The Bowery Boys: Podcasting serial historiography within and through participatory culture

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Abstract:

This article reads the non-fiction podcast *The Bowery Boys: New York City History* (2007-) as a significant example of the connection between the serial poetics and the participatory potentials of podcasts. It places the podcast in the context of 'participatory culture' (Jenkins) and argues that its serial aesthetics and longevity are crucial to its popular appeal. The podcast's transformation into an increasingly professionalized franchise that uses a variety of digital convergence tools to engage with its loyal, active audience is related to its serial strategies and transmedial proliferation. Through case studies of episodes that highlight and incorporate the podcast's interaction with its audience, this article outlines different forms and ways of participation in podcasting.

Keywords: seriality, participatory culture, digital convergence, podcast formalization, transmedial proliferation

Every other week, the greeting 'Hey, it's the Bowery Boys!' opens a new episode of the non-fiction podcast *The Bowery Boys: New York City History.* Since 2007, hosts Greg Young and Tom Meyers have been welcoming listeners to their show about the events, structures, and people that make up New York's cultural history from the Dutch colonial era to the present day. In their podcast, Young and Meyers address their listeners (and each other) in a conversational, pun-laden manner and cover topics that range from rather obvious landmarks like the Empire State Building and events like the Consolidation of New York City in 1898 to rather curious phenomena like New York Pizza, desserts, or, long before he became president, New York-native Donald Trump. What started off as a rather leisurely amateur project by two friends has become, over the course of more than 13 years, a small but increasingly professionalized media enterprise that allows its two hosts to make a living

out of their former hobby. This development echoes many similar podcasts' trajectory from hobby project to business operation and exemplifies what John L. Sullivan has described as 'a broader trend in podcasting: the slow transformation of an amateur medium into a new vehicle for commercial media content' (35). While several aspects of the *Bowery Boys* podcast are specific to the show, many others can also be related to other podcasts – both corporate-driven as well as more personal ones. Created in the context of an emerging convergence medium in the late 2000s, *The Bowery Boys* has become a small transmedia franchise that by now includes a Patreon-funded podcast with a new episode every two weeks that is accompanied by, among others, a website, a social media presence, print publications, live shows, and walking tours.

This article approaches *The Bowery Boy*s podcast through an analysis of its serial and transmedial aesthetics and argues that the narrative form of the show creates a specific kind of seriality which is endemic to this podcast. I argue that *The Bowery Boys* is a significant example of the connection between the serial poetics and the participatory potentials of podcasting in the context of a transmedia franchise within contemporary convergence culture. Through examples from the show's catalog as well as two case studies of recent episodes that actively invite and feature audience engagement, I will illustrate this connection as well as demonstrate how the show exemplifies the specific relationship between producers and consumers in 21st popular convergence culture in general and serial podcasts in particular.

Podcasting and Participatory Culture

Within the current multimedia landscape of digital convergence culture, the podcast has emerged as a cultural form that combines digital audio content with the affordances of 21st century participatory culture. Among others, podcasts can take the form of conversations, interviews, lectures, or scripted fictional and non-fictional narratives that are consumed via convergence technology such as computers and smartphones. While the pre-recorded nature of each individual episode may seem rather less interactive on the surface, the relative ease of access, the serial release structure, and the specific way of listening to actively selected monologues, conversations, or interviews still manages to create a distinctly personal and intimate relationship between the audio text and its consumer (Yeates 226).[1] Llinares et al. describe this relationship in terms of 'a deeply sonorous intimacy' that emerges out of the active selection and individual consumption of (often niche) content on personal digital devices such as car audio or smartphones, the latter frequently combined with ear buds (2). In addition, Llinares et al. describe podcasts in the context of a 'new aural culture' marked by the embeddedness of podcasts in contemporary digital culture (4). This claim is crucial insofar as this new form of aural culture did not develop independently, but as an integrated part of a larger transformation of the media landscape that has taken place since the early years of the 21st century. The very idea of podcasting is intricately linked to an increasing availability of soft- and hardware to produce and distribute media texts and the related emergence of individualized and interactive

digital devices, including portable audio players and smartphones.[2] These developments are part of a fundamental transformation of the media economy in the early 21st century and have led, among other developments, to an increasing reliance on the 'active' consumption of media texts. Ranging from film and music to television and podcasts, this kind of consumption revolves around the use of digital aggregator platforms like iTunes and Netflix which allow consumers to actively select, purchase, and consume content in the form of downloads or streams.

Podcasting can thus be seen as an important example of convergence culture (Jenkins, cf. Llinares et al. 3). For Henry Jenkins, convergence is 'the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search for the kinds of entertainment experiences they want' (2). The most obvious example of convergence is the increasingly digital consumption of media texts, from television to music to film, a process that goes hand in hand with an increasingly integrated media experience. This is also present in the production, distribution, and consumption of podcasts, which always already transcend their basic aural form through their integration with digital technology like audio players and smartphones and their more or less pronounced interaction and linkage with websites and other forms of interactive (digital) culture. Already the name 'podcast' discloses – in a curiously branded fashion, as Yeates points out – its origin in early 2000s convergence culture: Starting off from the Apple iPod and related digital players of audio content, podcasts have always been integrated with internet media technology and consumption. From the start, listening to podcasts required both an audio device like the iPod and software (often enough on a different device, for instance a desktop computer), while the consumption of a podcast typically presupposed the selection, download, and transfer of a given audio file to said iPod. Therefore, with its integration of various steps of media consumption, this form of digital culture was readymade for all kinds of expansion typical of convergence culture.

A concept closely related to convergence culture is Jenkins' idea of participatory culture. According to Jenkins, participatory culture is marked by the fact 'that fans and consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content' (331). On the surface, the rather closed nature of a pre-recorded episode of audio content typical of podcasts might seem to contradict this claim. However, since podcasts have always been integrated with processes of convergence culture, both from a technological as well as cultural and economic point of view, the position of podcasts within the larger media landscape that has emerged in the 21st century makes it almost quintessentially participatory – even though the degree of actual engagement varies considerably.

Next to the active technological part played by the listener in consuming a given episode and the possibilities to enhance the listening experience through links to images and other content, basic modes of engagement involve, among others, reviewing and rating of shows on aggregator websites and apps, commenting on accompanying websites and blogs, as well as proliferating awareness through liking and sharing of posts related to the

podcasts on social media platforms. This interaction is often actively encouraged and requested by the hosts; however, podcasting's intricate relation to convergence culture continuously prepares and maybe even presupposes consumers to engage in this manner. Seen from this perspective, podcasts urge their listeners to do more with the text than listening, just as much as video platforms such as YouTube already presuppose audience engagement beyond pure watching. Put abstractly, this claim borders on truisms of digital culture and social media, but a closer look at more specific instances discloses significant ways how these forms of audience engagement actually become reality. The case study of *The Bowery Boys* shows how medially contingent ways of engagement connect to the hosts' active incentivizing of audience participation and the podcast's textual and serial form to encourage and facilitate audience interaction.

One crucial claim relating to Jenkins' notion of 'participatory culture' is the idea that 'the relations between producers and consumers are breaking down as consumers seek to act upon the invitation to participate in the life of the franchises' (20). Writing about similar developments in recent serial television, Jason Mittell claims that:

> [t]he consumer and creative practices of fan culture that cultural studies scholars embraced as subcultural phenomena in the 1990s have become more widely distributed and participated in with the distribution means of the Internet, making active audience behavior even more of a mainstream practice. (*Complex TV* 35-36)

Podcasts are emblematic for elements of this trend through their various social media opportunities for fans to engage with the podcast. However, and certainly different from a cost-intensive, historically mass-addressed industry such as television, a podcast like *The Bowery Boys* also exemplifies how the very binary opposition between producer and consumer has become an increasingly fragile concept.[3] Functional producer-consumer relations are often enough firmly in place, while the normative top-down relationship traditionally assumed between corporate producers and 'subversive' consumers simply does not apply here (cf. Kelleter, 'Theory of Seriality' 102). Therefore, *The Bowery Boys* is yet another example for less binary and less vertically stratified relations between producers and consumers of popular culture and the participatory potentials that follow from this.

The Bowery Boys and Podcast Formalization

The Bowery Boys started off in 2007 as a small project by two college friends interested in New York History and the potentials of podcasting. After its – long-lost and only recently re-released to Patreon – first episode, the podcast soon found its rhythm through subsequent releases of new episodes, first on a monthly, soon after on a more frequent – though not completely regular – basis. In the context of participatory culture, the podcast's serial aesthetics and longevity are crucial to its popular appeal. Over the last 13 years, the podcast has become an increasingly professionalized transmedia franchise that engages with its

loyal, active audience through a variety of participatory tools. Within the podcast itself, phatic phrases like 'dear listener' and 'you' address the listener ('Consolidation!'), while the accompanying website boweryboyshistory.com provides the audience with additional information in the form of explanatory blogposts and images for every episode of the podcast, as well as stand-alone posts on episodes and elements of New York City history.

As a standard that has developed over the last 15 years, the vast majority of podcasts can be downloaded for free and there is little indication that this will change. Therefore, creators have to come up with alternative ways to make money. Commercial breaks, often narrated by the given hosts themselves, have become a common form of income, thereby creating a curious recurrence of monetization schemes established in radio and broadcast television in the 20th century. Initially, *The Bowery Boys* was no exception to this rule, as the podcast's economic potential exhausted itself in commercial messages for eurocheapo.com, a travel website for budget hotels in Europe (and eventually New York as well). This website, however, was not a large corporate interest but a small business owned by Meyers and the commercial was narrated by his sister. Therefore, while economic motives certainly played a role from day one, this early iteration can hardly be classified as a professional ad-supported enterprise. According to Meyers, this changed around 2014 when the podcast was approached by Stitcher and was able to integrate actual third-party commercials into the program ('Interview'). Typical for convergence culture texts geared towards niche audiences, these ads target digital-friendly consumers and include, among other things, website-based companies like Blue Apron, Audible, and Casper Mattresses. Usually, through dedicated coupon codes, podcast listeners can purchase items and services from these websites at a discount.

This development, both in terms of quality as well as revenue, echoes precisely what Sullivan describes in terms of 'formalisation' (36). For Sullivan, podcasting is changing due to the entry of big commercial players and the increased ability of amateur podcasters to turn a profit and produce an increasingly professional product (36). While *The Bowery Boys* can be read precisely in this context, looking at its specific direction is helpful in getting a better idea of what exactly is at stake here. Integrating niche appeal and mass potential in a way typical for 'narrowcasting' convergence formats, the podcast has developed into a small business that retains its independent status while providing its creators with the possibility to quit their day jobs. However, while the use of convergence media and the rather traditional integration of targeted advertising is hardly indicative of a sea change in media production and consumption, the further development of *The Bowery Boys* displays a much more interactive and participatory trajectory typical for the kind of internet commonly labeled as Web 2.0. In addition to these rather traditional tools, the producers also engage with listeners on social media like Facebook (17,900 subscribers), Instagram (12,300), and Twitter (14.300), where they announce new episodes, publish auxiliary posts, and advertise additional activities. Among these paratextual proliferations of the podcast are history-themed walking tours offered by the franchise ('Bowery Boys Walks') as well as live events

where Tom Meyers and Greg Young appear and record occasional episodes in front of a live audience.

Soon after the more professionalized acquisition of advertisements, and similar to other producers during the 'second age of podcasting' (Bonini in Sullivan 40), Meyers and Young began to integrate a second, but considerably different, source of income into the mix. Patreon, a membership platform and subscription service founded in 2013, became the podcast's second monetization pillar. This mixture is significant insofar as it mixes the indirect payment through commercials with the direct payment through a monthly subscription fee – a monetizing strategy that presupposes a considerably different kind of audience engagement to work. As is typical for this website, listeners can choose from different tiers, and everything above $3 comes with additional benefits. These range from the 'New Amsterdam Level' ($3/month) and the possibility to listen to additional podcast episodes (see below) to the 'Gilded Age Level' ($10/month), which comes with even more exclusive podcast content, a mentioning in the show, as well as invitations to patron-only events, to the 'Empire State Level' ($100/month) that gives the patron a 'once-a-year personal sponsorship or dedication message' ('The Bowery Boys: New York City History'). As of March 2021, almost 1,300 Patrons support the podcast on Patreon, thus generating a monthly revenue of $5,262 (before deductions) for the producers ('Patreon'). In their own words, this additional revenue enables both of them to focus full-time on the podcast and increase the frequency of the podcast to a release schedule with a new episode every other week ('The Bowery Boys: New York City History'). Moreover, both the website as well as the Patreon member area feature polls on a regular basis where listeners can vote on upcoming topics and during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, with New York City in lockdown and listeners all over the world at home, the podcast was released on a weekly basis and listeners were asked to share their 'At Home in New York' stories, thus rewarding *and* incorporating the active audience engagement of their listeners in times of crisis (see below).

Considered as a whole, it becomes apparent how the podcast's generation of additional revenue through transmedial formalization both requires and creates additional *and* more direct relations between itself and its listeners. Its 'monetizing paratexts' create the double effect of facilitating direct audience interaction at the same time that they make 'it possible for listeners to recognize themselves and others as listeners,' thus encouraging further engagement with the podcast (Euritt 35).

Podcasting Seriality and Serial Historiography

The podcast's participatory potential is directly related to its proliferation, which, in turn, is as much the outcome of economic potentials and technological affordances as it is due to the podcast's serial form. Writing about serialized narratives, Frank Kelleter argues that 'commercial series tend to proliferate beyond the bounds of their original media and core texts' ('Theory of Seriality' 101). While the largely episodic narration of *The Bowery Boys* does not entirely fit into the kind of texts he has in mind, its serial development is highly

commensurate with the claims and observations Kelleter develops with respect to popular seriality. Beyond the aforementioned technological and economic elements, narratological elements are crucial to understanding the relationship between seriality and participatory culture evident in *The Bowery Boys* and other long-running podcasts. To date, *The Bowery Boys* has released 352 episodes. Since the show is a non-fiction podcast on historical topics rather than one that focuses on current events or news, this back catalog of episodes is growing into an increasingly large archive that listeners can access for a variety of reasons, including interest in a specific topic, interest in the general focus of the podcast, and interest generated from listening to another episode. The vast majority of the episodes feature both Meyer and Young and are original recordings, while they occasionally also release solo shows by Greg Young when Tom Meyers is unavailable. Given the increasingly large back catalog, the hosts have also recently begun to re-release newly edited versions of previous episodes to establish a weekly release schedule and give new listeners a chance to catch up.

Varying in length between 13 and 88 minutes, with the majority of episodes running between 40 and 60 minutes, each installment tackles a specific topic related to New York City history. These episodes, in turn, can be roughly grouped into 13 categories: events (e.g. blackouts, fires, world's fairs); periods (e.g. British New York); locations, neighborhoods, and boroughs (e.g. Governor's Island, The Bronx); landmarks and monuments (e.g. St. Patrick's Cathedral, Grant's Tomb); people (e.g. Peter Stuyvesant, Dorothy Parker); commercial venues (e.g. Apollo Theater, Macy's); sports franchises (e.g. New York Yankees); media history (e.g. television, film, radio and/in New York); transportation (e.g. flight, public transportation); institutions (e.g. New York City Police Department, New York Department of Sanitation); infrastructure (e.g. Croton Aqueduct); food (e.g. New York Pizza, New York Desserts); and episodes that are devoted to ghost stories and hoaxes related to New York City.

Beyond its general serial production and release structure in subsequent installments, the podcast's textual seriality is characterized by a mixture of episodic and more serialized forms. Most of the podcast is episodic, i.e. individual episodes in the series stand on their own and can be listened to individually. However, the podcast's text also features several explicitly serialized elements in which the content of subsequent episodes is related to and/or continues from one episode to the next. Among these are several two- or three-part episodes, such as two-parters on Coney Island and the Five Points or a three-part show on The Bronx. Occasionally, especially during summer runs, *The Bowery Boys* also produces mini-series devoted to larger topics that exceed an individual release, e.g. a trilogy on New York TV or the six episode 'New York Transportation Summer Mini-Series.' Another serialized element – and one of the most popular features of the show – is the annual Halloween episode. Every year since 2008, the podcast has released a special episode that typically features three to four stories about supernatural events and myths that supposedly happened in the city. Before COVID-19, Young and Meyers had even begun to record this episode in front of a live audience.

The significance of this serial structure is directly related to the podcast's audience appeal and engagement. Similar to other podcasts, the seriality of the show is not merely an effect of its release format (Sullivan 38, cf. Sterne et al.), but rather an integral part of its textual and contextual nature. In recent approaches to podcasting, critics like Maria Sulimma and Alyn Euritt have extensively referred to seriality as a crucial element of podcasting research. Following their cue, I approach *The Bowery Boys*' seriality through recent approaches to studying the narrative structures of television series (cf. Euritt 38). Writing about television series since the 1980s, Mittell has argued that after decades of a rather strict division between heavily serialized daytime soap operas and largely episodic prime time comedy and drama series, US television has become increasingly characterized by 'narrative complexity,' which he defines as 'a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration – not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance' ('Narrative Complexity' 32). While a direct transposition of this concept from the medium of television to podcasts is of course rather difficult, the notion of a 'shifting balance' between episodic and serial narrative forms is still relevant for an analysis of *The Bowery Boys* just as much as some of Mittell's ideas on the consequences of narratological features on audience engagement. With reference to such shows as *Lost*, *Veronica Mars,* and *The Sopranos*, Mittell argues that complex televisual narratives invite and foster audience engagement through their appeal to viewers to understand the narrative and maybe even by becoming immersed in the question *how* a given series was narrated ('Narrative Complexity' 37, cf. Brasch 43-80). Therefore, already on the level of narrative, cultural texts in general, and serialized narratives specifically, invite audience engagement irrespective of the producers' concrete intentions. On this basis, Mittell relates narrative complexity to convergence culture technologies and their appeal to 'participatory engagement' ('Narrative Complexity' 31). According to Mittell, complex narratives invite commenting on or discussing episodes on websites, thus making active forms of consumption an integral part of complex texts and their narrative dialectic between demanding and rewarding active audience engagement.[4]

Though slightly different, this kind of nexus between narration and engagement can also be identified with respect to *The Bowery Boys*. As a long-running series that by now comprises more than 350 episodes, new episodes of the podcast frequently allude to its back catalog, thus creating an increasingly complex feedback loop between individual episodes. While the haphazard historical sequence of events between individual episodes has never alluded to a linear or chronological narrative of New York City history, this nonlinear progression is a further reminder that, as Ruth Mayer has argued, seriality cannot be grasped in terms of 'chronological sequence, in the sense of a chain of past, present, and future, neatly aligned consecutive episodes or operations' (7). Rather, both 'material that marks transitional moments, breaks, or disruptions in the serial flow and "the looped" quality of serial phenomena' need to be considered (14). Thus, the increasingly complex feedback loop between individual episodes that stretches across the entire series is a crucial element of the show's seriality.

Another central feature of serial narratives is their narrative pattern of varying repetition. Kelleter identifies this basic element within the broader phenomenon of 'popular seriality,' through which he describes those mass-addressed, long-running, standardized texts in popular culture that depend on a dialectic of variation and repetition and consist of incremental elements in sequential order ('Five Ways' 7-12). Ranging from serial novels in the 19th century to contemporary television series and from comic books to movies, sequels, and remakes, these texts, and popular culture in general, are characterized by serial structures of sequence, continuation, and varying repetition (Kelleter 'Five Ways', cf. Groß n.p.). All of these serial principles are also relevant in podcasting. Read within the context of popular seriality, podcasts like *The Bowery Boys* exhibit several instances of varying repetition relevant for its function in popular culture. At the most basic level, elements like introductory music, commercials, or the narrative structure (e.g. length of episodes, order of narrative elements) are repeated, but are also often slightly changed from episode to episode. This process creates an ever-evolving iterative text dependent on its popular and economic impact (Kelleter, 'Theory of Seriality' 100). Serial texts evolve through a feedback relationship between instances of production and reception. With respect to comic books, Kelleter and Stein have shown how the feedback loop between authors/artists and their audience is relevant to understand how comic books have evolved since the middle of the 20th century. Expressed for instance through the impact of fan letters and related activities on 1960s Marvel superhero comic books, the 'networking-character of serial narration' casts doubt on any traditional kind of hierarchical, work-based author-reader relationship (266, my translation). As a basic feature of virtually every serial text, this networking-character is also true for podcasts and their relationship between creators and audiences. This feedback loop as well as the serial pattern of varying repetition are important insofar as they provide the text with two elements that are crucial to audience appeal and commercial success: recognition and novelty.[5] To give another example that is directly related to the case studies below, the fact that the podcast is produced in the form of a conversation between the two hosts is a fundamental element that has been repeated over the last 13 years just as much as it has been varied through Young's solo-shows, invited guests, or the inclusion of listener stories and voices. Without the basic conversational structure, the fundamental nature of the podcast would be uncertain, but only the inclusion of slight variations prevents the podcast's format from becoming overly repetitive and stale.

Next to frequently cited historical events, the recurrence of several important figures in New York City history is especially pronounced in regards to the podcast's pattern of varying repetition and its incorporation of serial feedback loops. For instance, several important historical figures and events appear and reappear so often on the podcast that they begin to transcend their historical context and become serial elements themselves. Within the diegesis of the podcast, they somewhat cease to function as referenced historical personalities and rather become narratively active 'figures of seriality' within the serial text itself (Kelleter, 'Theory of Seriality' 101). In the course of this transformation, these characters, locations, and events become perfect examples of seriality's pattern of varying

repetition as well as the podcast's way of creating recognition. 17th century Dutch director-general Peter Stuyvesant and 20th century Parks Commissioner Robert Moses are prominent examples, but the podcast also covers people such as William 'Boss' Tweed or Gouverneur Morris time and again.[6] Due to their exceptionally prominent position in New York City history, this repetition is of course hardly a surprise; still, within the context of *The Bowery Boys'* seriality, these figures develop a recurring life of their own because they appear and reappear so often on the podcast that they become serial elements themselves. As such, 'Peg Leg Pete,' as Meyers and Young often call Stuyvesant on the show, or Robert Moses, often introduced whenever a given episode refers to mid-20th century developments in the city, become recurring characters in the podcast's story world. This world remains connected to the men's actual biographical trajectories, but they also begin to function as narrative elements in the plot of the podcast. Both of them simultaneously emerge as cantankerous, but overly powerful and eminently important figures for the development of the city and a kind of glue that gives serial coherence to otherwise largely disjointed episodic installments. This treatment of historical figures, in turn, is an important aspect of the specific mixture of episodic and serial forms present in *The Bowery Boys*. The podcast's narrative complexity manages to continuously invite new listeners into the show while simultaneously rewarding frequent listeners for their continued reception. *The Bowery Boys* therefore uses narrative seriality to engage a participatory audience. This dynamic, however, is less a conscious strategy of the hosts themselves than one of the instances where serial texts gain an agency of their own, independent of intentions and crucially dependent on reception. In an interview with Meyers, the host even voiced some uneasiness with the impression that they run the danger of turning a figure such as Moses into a 'caricature' ('Interview'). However, in the course of the same interview, he also acknowledges how the hosts have by now arrived at a much more nuanced picture of Moses over the course of 13 years of podcasting New York history. Only through the interaction between the serial creators that reference these historical figures, serial texts that integrate them, and serial audiences that recognize them, does this serial historiography unfold and develop its potential, both in terms of serial coherence and appeal to listeners through recognition.

These serial aspects are also evident in the podcast's creation of a transmedia franchise. Starting as an amateur project restricted to the production of a podcast, the show's commercial outreach and medial spread has drastically increased in the last few years. Next to the gradually professionalized production of the podcast itself, Young and Meyers have acquired corporate sponsors, created an accompanying website, released the companion book *Adventures in Old New York* (2016), held live stage events, have begun to offer history-themed walking tours, and produced a spin-off podcast (*The First*). All of this makes *The Bowery Boys* an illustrative example of the serial poetics – that is, its relation between form and discourse – as well as creative and commercial potentials of podcasting. Jenkins identifies three central elements in relation to convergence culture: the 'extension' of 'content across different delivery systems' that affords these companies 'synergy'

through the ability to control the revenue streams of these different outlets, and the formation of a 'franchise' that becomes both the container and the brand for these different endeavors (19). While this triad is certainly true for vertically integrated mega-franchises such as *Star Wars* or the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe), it also applies to the apparently much smaller, but nevertheless still highly significant example of *The Bowery Boys*. Seen this way, *The Bowery Boys* is an instructive example of how we do not need to restrict ourselves to considering only media giants like Warner Bros. and Disney as transmedia conglomerates in order to analyze the negotiation between active audiences and media companies when it comes to convergence culture. Rather, this is also – maybe even particularly – useful for podcasting's interaction between individual creators and relatively niche audiences, thus highlighting the collaborative rather than purely commercial relationship between listeners and producers. Writing about corporate convergence culture, Jenkins claims that convergence 'is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process' (18). While this statement is certainly accurate, its inherent binary dynamic nevertheless risks glossing over the many phenomena in-between these two poles, as recent fan studies research has shown (Gray et al.). Again, the podcast and especially its development over the last 13 years exemplifies a more complex relationship that necessitates more nuanced critical approaches which consider the specific contexts and effects of podcasting as a cultural practice.

With reference to the increasing professionalization of podcasting, Sullivan argues that 'the popular fascination with podcasting stems mainly from the home-grown, grassroots nature of its content. Thanks to independent and amateur podcasters creating new podcast episodes on a continual basis, podcasting has developed a powerful ethos of authenticity' (39). Even though large media conglomerates have entered the game, many podcasts still lend themselves to forms of reception along the lines of collaboration. In other words, the kind of subversive 'active' consumption imagined by classic Cultural Studies – from the Birmingham School to US critics such as Fiske or (early) Jenkins – does not apply here for the simple reason that especially in serial texts, the producer-consumer relationship is fundamentally different from the one that was assumed in the second half of the 20th century (cf. Kelleter, 'Five Ways' 10-11). The anti-mainstream sentiment inherent in fan reactions to corporate media that was often presupposed of subversive audience engagement in 'populist theor[ies] of reception' is symbolically shared here by producer and audience (Kelleter, 'Theory of Seriality' 100). To a certain extent, it is already part of the production process and as such highlighted by Young and Meyers in the Patreon call during each episode, when they claim that

> *The Bowery Boys* podcast remains an independently produced show in an ever-changing podcast universe; these days, sharing the audio world with major companies and huge podcast networks. And so we're incredibly grateful for the support of listeners on patreon.com, the membership platform where for just a small monthly donation we can provide you with

bonus audio features and other fun things depending on your membership level, including mugs, stickers, and T-shirts. It's actually because of Patreon that Tom and I can devote ourselves full-time to the production of *The Bowery Boys* podcast and website. [...] Tom and I thank you for your support. ('Listener Stories')

Next to the narrative structure of the podcast, this is yet another crucial element that encourages audiences to listen, comment on, and review the show.[7] Jenkins describes this phenomenon in terms of 'affective economics' through which companies and brands emphasize and focus on 'the emotional commitments consumers make in brands as a central motivation for their purchasing decisions' (319). While Jenkins still largely considers the relationship between transnational media companies and brands and their various audiences, applying these thoughts to smaller podcasts and their combination of podcasting's 'sonorous intimacy' (Llinares et al.), its 'powerful ethos of authenticity' (Sullivan), as well as serial elements, show how they specifically manage to form an affective relationship between creators and listeners.

Audience Engagement Through Audience Integration

Next to slight variations to the overall narrative structure, *The Bowery Boys* also features self-reflexive special episodes of their podcast, for instance on 'Bowery Boys - Behind The Scenes' (#199.5), 'Live in Brooklyn - The Bowery Boys: Ten Years of Podcasting' (#229), 'Bowery Boys 2014 Year in Review' (#175), or 'The Bowery Files' (#70). These episodes share a heightened degree of self-consciousness – because their topic is the podcast itself – as well as an explicit emphasis on the podcast's audience, either through direct address or listener integration into a given episode. Nowhere, however, has the latter element become more pronounced than in three episodes produced and released during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021.

The first of these instances was released during the first lockdown in the spring of 2020, when *The Bowery Boys* released 'Listener Stories: At Home in New York' (#326/327) on May 15 and May 19, 2020. Announced in previous episodes and via social media a month before, this two-part show was the outcome of the podcast's 'At Home in New York' listener challenge, in which audience members – presumably stuck at home due to lockdown – were asked to tell their personal stories of 'when exactly they felt at home in New York' (Young). Over the course of two episodes and for almost 80 minutes in total, Young and Meyers present 29 e-mails, letters, and call-in messages from listeners. These messages are grouped according to E.B. White's classification of New Yorkers into 'natives,' 'commuters,' 'settlers,' and 'tourists' ('Listener Stories'). However, the structurally more significant element is the fact that Young and Meyers frequently relate the listeners' messages to their own personal experiences and point out the similarities between their own and their listeners' anecdotes. For instance, at the beginning of the first episode, after a call-in message from listener Rachel in which she describes her arrival to New York in 1993, Young and Meyers remember

how they moved themselves to New York from Missouri and Ohio, respectively, in the same year ('Listener Stories Part One'). Through this engagement, the two enter in a kind of dialogue with their listeners. This technique creates both a less hierarchized relationship between producers and audience and a sense of interpersonal intimacy that goes beyond the orthodox 'relation-building labor' performed by podcasts in general (Sullivan 48). This relationality is especially true when considering that the episode also begins with the rather private message that host Tom Meyers has just adopted a girl with his husband. All in all, special episodes like these manage to integrate active forms of consumption in their attempt to signify and create intimate relations between podcast producers and their audience.

While episodes #326 and #327 are illustrative examples of participatory listening, they are rather special instances of the podcast in terms of form. Being clip shows rather than episodes on a specific topic, these examples vary the podcast's narrative formula to a degree that would make it difficult for them to be more than occasional specials. An example of audience engagement more integrated into the show's regular format was released on November 27, 2020 with episode #346, 'The Beatles Invade New York!' Despite the fact that it deals with a historical period in New York City, this is a special episode for a number of reasons. On a basic level, and this is also something Meyers acknowledged in an interview, both the topic and the subject matter are somewhat outside the podcast's 'comfort zone' ('Interview'). With a rather recent timeframe and especially with such a large topic that reaches well beyond the podcast's focus on New York City history, the episode treads untested ground within the context of the podcast. Even more relevant for the purpose of this article, however, is how the episode expands the podcast's production format through its active integration of listeners. In the weeks before the episode was produced, listeners were again approached through social media and invited to share their recollections of the time(s) when The Beatles visited New York in the 1960s. For instance, in their Facebook feed, *The Bowery Boys* posted 'Did you experience Beatlemania in New York firsthand? Let us know!' and asked:

> We're recording an upcoming show about the Beatles in New York City. Did you or a parent or grandparent experience Beatlemania firsthand at Shea Stadium, Carnegie Hall, Forest Hills Stadium or the Plaza Hotel? Let us know via special call-in line or email to us! ('Did You Experience Beatlemania')

Apparently, the call to provide personal recollections and stories did not go unnoticed, quite the contrary. In the words of the hosts at the beginning of the episode: 'Boy, did you deliver' ('The Beatles'). While the episode largely follows the podcast's conventionalized structure of first 'situating' the audience before digging deeper into the historical trajectory of the episode, it adds a rather rare element: Direct audience reactions. Due to the many reactions by listeners, the normally dialogic format of the podcast is broken up by call-in and mail

messages from listeners across the country. Among the messages are stories by 'Loretta,' 'Dari from Santa Monica,' 'Maureen from New Hampshire,' 'Anna F.,' 'Linda W.,' 'Sharon,' and Patricia Gallo-Stenman, author of the memoir *Diary of a Beatlemaniac*. What all of these listeners have in common is that they are middle-aged female fans who partook in the Beatlemania of the 1960s. The fact that the topic deals to a certain extent with the birth of fans as a cultural phenomenon is of course more than a footnote here – in a certain sense, this is one of the moments where popular culture comes full circle. The same generation of fans that laid the foundation for the kind of devotion that transformed the mid-century understanding of mass culture into a more nuanced approach to popular culture epitomized by, among others, the studies pioneered by British Cultural Studies, becomes engaged in a cultural text typical for 21st century convergence culture and its emphasis on audience engagement.

This interaction leads to a specific kind of listening experience. Through the hosts' narration, the listener learns about the New York-related history of The Beatles between 1964 and 1966, from their visit to *The Ed Sullivan Show*, their different stays at New York Hotels such as the Plaza, the Delmonico, or the Warwick, to their concerts at Shea Stadium and Carnegie Halls, as well as John Lennon's post-Beatles life (and death) in the Big Apple ('The Beatles'). Through the spliced-in voices of individual fans who actually attended the concerts, the listeners get a more personal, 'authentic' idea of, for instance, the concert at Shea Stadium (as told by 'Bonnie from Manhattan' and 'Pattie from Wilmington, Delaware') at the same time that their collective engagement is rewarded by the show's integration of their stories ('The Beatles'). Through this integration, conventionalized elements such as the eventual expression of gratitude to the listeners for reaching out and the expressive shout-out to the podcast's patrons become even more effective appeals for audience participation, both in terms of textual engagement in the form of comments as well as economic engagement in the form of pledges and subscriptions. The same is true for the final wrap up-sequence, where a reference to the pandemic situation is combined with two more messages and a reference to *The Bowery Boys* walking tours, thus integrating audience address, participation, and engagement once more ('The Beatles').

In addition to this special element, however, the episode also creates continuity through its intersection with the podcast's back catalog. References to New York City landmarks covered by the show (e.g. Carnegie Hall) are present just as much as direct allusions to previous episodes (e.g. #8 and #321 on the Dakota Building). Moreover, as is typical for an episode of *The Bowery Boys* set in the 20th century, a short, humorous reference to Robert Moses is not missing either, as the hosts jokingly ponder the question whether the 'Master Builder' attended the concert at Shea Stadium and conclude that he did not, but was rather 'irritated by the screaming girls' ('The Beatles'). Beyond providing continuity with the other episodes through its inclusion of this 'figure of seriality' (Kelleter),[8] this take on the patriarchal authority figure of Moses in relation to the very fans that helped the creation of this particular episode both highlights the episode's depiction of the

transformative nature of Beatlemania at the same that it celebrates the subversive role played by fans during this time.

Conclusion

Robert Yeates argues that '[w]hile the participatory affordances granted by serialization are not new, they are, nonetheless, reinforced by the new media technologies that allow fans and creators to interact almost instantaneously' (233). This article has shown how the interaction of podcasting and seriality unfolds in the context of 21st century convergence culture. Both as a cultural form within convergence culture and a distribution system for serial texts, podcasts engage audiences in ways that make it necessary to analyze technological and narrative elements in an integrated fashion. *The Bowery Boys'* textual and paratextual aesthetics exemplify podcasting's integration of serial poetics and listener participation through their combination of transmedial proliferation and seriality's pattern of repetition and variation. By creating more direct and intimate relations between the podcast and its audience, the show illustrates how current podcasts can address, enable, and integrate audience engagement. The analysis of *The Bowery Boys* also shows how situating podcasts in their concrete contexts of production and reception disclose the specific participatory potentials of these ongoing texts and make it possible to understand their appeal to audiences who regularly and actively listen to them – both in normal times as well as in times of crisis like the COVID-pandemic of 2020 and 2021. Moreover, a closer look at the ways in which the podcast itself actively engages with its audience makes it possible to analyze specific ways how the 'sonorous intimacy' (Llinares et al.) of podcasting is created and how it in turn facilitates and generates engagement.[9] Through this, this article hopes to add some ideas and approaches to the already existing literature and further spark the debate on the potentials of podcasting – to be continued.[10] Or, in the concluding words of each *The Bowery Boys* episode: 'Have a great New York week, whether you live here or not!' ('The Beatles').

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Notes:

[1] When I refer to 'texts' in the following, I am using a broad, cultural studies understanding of the term that goes beyond written language and also includes 'readable' cultural forms such as film, television, or podcasts.

[2] For an early comprehensive account of podcasting's terminological and ontological history, see Sterne et al.

[3] For a comprehensive account of and examples for recent work on the relationship between consumers and producers, see Gray et al.

[4] For a nuanced take on the potentials and pitfalls of this development, see Jenkins (251-294).

[5] Euritt has argued that serial repetition, both in the podcast text as well its paratexts, creates moments of recognition that help to 'build parasocial and fan-based intimate publics' (47).

[6] This dynamic is not restricted to people. Prominent developments such as the economic downturn of the 1960s and 1970s have also become serial elements in a similar way.

[7] And, in this case, write academic articles on it.

[8] Creating the same effect, episode #326 also features a similar Robert Moses joke.

[9] For an account of the connection between podcasting's conversationality and its creation of intimacy, see Euritt and Korfmacher.

[10] For instance, see Llinares et al., *Podcasting* or Volume 77 of *Gender Forum*.