

CARMILLA'S CREAMPUFFS: THE ALCHEMY OF QUEER ADAPTATION,
BRANDING, AND FANDOM IN A WEB SERIES

By

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Prologue

I can remember a Thursday in September of 2014 when I was planning to go to a campus event. While waiting for the event to start, I scrolled through my Tumblr feed, and paused on one particular post made by someone I was following. The post was a gifset of two girls, with one slowly stroking the other's hair; the look passed between the two of them indicated that there was *something* between the two of them. Although their relationship to each other was unclear to me at the time, the desire for each other appeared more than platonic. I cannot remember the exact text of the post, but I do know that it included a link to the show these characters were from. Maybe it was the tags on the post where the poster encouraged people to check the series out, or the fact that the look the two characters were giving each other was something I wanted to be invested in, but I was compelled to click the link and watch the series. It ended up that the post I had seen related to the seventeenth episode of the show, so instead of going along with my original plan for the evening, I instead sat in my room and watched what had been released so far of *Carmilla*, a web series based on the novella of the same name by Sheridan Le Fanu. What I didn't know then was that staying in and watching seventeen episodes of *Carmilla* would impact my life to the magnitude it has.

Introduction

The primary focus of this paper is the adaptation and queering of *Carmilla* into a web series and the community of fans it has created. With its use of transmedia—telling of a narrative across multiple digital platforms—*Carmilla* has created a community of individuals that otherwise may not have had a sense of belonging to a group of people similar to themselves. For those who need a connection to something bigger than a small friend group, the interactions among the fans with and about the series connect like-minded individuals who would not have met otherwise. This connection describes the *Carmilla* fandom and fan community, two terms that will be used interchangeably in this paper to refer to the group of individuals who have come together to talk and interact with one another in regard to their relationship with the series.¹

A definition of the term “queer” is not universally agreed upon. For the purposes of this thesis, the term “queer” refers to an individual who is not straight and /or cisgender. By extension, “queer adaptation” will be the term for an adaptation that takes straight cisgender characters and alters their sexualities and/or gender identities.² Although they have not had the same kind of impact that *Carmilla* has had on queer fandom and on the web series adaptation genre, two other web series—*The March Family Letters* (a web series based on *Little Women*) and *All For One* (a web series based on *The Three Musketeers*)—with the same use of transmedia and similar (yet smaller) fan bases will also be discussed.³ Finally, by combining ideas rooted in queer theory, use of transmedia, and personal anecdote, I will talk about fandom and how *Carmilla* has created a community of great significance to those involved in it.

It may be beneficial to begin with explaining what a web series is. Web series—the term for “audiovisual forms on the Internet that are serial, fictional, and have the basic structures

of a narrative” — are similar to TV shows, but “are series which are produced exclusively for Internet platforms (and can, therefore, be watched online)” (Alber and Hansen 143). Aside from the kind of screen they are broadcast on, there are other basic differences between television series and web series. Averaging between three to ten minutes long, a web series episode is much shorter than that of a TV show (Alber and Hansen 144). TV shows, when watched without commercials, usually run from around 21 to 44 minutes. With content produced for streaming sites like Netflix and Amazon Prime, individual television program episodes can run even longer. Because of the shortness of episodes in a web series, story arcs are long and played out over multiple episodes. There are three different kinds of arcs in web series: “micro story arcs (spanning two to five episodes), meso story arcs (spanning six to fifteen episodes) and macro story arcs (spanning more than fifteen episodes, sometimes more than one season)” (Alber and Hansen 144-145). Due to their condensed format, and because of smaller budgets, web series also have limited settings and characters (Alber and Hansen 145). Scripted web series employ a degree of “pseudo-authenticity.” This means that the series have the appearance of other types of video blogs found on YouTube and elsewhere on the Internet without actually being the real thing.

Since episodes of a web series are broadcast on YouTube, a space where content creators often talk directly to their audiences, “the characters of pseudo-authentic web series very often talk frontally into the camera to address the supposed audience directly” (Alber and Hansen 145). An example of this device is the concept of broadcast used in *All For One*, where viewers are supposed to believe that one character, Dorothy, is broadcasting from her dorm room to her friends in a chat room. Messages pop up on the screen when Dorothy’s Internet friends make comments, and there are even moments in the series where there are slight glitches in the image,

which mimic what often happens with video chats. As Alber and Hansen write, pseudo-authentic web series “employ a latently metaleptic pattern: the fictional characters speak to the real audience” (143). The audience believes they are being addressed even though the series is scripted and is already filmed.

The way that web series use transmedia seems exclusive to that platform of broadcast; however that is not to say that content creators using other platforms (like movies and television) do not understand the value of social media. Highly connected with television is the use of Twitter, or “live-tweeting.” Although fans of television shows cannot interact as intimately with their favorite characters on TV as they could with web series, “Live-tweeting television (and recapping and commenting after an episode) is a way for fans to participate in the show itself: to insert themselves into the game of television via technology and social networks in order to possibly demonstrate their dominance or superior knowledge over the text; to manifest their ironic or negotiated readings of the show” (Walsh 11). Walsh’s suggestion here, that fans only participate in a discussion about a show in order to boost their own egos, seems wrong to me; it is the opposite of why I think people would want to connect over social media. Compared to live-tweeting television, the communication that fans have with each other about transmedia is more collaborative. I am not saying that fans of TV shows do not collaborate or have insightful discussions, as I am specifically talking about live-tweeting and not interactions fans may have when a show is not airing.

By comparing the three series’ use of transmedia and their fandoms, considering how funding of a web series works, and using queer theory to analyze the adaptations, I will argue that *Carmilla* is the best web series of those I discuss in some detail. Aside from it being a show on the web, there is no universal understanding of the web series genre or therefore of how to

make judgments about web series. There are three criteria that I will use in order to analyze what makes a successful web series. First I will discuss how web series are funded and how sustainable funding that is compatible with millennials' biases about capitalism is web specific, and influences the series success. Second I will discuss the ways that classic texts are adapted for the web and how effective the web series are in queering the texts. Third I will discuss how the level of fandom engagement sets one web series apart from another. In general, the quantity of interactions between fans and content creators is greater than that of television series. While only a few people may get responses on social media from TV actors/content creators, the interactions with web series creators are more frequent. The fandom experience is about interacting with other fans and creators along with the content itself. What makes one web series stand out from another is the intensity of the relationship between viewers and the content creators. *Carmilla*'s approach to queer adaptation, use of brand partnership, and overall fandom involvement set it apart from the rest. By using *Carmilla* as my ideal model, I will outline the qualities that a web series needs to possess in order to be successful.

Branding

One of the ways that *Carmilla* is set apart from the other two series—*March Family Letters* and *All for One*— is that *Carmilla* is used as a marketing tool for U By Kotex. Although the concept for *Carmilla* was already laid out before Kotex came on board, the partnership between Kotex and *Carmilla* is part of the reason for the series' success. Kotex did not mention their involvement in *Carmilla* when it first started airing nor did *Carmilla* mention their series sponsor until a specific point in the airing of the series. This delay was deliberate. Kotex ultimately “finance[ed] a web series that people actually wanted to watch, and then subtly integrat[ed] its brand after an audience had already been built” (Staff). As *Carmilla* executive producer Jay Bennett said, “one rule we don’t see others following is we do not put the brand anywhere near the scripted content...once someone has fallen in love with the show and its characters, we then take them outside of the scripted series and create additional content that features the brand more clearly” (Longwell). Instead of having explicit product placement in the beginning of the first season, five “integration videos,” including fictional PSA videos for the students of Silas University and a game show, were presented as complements to the show (Singh). It wasn’t revealed that there was a brand behind *Carmilla* until episode 23 of season 1, and even then Kotex’s presence in the series wasn’t overpowering. Yes, from that point on in the episodes, a box of tampons or two show up in the girls’ room and Kirsch (a frat boy and self-designated “safety companion”) spends an episode wearing a “Save the Undies” t-shirt, but noticing these became like finding “hidden Mickeys” for fans rather than making them feel betrayed by blatant product placement.⁴ As Bennett says, “At that point, anyone viewing was a fan and so to find out a brand ‘made you a show’ you’re much more likely to embrace them for the gift then [sic] to tune out because of a hard shell” (Sauer). Bennett sums up his argument

with “Make a commercial and you’re just another commercial. Make great content and the audience will become your brand ambassadors” (Sauer).

Funding *Carmilla* was a \$500,000 to \$1 million investment for Kimberly-Clark (parent company of Kotex) as that is roughly the amount of money it takes to produce a full season of the series (Shields). While this is a relatively small part of the advertising budget for a two-billion dollar company like Kotex, it is still significant that Kotex chose to invest in a web series because of the comparative newness of the form⁵. Kotex is not the first brand to back a web series. In a study conducted by Celine Roque for *Contently* titled “Study: A Look At Branded Web Series and If They Actually Work,” Roque compares the success of fifteen different branded web series by looking at the statistics of the combined 265 episodes. Aside from a few outliers, one of Roque’s findings is that the views for the episodes decline over time. Roque also looked at the bonus content that the companies released (such as behind-the-scenes videos) and states that “While these bonus clips still bring in views, they perform below average relative to the other episodes for their respective series, generating only about 30 percent of the views for an average episode,” and concludes that, “Given this data, it’s not advisable for a brand to go out of its way to produce bonus episodes unless it’s absolutely relevant to company goals” (Roque). The branded five PSA videos that accompany *Carmilla* have much fewer views than those of the actual series. As of April 10, 2017, the video of the five that has the most views just breaks the 300,000 views mark. The first episode of *Carmilla* has over two million views and the season one finale has over one million as of April 10, 2017. The rest of the episodes average between 700,000 and in high 800,000s views as of April 10, 2017. While there are some videos in Roque’s study that have views in the millions (most of these from McDonalds), compared to the other web series, *Carmilla* is the most consistent with the amount of views per episode

throughout the season. Roque's entire argument does not rest entirely on view numbers as she also looks at recruiting influencers to appear in episodes and social media mentions and interactions. Roque concludes that "Since short episodes and seasons appear to be effective for now, today's barrier to entry is low enough for most brands to experiment, even if they can't go after pricey Hollywood talent or afford to spend weeks shooting a single episode. After all, even the smallest shows can be considered successful as long as the right audience tunes in," she echoes what I argue about Kotex's relationship with *Carmilla*: although the web series genre is a fairly new enterprise, it has proven to be successful (Roque).

The investment that Kotex made in *Carmilla* has paid off for the company. The research firm Fresh Intelligence, commissioned by Kotex in 2015, found that 31% of viewers said that they bought U by Kotex because of the series and 93% knew that the series was backed by Kotex (Shields). But it wasn't just market research that showed Kotex how much fans cared about the show and Kotex's involvement in it. At the end of season one, fans of the series created the #SaveCarmilla movement across social media, posting photos of themselves with U By Kotex products and giving testimonials as to why there should be another season of the series. The effort of spreading love for both *Carmilla* and Kotex are what gave the show its second season (Singh). If there is one message that U by Kotex brand manager Denise Darroch takes away from the experience, it is that "If you're not taking a risk, if you're not trying something new, you're never going to be a leader in the market – you're always going to be a follower" (Singh). By funding *Carmilla*, U by Kotex took a risk that worked, bringing millennials to the brand via the series.

Many companies are interested in reaching the millennial consumer. This is because millennials represent around a fourth of the U.S population with \$200 billion in annual buying

power, but they are hard to reel in with traditional advertising (Schawbel). Companies want to be able to get a piece of this large market but struggle with strategies. While some companies believe that millennials are not brand loyal, a study cosponsored by *Forbes* and *Elite Daily* found that “millennials are highly educated, career-driven, politically progressive and—despite popular belief—do indeed develop strong brand loyalty when presented with quality products and actively engaged by brands,” as summed up by CEO and Co-founder of *Elite Daily* David Arabov (Schawbel). The overall results of the study of 1,300 millennials were that millennials are not influenced by traditional advertising, but instead are more interested in having a relationship with the brand. They want to engage with brands on social media and help co-create products (Schawbel). Millennials prefer to have a relationship with the companies behind the products they are consuming, rather than have those products shoved in their faces with the expectation that they will want to purchase them. Having a connection with a person rather than a company creates a more authentic seeming relationship that millennials will want to invest in. For example, there are plenty of companies that use bots (automatically generated responses) or have a specific list of pre-written answers that are given in response to viewers’ questions. Receiving a personal response is something that millennials are more likely to engage with. Funding *Carmilla* allowed U by Kotex to connect with the series’ fandom, which made the relationship between the viewers and the brand seem quite personal.

According to *Huffington Post* blogger Matthew Tyson, some ways to make a brand stand out as being authentic are to communicate, be transparent, be relevant, and care about both the product and its consumers (Tyson)⁶. Automatically generated responses are not really authentic, since they are only showing a fake engagement with fans. Conversely, the team behind *Carmilla* is genuinely interested in communicating with fans and will answer specific questions that fans

may have. The most reliable way that companies are able to connect with millennials is over social media. According to the results of the study from Forbes and *Elite Daily*, “87% of millennials use between two and three tech devices at least once on a daily basis” (Schawbel). Because millennials grew up with the rise of social media as it is today, it is something that has always been part of their lives and is possibly something they take for granted. They engage in social media without thought; millennials are always connected to their devices.

Kotex, and more specifically brand manager Darroch, is aware of these things, which is how the self-named “Tampon Fandom” came to fruition. In her position, Darroch was looking for a way to replenish and potentially expand the number of Kotex users. The main challenge for companies that sell feminine care products is that the consumer only purchases for thirty or so years between menarche and menopause; feminine care companies are already competing in a space with a limited demographic.⁷ People will not use those kinds of products their entire lives, so it is important to get the consumer to buy the product earlier in their life so that hopefully they remain loyal to the brand for as long as they need it. With more boomers, “more people are exiting the category,” which means that a company like Kotex wants to stand out from their competition in order to get control of the feminine product market (Singh). Because millennials want to be emotionally invested in a company before spending their money, perhaps since they do not have a lot of it, Darroch didn’t want to “put content out there and then inundate it with branding and messaging,” but instead “wanted to provide that content, let people enjoy it, build that fan base and then come in from a different perspective and do [Kotex’s] own thing on the side” (Singh). As “one of the first moves into branded video for U by Kotex... the series was made to reach its target of millennial females ‘where they live and breathe’” (Staff). Noting that the approach of marketing towards millennials hasn’t changed

much in recent years, Darroch wanted to continue with Kotex's way of approaching periods in a way that draws attention to stigmas, and ultimately "teamed up with agency Geometry Global, branded entertainment co Shift2 and prodco Smokebomb Entertainment on what became a massive, modern hit" (Singh). That "massive, modern hit" is *Carmilla*, the web series with lesbians, a creepy college campus, and vampires who get their periods.

"Do vampires get their periods?" is a question that the creators of *Carmilla* have seen debated on vampire related fan boards (Martin). The question is also the title of one of U By Kotex's branded videos released in conjunction with the first season of *Carmilla*. While the period PSA video is more explicit in its intention to advertise Kotex as a brand than the series is, *Carmilla* as a brand is one of the most effective marketing endeavors used by Kotex. Although *Carmilla* executive producer Jay Bennett thought that the combination of tampons, blood, and vampires was a "weird mix," it makes sense that the partnership was made (Longwell). There is a long history of the relationships between vampires, periods, and lesbianism. In "'Carmilla': The 'Red Flag' of Late Nineteenth Century Vampire Narratives?" Laura Greenfell argues that despite the fact that other scholars say that there is an "*absence* of literary reflection regarding menstruation and menstrual blood," works such as *Carmilla* provide examples of thought surrounding menstruation and sexuality (153). It is evident to Greenfell that "male anxieties associated with menstrual blood are present in late nineteenth-century Gothic narratives" (153). This is marked by the change in what the Gothic genre looked like; instead of the "ghosts and psychological terror" of the early nineteenth century, the later nineteenth century brought vampires, beings whose double nature of being both physical and spiritual was "essentially sexual" (Greenfell 154).

Carmilla was the first vampire narrative to feature a vampire who was not only female, but also a lesbian. Greenfell argues that the text can be read “as supplying a metaphoric vocabulary with which to read the production of the ideologies of menstruation in Victorian literature,” or in simpler terms, a “literary reflection” of their ideology (156). While there are many coming of age stories about a young girl entering womanhood, Le Fanu’s protagonist is nineteen. Therefore, instead of “symbolizing Laura’s menarche” as a coming of age story would, *Carmilla*’s sudden arrival into Laura’s life represents “the advent of some form of feared menstrual ‘obstruction’ (ie. irregularity) in Laura’s menstrual economy” (Greenfell 158). Greenfell connects this thought to the assumption that doctors in the nineteenth century held, that “because lesbians were outside of the heterosexual mode of production, wherein menstrual blood was understood to be solely related to procreation, they therefore did not embody the ‘natural’ signs of womanhood such as the ‘red flag’ of physiological periodicity” (158). From its beginning as a novella, then, *Carmilla* brought together vampires, menstruation, and sexuality. That history makes the U by Kotex connection a logical one.

Although the other two series did not have a brand partnership, the absence is not an indicator of weak content. In fact, *The March Family Letters* was chosen as one of 17 out of over 188 entries to be funded through the Independent Production Fund or IPF (IPF). Similarly, *All For One* is produced by Corus Entertainment in participation with the Bell Fund.⁸ The Bell Fund “provides grants to Canadian independent producers who develop and produce engaging, interactive cross-platform digital content for Canadian broadcasters to complement and enhance associated television programs” and receives approximately \$17 Million from Bell TV annually (Bellfund). Even though the series were strong enough to attract funding for their first seasons, that limited funding does not allow them to make subsequent seasons. *Carmilla* is

the only one of the three to have sustainable funding, which has allowed it to have three seasons, extra content, and a movie in the works. Its success is reliant on the flow of money being put into the production and the constant creation of content to keep fans engaged.

Queering

In the introduction to this thesis, I said that a queer adaptation is an adaptation that takes straight cisgender characters and alters their sexualities and/or gender identities. The adaptation of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* seems not to fit that definition. Sometimes described as, "*Dracula* but before and lesbian," nineteenth-century *Carmilla* is undeniably about at least one queer character: Carmilla herself. However, Le Fanu's novella is by no means a positive representation of queerness and is therefore out of step with how queerness is viewed in the 21st century. Le Fanu takes for granted that lesbian relationships are perverse and dangerous, whereas queerness in the 21st century is not viewed like that. A text that operates on the assumption that lesbian = death (like the novella) cannot be considered queer because it operates on ugly stereotypes.

Gothic texts and queer theory are often looked at together because there is a strong relationship between the two of them, including "the way the narrative conventions of the genera seem to engage with the development of ideas about sexual nonconformity," as scholar Mair Rigby notes (47). Rigby writes, "In these textual worlds [the gothic] of excess and danger we find the institutions of family and marriage shaken, the representation of extreme states of being, encounters with outcast monsters, not to mention conventional preoccupations with forbidden knowledge, paranoia, madness, secrecy, and guilt," which are all traits that are shared between the gothic and queer theory (47). More specifically, "Vampires, for instance, are sites of ambivalent but strong identification for gay and lesbian people and have provided a productive source of queer reading" (Rigby 48). A queer approach to the vampire, "unlike the rather polite categories of gay and lesbian," as described by Sue Ellen Case, "revels in the discourse of the loathsome, the outcast, the idiomatically-proscribed position of same-sex

desire,” because looking at the vampire in this way can “occupy a critical position that ‘attacks the dominant notion of the natural’” (quoted in Rigby 48). By recognizing the vampire, “critics recognise [sic] queer critical practice as rooted in identification with that which is constructed as perverse, loathsome, and outcast, that which challenges ontological boundaries and categories and persistently attacks the assumptions that underscore notions of the ‘normal’ and ‘natural’” (Rigby 49).

Although *Carmilla* is different from the other two web series because its source text already has an explicitly non-heterosexual character, what makes the *Carmilla* web series a queer adaptation is that in addition to the queer characters LaF and Danny, the web series adaptation does not villainize Carmilla for being a lesbian. In fact, by the time we reach the end of the first season, viewers are rooting for Carmilla to be alive and for her and Laura to get together as a couple. Queer theorist Alexander Doty brings up the idea of “discussing how things are, or might be understood as, queer” rather than “co-opting and ‘making’ things queer” (2). The web series is a non-straight reading of *Carmilla*. The novella insists that Carmilla must be destroyed yet the queering of the series says that it does not have to end that way. The web series is queer because the interpretation is queer. Although there have been many other adaptations of Le Fanu’s novella, the web series sets itself apart from the source text and other adaptations with the way that the story of the vampire and the relationship between Laura and Carmilla unfolds. Instead of assuming the villainy of the vampire as something to be taken at face value, the web series questions the relationship between the two conditions: that is, if a vampire necessarily equals evil. Those who are considered to be the “big bad,” or antagonists such as Will (frat boy and Carmilla’s brother) and The Dean of this series, are not evil because

they are vampires, but rather are vampires who happen to be evil. Along with that, unlike the novella, Carmilla's lesbianism is not the villain of the story or the reason for her disappearance.

The basic plot of the first season of *Carmilla* is that Laura, a freshman at Silas University, is working on a project for her journalism class. One day, her friend and roommate, Betty, mysteriously disappears. Betty is quickly replaced by Carmilla, but Laura and Carmilla do not get along. There are more strange circumstances on campus and more students go missing, which leads Laura to enlist the help of her friends and turn her journalism project into a broadcast that aims to uncover the mystery of the missing students, and what, if any, role Carmilla has in that mystery. It turns out that it is Carmilla's mother (who is also the dean of the university) who is using students as a human sacrifice to please a large angler fish (or "Lophii") that resides in a large pit in the middle of campus. There is a battle, and Carmilla is presumed dead after diving into the pit to kill the light of the anglerfish. The season ends with Carmilla being alive, Laura and Carmilla kissing, and then an ominous alarm to signify that there is more coming. This adaptation of *Carmilla* queers the plot of Le Fanu's novella by shifting medium and genre. Instead of the gothic genre that the novella has, the web series can be viewed as a comedy, because unlike in the novella, both Carmilla and Laura survive. In terms of the macro story arc of the season, the story ends in romance rather than tragedy.

At the conclusion of the series' first season, the three kinds of story arcs typical of web series are obvious, even if some are a bit complicated. The arcs of *Carmilla* that I discuss here are the ones that occur in the first season, because it is the season that is most closely based on the novella.⁹ The macro story arc of season one of *Carmilla* is the "pod-people-ing" and ultimate disappearance of students on campus that Laura decides to investigate, solve, and ultimately document for her journalism project. This arc is similar to the novella in that the

narrator of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* often hears about other girls falling ill after the same pattern of events: there is some sort of accident or circumstance which leads another girl (Carmilla) to be taken in before the hostess becomes sick. In episode 20: "Sock Puppets and European History," Carmilla recounts the events of her past, and in particular the circumstances surrounding her relationship with one girl, El. The story that Carmilla tells - getting tossed out of a carriage, being taken in, and ultimately falling in love with her "mark" - is actually a romanticized version of the novella. Carmilla did not wish any harm to El, even though her (Carmilla's) mother made Carmilla out to be the kind of monster her character is portrayed as in the novella. In the novella, Carmilla's "marks" are strictly her victims. The relationships between Carmilla, her mother and others who travel in the mysterious carriage are never clarified.

Laura, as victim and narrator of the novella, is representative of

the traditional woman that is beginning to be replaced by women reaching for independence and identity. She embodies those characteristics that history has seen fit to infuse into the perfect woman. She is gentle and pretty, well bred and obedient, a direct contrast to the evil vampire Carmilla who hides behind the face of beauty, and who seeks to spread her evil through sexual allure and seduction.

(IKIZ 148)

Although her sexuality is never discussed in the novella, readers are able to make their own interpretations about Laura's sexuality and the nature of her relationship with Carmilla from the ambiguous recollection of its dynamic. At one point Laura says, "Now the truth is, I felt rather unaccountably towards the beautiful stranger. I did feel, as she said, 'drawn towards her,' but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed. She interested and won me; she was so beautiful and so

indescribably engaging,” which describes both her attraction and repulsion towards Carmilla (Le Fanu 19). Although the language of the text may suggest a queer context to 21st century readers, Victorian readers would have understood the text in a different way. Rather than Laura’s attraction being romantic, as 21st century readers of the novella may conclude, Victorian readers would have seen Laura’s attraction as stemming from a kind of manipulation on Carmilla’s part. Laura’s sexuality in the web series is not under debate. Although she is never explicitly labeled as “lesbian” until her father brings up the word in season three of the series, Laura’s sexuality is mentioned and discussed multiple times in the transmedia from the first seasons. Laura is also given another love interest, Danny Lawrence, who is her Lit T.A and is also another girl. Right from the first episode of the series, there is no objection by other characters to Laura and Danny’s relationship becoming more than friendly and in fact, Laura’s first roommate, Betty, encourages it a romance.

The character of LaFontaine is also an important element of the queering of the text. In the novella, the character Mademoiselle De Lafontaine is Laura's finishing governess. This means that she was the one who taught Laura etiquette and everything that a young lady should know to enter society. Because Laura is more autonomous in the web series, LaFontaine, while still a resource that Laura goes to when looking for answers, is more of an equal. What makes the web series version of LaFontaine queer is that they are non-binary. This means that they don't see their gender as either male or female, but as being somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. They also use they/them pronouns. While the term “non-binary” never appears in the show, LaFontaine is shown discussing their gender identity in the transmedia. There are also moments in season one where LaFontaine expresses their discomfort when referred to by their birth name –Susan– stating, “Maybe I don't want to *be* Susan anymore.”

Not only is the inclusion of this non-binary character an important representation for fans of the show, but learning about LaFontaine was also important for their actor, Kaitlyn Alexander. “Before playing LaF,” they said, “I did not know that there were genders outside the binary... I didn’t want to be a guy. I also wasn’t comfortable being a girl. I thought I was just honestly messed up in the brain. Then I got to play LaF and I was like ‘Oh my god, there’s a word for this? There are other people like this?’” (quoted in Atienza). While doing research for creating their version of LaFontaine, Kaitlyn realized that 1) they found themselves finally having something to identify with and 2) that there isn’t a lot of information about what it means to be gender queer or gender fluid; most discussion of gender lies at either end of the spectrum.¹⁰ Kaitlyn personally identifies with being gender queer.

The source texts of *The March Family Letters* and *All For One* do not have any explicitly queer characters. One technique that both of these series use is to gender swap main characters so that their genders have been changed from the two novels. For example, in *Little Women*, there is a character named John Brooke who is tutor to the Marches’ next-door neighbor, and with whom Meg falls in love. In the web series adaptation, Meg still falls for Laurie’s tutor, but instead of John it is *Joan* Brooke to whom Meg is attracted. We learn that Meg researches different sexualities and what it means for a girl to have feelings for another girl.¹¹ Meg is a character that in both texts (the original novel and the web series adaptation), has a lot of walls up and is very strict when it comes to following societal norms. When it comes to approaching something that she isn’t familiar with, she educates herself and then adapts. In the web series, this is the method she uses for exploring her sexuality and the ultimate realization of her feelings for Joan.

The other queer character in this series is Beth, who is asexual.¹² Her sexuality was first brought up on Tumblr, when she filled out a “getting to know you” tag (thebethmarch). Although the revelation was as simple as writing “Sexual Orientation: Ace,” in her blog post, it was something that a lot of fans latched on to. In an interview with the creators, the creators talked about the ways that using transmedia allowed them to connect with fans in a way that they may not have expected. Two days after the “getting to know you” post was added to Beth’s blog, the creators did a Q&A on YouTube in which they responded to viewer questions and comments regarding Beth’s sexuality. Regarding its inclusion, Sarah Shelson, executive producer and showrunner said, “It kinda came out in our transmedia right now just cause it’s not a plot point in the videos at this moment. And it’s also not something Beth would say on the videos” (Pemberly Digital 2). At the time of the Q&A, Shelson also said that she unfortunately didn’t think it was going to be a big thing in the videos because it didn’t make sense for the plot at that point, but would be relevant later in the story regarding some of the choices Beth makes about other people. Shelson and Lauren Evans, the executive producer and the person in charge of transmedia and marketing respectively, go on to talk about the post, saying that because the post wasn’t story-driven, they only expected it to get a couple of notes.¹³ They were not prepared for the way that people latched onto that plot point, even bringing up the fact that some people sent in anonymous messages to Beth’s blog to ask questions or talk about their own experiences with being asexual. Shelson said that it speaks to fact that we do not often see asexual representation in our media, so it was something that fans were excited about (Pemberly Digital 2).

Beth does eventually bring up her asexuality on screen in episode 38, “Turned Down for Whatever,” which was released May 15, 2015. It comes out during the following exchange with

her sister Jo regarding her (Beth's) relationship with Laurie. Jo asks Beth about her feelings for Laurie and Beth says, "Jo, you do remember that I'm ace, right?" Jo responds, "Yeah, but just because you're asexual doesn't mean you're aromantic. And just because you don't look at someone and wanna bang them, doesn't necessarily mean that you don't want to date them." Beth assures her sister that she only has love for Laurie in a familial way, and that is the extent of their conversation regarding asexuality. Although this interaction is brief, many fans saw their own sexuality as being validated and saw the conversation as important because they rarely see an explicitly asexual character in popular media. To make a note on why Beth may not have talked about her sexuality more in the series, the creators said that her story is better developed over transmedia, since she is so quiet onscreen (Pemberly Digital 2).

Even though Beth's asexuality is never explicitly stated in the book, it does make sense that the creators of *The March Family Letters* chose to explore this idea in their adaptation of *Little Women*. Episode 38 actually parallels the interaction in chapter 36, "Beth's Secret," where Jo asks Beth about her possible feelings for Laurie and Beth assures her that she only loves him in the brotherly sense (Alcott 214). Beth says, "I'm not like the rest of you. I never made any plans about what I'd do when I grew up. I never thought of being married, as you all did" (Alcott 214). It is important to note that in the novel, Beth means her comment in terms of being aware of her mortality. She also says that she "couldn't seem to imagine [herself] anything but stupid little Beth, trotting about at home, of no use to anyone but there" (Alcott 214). Alcott's Beth never saw herself leaving her family home in order to follow the heteronormativity of domestic married life.

The plots of *The March Family Letters* and *All For One*, unlike *Carmilla*, mirror those of the novels they are adapted from. Although there are some changes to the story of *Little*

Women and many elements of the plot are modernized, the overall plot is the same. The premise of the series is that the Marmee is deployed overseas, so Jo, who is a filmmaker, suggests the idea that they start posting weekly video diaries so that Marmee knows what her girls are up to while she is gone. Amy is easily convinced to contribute and starts creating her own outlandish videos for the vlogs. Beth, who has severe anxiety, performs some of her original songs in the videos with encouragement from Jo. Meg finds that she can use the videos as a platform to give important life lessons. The sisters still deal with a deployed parent, each sister has her own relationship with “the Lawrence boy” next door, and Beth is still sick. Even Meg’s developing feelings for Joan, the circumstances of their meeting, and the process by which Meg rationalizes a relationship with Joan all mirror the way Meg and John’s relationship develops in the book. Similarly, even with the gender swapping within *All For One*, the story follows the same general plot as *The Three Musketeers*. The Student Union at Dumas is parallel to the corrupt section of The Church under the Cardinal in *The Three Musketeers*. The sorority Mu Sigma Theta is parallel to the Musketeers with a brotherhood is changed into a sisterhood. Dorothy Castlemore arrives at Dumas College and has dreams of joining Mu Sigma Theta, the sorority that her grandmother left a legacy in. She befriends Treville (her recruitment advisor), MST sisters Alex, Portia, and Ariana, Connie (her roommate) and Miller, the later two of which she develops romantic attraction for. While rushing for MST, Dorothy goes head to head with Owen Rochefort, crony of Student Union president Rick Liu (who is often referred to as “Douche canoe” by Dorothy).¹⁴

The characters in the series all have parallels to the characters in their novels as well. There isn’t much change between the main characters of *Little Women* and *The March Family Letters*; the four sisters still have the same personalities and Laurie is still grandson to their

neighbor. Marmee is still the person that the girls turn to for advice; however she plays the role of both parents, as she is not only the one who provides encouragement, but is also deployed as Mr. March is in the book. The largest change is that Laurie's tutor parallel in the web series is named Joan. *All For One*, like the other web series, has a female-heavy cast. The brotherhood of The Musketeers being changed into a sisterhood means that the protagonist of the series, Dorothy, the three Musketeers, and the VP of the sorority have all been changed to female. Conversely, Milady de Winter in the novel is changed to Miller Winters, a male who is one of Dorothy's love interests and who once had a relationship with Alex, one of the MST sisters.¹⁵ Miller and Alex's past relationship does not change because it is still a male/female relationship, with *both* characters gender-swapped. The gender swap in this case is not meant to make this relationship queer, but it does show that the patterns that the two series from the same creative team follow are similar.¹⁶

This idea of gender swapping characters relates to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's argument about "homosocial desire." Sedgwick describes homosocial desire as a particular structure that "describes social bonds between persons between the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual'" (Sedgwick 463). Even though Sedgwick focuses specifically on the relationships between men, her argument can be applied to the queer relationships among women and nonbinary characters in the web series because of the gender swapping. The term homosocial desire applies most closely to *All For One* because the dynamic of the brotherhood of The Musketeers in the novel can be described as a homosocial relationship. Sedgwick likens homosocial desire to the idea of "male bonding," which is exactly the dynamic of The Musketeers (Sedgwick 463). The Musketeers are a group of men ranging in numbers between

150 and 300 that spend all of their time together; they live, breathe, and would die for one another. Its translation to a sorority, a sisterhood, changes the dynamics and significance of the relationship among them. Relationships between women are generally perceived differently than those between men. Sedgwick writes: “The apparent simplicity – the unity – of the continuum between ‘women loving women’ and ‘women promoting the interests of women,’ extending over the erotic, social, familial, economic, and political realms, would not be so striking if it were not in strong contrast to the arrangement among males” (Sedgwick 464). While close bonds between women are often accepted as the norm, “‘obligatory heterosexuality’ is built into male- dominated kinship systems” (Sedgwick 464). Sedgwick argues that homophobia is built into patriarchal systems. I have seen this idea enforced in my own life when two guys have shown some sort of affection for each other, followed by “no homo.”

If *All For One* had been an adaptation made up of mainly male characters, it would not have the same effect that it does. Many scholars already approach *The Three Musketeers* with a queer reading; however, the text itself is not overtly queer. If the novel were to be adapted in a web series with male characters, the same ideas of the novel may be there, but because there is an obligatory heterosexuality in male/male relationships, the relationships might not have the same weight as they do with the female-led adaptation. In *All For One*, Portia and Ariana, the counterparts of Porthos and Aramis from the novel, are dating. They kiss and hold hands, and talk about the fact that they are in a relationship with one another. In society, because relationships between women are often seen as familial and affection between women is accepted as the norm, there are other cues that people look for to determine if two women are dating or not. It is not enough for two girls to kiss or hold hands for an average audience to see them as being in a romantic relationship. The relationship between Portia and Ariana or

“Portiana” is only solidified when the two say that they are dating. With that being said, most viewers who watched the show knew that Portia and Ariana were a couple without having to be told explicitly. One thing that Alexander Doty asks when it comes to queering texts is: “Do we, in our roles as queer producers, audiences, or cultural critics, always have to play to, or consider, the segments of the population that prefer ‘hit them over the head’ messages or that only ‘registers dominant culture’s understanding of things’” (5). It seems that the creative teams behind *All For One* and *The March Family Letters* think so. This approach seems unnecessary since the audience of *All For One* and KindaTV, the YouTube channel where the videos are posted, is made up mainly of queer women. Watching Portia and Ariana interact with one another is enough for many of the viewers; they don’t need the same kinds of cues that other viewers may need.

The other gender swap in *All For One* that impacts the queerness of the series is that of D’Artagnan to Dorothy. If there were no gender swapping involved whatsoever, that character would not have been in any kind of queer relationship, as Milady de Winter and Constance Bonacieux are both female characters in the book. But because the protagonist of the series is now female and Milady is now Miller, Dorothy is bisexual and has relationships with both. While being bisexual or being a woman in a relationship with a woman can be considered queer, because it is against the norm, the queer relationships in *All For One* and *The March Family Letters* are only queered through gender swap.

Doty argues, “It is arrogant to insist that all non-blatantly queer-coded characters must be read as straight” (3). In both *Little Women* and *The Three Musketeers*, the central characters are blatantly coded as straight. The queer characters in *All For One* and *The March Family Letters*, however, are only labeled as queer or straight in terms of their relationships with other

people. Meg's sexuality does not come up until she works out her feelings for Joan. The situation is similar with Dorothy in terms of her feelings for both Connie and Miller. Even Beth's asexuality is not brought up in the series until Jo asks her about her feelings for Laurie. Conversely, we know that the characters in *Carmilla* are queer without having to see them in relationships. LaFontaine, for example, is still defined as queer whether they're in a relationship or not, and in fact it is not involved with someone until the last episode of the first season. This is only revealed in a comment from Laura where she mentions that LaF is dating someone "Kind of. Maybe." Even without this relationship, viewers understand LaFontaine as being queer and see their queerness as an important part of their identity.

Even with the character of Carmilla, the web series adaptation of *Carmilla* can still be interpreted as a queer reading. Doty says that "classic texts and personalities actually can be more queer-suggestive than 'openly' gay, lesbian, or bisexual texts. That is, the coding of classic or otherwise 'mainstream' texts and personalities can often yield a wider range of non-straight readings because certain sexual things could not be stated baldly" (Doty 1). This means that the readings of the source texts for *All For One* and *The March Family Letters* can just be considered readings, because as Doty believes, queerness is already in the text. The adaptations do not necessarily bring anything new to the text because the queerness is already a possibility. The web series are actually presenting a queer reading as opposed to a *revision* of the stories because the queerness is already in it. However, Doty finds that when talking to people about queer readings of texts, "you have to go the extra mile in terms of conducting really close and exhaustive analyses of 'mainstream' or classic texts to even to begin to get most people to consider the validity of queer, or lesbian, or bisexual, or gay readings" (2). The queer characters in *All For One* and *The March Family Letters* are only shown as being queered in their

sexualities in terms of their relationships with other people. It seems as though the creators of the series use this way of presenting queerness (i.e. queerness in a relationship) because it is the best, and perhaps most understood, way they can tell the audience that these characters are queer. It is not enough for them to just say that these characters are queer. Perhaps it is because the original novella had a non-heterosexual character in it, but of the three series, *Carmilla* is the most thoroughly queer in terms of its plot and characters.

Fandom

While *Carmilla* may currently be the most widely talked about web series based on a literary text, it is not the first to become popular. The trend of turning classic literary texts into web series started with *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (often abbreviated *LBD*), an adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In an article titled, "*Lizzie in Real Life: Social and Narrative Immersion Through Transmedia in The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*," Allegra Tepper reinforces the argument that transmedia is an important component of web series. *LBD* was really the first production to use transmedia in the ways I am emphasizing as significant in this paper. As part of the Web 2.0 and to reflect some of the anxieties held by the viewers' demographic – remember, most characters in web series are 15-30 years old– “This distinct reimagining of *Pride and Prejudice* mirrors some of the current cultural anxieties of emerging adulthood in a looming recession, and the ordeals of the first technology- and media-saturated generation, which is why the web series rings true with both Austen devotees and the uninitiated” (Tepper 46).¹⁷ The transmedia that *LBD* uses is in the form of social media accounts run by different characters of the series. While there is one person whose job it is to run these accounts, viewers should and do feel like they are actually interacting with these characters.

The transmedia element of web series is so important that Jay Bushman, the transmedia producer for *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, claims that “if you don't consume all of the transmedia content, you haven't seen the full show.” Bushman also says that “the tone and producer-to-consumer experiences on Twitter and YouTube are distinct, users can choose to be more engaged with whichever community suits their social media practices” (Tepper 46-47). There is more than one fandom of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, at least in Bushman's view, and those communities seem deliberately constructed by the transmedia producer.

There is no requirement for someone to follow every single social media account in order to get enjoyment out of watching a web series, of course. Fans are able to get as involved with the show as much or as little as they want. But it is important to note that:

These paratexts, which bleed into the virtual spaces we inhabit outside of the YouTube video frame, serve as a key enhancement to the story. If a fan using Twitter to catch up with friends, colleagues, and breaking news sees an exchange between @ggdarcy and @FitzOnTheFlitz, it blurs the line between his or her everyday reality and the *LBD* narrative, which creates an immersive relationship between the audience and the property. This ability to create a real-time continuum for the story is an advantage that transmedia storytelling boasts over film and even television. (Tepper 47)

This blurring of fiction and reality is what allows fans to feel a greater connection between the text and others who also participate in the fan community.

This is what scholar Frank Rose refers to as the “intersection of the lure and the blur,” or, the area of viewer participation and involvement that blurs the line between fiction and reality (8). Rose argues that “it is okay to immerse yourself in a world of fiction, but it is important to remember that it is still fiction” (37). What Rose is arguing is that there is a certain degree as to which you should immerse yourself in a fictional world. However, the opposite of fiction is not “real” because something fictional does not mean that it is fake. Traditionally, literary scholars see that fiction allows us to experience what it is like to someone who is not ourselves. The interactions on transmedia take this kind of relationship to texts one step further. Fandom creates a liminal world that brings together the fictional world of the series and the ordinary world of daily life. The relationships that take place in the liminal world are real relationships. The idea of these kinds of interactions gets at a prejudice that non-millennials

have about online relationships. Unlike older generations, millennials wouldn't assume that a relationship that takes place exclusively in cyberspace and largely in the liminal transmedia space is not real.

The use of social media accounts is also a way for fans to feel like they are part of the story, even if they do not directly influence its outcome. For example, if something dramatic happens to one of the characters in an episode, a fan might send them a message offering words of encouragement. While the character might "respond" in that moment, their actions in the episode are not going to be influenced by the online interaction, since all (or most) episodes are filmed prior to the first one airing. This fan, however, still felt compelled to talk to the character, to leave their own mark on the world surrounding the series, even if it does not make a difference in the grand scheme of the series. As Tepper writes, "In essence, the audience is not invited to co-write the story, but rather to co-create the world" (48). The "world" consists of the series *and* the transmedia.

Using transmedia is not exclusive to modern web series. As described in Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture*:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best ... Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole. (97-98)

In basic terms, a transmedia story is one that incorporates different types of media to world build and expand on the original text. For example, a movie may be made with

subsequent releases of books and video games. While the latter two cannot directly affect what is in the film, they do expand on knowledge of the film and characters in both directions (events preceding and happening after the extent of the film). One distinction between film and web series is that films are made to stand on their own. All of the added material (i.e. transmedia) is meant to assist with world building and to create a brand around the “product” that large studios are trying to sell. When it comes to the web series, all of the transmedia and “outside” materials are meant to be part of the story, since both the “inside” and “outside” worlds are developing simultaneously. This raises the question of whether viewers of the web series have a right to be upset or confused if they do not consume all parts of the story.

There are a few well-known examples of film productions that incorporated the use of transmedia into their marketing plans. One is the film *The Dark Knight* and the experience known as *Why So Serious?*. The participants ultimately became The Joker’s henchmen, completing tasks in the “real world” via instructions they initially received online. While there were only a limited number of “tasks” to be completed offline, a community of fans gathered together on the Internet “took part in a cascading sequence of riddles, puzzles, and treasure hunts that sucked them into the latest chapter in the 69-year-old story of Batman” (Rose 13). Frank Rose observes in *The Art of Immersion* that through the experience of *Why So Serious*, “the line between fiction and reality could also become blurred for anyone with an Internet connection” (13). There was a link between the different texts that could “carry you deeper and deeper into a story, revealing levels of detail that would be impossible to convey in a single, two-hour movie” (Rose 14). Finally, the main reason why *Why So Serious?* was so successful was that it relied on the connectivity of the Web, because the Internet is a place where fans collaborate and spread ideas and information with each other (Rose 14).

Transmedia can enhance a show or film's story: "The consumer who has played the game or watched the shorts will get a different experience of the movies than one who has simply had the theatrical film experience," or, "the whole is worth more than the sum of its parts" (Jenkins 104). Viewers can never fully experience the entirety of the story if they do not consume all of its parts. If a film makes a nod to something that happened in a comic book, viewers who did not read the comic might miss nods to events that happened in them or any resulting inside jokes. As media scholar Jenkins writes, "by the standards of classical Hollywood storytelling, these gaps...or excesses... confuse the spectator" (105-106). This can also relate to viewers' relationship with the texts the series were based on as well. While viewers of the web series do not necessarily need to have read the original texts in order to understand the plots of the shows, some nods to the original texts may fall flat or not be deemed as important to the overall story by someone who has not experienced both. Viewers also do not need to follow every transmedia account either, but by not doing so, those viewers should have the understanding that they are not getting the complete story. By not having at least some knowledge of the source texts or terms used within the fandom, viewers may not see the significance of limes in *The March Family Letters*, why Portia is called "bae" and Alex "mom" in the live episode of *All For One*, or why "creampuff" has been a reoccurring thing on *Carmilla* and within the fandom since its initial mention during the first season. Although these are minor things within the series, these nods are acknowledgements to those who have read the original texts and consumed the transmedia.

Moviegoers may not know about all of the parts of a story. When they see a film the narrative that is contained within the few hour span is usually all they need in order to understand the film. While absorbing parts of transmedia may enhance their enjoyment and

appreciation of the film, they aren't necessarily hindered a great deal by not experiencing the other elements outside of the film. Conversely, web series rely on transmedia in order to tell the story that is broadcast weekly. Although most of the information contained in transmedia could be considered "add-on" and world building, because a web series spans over multiple weeks, months, and even years, the information relayed through the transmedia is constantly evolving and adapting based on fan engagement and where we are in the macro arc of the season. These are examples of minor things that are not necessarily important to the overall story, but noticing these nods while watching might make some feel like a true fan. Interacting with transmedia allows for fans to feel like they have a connection with the characters, and sometimes fans even feel like they are able to go to the characters for advice. Fans also make connections with other fans by discussing and reacting to what transpires in the transmedia. For example, fans have asked Laura and Carmilla questions on their Tumblr blogs about coming to terms with their sexualities and for advice about coming out. The answers to these questions are posted publicly, and are then spread around Tumblr through reblogs. Transmedia interaction that happens on other social media like Twitter often makes its way over to Tumblr too through posted screenshots, which means that there is always a constant discussion and sharing of the material.

An example of being "in the know" is with the Inseparables that Dorothy of *All For One* interacts with. The Inseparables are friends that she communicates with through the Internet via live casting (video chatting), which is the formatting for the episodes of the series (rather than vlogs like the other two series). During each of the episodes, chat messages from the people she's broadcasting to pop up on the right hand side of the screen, and Dorothy and the other characters acknowledge and interact with them. Fans of the series I mention and other literary web series noticed something familiar about the usernames of the Inseparables. Some of the

usernames, such as @sometimesawesome and @ai-firestarter, are taken from the tumblr accounts of creators Sarah Shelson and RJ Lackie (*All For One* writer), respectively. Then there are other Inseparables, whom the creators obviously drew from other web series based on their similarities to other web series characters that viewers are familiar with. One is @canonicallyace, who fans say is Beth March. Not only does the username connect to the character, but there are periods of time when they don't show up in the chat, which could be reflective of the times that Beth is sick. There is also @cookiemonster, who, aside from being named as Laura, shares Hollis' love of cookies and often sympathizes with the characters in *All For One* being in a complicated relationship. Having fans discover the connection to characters and people they are familiar with independently (rather than to be explicitly told by creators) made them part of the community of viewers who tried to figure the identity of the Inseparables out. These nods to characters from other series signify that the creators saw their series getting the attention of those who watched the other shows. It also shows the creators have an understanding of their audience and "The Great Gay Migration." The Great Gay Migration is a term used to describe the phenomenon of queer (mostly women) audiences going from show to show just because they have queer representation in them. Some reasons for the "move" is usually because of poor character development or the killing of characters for shock value, although the most common reason is that because there is very little positive queer representation in media, viewers are willing to watch a show the minute they hear a character might be queer. Many individuals who are in queer fandoms are usually fans of the same shows. The premiere of *All For One* came after the untimely death of Commander Lexa of *The 100*, which left fans both devastated and looking for somewhere else to find positive queer representation.

Knowing about how fandom comes together to interpret and interact with the web series is integral to understanding how this type of media is different, and perhaps even more prominent, in a culture that relies heavily on communicating through the Internet. Even though television and movies are different media than web series, they also use transmedia and fan involvement to help create fan bases for their products, since elements of fan culture and interaction are the same across platforms. However, because the web series are not produced by “big-name” companies, the interactions within the fandoms and creators are more intimate, which is worth exploring in comparison to what other media are doing.

In order to understand methods that companies use in order to gain interest in their products from current fans, and to generate new ones, first we must recognize how people become fans in the first place. One popular position among media scholars is a “contagion-based” one, that is, the idea that “a fan can be ‘contaminated’ by each new interest” which “implies that fandom is ‘contracted’ with relative speed primarily due to ‘exposure’ to an outside source” (Duffett 125). Once someone is “bitten by the bug” they are hooked. However, becoming a fan of something is not that simple. Some argue that the contagion-based method is dangerous, since it “place(s) causation in to the hands of the products themselves” (Duffett 126). However as Duffett argues, these claims “see emotion merely as an unchanging social property able to be passed unproblematically from one body to the next,” which does not seem to take into account the relationship of fandom to the individual (126). An example of this given by Mark Duffett involves a woman who became a *Doctor Who* fan after seeing a stranger dressed up like The Doctor. However, his involvement in the fandom did not cause her to be a fan. Rather, it made her look into the material, and her own connection with the media is what ultimately made her a fan (Duffett 127). Other examples that suggest contagion at work is when

parents expose their kids to the media that they personally like, or when partners in a couple watch the same things as each other in order to find shared interests (Duffett 127-128). Still, the rejection or reception of the media is up to the individual; someone may get a better understanding of a person by their interest in a particular fandom by exploring its parts, but it does not necessarily mean that they will become a fan themselves. My recent experiences with becoming a fan have been due to contagion. As I mention in the prologue, the reason I watched *Carmilla* in the first place was that someone had posted a link to it and I was intrigued. While it was not necessarily that post that made me a fan, the fact that I then watched the episodes of *Carmilla* and became hooked is the result of contagion. My experiences with watching the other two series are a bit different. I first watched a couple of episodes of *The March Family Letters* because I heard that Natasha Negovanlis, who plays Carmilla, had a role. The third episode I watched was the one where Meg and Joan get together because I had seen tumblr post of the scene where they kissed and wanted to watch the moment in its entirety. I did not watch the whole season until beginning work on this thesis. *All For One* was the only series of the three that I heard about prior to it airing. It was broadcast on the same YouTube channel as *Carmilla*, KindaTV, and therefore I had seen a lot of promos for it. KindaTV had broadcast other web series post-*Carmilla*, but I was interested in *All For One* because it was another queer literary adaptation, and viewers were promised that no character would die. These experiences do not correspond closely to the contagion model.

By the time I entered the *Carmilla* fandom, seventeen episodes had aired, Carmilla had gone on a series of adventures through badly shopped photos of her in Iceland (which even now, I'm not sure I understand), and Kaitlyn Alexander (who plays LaF) had been named as Captain of the S.S LaFerry. This was on 25 September 2014. The fandom still didn't have a name yet; it

was still relatively small, though was made up of people just as passionate about sharing content and interacting with one another as they are now. The *Carmilla* fandom, or “Creampuffs” as fans call themselves, didn’t get their name until the beginning of October 2014 when Elise Bauman (who plays Laura) tweeted “Alright Creampuffs, hope you are still buckled in, because tonight’s episode might blow your minds. #puppetmaster #carmilla.” This tweet was posted the day that the 20th episode, or the one with Carmilla’s backstory told with puppets, was aired, and in this tweet Elise was referring to something that Carmilla had said in the previous episode (“buckle up, Creampuff”). At this tweet, fans of the series embraced the title, and so did those involved in the show. In the following seasons, Carmilla refers to Laura as being a creampuff, among other affectionate pet-names. There was even a nod to creampuffs when Natasha Negovanlis (who plays Carmilla) played Sallie in *The March Family Letters* and walked into the scene with a pastry and said, “ooh creampuffs are my favorite.”¹⁸ It’s a name that the creators have also affectionately called the fans of the series.¹⁹

Although I have seen some degree of engagement in all of the series’ fandoms on my Tumblr feed, I am more familiar with the interactions in the *Carmilla* fandom than the other two. Just like any other fandom, the Creampuffs have their own vernacular and inside jokes. They have favorite scenes and episodes and bond over which characters with whom they want to have romantic relationships. *Carmilla* fans talk about the series and are inspired to create art, writing, and their own analyses of the series. I personally once wrote a short analysis of the “THIS IS A GOOD SIGN” sign that is on top of the wardrobe in the girls’ dorm room because someone posed the challenge of proving Danny was evil in season one of the series. While I did not really answer why Danny was evil at all (and only added it on as an afterthought), I felt comfortable enough with my knowledge of the series and feeling that other fans would be open

to hearing my interpretation that I took time to write and post. Certainly people in other fandoms spend the time writing up analyses of characters and scenes, but because I was posting for the Creampuffs, I felt as though I would be listened to than just rather than talking to a void. There are far fewer responses to such posts in the other fandoms.

Similarly, fans of *Carmilla* feel like they can talk to and ask questions of the cast and creative team because they are easily accessible, unlike with Hollywood actors. While Hollywood actors do sometimes interact with fans online, it is not at the same level that one might interact with someone from a web series. It makes sense that the people involved in web series have a large presence on social media, since that is the space that their content is broadcast and posted on. Aside from answering fan questions about the series and about their personal lives, the cast and creative team often reblog and comment on fan art, writing, and other interpretations of the series. In fact, some of the more popular fan artists (i.e. ones who frequently post drawings in relationship to the show), are often asked to draw *for* the show. Fan art has appeared in the background, and in season two there was a contest to have one of the props feature a design by a fan. What this says is that the creative teams are just as excited about fan – produced content as the fans are, and in fact encourage it.

Unfortunately, because I did not tag a lot of my posts, it is difficult for me to go back and find specific ones that were either popular and/or my own personal interpretations and additions to others' ideas. Because people on Tumblr often change their urls, it is also hard to find posts that I recall specific people making. For example, if were trying to look up a post I know was made by someone with the url "carmillawearsplaid" and they have changed their url to "yodaisqueer," I would not be directed to a post associated with that blog.²⁰ The issue with the urls not only shows that fans of the series evolve, but also the way that Tumblr, the area that

most fan engagement occurs on, works. Tumblr seems to be the kind of platform meant for interactions in the moment, rather than as an archival tool for later analyses of posts (like this one).

Conclusion

Social media connects people to other people and perspectives they may never be exposed to otherwise. The Internet can bring together fan communities made up of people who are able to learn about and understand each other because of a common interest. I want to reiterate that just because the characters, episodes, and transmedia are fiction, does not mean they are not real. Just because relationships take place in cyberspace, does not mean they are not real. The Internet, and more specifically fandom, provides a space where fans feel comfortable enough to voice their opinions and ideas, and more importantly be themselves. *Carmilla*, with its close fan community, has provided a space where people of different backgrounds come together to share, create, and feel a sense of belonging.

Appreciation for *Carmilla* as a web series extends outside of the fandom. The series and Kotex have been nominated for and won many awards including the Digi Award for Branded Content in 2015 and the Canadian Screen Awards' honor for Digital Media Program/Series – Fiction in 2016. A fuller list can be found in Appendix 1. The amount of recognition given *Carmilla* shows that other people have seen the value in the series from a variety of perspectives. Even though *Carmilla* may not be a household name, it is important enough to those who are aware of it that it does not necessarily have to be.

The point of this thesis is not to say that if a web series does not have a brand partner, queer elements, or close fan community, that is bad or not worth watching. In fact, I think that it is healthy to expose yourself to different kinds of media and perspectives that you are not necessarily familiar with. However, I do think that when it comes to the combination of the three criteria, *Carmilla* does it best. The strongest aspect of the series, at least for me, is the fan community. With that being said, the fandom would not be as strong if the series were not

effective in its queering and positive queer representation; many people who watched the series would not have watched or even heard of it if it were not queer. Fans would not continue to come together to express their feelings and excitement about the series as they currently do if there were no brand partnership, because there would not be a continuous roll out of content. Overall, I believe that the combination of brand partnership, effective queer adaptation and a close fan community for a web series are what set *Carmilla* apart from the rest, and by outlining these criteria set one possible standard for literary web series in the future.

Notes

¹ These terms are not to be confused with fan base. A fan base is the overall grouping of individuals who are fans of a specific thing, while a fandom more specifically relates to the relationships the fans have with one another.

² “Genderswapping,” or the change of a character’s gender / gender identity from canon does not fall under this category, however it will be discussed in terms of the adaptations themselves.

³ It is important to note the distinction I am making between fandom and fan base here. I will argue in this thesis that while the fan bases of these series may be different, there is a fandom that surrounds these three series, with some areas being more prominent than others.

⁴ Hidden Mickeys are representations of Mickey Mouse, usually three circles to represent his silhouette, that are snuck into the background of Disney Films, part of the architecture of the parks, in merchandising, and more. As a general concept, “hidden Mickeys” are images or symbols that usually only people who know they should be looking for them, see.

⁵ It is worth noting that even though investing \$1 million in a web series seems like a lot, creating a commercial would be more expensive because of production costs and buying air time. Advertising budgets tend to be about 10% of revenues, so the budget for Kotex would be about \$20Million (Moorman).

⁶ Tyson uses examples from Schawbel’s article in his own. There is a general consensus about what millennials look for from companies, and the best ways that companies can approach millennials.

⁷ Although “feminine care products” is the most common way to refer to tampons, pads, etc., the use of it in this paper is not to say that all females will use these kinds of products, or that everyone who uses them is female.

⁸ These are Canadian-specific funds as all three series are produced in Canada.

⁹ As a reminder: micro story arcs span 2-5 episodes, meso story arcs span 6-15 episodes, and macro story arcs span more than 15 episodes, sometimes even multiple seasons.

¹⁰ As Kaitlyn describes, “Gender queer means different things to different people. Some use it as an umbrella term for anybody that may be non-binary. Some people use it as a synonym, some people don’t. Some people are like ‘No, I’m not gender queer. I’m non-binary’ or vice versa” (quoted in Atienza). The need for more representation that discusses this kind of gender identity led Kaitlyn to create the web series *Couple-ish*, in which they star as Dee, a lead character who is non-binary.

¹¹ As shown in episode 41: “How to Fall in Love w/ Meg March”

¹² There is a constant discussion on whether people who are asexual can be considered queer. For the purposes of this paper, it will be under that label because asexuality is a non-normative identity.

¹³ The notes of a post consist of all of its likes, reblogs (or the way of putting content on your own blog with it still being linked to the original Tumblr blog poster) and replies. As of February 15, 2017, there was only one reblog of Beth’s post, and the rest of the notes came from likes.

¹⁴ Although I have only provided a few examples for each series, the narratives for each series have distinct parallels to the texts they are adapted from

¹⁵ For a full breakdown of the parallels, see: a4oseries “A List of A4O characters and their Three Musketeers counterparts.”

¹⁶ Interestingly, Alejandra Simmons, who has a role in both of these series, is part of both of these pairings.

¹⁷ To refer to the Web 2.0 is to talk about the period of the Internet with the rise of online participatory culture: blogging, file sharing, collaborative writing and editing, and more (Meikle and Young 65).

¹⁸ Natasha played Sallie in episodes 33 and 34, which aired on April 28, 2015 and May 1, 2015, respectively.

¹⁹ To add a note about the names of the other two fandoms: *The March Family Letters* has no official fandom name, though some dub themselves as “Marchies.” I asked one of my friends who is a big fan of *MFL* if there is an official fandom name and even she wasn’t sure if there is one. She asked Shelson, a friend of hers, who said that she wasn’t sure if there was one either, but that “Marchies” made the most sense. Fans of *All For One* are named “Inseparables,” because that is the name that Dorothy calls her friend group that she talks to through her webcasts.

²⁰As of April 15, 2017, these are not urls for actual Tumblr blogs.

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Appendix 1

Awards Won

AfterEllen Visibility Awards.....Favorite Web Series – 2014

- Favorite Lesbian/Bi TV character – 2015
- Favorite Fictional Lesbian Couple – 2015
- Best Web Series – 2015

Digi Awards.....Branded Content – 2015

Canadian Screen Awards.....Digital Media Program / Series- Fiction – 2016

Banff Rockies Awards.....Branded Content Award – 2016

Shopper Innovation Awards.....(Kotex) Grand Prix: Commercial / Gold: Reinvention /

Gold: Original Idea / Gold: Targeting - 2016

Canadian Screen Awards.....Best Original Program or Series produced for

Digital Media – Fiction - 2016

- CSA Fan Choice Award – Natasha Negovanlis – 2017

Shorty Industry Award..... Best LGBTQ Community Engagement - 2017

These may not be all of the awards that *Carmilla* has won but is a list of what I could find; there does not seem to be a comprehensive list.