

## Introduction

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# Introduction: Remixing the Classics

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**ABSTRACT** Drawing on the findings of the Remixing the Classics research network, this introduction highlights the importance of both digital culture and classic literature to adaptation studies today. It starts with a historiographical account of digital media's impact on adaptive creativity and adaptation studies, particularly in light of twenty-first-century franchise culture and transmedia storytelling. It then makes a case for the continued relevance of classic literature to these fields, despite its decreased prominence within adaptation studies and its near-invisibility in transmedia studies. That case is grounded in three arguments: the continued centrality of these texts in compulsory education, the potential for radical adaptations to articulate progressive political engagements through canonical works, and the special ability of repeatedly adapted literature to illuminate cultural change. The introduction finishes with a summary of the issue's contents and an assertion of the artistic, pedagogical, and political significance of new media to old stories and old stories to new media.

**KEYWORDS:** *digital, new media, canon, adaptation, remix, classic literature*

This special issue explores the meeting point between classic literature and digital culture, examining how and why adaptors have drawn on digital tools to reimagine older and often canonical texts. It emerged out of a year-long project, called 'Remixing the Classics', which brought academics, creative practitioners, and teachers together to consider the following question: what do digital technologies bring—artistically, pedagogically, politically—to the re-telling of old stories? Speakers at the Remixing the Classics meetings discussed a wide range of media and events, including videogames, web series, hackathons, augmented reality, digital escape rooms, and interactive fiction. They also explored questions concerning accessibility, inclusivity, publishing, funding, sustainability, and preservation, which are not unique to digital adaptations but that often manifest in new ways.<sup>1</sup> These conversations were at the very least inflected, and often explicitly shaped, by the Covid-19 pandemic and the way it accelerated digital innovation within the arts. The fact that all but one of the Remixing the Classics events took place online was a further example of how Covid-19 redefined the working practices of everyday life.

## MAPPING DIGITAL ADAPTATION STUDIES

The pandemic may have intensified discussions about digital creativity, adaptation, and the arts, but it certainly did not inaugurate them. As scholars of adaptation know

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very well, every new medium—whether photography, radio, film, television, or digital media—gives rise to new creative possibilities. In her classic study, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), Janet H. Murray explores what she considers to be the central affordances of digital media, including immersion, agency, and transformation, by which she means the ability to shift quickly from one character or environment to another. Murray frequently draws on classic literature to demonstrate parallels between past modes of storytelling and the digital present and future. The imaginative, collaborative games of the Brontë children, she suggests, bear similarities to open-ended electronic worlds like *Myst* (Murray 154–60). The ‘community of oral bards’ that created the *Odyssey* offers a precursor to iterative, ‘multiform’ storytelling online (174, 178). The time is ripe, Murray argues, for a ‘digital Homer ... who combines literary ambition, a connection with a wide audience, and computational expertise’ to realize the full potential of electronic fiction (192).

While Murray looks to older, canonized texts as a way of framing what late 1990s digital creativity might become, she is less interested in how these technologies could be used to represent classic stories themselves. In the years that followed her study, experiments in born-digital storytelling did proliferate, as did adaptation across these new and evolving media. Thomas Leitch has referred to this period as ‘Adaptation Studies 2.0’, a period in which scholars became ‘more emphatic in their rejection of fidelity criticism and medium specificity’, and Kamilla Elliott has demonstrated in quantitative terms how the field ‘expanded exponentially’ in these years (Leitch, *Oxford Handbook* 5; Elliott 1). Elliott attributes this phenomenon in part ‘to the rise of new media’, which alongside the growth of globalization, media franchising, and ‘postmodern pluralism’ helped establish a creative landscape in which remixing was at once easier to achieve and increasingly desired among audiences (6–7).

It is unsurprising, then, that when Linda Hutcheon reissued her influential *A Theory of Adaptation* in 2013, she began by considering the impact of digital media on the field since the book’s first publication. Was the current ‘shift’ in adaptation practices—characterized by a proliferation of platforms, more involvement from fan communities, new creative forms, and greater slippage between creation and reception—‘one of degree or, more radically, of kind?’ (Hutcheon with O’Flynn xix). In the Epilogue, Siobhan O’Flynn outlined the effects that ‘the social web’ was having on multimedia storytelling, particularly in terms of commercial franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The Hunger Games*, and the way fan activity was destabilizing long-held assumptions about authorship and copyright (179). Shifts in communication structures were producing shifts in power structures, with audiences turning into authors, advertisers, and newly mappable markets all at once.

These developments also led to debates about the relationship between adaptation and transmedia storytelling, a term Henry Jenkins coined to refer to commercial entertainment that spreads ‘across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole’ (‘Transmedia Storytelling’; *Convergence Culture* 97–8). Adaptation scholars happily accepted transmedia into their ever-growing understanding of adaptive creativity, particularly as the field entered a ‘3.0’ phase defined by ‘an embrace of digital technologies’ (Leitch, *Oxford Handbook* 5). In 2013, the same year that Hutcheon’s revised *A Theory of Adaptation* came out,

this journal published a special issue on ‘Adaptation, Transmedia Storytelling, and Participatory Culture’, edited by Eckart Voigts and Pascal Nicklas. Shortly after, Kylie Mirmohamadi (2014) and Stephen O’Neill (2014) explored the intersections between classic literature and internet culture in their respective studies of Austen fanfiction and Shakespeare on YouTube, while Jennifer Camden and Kate Faber Oestreich (2018) examined the rise of multi-platform web series inspired by the novels of Austen and Shelley. For adaptation scholars interested in what happens to classic stories when artists and audiences reimagine them online, work in transmedia studies has been of obvious significance.

Transmedia scholars, however, have been less inclined to align themselves with adaptation studies. Most outspoken about this has been Jenkins himself, who argued in 2009 that while adaptation ‘reproduces the original narrative with minimum changes into a new medium and is essentially redundant to the original work’, transmedia ‘expands our understanding of the original by introducing new elements into the fiction’ (‘Revenge’). For Jenkins, adaptation represented an essentially conservative, world-preserving mode of creativity, primarily interested in ‘high art’ and the fidelity of its offshoots, whereas transmedia involved a much more radical, world-building kind of storytelling, focused on popular culture. Jenkins’ views show how even though the boundaries of what constitutes adaptive creativity have expanded significantly within adaptation studies itself, in wider culture, and even in neighbouring academic disciplines, expectations about what counts as an adaptation remain narrower.

As is so often the case in academia, the debate about whether transmedia storytelling constitutes adaptation has ultimately proved one that hinges on terminology. Within transmedia studies, Christy Dena has highlighted how expansive the practice of adaptation can be, involving a ‘meaning-making process’ that results in creative works that are far from ‘simple’, ‘redundant’ retellings (‘Transmedia Practice’ 145–6; ‘Transmedia Adaptation’ 201). In response, Jenkins has subsequently conceded that ‘those of us who study transmedia (and fan fiction) and those who study adaptation are asking a related set of questions, though as of now we are often talking past each other’ (‘Adaptation, Extension’). By setting aside ‘terminological and methodological assumptions’ and resisting the impulse to ‘underestimate the materials the other [discipline] is studying’, scholars of transmedia might find they have more in common with adaptation studies than they initially thought (‘Transmedia Practice’ 145–6; ‘Transmedia Adaptation’ 201). Indeed, in skimming the tables of contents of *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies* and *The Routledge Companion to Adaptation*, both published in 2018, one finds multiple essays on media change and participatory culture that would be at home in either volume.

What one does not find, however, is much interest in older, classic texts in *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, which like the wider field it represents focuses primarily on contemporary, commercial media franchises. Unsurprisingly, *The Routledge Companion to Adaptation* does include chapters on Dickens, Goethe, Hugo, and Shakespeare, but perhaps not as many as someone outside the field might expect. Like *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, published in 2017, the Routledge collection includes chapters across media, genre, time periods, and authors, reflecting how much the field has grown since its initial focus on ‘great’ literature on film. This is undoubtedly a

good thing: it shows how older, culturally loaded distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art have steadily faded away, at least within adaptation studies, and furthermore how central the idea of adaptation as a cultural process—rather than a specific kind of aesthetic product—has become to the field. Adaptation studies today belongs as much to cultural studies and media studies as it does to English and film.

While none of these developments is solely the result of digital change, neither is it irrespective of it. As Johannes Fehrle argues in *Adaptation in the Age of Media Convergence* (2020), ‘the rise of digital media ... quite possibly constitutes the single most important development in the material we study as adaptation and (trans)media scholars since the advent of film and photography in the 19th century’ (10). Like the Routledge and Oxford companions, as well as Voigts and Nikolas’ special issue, Fehrle and Werner Schäfke-Zell’s collection considers newer, popular texts alongside older, classic ones. In doing so, it powerfully registers the impact digital, participatory culture is having on storytelling across media and art forms. Once again, the central issue is the process (or, more accurately, the complex and multiple processes) that shape how art is conceptualized, created, disseminated, received, and, increasingly, reproduced and shared by audiences again. By looking at *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Star Wars*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Wolfenstein* through the shared lens of media convergence, their collection illustrates the levelling influence digital media has had on cultural production and consumption, as well as on adaptation studies itself.

#### WHY CLASSICS?

It may come as a surprise, then, that both the Remixing the Classics project and this special issue focus predominantly on digital adaptation of literary and dramatic classics, that nebulous and at times problematic category of art mired in debates about cultural value, institutional power structures, and the long shadow of empire. What constitutes a ‘classic’ is, of course, a highly contested matter. In this project, we have broadly understood the term to mean literature and drama historically celebrated as artistically and culturally significant, and therefore frequently taught in classrooms. Some may wonder why we have returned to this prescriptive set of texts, rather than continuing the important work of diversifying the field and releasing it from a particular canon’s grip. Three reasons have especially shaped our project: first, the fact that these texts remain central in compulsory education; second, the potential for radical adaptations to subvert expectations surrounding seemingly out-of-touch works; and third, the possibility that looking at continually reinterpreted texts can yield important insights into cultural change.

In practical terms, the first issue, education, is obviously the most important one. Even for people who question whether Austen, Dickens, Homer, or Shakespeare should continue to be taught, the fact remains that they are. A major imperative of the Remixing the Classics project was to work with teachers to learn about the challenges they face and the joys they have experienced when teaching older literature in the classroom. Unsurprisingly, many talked about the difficulties of engaging students in seemingly distant, even irrelevant stories. For Stefan Kucharczyk, a former primary school teacher, teaching digital creativity in tandem with classic literature gave him a way of ‘meeting young people where they’re at’ (Bradbury, Kucharczyk, and Sen).

Digital adaptations can provide powerful hooks into a set text, piquing interest and driving pleasure.

If this were the only thing that digital adaptations did—function as gimmicks that help students enjoy something they have to study in school—then that would arguably be enough. But discussions at the Remixing the Classics events, as well as the articles in this special issue, illustrate how digital adaptations can also facilitate critical engagements with texts that benefit classroom study. Fiona Morris, CEO of the UK digital arts organization The Space, spoke about how ‘interactivity is the big shift online’, and Elizabeth B. Hunter, a digital maker and academic, considered how videogames and immersive experiences can ‘collapse the spectator into enactor’, putting students into a character’s ‘subject position’ (Bartley, Morris, and Wisdom; Burn, Bushnell, and Hunter). Digital adaptations like social media-based web series can encourage students to talk back to the characters, creators, and gatekeepers of the books they are required to read, while virtual and augmented reality can place students within the fictional world and invite them to unpuzzle it from the inside out. Still, as much as teachers at Remixing the Classics events admired the creative potential of digital adaptations, they worried about the effects they might have on students’ exam results, given the conservative nature of UK examination boards.

The ‘read/write’ potential of digital tools and the culture they have created, which allows audiences to become creators themselves, is at once the most celebrated and lamented affordance of new media. But not all digital adaptations are interactive, just as not all analogue creativity is ‘read only’.<sup>2</sup> There are digital works that are meant solely for consumption, and low-fi ones designed for active participation. What almost all digital adaptations of classic texts do have in common, however, is a heightened engagement with multimodality, which Mark Dressman has defined as ‘the combination of multiple sensory and communicative modes, such as sight, sound, print, images, video, music, and so on ... to communicate a single, or at least a unified, message’. While Dressman acknowledges that ‘all communication is multimodal’, he also argues that ‘In the digital age, multimodality has become even more central’.

Multimodal literacy, in turn, refers to the idea that there are multiple forms of meaning-making and comprehension present in the world. Understanding language remains central to the navigation of contemporary life, but so does interpreting images, sounds, and other compositional forms. The importance of teaching multimodal literacy to students profoundly shaped by digital culture has become a growing focus among educational researchers, who recognize that ‘Children are constantly engaged in decoding the reality represented in the world around them’, including the different forms of reality conveyed through digital and social media (Berger and Zezulcova 65).

In adaptation studies, scholars such as Leitch and Kyle Meikle have advocated for the field’s particular suitability to help students ‘critically read and write with and across varied symbol systems’ and to analyse ‘the incessant processes of rereading and re-writing’ that underpin all forms of semiotics (Leitch, ‘Adaptation Studies’ 76; Meikle 554). Digital adaptations create an opportunity to teach classic texts alongside contemporary media, and in doing so to help students decipher past and present at the same time. If looking at a TikTok parody of *Beowulf*, for instance, prompts a student to think harder about the poem *and* about TikTok, then all the better.

Our second reason for focusing on classic literature and drama comes from a desire to probe the progressive, even radical potential of these texts. Sometimes that potential arises from the subversive purposes to which adaptors put this writing—that is, it is externally created—while at other times it comes from the texts themselves. Amrita Sen, a Shakespeare scholar at the University of Calcutta, spoke at a *Remixing the Classics* event about the political utility of canonical writers, who become a ‘means to avoid censure and to talk about provocative themes and issues that would otherwise not be allowed’, especially for ‘marginalized communities within post-independence nations’ (Bradbury, Kucharczyk, and Sen). Lucy Askew, CEO of Creation Theatre in the UK, highlighted the fact that classic texts are often out of copyright, meaning that they are free to use and that adaptors can work with them in more daring ways than are typically possible with more recent, IP-controlled works (Askew, Day, Ratnaraja, and Yarker).

The experimental and political force of adaptation has long been a focus of academic research, so, in this sense, any subversive commentaries that digital adaptations might offer are simply part of an ongoing history. What is arguably newer, however, is the possibility that smaller scale, amateur adaptations might contribute in meaningful, globally visible ways to the politicization of the classics. Sen calls for digital adaptors of classic texts to be ‘brave enough’ to follow in the paths of radical theatre and cinema and to use these works to pose serious challenges to establishment values (Bradbury, Kucharczyk, and Sen). It is true that many digital adaptations lack a clear political thrust: as Voigts argues, ‘the playful hedonism’ of internet memes and mashups ‘is primarily and essentially recreational and apolitical’ (‘Memes’ 298). They are frequently also celebratory and even conservative in their views on the fundamental value of the classics, even when their tone is irreverent and parodical. As Marie-Laure Ryan observes, ‘A large part of fan activity ... is devoted to protecting the canon’ (531). An enthusiastic love for the material and a commitment to community identity can preclude more political re-readings.

But amidst the wide and unruly body of digital adaptations circulating through the internet, significant political engagements can be found. In his study of Shakespeare-oriented web series, Douglas Lanier notes how many of these adaptations include ‘characters who visibly stand outside the conventional hetero- and ethnonormative categories that governed earlier teen Shakespeare adaptations’ (200). Queer-positive, inclusive representation is a frequent feature of teen-created web series, and while such imperatives can be seen in some film and television adaptations that came before them, they are registering increasingly powerfully in commercial projects created in web series’ wake. This is not to say that the amateur web series is the direct precursor to diverse casting in popular shows like *Dickinson* (2019–21) and *Bridgerton* (2021–) (not quite an Austen adaptation, but also not entirely *not* one). Rather, it is to suggest that the born-digital, grassroots creativity of young millennials and early Gen Z reflects the social values they have come to champion, and that these values have in turn started to influence the kinds of big-budget adaptations that commercial production companies are willing to back.

Finally, our third and most speculative reason for focusing on classic literature and drama is the possibility that there is special value in looking at adaptations of texts that have often, even continuously, been adapted. That history of adaptation offers a genealogy of cultural influence and change as one generation’s hero, for instance, turns



into another generation's villain (Prospero, Huck Finn, Mr Rochester, even Mr Darcy). If one definition of a 'classic' is a story that gets told over and over again, then it is worth pausing with each new iteration to consider how the story is changing and what this reveals about the society that made it. Classics, in this sense, become useful cultural barometers, making visible social, political, and technological concerns that can become naturalized and difficult to see.

One current concern that emerges from many digital adaptations of classic literature is unease about the integrity of the self in a globally distributed, evermore 'virtual' world. At one Remixing the Classics event, the classics scholar Emma Cole suggested that texts that survive in fragments—for instance, many Greek and Roman works—provide particularly useful material for digital adaptors (Askew, Cole, and Pullinger). Part of this is because gaps in the story, ready for filling, have always benefited adaptors, irrespective of medium. But perhaps it is also because of very live concerns in the twenty-first century about fragmentation, whether of society, notions of truth, or the different forms of reality they create.

Indeed, as we prepare this special issue, anxieties about artificial intelligence are shaping public debates about the future of politics, journalism, critical thinking, and art. Though the Remixing the Classics events took place before the debut of Open AI's ChatGPT and Google's Bard (itself a vague Shakespearean reference), in early 2022 we did experiment with WOMBO Dream AI art generator to create our publicity materials. Typing 'digital william shakespeare jane austen charles dickens' into the tool produced the surreal image below: part bearded sage, part cerebral forehead, part vivid palette, part ghost (Fig. 1). It remains an apt icon for digital responses to classic literature, whether human or otherwise, in its yoking together of fragments to form an unsmooth whole. Predictably familiar and yet evocatively strange, it gestures towards a future of adaptation in which human and digital entanglement becomes the subject, method, and outcome of critical enquiry all at once.

## THE CURRENT ISSUE

This special issue explores how the tools, platforms, constraints, and values of digital culture are shaping audiences' encounters with classic literature and drama. Many of its articles and reviews focus on specific classic texts in particular digital formats, while others look at the wider context of adaptation in a digital age and its impact on cultural production more generally. Kamilla Elliott's opening article considers how a move towards shorter-form, 'snackable' literature on platforms like Instagram and Yonder is simultaneously making reading more accessible and, potentially, more addictive. Chris Louttit, in turn, explores how the long-form novels of Dickens, which have not always fared well online, can provide rich source material for web series adaptors committed to LGBTQIA+ representation. The discovery of unexpectedly progressive potential in classic texts also informs Benjamin Broadribb's article, which investigates how Kafka's *Metamorphoses* became a parable for community and inclusion in a Covid-era adaptation on Zoom.

Kate Faber Oestreich moves the discussion in a different direction, examining how the formal features of transmedia web series can push against audience immersion, especially as projects age and opportunities for interaction disappear. Eckart Voigts





Figure 1. The Remixing the Classics logo, created with WOMBO Dream AI art generator.

and Heebon Park-Finch continue by looking at the media networks that shape global digital culture, focusing on how *Medea* has been repackaged, exploited, and at other times erased in the *Dr Foster* television franchise. Justin Smith and Lucy Hobbs likewise consider how digital platforms redefine the boundaries of classic texts in an analysis of their genetic edition of *Middlemarch*, which includes both George Eliot's text and Andrew Davies' 1994 television adaptation. Finally, Christina Wilkins puts forward a new theoretical model for adaptation, exploring how digital duplication in the television show *Westworld* invites audiences to rethink originality, authenticity, and selfhood in the twenty-first century. Together, these articles show how digital culture expands the creative possibilities of classic texts while also introducing new limitations, helping to democratize artistic experience even as it erects new barriers.

The special issue then moves into a series of review articles that explore specific texts and genres. John Sanders, a member of the Remixing the Classics team, offers an analytical overview of a database he has created that catalogues over 150 videogames based on classic literature and drama. Rebecca Bushnell, Elizabeth B. Hunter, and Andrew Burn engage in a roundtable conversation about their academic, pedagogical, and creative investigations into videogame adaptations of Shakespeare and other canonical drama. Lin Young moves the conversation from early modern plays to nineteenth-century novels, examining how the Dracula Daily project used Stoker's epistolary structure to deliver the novel's narrative in emailed segments according to its fictional timeline. Emma Paton, in turn, looks at the way a live Zoom re-telling of *Romeo and Juliet* used that platform as both a practical and thematic resource in the latter stages of the pandemic. Finally, Antonija Primorac reviews two academic studies of transmedia creativity in the nineteenth century, illustrating how the impulse to tell stories across media is far from a modern invention.

As is so often the case with special issues and edited collections, our combined exploration of digital adaptations and the classics does not have a single, uniform argument. Many of our authors focus on the encouraging potential of digital media to make classic texts more accessible and politically progressive for diverse audiences, but others highlight how digital platforms can facilitate disempowering and even damaging encounters between audiences and texts. Both things, of course, are true, and both extend far beyond the specific question of the role of classic literature and drama in the world today. What the contributions to this special issue do all show, however, is the relevance of new media to old stories, and old stories to new media. Whether considered artistically, pedagogically, or politically, the two offer a powerful model for cultural innovation, engagement, and change.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Recordings of Remixing the Classics events, as well as further information about the project, can be found at <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/shakespeare/remixingtheclassics.aspx>. Remixing the Classics was funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council and led by Deborah Cartmell, Beth Sharrock, and myself. We are grateful to the Association of Adaptation Studies for its support and especially to Julie Grossman and Kamilla Elliott, who were co-presidents of the Association during the project period.

<sup>2</sup>Lawrence Lessig popularized the notion of read/write versus read-only culture in his book *Remix* (2009).

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