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Education, Community, Narrative Voices:

The Internet as a Queer Storytelling Platform

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As our increasingly technological society moves forward, scholars and cynical media-consumers alike continually disparage the Internet in all its forms, insisting that it only serves to make its users lazier, more passive, less creative, and more disconnected from humanity. Little attention is paid to the ways in which the Internet has shifted to become a platform through which creativity and activity may flourish, allowing users to access more respectful understandings of others and become more connected to diverse communities. It is through fiction that many individuals come to understand complex social issues, such as queer issues, and the Internet is rich with fictional queer narratives that queer and non-queer audiences worldwide have latched on to in lieu of mainstream fiction.

The Internet provides a space where creative works and stories can be produced and shared not for the sake of profit, but for the sake of the works themselves. Through such a platform, artists may produce queer-centered narratives without fear of censorship, and

audiences may access such queer narratives that are told through these alternative storytelling forms. These types of narratives have a profound influence on all audiences, whether they are queer or not. When queer characters are represented realistically, and their identities are not rooted in jokes or stereotypes, queer audiences may have access to stories in which their experiences are represented with accuracy; queer audiences are thus no longer excluded from the fiction they consume. This is especially important to queer youth, who often turn to fiction for necessary emotional support when coming to terms with their identities. Further, through these narratives, straight audiences may gain a more accurate and sensitive understanding of the queer experience: when given access to empathetic and well-developed queer characters, especially those presented through a unique or particularly accessible storytelling form, straight audiences may become more invested in these queer narratives, and may even change their attitudes and beliefs surrounding queer issues based on their new understandings. Further, the potential for audience interaction in an Internet-based story allows for queer audience members to find a supportive community and even contribute their own creative voices to these narratives, so through this medium, queer narratives can be created with more diversity and complexity than the shallow, stereotype-based queer representations in mainstream fiction.

The podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* and the webcomic *The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal,* both of which feature queer main characters, provide realistic and complex queer narratives such as these, and these stories' powerful influences on their audiences demonstrate the necessity for thoughtful and true-to-life queer narratives. Both of these Internet-based stories feature queer main characters, specifically depicting interracial relationships between cisgender men. There are many queer narratives in other Internet stories that feature queer women, transgender characters, and other characters of nonbinary identity, but these two narratives were

chosen in order to more closely examine the storytelling form and how the Internet as a platform influences these representations and their reception.

Welcome to Night Vale is a podcast told in the form of a radio drama, written by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor. The main character, Cecil, is a radio host in the small desert town of Night Vale, where strange and supernatural things happen all the time and are entirely normal. On the show, Cecil reports the bizarre town news, and often pines after Carlos, a visiting scientist who is studying the scientific anomalies of the town. In the twenty-fifth episode of the podcast, Carlos returns Cecil's affections, and the two of them begin dating. Cecil makes occasional references to his love life, and his relationship is consistently present in the story, though not central to the plot. As the story is told in podcast form, this story is an entirely aural experience, which allows for audiences to "fill in the [visual] blanks," in the words of Jeffrey Cranor, one of the writers of *Welcome to Night Vale* (Cranor). Conversely, *The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal* (commonly abbreviated as *<Epic* by the creator and artist, E.K. Weaver) is told through an entirely visual form of storytelling: the webcomic. The story centers around two queer young men, TJ and Amal, who meet in a bar and make a drunken agreement to go on a cross-country road trip together to attend Amal's sister's graduation. The story follows the meandering path of TJ and Amal's road trip, as they get to know one another, embark on "less than epic adventures" together, and eventually fall in love.

As this paper mainly focuses on these two narratives, the term "queer" here generally refers to queer sexualities; that is, any sexuality that diverges from the heterosexual norm. In conjuncture with each other, these two popular Internet narratives, one entirely visual and one entirely aural, demonstrate the benefits of representing queer narratives complexly, respectfully, and through a variety of storytelling forms. Storytelling forms such as these flourish and gain

popularity on the Internet, and through these unique storytelling forms, queer narratives may be told in new and progressive ways. Considering the ramifications of the limited and stereotype-based queer representations in mass-produced fiction, it is clear that the Internet offers a much-needed platform where more realistic, progressive queer narratives may be told and shared without censorship. Having access to relatable and accurate queer narratives in fiction is imperative to queer and non-queer audiences alike, for it is through stories such as these that audiences come to understand themselves and others.

Fiction and the Queer Experience

Media and fiction play indispensible roles in the development of self-identity in children, adolescents, and even adults, for it is through fiction that audiences come to understand their larger culture and their place in it (Igartua 348). In consuming fiction, audience members often seek out characters with whom they can best identify: characters of their own race, class, gender, or sexuality. Through representations of these characters, minority audiences, particularly young queer audiences, often find the confidence and support they need when coming to terms with their identities. Fiction often plays a significant role in "aiding in the coming out process, feeling part of a community, and feeling more confident about [one's] sexuality" (Houseman 39-40). However, when seeking characters of queer gender identities or sexualities in mainstream fiction such as television and film, the options are slim, if not nonexistent. Leading characters in mainstream fiction are starkly non-queer, while any existing queer characters play significantly smaller roles in the story (Steiner 402), and are presented through negative and humorous stereotypes (Steiner 399). Such representations perpetuate ideas that queer people are an "other," and that their experiences are not significant or worth portraying with any depth or complexity.

Through these harmful representations, queer audiences suffer, having their own narratives silenced and misrepresented. Further, non-queer audiences have no access to an accurate understanding of queerness or the queer experience.

Representations of queerness have largely been insufficient and problematic in mainstream media, constantly working to portray homosexual characters only through highly limited roles and stereotypes. Heterosexism is a pervasive force in the industry of film and television, which works to portray heterosexuality as the societal norm, even implying that heterosexuality is the only option in romantic relationships. This results in homosexual invisibility: queer issues and characters, especially gay female characters, often simply do not exist in the television world (Steiner 401). When queer characters do exist, they are generally presented through stereotypes, occupying an identity in the story that is marginalized and given very little agency or complexity. This is particularly significant in the stereotypical representations of gay men: gay male characters have often been constructed as "shy, unmanly," "wild-eyed" "sissy men," who are "used for comic effect" (Steiner 400). Examples of such "comedic" queer characters include Damien from *Mean Girls,* who shows no romantic interest in men yet is labeled as "too gay to function" due to his feminine interests and clothing (*Mean Girls*), and Kurt from *Glee,* whose sexuality was obvious to his father due to his interest in wearing high heels (Murphy). Significantly, in the cases of many characters such as these, the queer man's sexuality is determined not through his relationships or sexual desires, but through his "humorously" divergent gender expression. The stereotype that homosexual men are inherently "unmanly," and that this unmanliness is humorous, has constructed a cultural idea that gay men are a joke, that their queer identities render them as "lesser men."

Queer identities are degraded still more in the positions queer characters occupy in their stories. Rather than existing as active characters, or even as unique individuals, these characters are mostly presented as caricatures of what is popularly understood as "queerness." In essence, these characters are a representation not of queer *people,* but of *queerness* itself, on a highly stereotypical level. "[Gay and lesbian characters] are rarely presented as members of a larger homosexual community; gays and lesbians are secondary or occasional characters who exist primarily in a heterosexual environment" (Steiner 402). Interestingly, these queer characters are seldom portrayed in healthy romantic relationships, and any portrayal of homosexual intimacy is rare in mainstream television: "Overt display or discussion of physical and sexual behavior between homosexual characters is generally off-limits; television homosexuals are de-sexed and without desire" (Steiner 402). This invisibility of male homosexual intimacy is prevalent in current queer representations: in the popular television show Modern Family, for example, the straight couples are often shown kissing and having sex, but it is rare to see the gay couple touching more intimately than hugging (Hudson).

Conversely, queer relationships among women are frequently oversexualized in the media, providing a portrayal of lesbianism that is not accurate to queer women, but more tailored to the male gaze: lesbian characters are used as tools of male fantasy rather than being given any relatability or character depth (Steiner 402). The BBC show *Sherlock* provides a clear example of this through the character of Irene Adler, who is introduced as a lesbian woman; she then spends an entire scene parading her naked body in front of Sherlock Holmes, and by the end of the episode she has fallen in love with him (Moffat). Her relationships with women have fallen by the wayside so that she may be represented as a sexual object at the main character's mercy; her queer sexuality serves no purpose other than to "spice things up" and make her sexier to the

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male audience. In these ways, queer women's identities are limiting in mass-produced fiction; their queerness often labels them as objects to be used, rather than as real characters worthy of respect or complex understanding. These portrayals of queer characters in mainstream fiction thus limit audiences' understandings of queerness: homosexual characters, particularly homosexual men, are not identified as queer through their romantic and sexual relationships, but through stereotypical and gender-divergent behaviors, and on the whole, homosexual characters are not portrayed with any complexity or depth. They are defined only by their sexuality, and their sexuality is represented more through patriarchal concepts than accurate portrayals of queerness.

Audiences thus come to understand homosexuality from an essentialist perspective, believing that the expression of homosexual identity hinges on behaviors and mannerisms rather than sexual attraction. Queerness becomes a collective identity, leaving little room for individualism within the queer community: all queer men and women are believed to act exactly the same as other queer men and women, whether through their gender performances or their career choices. This essentialism further perpetuates an understanding that queer people are inherently different from non-queer people; that they are queer first, and people second. With queer characters being portrayed through stereotypes, with few individual traits outside of their queerness, queer identity is constructed as an identity entirely separate from a real, nuanced human existence.

This limited construction of queer characters is only further perpetuated through the restricted roles that queer characters play in these stories and narratives. Most existing queer characters in film and television are mere supporting characters at best, villains and joke fodder at worst; it is extremely rare to encounter popular mainstream fiction with a queer main

character. Generally, audiences experience the story from the main character's perspective, for this character's experiences are central to the story and are therefore presented as important. As queer characters are continually shoehorned into the limiting roles of supporting characters and cameo roles, there is little opportunity for audiences to understand queer experiences as important or real, or to understand the stories of queer people as stories worth telling. The queer experience is thus portrayed in mainstream fiction not as an experience that is actually lived by real individuals, but as one that is merely witnessed by non-queer people.

Further, as these queer characters are seldom constructed with empathetic qualities, the audience has limited access to a detailed understanding of these characters' experiences. Fiction typically provides a window through which audiences may "live" a certain experience, through the perspective of relatable characters: it is through fiction that audiences may become "the bewitched beings into whose midst the [artist] transfers us….our lives opens [*sic*] up and we sally forth to be others, to have vicarious experiences which fiction converts into our own" (Llosa). When audiences are provided with a character whose actions and emotions they can empathize with, audiences are more likely to understand the narrative from that character's perspective, and even come to change their attitudes and beliefs surrounding the subject matter (Igartua 370). Through believable and empathetic portrayals of queer characters, then, non-queer audiences may come to understand queer experiences from a deeper perspective.

Mainstream media and fiction, however, fail to portray the queer experience accurately, realistically, or even in a way that allows queer characters to be nuanced, relatable individuals. In representing queer characters through "comedic" stereotypes, as side characters with non-hegemonic gender performances and no evidence of actual sexual desire, mainstream fictions do not present queer characters in a way that audience members, gay or straight, are able to relate to.

Straight audiences are provided with no access to an understanding of the queer experience. Queer audiences are provided with no accurate or relatable representations of their own identities in fiction. These stereotypical and degrading representations of queer characters often act to silence and degrade members of the queer community, which can severely impact the self-worth of queer individuals from a young age to adulthood (Steiner 409). Without complex and realistic portrayals of their own identities, queer audiences must seek other platforms of storytelling, through which their identities may be portrayed with accuracy and their own voices may be heard.

The Internet, then, provides an extremely necessary space where creators can construct more realistic and progressive queer narratives. Through such a platform, creators and audiences can interact more directly, without an industry or producer acting as the "middle man" through which these narratives are structured. Free of the rampant censorship and limiting story structures of mass-produced fiction, creators of Internet stories can explore new mediums through which queer narratives can be expressed, or even shift the ways in which certain storytelling forms are used, in order to make them more inclusive of queer experiences. The comic book form, for example, has been used for decades to express challenging narratives; in its accessible and relatable visual expression of its characters, the comic is an ideal storytelling form for the queer narrative. Through the Internet, artists such as E.K. Weaver, the creator of *The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal,* have the opportunity to express queer narratives through a useful, accessible, and culturally relevant form such as the comic.

The Use of Comics in Storytelling

The comic form has traditionally been used to address social issues through entertaining stories: whether through serial comic books, newspaper comic strips, or more modern graphic novels, this easily-digestible (and often lighthearted) style of storytelling allows for deeper issues to be explored—issues that otherwise might not be discussed. From the *X-Men* comics to darker graphic novels such as *Maus,* these types of comic forms "directly or indirectly address questions citizens need to be asking and researching: questions about war, genocide, stereotyping, poverty, and justice" (Schwartz 2). The comic form, then, is a comfortable medium through which readers can address and understand uncomfortable issues and their cultural significance.

Additionally, the accessible nature of the comic form is essential in "hooking" readers, particularly young readers, and addressing these social issues in an understandable way. Though comics are often viewed as "low-brow entertainment" or "dumbed-down" forms of storytelling (Schwartz 1), it is precisely this simplistic visual form that makes the stories accessible and appealing to readers of all ages and educational backgrounds. Comics often address complex cultural issues in relatively simple stories, which are rarely overly serious nor too dense for some readers to understand or find interesting. As comics historian Bradford W. Wright describes, "comic books had not only afforded me an escape from a confusing reality, they had helped me to perceive reality in terms I could understand and accept. Comic books helped me define myself and my world in a way that made both less frightening" (Wright ix-x). Comic books thus provide a story world entirely separate from the reader's reality, and while the story world may be rife with the same dangers and social issues as our own world, it is contained in the pages and images of a comic, and is therefore a safe medium through which audiences can understand these issues and dangers without being threatened or confronted by them in their own lives. The self-contained nature of the comic book is thus an essential factor in the appeal of the comic story:

these fantastic-yet-realistic visual stories, constructed in a separate reality from our own, offer an appealing "escape from reality" while simultaneously providing a safe, understandable, and stylized representation of our reality and the complex and upsetting issues within it.

Queer Representation in *The Less than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal*

This use of the comic style, to provide an escape through which our own reality can be represented and understood, is utilized gracefully in the webcomic *The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal.* Since most of the story centers on TJ and Amal's road trip, the plot is meandering, and not overly complicated: the comic focuses more on the characters and the development of their relationship than the events of the plot. In this way, the story epitomizes Wright's ideas of comics as "an escape from a confusing reality": even the characters themselves experience this road trip as a much-needed escape from the complexities of their everyday lives. In reading this webcomic, readers have the opportunity to step away from their own reality, and experience the fun, meandering romp of TJ and Amal's road trip, and it is through this carefree escapism that the comic is able to address more serious issues. The characters and the story are presented in realistic detail, providing a window through which the audience can relate to these characters' experiences.

Significantly, this webcomic is structured so that the reader experiences the story in a way that feels true to life: since there is little plot to drive the story, rather than experiencing the story as a series of relevant events, the reader is guided fluidly through these characters' journey. The way each scene is visually presented makes the story appear almost picaresque: each chapter captures these moments in minute detail, moving fluidly from moment to moment as though the readers themselves are experiencing this scene, from the passing landscape to the characters'

conversations to the emotional intensity of their experiences. Few moments are left out; we often witness the characters smoking cigarettes on motel balconies, or waiting in line at a coffeeshop, and these small, quiet moments add to the realism of the experience in their detailed mundanity. The visual and sensual details provided in each page of the webcomic provide the audience with a vivid sense of how each moment feels. Indeed, at times, the webcomic seems less like a constructed story and more like a snippet of real life. The story follows no formulaic structure but instead moves fluidly through time, and the characters are constructed not through storytelling tropes but through realistic individual characteristics.

The comic as a storytelling form is an ideal medium through which to construct relatable characters. Comics appeal to many audiences due to their universal identification and simplicity of style (McCloud 36), but surprisingly, it is within this artistic simplicity that the audience may explore and comprehend the complexities of each character. In presenting a character through a simple and somewhat abstract style, the artist creates a space for the reader to relate themselves to the character, for "[Every]one sustains a constant awareness of his or her own face….which is as simple and basic as a cartoon. Thus when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face, you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon, you see

*The Less Than Epic Adventures
of TJ and Amal,* page 55

yourself…We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it!" (McCloud 36). E.K. Weaver's character designs gracefully blend visual details with cartoonish simplicity, as shown: Amal's body here has detail and shading, but his face embodies a simpler style, allowing him to appear realistic while still providing that space for the audience to "see themselves" and "become" the cartoon. The

comic thus becomes a "vacuum into which [the audience's] identity and awareness are pulled" (McCloud 36), through which the audience may seemingly *live* the character's experiences as their own.

Weaver's art style continues to blend realism and the abstract in order to create an experience that feels realistic not just visually, but sensually and emotionally as well. As a purely visual medium, the webcomic often works visually in order to create a sense of what each scene sounds and feels like to the characters. Details surrounding the characters' voices and speaking patterns are incorporated into the text and speech bubbles; TJ's voice is presented in great detail, through his casual diction and enunciation: "Nah, man… Imma shower real quick, an' we can hit the road" (Weaver 57), and Amal's anxiety and self-consciousness manifest in his cut-off exclamations ("Wha--?") and long trailing words ("Sssooo…") (Weaver 36). When the characters laugh, the "ha ha"s and "heh heh"s break out of speech bubbles and blend into the scenery around them, giving the sense that the laughter is a present part of the moment itself. These kinds of details invite the audience in to the sensations of the experience, its realistic and relatable sounds and moments.

In addition, music is constantly present in the story, and the lyrics of each song are incorporated into the images in a way that reflects how the music influences the environment. For example, when TJ and Amal are listening to Sigur Rós in the car (right), the lyrics wave across the landscape on a thin, smokelike banner. Conversely, when TJ is singing in the hotel (next page), the lyrics are bolder and

The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal, page 62

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take up more of the panel, even when he is not pictured, and the air is cluttered with wonky music notes. These visual cues seamlessly provide sensual details of the scene, so the audience may continue to experience this webcomic not as a limited visual story, but as a realistic and relatable experience. The ordinary, life-like feeling of the narrative allows the audience to relate more deeply to these characters, however different their identities might be.

The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal, page 45

Further, the frequent use of music provides the audience with a more specific window into the sensual experience of the characters. Audiences may recognize a popular song in the webcomic and immediately know what the scene sounds like, or they may easily look up and purchase the song through the webcomic's "Notes and Credits" page, which contains links to all of the songs used or mentioned in the comic. The Internet as a platform plays a significant role in this area, in allowing the audience easy access to these musical moments in the story. Audiences may not be able to experience or access the characters' lives in full, but they can easily access these auditory aspects of the characters' experiences. The music and its prominent visual presence in the comic thus creates a balance between familiar experiences and unfamiliar ones: certain audiences may not be able to relate fully to these characters, but in incorporating this static auditory experience as a "common ground" between audience and story world, Weaver allows for the story's more unfamiliar experiences to be less threatening to a new audience member. These artistic choices further close the gap between the audience and these queer characters.

Visual storytelling forms such as these thus allow for the experiences of minority groups to be experienced by wider audiences. Comics have often been used to provide an authentic voice to minorities; or, more specifically, representing minority characters in a way that is not rooted in stereotypes and harmful expectations. Media literacy scholar Gretchen Schwartz notes the cultural significance of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis,* which "shows the Iranians as real, diverse, even funny human beings caught in a difficult historical-political situation…[The comic form] can sometimes communicate the human reality better than an academic text or strategy report" (Schwartz 9). In a similar way, <*Epic* effectively provides a nuanced voice for these non-straight characters: rather than playing out gay stereotypes, as many gay characters do in mainstream media, TJ and Amal each have complex and different identities. Amal is a tightly-wound, yet compassionate medical student, while TJ is a laid-back and friendly tattoo artist. Essentially, they are two very different characters, who both happen to be romantically interested in men. Although the story centers on their relationship, their identities do not center on their homosexuality. Amal even comments to TJ, "You don't exactly ping on the gay-dar" (Weaver 36). Each character is well-developed and empathetic in his own way, and this representation provides a window through which queer audience members may see their own experience represented, and straight audience members may come to understand these gay characters not simply as gay, but as characters, with realistic and complex experiences.

However, the webcomic takes care to portray these characters' empathetic qualities within the context of their queerness. In no way does the comic ascribe entirely "straight" characteristics to TJ and Amal in order to make them appear more relatable or "valuable"; nor does the comic portray their "queer" characteristics through humorous stereotypes or divergence from masculinity. The characters of <*Epic* provide clear evidence that there are no essential

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personal characteristics that define queerness; however, occupying a queer space within American culture has certain influences on a person's personality and behaviors, and *<Epic* portrays those influences in realistic detail. Amal in particular suffers from a lot of internalized homophobia and self-hatred, due to his cultural background and his conservative family. At the start of the comic, Amal has just cancelled his arranged marriage and come out to his conservative parents as gay. He knows he is a disappointment to his parents and has no idea what the future holds for him. Amal's emotional tension is rampant in the early chapters of the webcomic: he is angry at his parents for their homophobic beliefs, angry at himself for being a disappointment to them, and terrified of what may happen as a result of him coming out. He tries to mask this fear by blunting his outward emotions: "You've caught me on a day where I care about jack shit" (Weaver 32), but whenever he tries to think farther than a few days in the future, his overwhelming anxiety leaks through.

This suppressed fear that Amal deals with in many situations provides the audience with a gripping sense of just how terrifying the queer experience can be when homophobia and heterosexism are such an ingrained aspects of American cultures. However, Amal's emotional problems are evidently not essential parts of his queerness, for TJ's generally easygoing personality provides a clear foil to Amal's outbursts and anxiety attacks. Amal's fears, then, are not "queer" characteristics, but rather characteristics that come as a result of the oppressed space he occupies as a queer man. Queer identity is thus explored in *<Epic* from a more inclusive perspective: these characters are affected by their queerness, but they are not defined by it; their characteristics vary on an individual level, rather than a "queer" or "straight" one. Amal's struggles are certainly not unique among the queer community, but they are often unexplored in mass-produced fiction. Such a representation of these characteristics provides a more accurate

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and thoughtful queer narrative, through which queer audiences may understand their own struggles, and non-queer audiences may understand the less-often-discussed aspects of queer experiences.

In other situations, TJ and Amal face homophobia and potential aggression from strangers, such as when a group of threatening-looking men starts to stare at them in a restaurant, or when a police officer approaches their parked car and shines a flashlight at them. In both of these situations, the threat is not explicitly acknowledged by the characters, but it is clear that Amal is all too aware of it: he tries to act casual, but starts to sweat and trips over his words. Amal's own nervousness highlights this sense of underlying fear that queer people experience in public situations, especially in less liberal communities. Though Amal and TJ do not become victim to any actual violence, the tension and potential for aggression in these situations accurately depicts these darker aspects of queer experiences. These scenes provide a dark contrast to the light and easygoing atmosphere of the rest of the comic: such moments stand out in their tension and emotional weight, allowing the audience to fully experience their impact on the characters and the atmosphere of the story. It is important to note that the comic form here does not "dumb down" or attempt to *explain* issues of homophobia in clear terms, since to do so would involve tackling a mountain of complexities. Rather, it gives the readers access to the experience of encountering homophobia, through a visual form and character-driven story that allows audiences to "experience" the narrative in a constructed, yet realistic medium.

Representations of Queer Relationships in Internet Storytelling

Such realistically-structured queer representations also allow room for more complex and meaningful portrayals of queer relationships. As discussed previously, queer relationships in

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mass-produced fiction are often portrayed with little emotional depth or intimacy, and as such, queer relationships are largely understood as being less complex or valuable than non-queer relationships. Internet stories largely move away from such shallow understandings of queer romance, and create a space where queer relationships are portrayed as meaningful and valuable experiences.

Most mainstream portrayals of queer couples are meticulously censored, often to the point of being completely devoid of physical intimacy. The Internet, however, provides a platform where such censorship does not exist. In her webcomic, E.K. Weaver does not shy away from showing queer couples in intimate situations: once they become romantically involved, TJ and Amal often kiss, and they have sex three times in the 44-chapter comic. The scenes with sexual content are not censored, but neither are they overly romanticized: continuing with *<Epic's* convention of portraying situations realistically, the sex scenes contain all the moments of awkwardness, hilarity, and desperation that come with sexual intercourse in a new relationship (Weaver 159). The realism of the experience is persistent, and in the moment, the fact that the characters are queer is barely acknowledged. They are presented as two people being sexually intimate, experiencing all the emotional intensity that comes with such intimacy. Such a representation is refreshing to queer audiences: their experience is acknowledged and represented in fiction as something that is real, meaningful, and even normal.

Similarly, the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* works to move away from shallow and uncomplex representations of queer romance, moving even within the arc of the podcast towards more realistic and believable relationships. Early in the podcast, the narrator, Cecil, falls in love with Carlos, a scientist visiting the town of Night Vale. He often describes Carlos as being "perfect in every way," but notably, in the early episodes, Cecil's understanding of Carlos's

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"perfection" is limited to his appearance: his teeth, his jaw, and most of all, his hair. Cecil's infatuation with Carlos functions on a merely physical level. Even as he gets to know Carlos better, Cecil's narration does not portray Carlos in any realistic way, continuing to believe he is perfection personified; indeed, even when they are dating, for awhile Cecil continues to see Carlos, and their relationship, as perfect. However, as Cecil comes to know Carlos better, and becomes acquainted with the way Carlos chews his food a little loudly and often forgets to return phone calls, his love for Carlos shifts away from that idea of perfection: Cecil loves Carlos not because he is perfect, but because he is Carlos. Their relationship is no longer based on shallow understandings or ideas.

This shift in Cecil's ideas of Carlos is acknowledged quite explicitly in the episode "Condos," which was performed live on the *Welcome to Night Vale* tour in late 2013. In the episode, a mysterious force is taking Night Vale citizens captive, by hypnotizing them and convincing them that they will achieve perfection if they are taken. Carlos is among those hypnotized, and when Cecil rushes to save Carlos, he is nearly hypnotized himself, but he manages to fight back against the concept of perception, as he narrates:

> "After all these months together with dear Carlos, I've come to realize that perfection isn't real. Perfection isn't human. And Carlos is not perfect. No. Even better, he is imperfect. Everything about him and us and all of this is, it's imperfect. And those imperfections in our reality are the seams and the cracks into which our outsize love can seep and pool" (Fink).

Through this reflection, Cecil emphasizes the necessity of understanding one's relationship on a complex level, acknowledging imperfection within the other person, and loving them within that imperfection. The episode thus works to deconstruct the shallower portrayals of queer relationships, in which the realities of living together and being in love are not addressed. The characters are portrayed within a more realistic understanding of queerness: they are simply two

people in love, and although Cecil and Carlos's love exists in a strange and fantastical setting, it is still portrayed with depth and realism.

Interactive Storytelling and the Voice of the Audience: *Welcome to Night Vale*

As an interactive platform, the Internet provides a unique space where creators and audiences may interact more freely and directly than in other contexts. Certain Internet stories encourage audience interaction, creating a sense of creative community among audiences and creators, and even allowing audiences to have a creative role in the story. Using the Internet as a storytelling platform allows for a certain blurring between reality and the fiction world. Many Internet stories have used the reality-based nature of Internet interactions to provoke "initial confusion [among the audience] over whether or not the characters were real, which incited users to participate" in the story world (Christian 344). This type of storytelling experience promotes "dynamic community-building across multiple social media networks that…tend[s] to blur the line between the fictive and the real" (Gutiérrez 101), and it is exactly this blurring that allows for revolutionary forms of audience representation within the story.

As the audiences access these stories through the Internet, they have the ability to interact with the story just as they would with anything else online (they may post comments and video responses on YouTube, for example). As an interactive storytelling experience, episodic stories such as web series and podcasts provide various opportunities for audience members to participate in the "reality" of the story world: upon encouragement from the original creators of the web series, viewers will often "take the ball and run" with the story, notes Jay Bushman, producer of the popular web series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (Gutiérrez 110). Audience members may create their own characters, or even simply insert themselves into the story world

in the responses they create, and through this type of participation, their own creative works can "essentially become part of the canon" (Gutiérrez 101). Through these interactive, "immersive" Internet stories (Zaluczkowska 263), audiences of marginalized groups, such as the queer community, can participate in the story as real individuals, and can even contribute their own voices to the construction of the story itself.

This idea of audience participation and creativity is particularly significant concerning *Welcome to Night Vale,* as this podcast has grown to have such a massive cultural influence. In June 2013, *WTNV* became the #1 podcast on iTunes almost overnight, due to its queer content and progressive representation of queer characters (*Emerald City Comicon 2014: Welcome To Night Vale Panel*). The creators of the podcast make special efforts to make audience participation an integral part of the story and the overall experience of the podcast. The blurring between fiction and reality occurs in a way that specifically provides audiences with a creative voice. Given that the majority of the podcast's most avid fans are queer people, many of them queer youth, *WTNV's* inclinations toward audience participation take on new significance: these queer audiences have a platform through which their own creative voices may be heard, and they may actively participate in the narratives being produced about their own identities.

Since the first episode of the podcast, the creators have emphasized audience creativity and participation. Indeed, *Welcome to Night Vale* has absorbed audience participation and creativity into its very structure: most prominently, each episode of the podcast features a section called "The Weather," during which an original song from an independent musician is played in full for the audience to enjoy. Significantly, these creative contributions are always played in their authentic original form, rather than being censored by the producers. The storytelling form does not influence or limit their creative voices, and the audience thus has a platform to perform

their creative work authentically and gain a wider viewership as a result. At the end of each episode, the audience can find out more about the featured musician, and is encouraged to contribute their own original music and to interact with the creators: "Want to contribute your talents to the show? Just want to say hi? Email us at nightvale@commonplacebooks.com" (Fink). This information is repeated at the end of every episode, thus providing the audience with constant encouragement to take part and contribute their creative talents.

Certain specific episodes of the podcast utilize even greater levels of audience participation: the episode "Poetry Week," for example, featured several poems written and submitted by listeners of the podcast. The poems were presented as though they had been submitted by "citizens of Night Vale," who listen to the "radio show," but the characters that had submitted these poems were named after their real-life poets. In this sense, these real audience members were represented in the story world not just through fictional characters, but through their own creative work, and they were identified in the story world as their real selves. In this way, the audience members participate in the story world of Night Vale as themselves; their creative voices become a part of the canon, and their authentic selves populate the fictional world. Through these opportunities for interaction, then, the podcast emphasizes the blurring between fiction and reality, between audience member and character: when Cecil addresses the "listeners" of his radio show, he simultaneously addresses the characters who live in the town, and the audience who listens to the podcast. Audiences may see themselves as individuals in the story world, through their interaction within this fictional platform.

Further, the podcast as a storytelling form allows any audience member to contribute to the canon in more abstract and independent ways. Since the story is told entirely in an aural format, there is a lot of free reign concerning what the town of Night Vale looks like, and even

what the characters look like. The creators have made special efforts to avoid identifying most characters by appearance, allowing each audience member to identify them as any race, body type, or appearance. Even the appearance of the main character, Cecil, is ambiguous: he has only ever described himself as wearing a tie. Creator Joseph Fink has expressed that this open ended character conception is intentional: "[the show] has no visuals and intentionally has very few physical descriptions. We rarely describe people. It's just not really what's important in our show. And I think part of that is it allows for a huge amount of creativity on the part of [the listeners who create fanart]" (Johnston). This lack of concrete visuals has been described as "freeing" to the story world: every audience interpretation, or "headcanon," about the characters' appearances can be correct. The characters can thus exist as any race and every race; any body type and every body type. Many members of the Night Vale fan community have chosen to believe that every audience member's "headcanon" concerning the characters' appearances is canon, because there is no canonical evidence to prove that it is not (Red3blog). Audience members can create their own canonical ideas of the characters, and thus their own experience with the story contributes to, and in a way determines, the canon itself.

In a way, an interesting blurring occurs here between the roles of audience member and creator. The audience's experience and interpretation *is* the canon; the audience members' creative voices and works exist *within* the canon in the form of music and poetry. This kind of blurring seems to be something that the creators of *Welcome to Night Vale* and its fans alike have embraced. In more recent episodes of the podcast, the identity of the creator, Joseph Fink, has come into question. Fink usually starts off each episode with a short spiel containing news updates about merchandise, live shows, etc. However, on a few occasions, other members of the Night Vale team have recorded his opening announcements, always declaring, "This is Joseph

Fink, creator of Welcome to Night Vale." They all insist to be the real Joseph Fink in these segments: "for sure this time. It's me, everyone. …[I am] the only one. All others are lies and illusions" (Fink). Fans of the podcast have taken the joke still further, claiming Fink's identity as their own: a tumblr post with over two thousand reblogs instructs the reader to "reblog if you're the REAL Joseph Fink." Fans have added captions and tags to this post such as, "You are all fools, I am clearly the real Joseph Fink," "you lie, it's me, I'm the real one," and "We are all Joseph Fink" (thecompanionintraining). Fink's identity as "Creator of Welcome to Night Vale" thus blurs not only within the story world and among the other producers of the podcast, but into the members of the larger fan community, who have willingly, if jokingly, claimed Fink's identity as their own.

In certain other instances, fans of the show have taken on other roles in relation to the story world: not only do they act as creators and unique characters, but certain fans have also tackled the challenge of becoming both producer and character as one. In late 2013, one queer *WTNV* fan, Carlisle Robinson, worked to translate several episodes of the podcast into American Sign Language, dressed up as the character Cecil, and uploaded YouTube videos signing the episodes in character, so that people with hearing impairments could experience the story (*Welcome to Night Vale in ASL*). In this instance, telling the story through a platform such as the Internet allowed for fans to spread the story to wider audiences, in a medium that may be considered part of the canon, or at least a different form of the canon. Robinson's videos work to spread the queer narrative of *Welcome to Night Vale* to hearing impaired audiences, allowing more people in minority positions to experience the interactive nature of the story, as well as the realistic portrayals of queer characters. Through creative interactions such as these, queer audience members in particular take on the roles of the characters *and* the creators, and in the

ways they take part in *Welcome to Night Vale,* these audience members work to create and further their *own* narratives. The use of the Internet as a storytelling platform, combined with the podcast's invitations for audience creativity, allow queer audiences to participate in these more diverse representations of queer identity, constructing portrayals of queer people as real individuals, queer people with funny and strange stories, queer people who are not defined only by their queerness.

The Diversity of the Queer Experience

In their construction, these queer narratives of the Internet thus work to emphasize diversity within the queer community, inciting audiences to understand and relate to these characters on multiple levels. Rather than constructing these queer characters with the one trait of "queer," *Welcome to Night Vale* and *The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal* create queer characters that are diverse in interests, personalities, and racial/cultural backgrounds. Significantly, though most mass-produced works of fiction gravitate towards representing queer characters as white (the "default" race), both of these Internet stories feature queer men of color: Amal, who is Indian-American, and Carlos, whose only physical descriptor (apart from his "perfect and beautiful hair," of course) is that he is dark-skinned (Fink). Not only do these narratives feature realistic queer romances and queer main characters, they also prominently feature queer people of color *as* main characters. Such representations acknowledge and actively represent the diversity within the queer community: rather than defining such characters only by their queerness, these stories work to demonstrate how multiple identities—cultural, racial, and sexual—can all work in tandem in an individual's life. Such representations allow for more diverse audiences to see their own identities and experiences reflected in fiction, paving the way

for wider audiences to relate to these characters and understand their experiences as real, significant, and valuable.

Further, both of these narrative forms allow for audiences to attach their own identities to the characters as they experience the story. As discussed previously, the comic form in <*Epic* allows audiences to "not just observe" the characters, but "become" them, in the words of comics theorist Scott McCloud (McCloud 36). Interestingly, *Welcome to Night Vale'*s complete *lack* of visuals allows audiences to "become" the characters in a different way. The characters' physical characteristics are seldom mentioned, nor are their cultural backgrounds discussed. The audience thus has the freedom to imagine the characters as having any body type or belonging to any race or culture, and can create their own images of these characters to share online. Hundreds of *WTNV* fans have created art imagining Cecil as any race, and many fans have created images of the character Dana, Cecil's intern, wearing a hijab. *Welcome to Night Vale's* interactive structures not only allow audiences to have individual creative voices within the story; they also invite audiences to create and share their own visual interpretations of

Fanart of Dana, drawn by tumblr user partially-stars

the characters, and such open-ended physical descriptions allow for a wide variety of racial and cultural identities to be represented within the audience's experience of the story. Significantly, it is this interactive platform that allows for such diversity in the story to be shared; the audience's ability to participate in this story world and influence how the characters are constructed encourages audiences to *create* this diversity actively, to be constantly aware that the stories and experiences of *all* characters are interesting and valuable, no matter what their identities are.

In these storytelling forms, then, audiences are able to attach their own experiences and their own identities to these characters, as well as understand other experiences and identities as valuable and important. This is particularly significant in encouraging more thoughtful understandings of queer individuals. It is through these storytelling forms and interactive narratives that the audience can place their own identities and experiences in these characters, blurring the line between character and audience. These stories are constructed to encourage the audience member to understand these characters as being *just* as complex and interesting as themselves, and their experiences and stories just as valid and worth sharing.

Conclusion

The Internet thus provides a space where queer narratives such as *Welcome to Night Vale* and *The Less than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal* may flourish: without the censorship and structural rules of queer representation in mass-produced fiction, Internet storytellers may create narratives that feature queer main characters, representing their experiences not through simple stereotypes, but through complex, meaningful, and valuable stories. Further, through this platform, creators and their audiences are able to interact more directly, allowing audience members to participate in these stories and add their own creative voices to these representations, which is particularly significant in that it provides queer audience members with the opportunity to shape and influence their own representations in fiction.

Through the Internet, new storytelling forms such as the webcomic and the podcast can have a vast influence, drawing audiences in through abstract storytelling techniques that allow readers to relate more easily to the characters. The comic form encourages audiences to relate themselves to the comic character, while the entirely-aural podcast form encourages audiences to

attach a multitude of appearances and cultural identities to these characters. These storytelling forms also provide a more racially and culturally diverse representation of queer characters, through which audiences may understand all experiences as valuable. Such stories as these pave the way for more considerate minority representations in fiction and respectful interactions with marginalized communities, such as the queer community. The incredible influences that these Internet narratives have had on queer and non-queer audiences alike demonstrate the necessity for complex, realistic queer narratives, shared through a variety of storytelling forms and platforms and accessible to wide audiences.

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