 24 hours. Even with help from YouTube® headquarters and the addition of the fundraiser, though, the primary aim of the project — to subvert the platform and make it a stage for good causes — remained intact.

If Web Squared is in fact the next evolution of the internet, it will be reliant upon services provided by Web 2.0 platforms. The Greens and their fans have shown an intuitive understanding of how and why this is, using the multiple platforms available to them in order to dictate how their community will operate in a new media environment. They adjust to the structure that sites give them when necessary, as they did by improving the quality of their equipment as the YouTube® increases the quality of its video-handling capabilities, but they are also instinctively aware of when the structure will be too confining. When the Nerdfighters move detailed discussions away from YouTube® and onto Your Pants, for instance, it is not a rejection of YouTube® so much as an honest assessment of the platform's capabilities. If anything, activities like the Project for Awesome tie the community even more strongly to the original YouTube®

platform, even though much of the discussion of the project in advance occurs elsewhere. On the whole, all three of their major platforms are meant to be viewed as one large, interconnected home for their community. Eff Yeah Nerdfighters would not exist without the Vlogbrothers channel on YouTube®, but the Vlogbrothers videos would also not achieve such a high view count without a way for their viewers to come together and feel like their contributions are important.

The next two chapters will explore how John Green's readers are embracing participatory and convergence culture in ever evolving ways. Without their intimate understanding of the platforms available to them such participation would be next to impossible. Web 2.0 is only as good as the ways in which it is used, and by realizing the social and technical functions of these still relatively new sites, Green's readers and viewers are able to transform their relationships with these platforms. YouTube® is about watching videos, but it is also about building community. The Ning is about creating a home for fans of a very narrow, specific topic, and it is also about making them feel like they are part of a larger whole. Tumblr® is about posting words and images, but it is also about letting others borrow and build upon your creativity. The fact that, for the Nerdfighters, these sites are different but not isolated from each other means that they have created a way of combining all of these tools into one, which gives them much more potential for change. Thanks to their creation of this wide-ranging foundation on the internet, Nerdfighters are regularly using these platforms to launch a form of participation that contrasts sharply with traditional reading practices.

### CHAPTER 3 READING VIA AFFINITY SPACES IN A PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

If John Green and his fans have shown that they know not only how to use but also how to manipulate Web 2.0 platforms to the advantage of their community, then it is worth considering the broader context of what, exactly, they do with this knowledge. Even if they understand the rules and confines of the platforms in question, the Google hack or the Project for Awesome cannot take off without an actively participating audience. One person alone cannot subvert the function of a website as easily as hundreds or thousands of people might when acting in concert. But at the same time, participatory culture does not have to be just about subversion; most of the ways that Nerdfighters interact with one another embrace a platform's structure as-is. The literary discussions Green has with Nerdfighters that will be taken up later this chapter demonstrate this approach, in which the act of participating is more important than the platform that is used. Green's ongoing conversation with his fans provides a clear picture of how participatory culture has already begun to change the ways that we may read and teach print novels, and why we must pay attention to these changes.

The white paper that Henry Jenkins and his four co-authors released in 2006 through the MacArthur Foundation, called "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", provides an excellent framework for understanding participatory culture. Jenkins lays out a five-part definition of participatory culture, saying it is one:

1. With relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. With strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others
3. With some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices

4. Where members believe that their contributions matter

5. Where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at least they care what other people think about what they have created).  
(7)

Considering this definition, it becomes clear that many Web 2.0 platforms, including those like YouTube®, Ning®, and Tumbler® (discussed in Chapter 1) are services which facilitate and support participatory culture. YouTube® makes uploading videos easy for anyone with a file and an internet connection, allows videos to be passed back and forth, and has a community that makes learning new techniques possible and that encourages feedback. On its own, YouTube® is a technological framework, not a participatory culture, but with the contributions of an ever-growing number of users, the YouTube® community is among the most prominent examples of participatory culture of the moment. Jenkins adds a small caveat after this definition, noting, “Not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute when ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued” (7). Non-participants are found within participatory cultures, but their non-participation must be a choice freely made rather than one thrust upon them. Thus, members of Green’s audience who do not comment on his videos, for example, are still a part of the culture because the community would make room for their involvement if they wished to be more active.

Jenkins also determines that there are four primary ways available for thorough participation in participatory culture: affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem-solving, and circulations (8). Examples of each of these four categories can easily be found in Nerdfighteria. The concept of affiliation is the most obvious, incorporating those who choose to refer to themselves as “Nerdfighters”. Eff Yeah Nerdfighters and The Ning provide regular examples of the community’s expressions, featuring artwork and

other creative projects from members. Nerdfighters engage in collaborative problem-solving whenever they create a new project or address a new issue, including such variations as the Project for Awesome and the critical readings of literature that will be taken up later in this chapter. The community's migration from platform to platform described in Chapter 1 is all about circulation, as they determine how the media they have chosen will be presented. The Nerdfighter community thrives in no small part because it has a broad enough reach to incorporate all four of these areas in significant ways, thanks to the way that members do not just have the ability to share content and connect with other users, but actively seek it out and embrace it.

With any community that bases much of its value upon the active participation of its members, a question emerges: who is participating? Jenkins's paper is largely concerned with the ways that youth are dealing with the emerging participatory cultures, and he cites the Pew Internet and American Life Project's 2005 study of teens who use the internet to create media. The report found over half of teens who go online to be "content creators", which the report defines as "online teens who have created or worked on a blog or webpage, shared original creative content, or remixed content they found online into a new creation" (1). The study also notes that older teenage girls would be more likely than boys their age to engage in social interactions online (1). The problem with considering these numbers in light of Nerdfighteria is that the statistics were gathered two years before Green's online community was born. A more recent study may be more useful, and in 2010 the same bureau published a study called "Social Media & Mobile Internet Use Among Teens and Young Adults". It finds that 93% of American teens use the internet, and that 73% of these teens make use of social

network sites (2). Notably, it also found that “there is no variation among teens today in sharing self-created content by sex, age, race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status — all groups are equally likely to share” (23). The exact kind of content shared might vary, as girls are more likely to remix content online than boys, for instance, but the drive to share — to participate, in point of fact — spreads across all teens who go online.

The focus on teens by both Jenkins and the Pew Reports is of relevance in the case of Nerdfighteria in light of Green’s own focus on teenagers across all of his work, including his videos. According to demographics cited by Green in various videos, the Vlogbrothers viewership has a tendency to skew young and female. The female portion, in particular, has been referenced on multiple occasions. In “How to Make Guys Like You” Green notes that “all of our videos, except for the ones that feature giraffe sex as the center screenshot, are watched by nearly three times more women than men”. The giraffe videos Green references are significant exceptions to the rule. Not only do the videos with that image not feature the aforementioned viewing ratio, they are in fact the only videos watched by more men than women (“Guys Love Giraffe Love”). Green bases these statistics on the demographics given to him through YouTube®, possibly the most accurate source available to him. His brother Hank has, in an interview, also indicated that he believes the YouTube® demographic trends “young” in addition to being predominately female (Lulay).<sup>9</sup>

But even knowing that his audience skews young and female - which is to some extent in line with the Pew Reports - does not provide a specific-enough picture of the

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<sup>9</sup> Green’s videos tend not to show a significant gender bias in the topics covered, answering questions and discussing topics of interest to both males and females, which mitigates much, but not all, of the female dominance in the community.

most active participants of Nerdfighteria. Both of the Green brothers play a role in helping to mold the community, but John's videos in particular demonstrate a more complex understanding of their audience. Since the beginning of the project, Green has shown Hank to be his stated audience — literally. Green's videos begin with the phrase "Good morning, Hank!", whether or not the videos were made or posted in the morning. Hank is brought front and center in this way every time. When asked recently if his conception of his audience has changed at all since the beginning of the project, Green admits, "I'm definitely more conscious of the audience than I used to be, but in my mind, even though 150,000 people are likely to see my video, the most important person is still Hank. That's very helpful, because I know my audience: My audience is my brother" ("IAmA"). The problem with using demographics as described above to conceptualize the community is not their accuracy, per se, but their inability to account for nuances such as these. Jenkins points out that "Not all participants [in a participatory culture] are created equal", which is especially true for Nerdfighteria. John and Hank are more "important" to each other and to the community as a whole than is anyone else within the community, which gives an extra weight to their actions.

In other respects, John and Hank are only two members of the community, however, and John has time and again used his videos to expand upon the traits that help identify Nerdfighters. Early in the project, he worked to define what his fellow Nerdfighters would value. In one of his more quoted videos, "July 27: How Nerdfighters Drop Insults", he tackles the concept of "nerds" head on, asking, "Why is being a nerd bad? Saying, 'I notice you're a nerd' is like saying, 'Hey, I notice that you'd rather be intelligent than be stupid, that you'd rather be thoughtful than be vapid, that you believe

there are things that matter more than the arrest record of Lindsay Lohan. Why is that?”

By undermining the traditional cultural conceptions of nerds, and reworking the term to be reclaimed as a positive attribute, Green encourages his viewers to take up the label and to identify themselves as “nerds”. In other videos, he compares the comments that Nerdfighters leave on his videos to the comments that can be found on YouTube® as a whole, reiterating the fact that they are “thoughtful and respectful” instead of the low-brow insult-based comments that are generally associated with YouTube® (“On Iran”). Praising this behavior nurtures it, creating a fan base that values these characteristics in one another. They decry those that act in “Un-Nerdfighterlike” ways, policing each other to strengthen the community. Green’s most loyal audience works to embody these traits and views them as integral not just to the success but to the identity of the group.

The result of all of this is a community of participants that is determined by more than factors such as age and gender that surveys are able to easily quantify. These participants have also come to be identified by more indefinite qualities like nerdiness and thoughtfulness. There are outliers, of course, as his videos are viewed by adults and many of Green’s viewers may not fulfill every last characteristic Green applies to the community in his videos. Nonetheless, this shared identity construct of young, intelligent nerds within the community has come to direct the community’s participatory culture. When Green presents a topic in a video, he does so with an awareness that it will have a viewership beyond his brother, even if he still claims to make the videos primarily for his brother. He deconstructs complex topics until they are engaging and easy with the obvious intention of sparking conversation and creativity among his young viewers in response. Green makes strides towards educating the teens that watch his

videos by taking on topics that may not be directly relevant to their daily lives, and through this undertaking moves them away from a passive viewing experience into membership in an active learning community.

The primary way that Green achieves this is by creating an “affinity space” with his viewers. Jenkins credits this concept, derived from the study of learning environments in participatory culture, to literacy scholar James Gee and explains that affinity spaces are “informal learning cultures” that are “sustained by common endeavors” and make it so that “people can participate in various ways according to their skill and interests” (9). They also rely upon “peer-to-peer teaching” that enables all participants to call upon their own expertise (9). Gee structures this idea around the consideration of the fact that people are more likely to be engaged and actively learning if they are focused on popular culture rather than a standard textbook. Some online participants may find being forced to learn the details of a particular historical event dry and boring, for example, but will gladly examine the writings of Jeremy Bentham to better understand *Lost*. Green’s more educational videos split the difference, as the videos themselves are popular culture artifacts but they are regularly engaged with topics that might be found in textbooks. In order to fully understand the structure of the affinity space Green creates, as well as how the viewers are able to work with their peers to learn, let’s consider Green’s discussion of J.D. Salinger’s novel *The Catcher in the Rye*.

In “OMFG CATCHER IN THE RYE!!!”, which Green posted on July 22, 2008, he makes a case for the importance of reading critically, with special attention to the concepts of symbolism and metaphor. *The Catcher in the Rye* had been chosen as the “Nerdfighter Blurbing Book Club” book of the month, which is an ongoing project that

encourages Nerdfighters to read the selected book and then create a short blurb describing it, with a nominal winner to be chosen at the end. (There are two variants of the contest: a traditional summary and a LOLCat-inspired humorous description.<sup>10</sup>) The idea of taking a novel such as *The Catcher in the Rye* and boiling it down to just a few words of course requires an oversimplification of the text, but Green makes a point of expanding the Nerdfighters' conversation about the novel. "It is my strongly held opinion," he states, "that a book becomes richer and more vibrant when we read it closely and think hard about it. To that end, Hank, in the next two weeks I'm going to make two videos about *Catcher in the Rye*...And I'm going to be totally English teacher-y about it!" Green proceeds to do just that with the videos called "Catcher in the Rye, Part 1" and "The Catcher in the Rye, Part 2".

In the first of these two videos, Green briefly tackles a few thematic elements of the novel that he finds interesting. He discusses the loneliness felt by Holden Caulfield, emphasized by Caulfield's hunting cap, as well as the narrative distance that Holden puts between himself and the recounting of painful memories. Green doesn't shy away from criticisms of the novel, either, bringing up its misogyny and saying, "It sometimes feels like Holden's desire to protect people and to keep them innocent is in some ways kind of inhibiting the empowerment of women". He ends the video by noting that he has started a discussion thread at The Ning, giving his more engaged viewers a place to go to continue talking about the novel in detail. In the second video, Green takes a slightly different approach to the conversation. He delves deeply into the idea that the

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<sup>10</sup> LOLCats are an Internet meme where in short, often grammatically incorrect phrases such as "I Can Has Cheezburger?" are placed on a photo of a cat for humorous ends. The Blurbing Book Club makes use of the phrases, not the images. Examples can be found at <http://icanhascheezburger.com>.

metaphors and symbolism of *Catcher* are a key part of bringing readers into and helping them understand the novel. He asserts that the story is ultimately hopeful:

“Because a year later he's [Holden] writing a story about the person he was, and the way he writes the story makes us care. NOW we are able to listen to him, NOW we are able to empathize. That's the miracle of text I would argue, but it's also the miracle of non-literal communication. The hunting hat, the movies, the carousel, that's his way into us. That's how he gets inside of us and makes us care, makes us believe in him, makes us realize that he is a person in the same way we are.”

Both of these videos argue for the value of traditional close readings of literature, by walking his viewers through the important thematic threads of the novel.

It's worth noting that the Blurbing Book Club had been in place for some time when Green made these videos, and it is the first time that he dedicates such substantial depth to his discussion of the month's chosen book. Many months go by without acknowledgement of the book club at all from Green. This raises the question: why *The Catcher in the Rye*? Although Green himself does not answer this question, it is not difficult to pinpoint some possible answers. As established above, Green's viewing audience is both factually and conceptually young, primarily constructed as teenagers. The Blurbing Book Club selection typically panders to this age group, focusing on YA literature. By selecting *Catcher*, the book club is working with one of the iconic and respected texts in adolescent literature, as well as a text that many students either have or will have been assigned to read in school. Green's own work has been heavily influenced by Salinger's novel, and his appreciation for the book is evident throughout his videos. Creating this three-part series about *Catcher* instead of many other novels, then, allows him to speak passionately about a text with which a huge section of his audience will be familiar.

If we consider only the videos on *Catcher*, Green's opinions and interpretations take center stage and offer little in the way of a participatory culture. By declaring that he would be "English teacher-y" about his approach to the novel, Green begins to enact a teacher-student dynamic within which he gives himself leave to dictate the kinds of analyses he will offer of the novel. He is in control of the topics discussed, the quotes read, and the judgments made. He even gives out something of a homework assignment, instructing the viewers as to what details to keep in mind while reading the novel. As a result, the videos do not present any information that would not be at home in a traditional high school English classroom. Emphasizing the shifts Holden makes between "you" and "I", for instance, allows Green to talk about the narrative persona and the ramifications of those variations within the story. His analyses are not edgy or groundbreaking, but sit comfortably within those that can be found in traditional teaching models. In the videos, Green is alone at the head of an empty classroom, or perhaps is in a virtual one, speaking to an audience that should (and does) exist but that cannot speak back.

Of course, the didactic and solitary nature of these videos is largely a result of the technology itself, as the video has to be filmed, edited, and uploaded before Green can get any feedback from his audience. But once the videos are in place, the Nerdfighter community is able to make its presence felt. Nerdfighters have two main avenues for this: YouTube® and The Ning. The YouTube® comments tend to be short and largely focused on the content of the videos instead of analysis of the text, though this is not a hard and fast rule. If the comments are any indication, Nerdfighters may not have a universal affection for *Catcher* but they respect and enjoy Green's work in the

videos. At The Ning, the official discussion thread Green started to accompany the videos swelled to hit a total of 37 pages, with topics ranging from frustration over Holden's grammatical errors to a dissection of Holden's interaction with the prostitute. In both locales, Nerdfighters largely work with one another in the framework of peer-to-peer teaching. They "Thumbs Up" comments on YouTube® that they like or agree with and reply to each other with answers to questions. The nested comments on The Ning allow for extensive back-and-forth on a given topic, offering the chance for rebuttals and adding detail.

But what makes this scenario, this particular affinity space, so appealing to the Nerdfighters that take part in it? At first glance it doesn't seem that it's because of a dislike of the trappings of a traditional classroom: they still have a teacher, they have homework, they read the novel critically, and have in-depth discussions about it, just as they would in class. These constructs are deceptive, however, because each of them functions in a different way in this online environment. Green is the teacher, but for many of his viewers he is also akin to a friend. The year and a half of vlogging that led up to this series of videos has allowed Green to share jokes with his audience, admit embarrassing stories from his past, and otherwise make himself utterly human to those watching. Thus the dynamic of the teaching interaction is changed; intimidation that may have come with him being a teacher has potentially been stripped away by previous videos. This is not a luxury generally available to teens in high school, whose teachers often work to maintain a professional distance between themselves and their students.

The other three factors are also more fluid than they would be in a formal classroom. Discussing the benefits of affinity spaces, Jenkins notes that "We can move

in and out of informal learning communities if they fail to meet our needs; we enjoy no such mobility in our relations to formal education” (9). It is true that those in school, youth in particular, cannot easily remove themselves from a formal education setting that is not serving them effectively unlike in similar scenarios online. It is also important to note that this mobility is not limited to moments when the community fails, but exists even when it is thriving. Just because Green suggests that his viewers read with a particular topic in mind does not mean that they have to or even that there will be consequences for not doing so. Even though the conversations center on critical reading, Nerdfighters are free to read quickly or not at all. The informality is key here, as there are no grades or papers attached to this learning community. Members of the affinity space can change their levels of engagement according to the degree and nature of their interests and their availability, without worrying about jeopardizing their standing within the space.

The in-depth discussions of Nerdfighters on the topic of *Catcher in the Rye* also function differently than they would within a classroom. What is especially fascinating about these conversations is the fact that Green can essentially disappear once he starts them, unlike a high school teacher who would be physically present. He is, of course, in the videos and he starts the thread at The Ning, but he then largely removes himself from the discussion. He might pop up occasionally to praise an insight or ask a question, but he does not direct the conversation. Given that, to borrow from George Orwell, some participants in a participatory culture are more equal than others, this is a savvy decision on Green's part. Too much participation from him could potentially stifle participation from others, out of concern for his response. By letting Nerdfighters

discover moments and details of the novel on their own, he allows them to take ownership of the topic rather than making them feel like a subordinate that must listen to the community's head. In this way he steps back from the teacher role, having informed and begun the conversation but choosing not to direct it after that point.

These three videos, and the participation they sparked, are just one example of the many affinity spaces that have cropped up around Green's videos. To some extent these videos seem to be Green testing the waters, as he has since handled topics in history and philosophy in similar ways. For the most active participants in his audience, the ones who most fully seek to embody the personal characteristics of intelligence and thoughtfulness that he expects from his viewers, these spaces grant them the ability to learn from Green and each other in a stress-free environment. These spaces are important not least because the kind of learning they foster, specifically in relationship to their critical readings of a text like *Catcher*, can potentially reshape the reading experience. The interest common to all Nerdfighters — Green's videos — bridges differences and allows them to look to and trust one another when building knowledge. They are able to use new technologies like YouTube® and The Ning to communicate complex ideas about traditional texts. The platforms and participatory culture that has been constructed from this fandom remove the solitude from interpreting texts, and, as the next chapter will show, from reading them.

## CHAPTER 4 TRANSTEXTS IN A CONVERGENCE CULTURE

Perhaps it isn't surprising that Henry Jenkins published works defining both participatory culture and convergence culture in the same year, given that these phenomena are so closely linked. In fact, Jenkins explains that convergence culture deals in part with the relationship between "media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence" (*Convergence Culture*, 1). The platforms that Web 2.0 has created, and the participation that has emerged through them, have given us convergence culture. Green's fans have grown used to bouncing from book to video and back again as part of the reading process because more and more "consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (3). As Jenkins asserts, "because there is more information on any given topic than anyone can store in their head, there is an added incentive for us to talk among ourselves about the media we consume" (4) - meeting in a chat room with other fans to discuss poetry only makes sense, because everyone can rely upon each other to help combine and share knowledge. By becoming comfortable with participation in an online community and building upon each other's ideas and insight, Nerdfighters are creating the groundwork for the kinds of production that comes with convergence culture, in which professionals and amateurs are not easily distinguished from one another.

The kinds of products that might emerge from these conditions, though, are predicated upon the above-cited idea of media convergence. Jenkins notes that technologies are combining with each other, as our machines are expected to multitask. Phones are no longer just phones, and DVD players are no longer just DVD players.

Ongoing media convergence has also resulted in the consolidation of media producers, with, say, television networks attempting to break out into web video and developing branches aimed at making feature films or publishing novels. But the other, and for our purposes most important, aspect of this concept of media convergence comes in the way that stories are created. Jenkins refers to the idea of “transmedia storytelling”, which he calls the “art of worldbuilding”, in which “consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience” (21). It is a combination of different forms of media that would all build on each other to create a single story, a form which has been slowly growing in popularity in the world of movies and games.

As first mentioned in the introduction, Kimberley Reynolds’s *Radical Children’s Literature* discusses “transtexts”, which would combine print with other media. It is a similar concept to that proposed by Jenkins, though Reynolds’s is tied to a very specific, literature-based context. Transmedia storytelling could be primarily based in film or video games, while transtexts are entirely contingent upon the written word element. Despite this difference, it is clear the more that Reynolds describes it, that the concept of transtexts fits firmly within Jenkin’s idea of convergence culture. Throughout her chapter on the recent developments in the forms of children’s literature, Reynolds looks for examples of the ways in which traditional printed texts have been combined with media produced through new technologies, while also considering the way that these technologies have been presented in the narratives we give to children. Reynolds

seems disappointed that a true genre of “transliterature” has yet to emerge despite what she views as an obvious presence of an entire generation of readers that she deems “transliterate”. For Reynolds, the need to make use of new technological platforms available to writers and readers in developing the future of children’s fiction is an obvious one that has yet to be fully explored or developed. This is undoubtedly accurate, because the kinds of internet literacy demonstrated by John Green’s readers in previous chapters are not unique but are instead indicative of a larger pool of technology-savvy users — especially as these technologies spread beyond the early adopters that make up much of Green’s audience.

In order to fully understand the implications of Reynolds’s call for transliterature, though, it is worth taking the time to consider the nuances of how she uses this term. She believes that looking to children’s literature as a site of this sort of technological transformation is only logical, asserting:

The relationship between children’s fiction, computer games, Internet chat rooms, fan sites and blogs, and developments in Virtual Reality (VR) is also well established, not least because writing for children began experimenting with the narrative possibilities now associated with computer games and VR long before they took shape...in the form of arcade, video, and Internet-based computer games. (156)

Reynolds explains that some of these textual experiments, such as the adventure gamebooks popularized in the 1980s, anticipated the kinds of narrative interaction that technology has since made possible in the form of video games (157). She also asserts that the high cost of technological innovation prevents such innovation from occurring simply for creativity’s sake, resulting in an emphasis by the specialists on the technologies themselves rather than the narrative innovations they make possible. All of this means that “Transtexts will only become ‘transliterature’ when a balance is struck

between the aesthetic and technological opportunities provided by new media.

Achieving this balance requires exploration of narrative possibilities at all levels and in every medium” (157).

But even this conception of its development does not give a clear picture of what Reynolds pictures when she discusses transtexts. She seemingly expects, as mentioned above, that transtexts will follow in the footsteps of electronic texts by embracing “opportunities for digression, extension, and embellishment via hypertext links” (158). She exhibits a longing for an increased integration of new media and its possibilities of freeing writers and readers both from the structured bounds of a linear text. Her most stringent requirements with regard to transtexts, however, necessitate the participation of professional authors and publishers in the creation of them, noting that “professional writers have yet to fully explore the possibilities for narrative offered by new media” (157). Later she touches upon the ways that readers have created their own transtexts through online interactions with texts, but she dismisses this as only a “proto-transliteration” and once again reiterates the fact that we “are still waiting for the first fully transliterary texts” (178). She only dedicates a few pages in her conclusion to the contributions of readers, and even then it is only within the now nearly traditional domains of fan fiction. Time and again, Reynolds looks to the established literary world as the one that must provide innovation in the form of transtexts – innovation that comes from established authors, editors and presses in the traditional publishing world.

As persuasive as her call to action is, however, her reluctance to seriously consider the contributions of amateurs is fascinating, given the rise of convergence culture. She observes that “it seems likely that it will be the rising generation...that finds

ways of realising the potential in electronic narratives to tell new stories in new ways” (178). I don’t disagree, but I do wonder why, if she believes this to be the case, she largely writes off or ignores the increasingly complex contributions of that generation. Amateurs have access to many of the same technological tools as professionals, and are often able to produce content with the same degree of sophistication as the professionals. It seems that ignoring that fact runs the risk of losing ground on the search for the emergence of transliterature. The “rising generation” has not been sitting back, patiently awaiting a turn as the head of publishing, but has instead been grabbing onto participatory opportunities of the internet to challenge conventional understandings of narrative interaction. With this in mind, this chapter will look at two examples of emerging transtexts within the Nerdfighter community, one created by John Green’s readers from his existing work, and one created by Green directly.

Given Green’s extensive online work, one could reasonably assume that the plots of his novels might reflect an inventive view of technology and the innovations it makes possible. They often do not. Instead, Green’s stories regularly take the main characters out of circumstances where technology would be useful to them, and tend not to engage heavily with new media as a way of connecting with friends and creating new relationships. Much of the communication in *Looking For Alaska*, set at an Alabama boarding school, is accomplished through a pay phone. *An Abundance of Katherines* takes its two main characters on a road trip into rural Kentucky, relying on pencils, paper, and tape recorders to exchange ideas. Even Green’s section in *Let It Snow* takes place during a major snow storm, which restricts the technological options available to the characters. His co-written *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* does not shy away from

technology, and David Levithan's portion of the novel actually includes an online relationship, but the novel does little to break new or different ground in the way it is handled. Only *Paper Towns* shows any real interest in or awareness of the more transformative functions that new media can allow.

*Paper Towns* demonstrates this awareness through the series of clues that Quentin and his friends believe they must follow in order to find Margo after she goes missing. These clues are highly intertextual, jumping across time, space, and medium, ranging from highlighted stanzas in a poem to a Woody Guthrie poster, each requiring Quentin to go to the source material or other information in order to fully understand them. The boys are enacting the kinds of conversations that emerge in participatory culture, comparing notes and building off of each other's information to solve the clues. After a long time of debating why Margo would have highlighted "Unscrew the locks from the doors! / Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!" in "Song of Myself", for instance, Quentin's friend Ben finally has a major revelation, saying, "It's not *poetry*. It's not *metaphor*. It's instructions. We are supposed to go to Margo's room and unscrew the lock from the door and unscrew the door itself from its jamb" (Emphasis in original, 125).<sup>11</sup> The characters had spent so long trying to interpret the poem's lines that they neglected to read them literally; this revelation eventually leads Quentin to a message hidden in his door, not Margo's. In every step of the process of solving these clues, however, Quentin is indebted to someone else's help. He cannot solve them alone.

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<sup>11</sup> This may seem surprising, given Green's constant championing of the importance of figurative language, but it is later countered by a conversation with an English teacher who stresses the importance of not just reading it literally.

Aside from his small circle of friends Quentin also makes use of a larger community by the name of Omnictionary. Omnictionary functions as the novel's version of Wikipedia®, and Quentin's friend Radar spends most of his time editing and updating the articles on the site. In an accurate portrayal of casual research habits, Quentin and friends turn to Omnictionary first when they are looking for information on a topic about which they need more background. Ultimately, it is Omnictionary that gives the friends their final clue in the pursuit of Margo, a clue that would have been lost without a community-based "talk page" associated with the various articles. Quentin recognizes a comment left by Margo — "the Population of agloe Will actually be One until may 29<sup>th</sup> at Noon [*sic*]" — on the "Agloe, New York" page, and gathers his friends to go track her down (236). Thus, not only did they need the crowd-sourced information made available to them via Omnictionary in order to solve her little puzzles, an informal conversation on the site led them to the final, larger answer. Despite all of this, the community on the site is only important to Quentin for how it allows him to maintain existing connections with his current friends; he shows no interest in expanding his social network even with the impressive tools available to him.<sup>12</sup>

Because of this characterization, the relationship between the characters and technology in *Paper Towns* does not align with the approach that the Nerdfighter community has taken in interacting with the novel. They work together, with friends new and old, to make the novel as interactive and multimedia-based as possible. Chapter 2 detailed the ways in which Green's videos encourage detailed conversations of the texts that Nerdfighters read, but the affinity spaces they create allow for more than just

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<sup>12</sup> The character of Radar is the one that seems most likely to pursue these kinds of online relationships, but there isn't really enough information available in the novel to know just how important they are to him.

interpretations of the text. Conversations in the comment threads on videos and in The Ning allow Nerdfighters the opportunity to interact with one another and make new friends in a way that Quentin and his friends do not. They depend upon each other's contributions as much as they do Green's. Viewers have side conversations about small textual moments they found interesting or take to the internet to research a question and post back so that others can share in knowing the answer, all of which helps them to get to know the other Nerdfighters involved in the discussion beyond their common interest in Green's work.

Considering the case of Katrina Vandenberg's *Atlas* in particular, the online conversations about her poetry collection have transformed that text's relationship with *Paper Towns*. Green's quoting and continual discussion of *Atlas* has led to an increase of sales of *Atlas* to those that have also purchased *Paper Towns*. This datum alone is not necessarily interesting or surprising, and could possibly have happened without the repeated live shows. What makes it significant, however, is the fact that the increased sales of *Atlas* have since begun to change the way that online retailers such as Amazon.com® label Vandenberg's text. While in a brick-and-mortar store the Teen and Poetry sections would not only be divided and labeled but likely in completely different areas of the store, the sales of *Atlas* to Nerdfighters have brought the two texts closer together in Amazon.com's® format of literary organization. When browsing for *Atlas* on Amazon.com®, for example, *Paper Towns* and Green's other novels often show up in the recommendation section. The texts themselves have obviously not changed since their publication, but because of the regular bundling of the texts by Green's audience, in some ways their genres have been changed. *Atlas* is almost as closely aligned with

young adult literature in the online stores as it is with poetry, a nuance that can only be supported through the fluidity of online tracking.

Poetry is not the only other form of art that has come to be associated with *Paper Towns*, as on the same page where Green quotes from *Atlas* he also quotes a lyric from a The Mountain Goats song called “Game Shows Touch Our Lives”. The lyric — “People say friends don’t destroy one another / What do they know about friends?” — speaks to the thematic musings of the novel, but that snippet is not the only mention of The Mountain Goats that Green makes both in and out of the novel. Quentin and his friends listen to The Mountain Goats while driving; they “[roll] down the one window that worked so the world would know we [have] good taste in music” (138). Green also regularly cites them in his videos as his favorite band and has, in large part thanks to the persistence of Nerdfighters, had multiple interactions with the band’s primary member, John Darnielle. Green’s public adoration of the band has raised its profile within Nerdfighteria, as many Nerdfighters have embraced its music whole-heartedly. Green’s role in promoting The Mountain Goats to his fans is more complex than just being a tastemaker because of the tie to his novel. By seeking out and listening to the music referenced in *Paper Towns*, as they do through fan-created playlists among other avenues, Nerdfighters turn a background detail of the novel into a major element of their lives outside Green’s fiction.

Nerdfighters also offer their own unofficial creations inspired by the novel, and EffYeahNerdfighters.com has been the primary aggregator of much of this content. Among the most common features are quotes from the novel, set against artistic backgrounds or created out of found materials. The site also posts images that remind

readers of the novel, or pictures of fans that have made a trek to Agloe. Among the more interesting contributions are videos and songs created by fans as a result of their affinity for the text. Nerdfighters often give fan-written songs a warm reception, as the songs require a more profound engagement with the text in order to take an idea or moment and transform it from prose to lyrics. Green has also shown in his videos fan-made artwork and toys about *Paper Towns* that he has been given as gifts. All of these kinds of contributions are different than what Reynolds would likely consider to be a transtext in that they are additions or embellishments rather than integral to the reading process itself. The novel can be read without seeking out any of these creative projects. But the mere fact that it *can* be read alone does not necessarily mean that it *is* being read alone. Nerdfighters often link all of these creations with their own reading experience, even if it is after the fact.

The other major convergence of novel and cyberspace is in Radar's beloved Omnictionary. Omnictionary.com does not exist only in *Paper Towns*. Though it has largely since died away and been infiltrated by trolls intent on disrupting the content, in the time around the 2008 release of the novel Omnictionary was the site of another Nerdfighter project. It was not simply an imitation of Wikipedia®, though a Nerdfighter-specific version of Wikipedia® would likely have been embraced by the community.<sup>13</sup> Instead, Green describes the Omnictionary project thus:

And so what we did was make a wiki and took some terminology from *Paper Towns* and some of the world from *Paper Towns* and we basically wrote an entirely different story from *Paper Towns*. And also a story that doesn't have a beginning, a middle or an end...Our idea is in the same way Wikipedia is a user-created encyclopedia, Omnictionary.com can become a kind of user-created novel. Readers of Omnictionary will pick how they read

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, the recently developed video-transcription wiki seems likely to expand to serve this function.

it in the same way we choose how we read Wikipedia. Instead of being written by one person it will be written by everybody. (“Three Things”)

If the description sounds confusing and complicated, that’s because it is. The project did not take off in quite the same way that something like the Project for Awesome did, probably because of the flexibility of fiction. A user-created novel is also a user-edited novel, which would make it rather difficult to track across the entire site. Green anticipated this, acknowledging in the announcement that the project may fail. But the sheer ambition and conceptualization of the project, of letting readers concoct a new story within the world of an existing book, embraces possibilities of both transtexts and transmedia storytelling. Had it been properly completed, Omnictionary would have been a truly hyper-mediated novel.

Related interpretive and creative projects have cropped up surrounding Green’s other novels. Readers try to use the mathematical equation in *Katherines* and share the results with each other, they have created the annual “Alaska Young Memorial Day” on Facebook, and are even attempting to stage a real-life production of the play described in *Will Grayson, Will Grayson*. *Alaska* also sparked one of Green’s more contemplative videos, called “Looking for Alaska at My High School”, in which he returned to his high school, which inspired the setting for the novel, and walked through the locations with his viewers. Each of them can and does function as an example of the expanding connectedness that readers are able to find through their online conversations. As a result, *Paper Towns* is not unique, but its more direct focus on the possibilities provided by the internet makes it a more apt case study — especially because the other novels do not have a feature as easily translatable to the existing internet platforms as Omnictionary. No matter which novel is in question, though, it is clear that Green’s most

active readers and viewers choose not to restrict themselves to one form of media when interacting with his fiction.

As has been established in earlier chapters, Green sees an important overlap between his reading and viewing audiences, and this overlap includes his most ardent fans in a community that is often rapidly expanding. His viewers have even started an outreach project of sorts in an attempt to make more readers of his novels into viewers of his videos. To that end, Nerdfighters have begun a pointed effort to insert notes into copies of Green's novels in bookstores and libraries. These "Nerdfighter Notes" are usually quite brief, but indicate that if a person enjoys the novel in hand then he or she might also enjoy being a Nerdfighter. A recent note reads in part: "If you like this or other books by John Green then you are probably a Nerdfighter...embrace the Nerdfighter community at [www.youtube.com/users/vlogbrothers](http://www.youtube.com/users/vlogbrothers)" ("I found my first"). The notes can be almost evangelical in tone, as they seek to share information about how to become a part of a larger community that the note writer enjoys. Pictures of Nerdfighter Notes are a regular feature on [EffYeahNerdfighters.com](http://EffYeahNerdfighters.com), both as they are being written and after they are found. Existing Nerdfighters who find notes in their areas often use them as a call to find other local fans. Green himself has endorsed the idea, and in the video "J Scribble Goes to Borders" he even participates by going to a bookstore and inserting notes that he had written into his own books.

Nerdfighter Notes equate the two kinds of work Green does, essentially observing that if you read his novels you might be a Nerdfighter without even realizing it. This in no small way relies upon the assumption that the tone, subject, and audiences of Green's novels are similar enough to his videos that the same audience might

appreciate both. This may be an imperfect bit of logic, but it does indicate that much of Green's audience is willing to move from medium to medium; they are the transliterate readers that Reynolds speaks of so highly. Of course, dismissing these kinds of connections as "pseudo-transtexts" as she does also effectively invalidates the efforts of some readers to reinterpret the reading experience. The existence of these Nerdfighter Notes demonstrates that Green's novels and videos, while created as separate entities, are considered by a section of his audience as portion of a whole. This section of his audience believes that if you read his books, then you should also watch his videos. The interactivity provided by the internet and YouTube® means that the community is able to foster a shared reading experience through a complex network of fan-created links, notes, and images even when they are reading in a different time or place. The fact that Green's publisher did not create the transtext, or that it is not a universal experience of the text, is, if anything, more indicative of the possibilities of convergence culture than if it were to be so tightly controlled. Nerdfighters read a print novel in the spirit of this culture, and it transforms the experience into a new kind of literature.

In light of this multi-media approach to reading that Green's audience has developed, the vast majority of Green's literary output seems entirely traditional, both in form and in content. His published texts do not offer, in and of themselves, much in the way of innovative formats or interactions with new media, confined as they are to the printed page. His online social networks and the conversations he has with their members about literature are certainly creative, but there has been relatively little overflow of this effort into his fiction. The one exception to this comes in his participation in ThisIsNotTom.com, a riddle website that both John and Hank enjoyed and shared

with their viewers in 2009. Initially, the Greens just made use of their dedicated audience as a way of solving the site's incredibly difficult puzzles, as well as the side-project of finding a way to contact its creator. Their interaction with This Is Not Tom (TINT) began as just another Nerdfighter project, but John and Hank's communication with the site's owner took it in another direction.

Once Nerdfighters tracked him down, the creator of This Is Not Tom, Alexander Basalyga, teamed up with John and Hank, changing the direction of the website from just intricate riddles into a series of stages that had a narrative arc. John Green began writing a story to accompany the site, but the story would only be available to those that had completed the riddles. Each chapter began with a YouTube® video that had the first of three riddles that would eventually lead to the story at hand. The story follows a girl, who calls herself Your Faithful Narrator or YFN, living in a society where virtual reality has become so extensive that she no longer knows who she is, and follows her as she attempts to break out of her virtual life and find herself. In an essay for *School Library Journal*, John Green emphasizes the immense level of difficulty inherent in the riddles, indicating that he cannot solve them alone and thus has to rely either on Basalyga or "This Is Not Tom's readers, who gather in a chat room and spend hours working through the puzzles and the story, together."<sup>14</sup> That even one of the creators cannot easily access his own work is an interesting nuance to TINT that separates it from print literature. Hank pinpoints the uniqueness of this approach in one of his videos, exclaiming, "Books have riddles in them all the time but riddles have never had books in them before, and that, my friends, is what John Green's doing. I mean, it's

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<sup>14</sup> Hank Green also created a forum for This is Not Tom's readers to come together to solve the puzzles.

really and genuinely extremely exciting, if you're not following it" ("10 Book Reviews in 4 Minutes"). Even just at the level of this reversal of expectations, TINT is, indeed, exciting — but the layers do not end there.

The story line of TINT is also dependent upon the reading and puzzle-solving audience. In the same essay, Green notes that "When, for instance, readers didn't notice that YFN was coding her latitudinal location inside story chapters, she was stuck hiding on her own. When they figured her location out, I gave her a companion." Narrative choices such as this are reliant not just upon the readers reaching a certain stage or noticing a particular pattern, though that does make up a large part of its functionality. These choices also require a dedication on Green's part, in that he has to follow and study the readers of his story in order to know when to give her a companion. It shifts the dynamic of stories where readers manipulate the outcome — an approach Reynolds believed would only lead to "wishfulfilment fantasies of the kind familiar from dreams and daydreams" (158) — away from a direct choice on of A or B on the readers' behalf and towards a more genuine interaction. Neither author nor reader in TINT get to dictate the ultimate outcome of the story, each relying upon the active participation of the other. In some ways, TINT combines the best aspects of Green's work, integrating a focus on community-based efforts with tough challenges, YouTube® videos, and a traditional literary text.

The informality of TINT (Green's essay calls it his "foray into nonprofit, Internet-based, multimedia book publishing") might be cause for Reynolds to dismiss it as a true transtext, but TINT functions as an experiment more than anything. Green admits that TINT has had a much smaller readership than his print publications, but chalks it up to

two problems: the high barrier for entry and the (self-assessed) low quality of the story. “Someday soon,” he writes, “someone will come along with a more entertaining story told behind a curtain that is easier to part, and some variant on the TINT Internet-based book will find a much broader audience.” Perhaps the support a formal publisher could provide might have brought the story to more than just a handful of dedicated readers. But the traditional publication model would also have to be overhauled for a project like TINT to be successful. Maintaining the high level of interactivity that made TINT unique may also weaken the writing, disallowing the lead time that would have gone to rewrites and editing in a print model. The laid-back approach to the creation of TINT also allowed it to be more experimental, making it closer to the multimedia-laced stories that Reynolds hopes to see as a result of the ever-changing media interactions.

Even though TINT was just an experiment, it is one that epitomizes convergence culture as Jenkins presents it. TINT brings together an amateur like Basalyga with a professional writer like Green, combining text, video and other media into one world that requires the reader to connect with other readers to get the most out of it. Even fan-driven products like Nerdfighter Notes or the Omnictionary story blur existing boundaries, pulling together the texts and videos produced by Green and the images and words created by his readers. Reynolds’s transtexts and Jenkins’s transmedia storytelling are useful ways of contextualizing these new approaches to media, but they each are essentially just putting names to existing phenomena. Even if Reynolds is still waiting for professionals to take the reins in creating this kind of literature, the way that Green’s readers have manipulated his projects indicates that a line has been crossed. His readers will no longer be content to read alone, and will instead create seek out

communal reading experiences that stretch across time, space, and media into the participatory future that Jenkins predicts.

## CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

“Just before my brother Hank and I began making videoblogs in 2007,” Green writes in *School Library Journal*, “Hank told me something that has stuck with me: participating in technological innovation allows us to *shape* the change innovation makes” (emphasis in original). Green’s choices in his treatment of literature in his videos appear to support this approach. As an author, Green has an investment in keeping traditional publishing and reading models alive and making sure that they thrive. As a vlogger, he works on the cutting edge of participatory media, challenging the limits of the format and helping determine what will come next. These two goals could be seen as opposed, given fears that new media literacies will obscure or even completely overwrite print literacies. But through his online and offline work, Green makes a point of showing that one does not have to come at the cost of the other. Text can still have value in a visual society, and Green’s videos demonstrate that visual tools can be used to promote and support the importance of reading critically. If anything, Green’s presence on YouTube® has had the effect of making his work with printed texts more compelling and persuasive. He could have jumped completely onto the new media bandwagon, but he does not want to leave print or texts behind.

Kimberley Reynolds might agree with Green’s philosophy of technological change. When considering the move to protect the book against electronic media, she asks, “Is it possible that those who seek to defend printed texts by denigrating new media may in fact be putting the book in danger: if it becomes an ossified form, how well is it likely to appeal to a transliterate generation?” (164). Tearing down new media does not appear to be a reasonable approach to protecting traditional novels, as it only serves to

encourage a disconnect between new and old. Green's approach circumvents this problem by fully entrenching himself in new media in order to support and promote the value of a good book, even one like *Catcher in the Rye* that has not traditionally been associated with a participatory media community. His work is not just about preserving printed texts, either, but is instead about making sure that the critical reading skills associated with them survive as well. By understanding and valuing new technologies, Green is able to interact with his audience in a way that brings the reading practice into the twenty-first century.

That is why Green and his viewers refuse to be bound by just one platform of expression. That is why they come together on YouTube® and The Ning to discuss what they have read with people they may have never met. That is why they come together to solve riddles or share *Paper Towns*-inspired imagery with each other. They do so because Green has crafted a savvy community, with himself and his brother at its center, that is actively interested in working together to shape the innovations that are yet to come. Taking advantage of multiple platforms, as they do through YouTube®, Tumblr®, and Ning®, lets them cast a wider net in their Web 2.0 presence. Using these platforms for in-depth discussions of printed texts means that they can use these new online tools as a means of improving their offline literacy, and creating a new forms of reading experiences that rely thoroughly upon others' contributions, and thereby put new forms of on- and offline literacy into action. Green alone cannot dictate the direction that medial developments like transtexts will take; Green and a loyal, participating group of followers might just earn a say in the matter.

Despite the compelling nature of Green's interactions with his fans, it would be easy to dismiss them as an oddity rather than a new trend. Most YA writers do not have a YouTube® channel or an online fan base that hangs on their every (non-written) word. Most are not even experimenting with new forms of media in the vein of transtexts and This Is Not Tom. Green's work is exceptional in the truest sense — he is not a model for the average author or vlogger. But his singularity does not lessen his significance. He is a case study of the potential that the participatory media hold in transforming the nature of reading, a demonstration of the possibilities that may emerge from it rather than a promise of the eventual outcome. His most committed fans are the kind of active readers that English teachers dream of, transliterate readers that use their transliteracy to engage classic texts in new ways. The lesson that his work offers is not that YouTube® will safeguard the printed word, or that all YA authors must foster an extensive online presence if they are to reach a wider audience. Instead, the lesson the work of Green and the Nerdfighters offers is that participatory culture and convergence culture will be a site of the evolution of printed texts and the reading experience, and that readers will play a major role in the outcome of this transformation.

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