Achieving a depth of character: Long-form improv practices in US comedy podcast culture

Anthony N. Smith

Long-form improvised comedy – or long-form improv – has been enduringly significant across media cultures since its development in 20th Century North American theatrical contexts. The comedic mode has been formative to the early development of various successful and influential comedy performers, writers and producers in recent decades, including Mike Myers, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler and Adam McKay (Fotis 2014, 7). It has influenced the scripting and performance processes of many US film comedies, including *Anchorman* and *Knocked Up*, and US television sitcoms, such as *30 Rock* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.[1] It has furthermore recently spread into podcast culture, underpinning various popular podcast series, including *Comedy Bang! Bang!*, which garners upwards of two million episode downloads per month (Wilstein, 2017).

This article focuses on the under-examined latter development, exploring how the particular characteristics of the podcast medium factor into improvisers' approaches to long-form improv performance. The fundamental features that typify this comedic mode remain consistent across media. Improvisers' practice of inventing, as part of a performance, relatively complex and substantial comedic narratives concerning fictional characters and the relationships they share is what defines long-form improv;[2] this basic definition remains stable regardless of whether long-form improv occurs on stage or within a podcast recording studio. Yet podcasting technologies, together with cultural conventions that have formed in relation to them, have nonetheless motivated long-form improvisers to develop techniques different from those applied in theatrical contexts. This article identifies these distinctive techniques that have emerged, and furthermore traces how podcasting's contexts have given rise to them.

So as to exemplify this process, the article draws on the content output of the Los Angeles-based podcast network Earwolf, as well from evidence of production pertaining to this content. The network, founded in 2010, has been a significant force

this decade in driving the production and dissemination of long-form improv podcasts, including the aforementioned *Comedy Bang! Bang!* (hereafter *CBB*).[3] Earwolf is therefore an appropriate case study subject here. The network's long-form improv podcasts typically draw talent from a community of professional Los Angeles-based comedy performers; these performers have, observes Vincent Meserko (2015a, 20), come to utilise the podcast form as an alternative 'artistic outlet and promotional tool'. Many of these performers that contribute to Earwolf's slate of long-form improv podcasts also regularly practise the mode in theatrical contexts, such as LA's UCB Theatre, a key site for contemporary long-form improv performance and development.[4] It will be useful here, therefore, to assess how podcasting's contexts motivate these performers to reconfigure their theatrically-honed approaches to long-form improv.

Through examining the practices of long-form improv podcasting, this article makes necessary contributions to two distinct research fields. Firstly, it contributes to a nascent body of research concerning the increasingly prominent comedy podcast sector, of which long-form improv podcasts are part. This increased prominence is linked to the growth of the podcast media form in the late-2000s and 2010s, as indicated by the large expansion of podcast audiences during this period; according to market research (Edison Research, 2018), in 2006, only 11 per cent of the US population had ever listened to a podcast, but by 2018 that percentage had risen to 44. Within this context in which the podcast form has become prevalent, many comedy titles have, similar to *CBB*, developed substantial audiences. These include, for example, surreal comedy-drama *Welcome to Night Vale*, which generates around three-and-a-half million episode downloads per month (Wade, 2018); humorous 'advicecast' *My Brother, My Brother, and Me*, of which more than five million episodes per month are downloaded (Berg, 2017); and stand-up comic Marc Maron's interview podcast, *WTF*, which attracts between seven and eight million downloads a month (Naughton, 2015).

Despite the current cultural relevance of comedy podcasts, however, there exists only a small quantity of academic research on the topic. This scholarship includes studies by Meserko (2015a) and Richard Marx (2015) that explore practices of comedy podcast production, situating these practices within broader cultural/industrial systems

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across media. The field of comedy podcast scholarship furthermore comprises studies concerning how comedians use podcasts as a means to present 'authentic' versions of themselves to listeners (Meserko, 2014; Meserko, 2015b; Symons, 2017). This slim body of research into comedy podcasts is certainly useful, yet further exploration of this culturally significant form is clearly required. Through providing a unique examination of long-form improv practices in the podcast setting, this article usefully develops this embryonic academic field.

Secondly, this article additionally makes a unique contribution to the field of academic literature concerning improvised comedy performance. Despite its significance, there exists relatively little scholarly exploration of long-form improv, or of improvised comedy performance more generally; the majority of publications concerning the topic is instead comprised of training manuals designed to impart improv techniques (see, for example: Johnstone 1981; Halpern et al 1994; Hauck 2012; Napier 2015). Scholarly works that do usefully explore cultures of improvised comedy performance examine improv practices within their theatrical setting (Seham 2001; Leep 2008; Fotis 2014) or analyse the application of comedy improv modes within film and television (Edge 2010; Fotis, 147-177). By examining the distinctive approaches to long-form improv that have arisen within the podcast sector, this article widens the scope of this scholarship.

So as to demonstrate how the podcast medium is conditioning long-form improv practices and therefore make these scholarly contributions, however, it is first necessary to clarify how this medium is being defined here. In response to podcasting's advent in the mid 2000s, the medium was largely identified in technological terms; that is, the medium was primarily understood as a distinctive technological means of audio content production, circulation and consumption (see Berry 2006; Menduni 2007). There is value to understanding the podcast medium along these lines, as a particular set of technologies. By affording long-form improv performances particular possibilities, these technologies can factor into improvisers' approaches, as this article shows.

Observing its development since its origins, however, podcasting scholarship has come to perceive the podcast medium as, not merely a set of technologies, but also a

distinctive cultural formation. Jeremy Wade Morris and Eleanor Patterson (2015, 221-22), for example, claim that 'Podcasting is neither limited to nor defined by its technologies. Rather it is a set of specific practices and cultural meanings that are entirely entwined with the technologies for its distribution, organization, and consumption'.[5] This perspective on podcasting, as a set of both technologies and cultural configurations, is necessary here. As this article's analysis indeed clarifies, improvisers' own culturally-formed practices and attitudes have born as much influence on the development of long-form improv in the podcast space as the medium's technologies have.

The significance of podcast culture on the development of long-form improv practices within the medium, including with regard to its cultural associations with other media, are well evident in this article's first case study section below. This section identifies how format conventions and textual features of podcasting and broadcast radio, which are ultimately cultural norms, have come to underpin the methods by which long-form improv performances are organised in podcast form. As Danielle Hancock and Leslie McMurtry (2017) show, there is a tendency whereby podcast creators utilise podcasting's pervasive textual characteristics when incorporating cross-media genres to the podcast medium. Their research shows that producers of horror podcasts typically draw on the particular journalistic and non-fiction formal features that *Serial* and similar high profile investigative podcasts have popularised within the medium (6). The reliance within long-form improv podcasts on podcasting's textual conventions forms part of a similar process by which the podcast medium's cultural contexts influence production

Stretching out discussion: improv podcast formats

So as to demonstrate how podcasting conventions have informed the formats of long-form improv podcasts, it is useful to first establish the general conventions of organising long-form improv performance in a theatrical context. While forms of US theatrical long-form improv comedy performances vary, they do commonly utilise structures and devices that are embedded within theatre's traditions. Performances are, for example, often organised into a collection of connected scenes and quasi-acts,

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and are therefore structurally similar to traditional stage plays. This is the case with the Harold structure, which, observes Matt Fotis (2014), has been the most influential and pervasive of long-form improv's theatrical forms. Via the Harold, which influential improviser Del Close pioneered in the 1980s, multiple improvised narratives and thematic threads are structured into three 'acts', with each 'act' divided into three scenes.[6] Many theatrical long-form improv forms that have since emerged have also been modelled on theatre's conventional plot structures. For example, TJ and Dave, a high profile theatrical long-form improv group, typically assembles a single scene-based linear narrative as part of a given performance; as Fotis (2014, 93) observes, the group's formal approach indeed results in its performances being labelled as 'plays'.

Certain Earwolf podcasts similarly draw upon theatrical convention in terms of the means by which they structure long-form improv. For example, each episode of Earwolf's *Spontaneanation* centres on an improvised narrative that adopts a scene-based two-act form, which is akin to theatrical convention. Yet improvisers, when performing long-form improv in a podcasting context, most typically neglect to import the common structures and devices of theatrical long-form improv. In a manner that has become conventional within the podcast medium, they instead rely on loosely structured formats developed specifically around practices of lengthy and free-flowing interview and discussion. As Merserko (2015a, 32) notes, 'Within podcast discourse… improvisation is defined by conversational context'.

This section goes on to outline some of the factors motivating improvisers' reliance on such interview and discussion-based formats. It additionally explores how this reliance has uniquely shaped long-form improv performance. It is first necessary, however, to account for the dominance of the format features of interview and discussion within the podcast medium. Two parallel cultural developments appear to have contributed to the pervasiveness of interview and discussion within podcasting. The first of these developments is the important contribution blogging communities made to the medium's inception in the mid-2000s (Hammersley, 2004; Acohido, 2005). This development resulted in discursive practices redolent of those of blogging, specifically the offering of commentary and discussion concerning a

particular given topic, being commonplace within the medium's formative years through to the present day.

The second and perhaps more significant of these developments, is the industrial integration of broadcast radio into the podcast medium. Traditional media institutions have, observes Berry (2016a, 665), come to control a large portion of the podcasting sector. As part of this process of control, many radio organisations, including NPR and the BBC, rely on the practice of making previously broadcast radio content available in podcast form so as to reach audiences that abstain from radio programming in linear broadcast form. This practice, which dates back to the mid-2000s, has led to repurposed broadcast content maintaining a dominant presence within podcast culture. For example, multiple NPR podcast versions of broadcast programmes, including *This American Life* and *TED Radio Hour*, consistently feature highly in US podcast download charts.[7] While, as Berry (2016a, 665) notes, the advent of podcasts in the 2000s was perceived as a potential danger to broadcast radio, 'broadcasters have responded to the threat posed by podcasting… by embracing it and making it their own'. Broadcast radio's dominance over podcasting has contributed to many key discursive traditions of speech radio programming – including practices of interview and discussion – becoming baseline norms within the podcast medium.

CBB, which host Scott Aukerman previously billed as 'the show where we talk to interesting people', serves as an example of how long-from improv podcasts draw on these conventions. The series is presented as a talk show, with the format developed around Aukerman's interviewing of guests. As part of a given episode, Aukerman interviews characters invented and performed by improvisers, as well as comedians, actors and musicians appearing as themselves. Further Earwolf podcasts that structure long-form improv performance as part of interview and discussion formats include *Hard Nation*, *Womp it Up!*, *Hollywood Handbook*, *With Special Guest Lauren Lapkus* and *The Andy Daly Podcast Pilot Project*.

In various cases, improv practitioners' goals of parodying podcast culture have additionally motivated the adoption of the podcast and broadcast radio conventions of interview and discussion. This is the case with *Hollywood Handbook*, hosted by Sean

Clements and Hayes Davenport, which satirises the conversations of a popular genre of comedy-focussed interview podcasts; this genre includes *WTF* (hosted by Marc Maron) and *You Made it Weird* (hosted by Pete Holmes) among many others. Episodes emblematic of this type of podcast are structured around comedian hosts and guests extensively discussing and reflecting upon their own careers and broader comedy culture. As Clements (Elder, 2015) acknowledges, '*Hollywood Handbook* is just making fun of podcasts that are that. Most of the premise of the show was just like, every fucking podcast is just two mid-level comedians sucking each other off about their career. … We want to satirise that.' As part of episodes, Davenport and Clements adopt and develop fictional versions of themselves as arrogant and self-important comedy practitioners who are patronising towards their guest comedian interviewees. The pair thereby satirise the self-absorbed, self-congratulatory personas that, from the perspective of some, typify the genre of comedy-centric interview-based podcasts.

With Special Guest Lauren Lapkus (hereafter *WSGLL*) is a further Earwolf podcast that leans on audio media conventions of interview and discussion as part of its parodying of podcasting's discursive modes. While *Hollywood Handbook*'s target for satire is a podcasting's professionalised sector, *WSGLL*, in contrast, frequently parodies the culture of amateur podcasting that has served as an integral part of the medium since its formation. A given episode of the series features a guest improviser performing as host of a fictional podcast that exists only within the confines of that episode. Characters performed by actor and improviser Lauren Lapkus appear as guests as part of each episode's fiction. *WSGLL*'s fictional podcasts are often parodies of the common type of amateur enthusiast podcast that is built around in-depth discussions concerning a narrow topic of interest. The *WSGLL* episode titled 'The Lunch Hour' (no. 115, 19 May 2017), which features construction worker host Chucky Spliff (performed by improviser Mary Holland) and work colleague Joey 'The Sink' Mulroney (performed by Lapkus), is an example of this approach. Much of the episode's fictional podcast revolves around a discussion between Chuck and Joey concerning the topic of their own lunches.

Earwolf's podcast formats, however, are not only typically structured around interview and discussion; as noted, they additionally facilitate the type of lengthy and

loosely structured interviews and discussions that are customary within many podcasts. As Meserko (2015b, 799) observes, podcasting has a 'predisposition towards conversational depth'. In many podcasts centred on the interviewing of (non-fictional) guests, for example, a single interview will often exceed sixty minutes in duration, as is standard for the aforementioned *WTF* and *You Made It Weird*. In discussion-based podcasts, a given topic is similarly often explored to an extensive degree; in a given episode of many film criticism podcasts, including *Blank Check*, *The Canon*, *The Flop House*, *How Did This Get Made?* and *Black Men Can't Jump (in Hollywood)*, a single film is typically critiqued for longer than an hour.

A combination of the podcast medium's technological affordances and cultural practices contributes to this tendency towards expansive interviews and discussions. Through enabling listeners to consume episodes 'on demand', the medium's technologies ensure that podcasts (bar those initially produced for radio) are not beholden to the time restrictions that broadcast linear schedules impose; these conditions thereby afford podcasters increased freedom in terms of episode duration (Berry 2016a, 666). Podcasting technologies furthermore enable listeners to seek out episodes of their choosing, and to privately consume them (via headphones, say) at their convenience (ibid.). This facility invites a mode of consumption whereby a given listener actively decides what they will listen to, and how they will listen to it. This can lead to listeners possessing a higher level of commitment towards a selected podcast than they would towards, say, a broadcast radio show that they had chanced upon. These consumption contexts inform a production culture in which podcasters typically cater to deeply committed niche audiences that enthusiastically receive protracted discussions concerning topics that they are particularly interested in. Cognizant of their audiences' high level of interest and dedication, podcasters accordingly tend to permit extensive interview and discussion.

The connections between Earwolf long-form improv podcasts and their listeners reflect this broader cultural pattern within the medium. As Aukerman (Riley 2015) acknowledges, the *CBB* podcast, for example, does not attract mainstream audiences. Instead it offers a 'super specific' appeal to an audience of highly engaged comedy fans. Aukerman (Fienberg 2012) furthermore operates under the view that there is a demand among this niche and dedicated audience for him to stretch out and

decompress *CBB*'s interview and discussion format: 'That's what's great about podcasts is really that you can take your time with them and people want you to do an hour. They want you to do an hour-and-a-half.' Complementing this context, the interviews and discussions that serve as the frameworks from which performances emerge within Earwolf's long-form improv podcasts are often exhaustive.

The adherence of long-form improv podcasts to this convention of extended interview and discussion further influences a degree of character development that is distinctive from that which emerges in theatrical spaces. The segmented, scene-based structures that typify much theatrical long-from improv, such as the Harold, certainly permit characters to be defined. The relatively open and interview-focussed format of many long-form improv podcasts, however, enable a far more extensive examination and development of improvised characters. As Meserko (2015b) observes of the lengthy interview format of *WTF* and other shows within this vain, they permit guests to open themselves up to extended probing in an effort to reveal their 'authentic' selves. Long-form improv podcasts built around extensive interview and discussion allow invented fictional characters to be similarly scrutinised in ways that are uncommon for theatrical improv. As Lapkus (Greiving 2016) observes, a key advantage of long-form improv formats such as *CBB* is that they enable performers to 'explore characters on a deeper level and live in them for longer than [a theatrical] improv scene'.

As part of such processes, the improviser is afforded the space to invent a given character's intricate back-story. In the case of *CBB*, for example, guests, when performing a new character, will typically commence with the bare minimum of character detail – a name and occupation, say. From this point, as writer, actor and *CBB* regular Jessica St. Clair (Wilstein 2017) observes, Aukerman, through the process of interview, 'helps you build it into this fleshed out character'.

Aukerman's interview with Debbie Creepy in the *CBB* episode 'Is that Chocolate, Or What?' (no. 533, 25 February 2018) is exemplary of this type of performance. Aukerman introduces Creepy, a character created and performed by Mary Holland, as a beauty pageant consultant before exploring what her vocation entails. In *CBB* tradition, Holland, in response to Aukerman's questioning, repeatedly invents zany

and absurd approaches to her profession. Creepy, for example, reveals that she coaches the young girls in her charge to walk like they 'have a car lease'; she does so as a means to help them convey the type of 'world weary' personas that Creepy believes will give the girls a competitive edge in pageant contests. The process of Aukerman's extended probing, however, additionally results in discursive tangents, as part of which Holland contrives many of Creepy's personal history and personality traits. Via discussions, for example, Holland invents for Creepy a prior unsuccessful acting career and a barren romantic life. Holland furthermore establishes the intensely positive Creepy's inability to acknowledge what she perceives as her professional and personal failings; Holland does so by repeatedly rendering Creepy catatonic in response to Aukerman querying her life experiences.

As part of these types of performances, listener enjoyment can no doubt be derived from the absurd fictional character personalities and histories that improvisers such as Holland build during interview and discussion. Listeners can, however, potentially gain additional pleasure from following, at a meta level, the creative processes by which highly detailed characters are constructed. Concerning the Harold, Fotis (2014, 61) argues that performances of the theatrical form not only entertain via their 'witty dialogue or situations'; they also invite audiences to marvel at the skilful ways in which 'players connect the various threads of the piece together', innovatively fusing disparate scenes, narratives and themes as part of a given performance. The complex craft of character construction, which long-form improv podcast formats demand, similarly bid for audience's attention and appreciation. As comedy actor, writer and performer Andy Daly (Wilstein 2017) notes with regard to appearing on *CBB*, a given performance becomes a 'constant juggling act between playing some kind of a plausible character and "yes and"-ing the fanciful, crazy things that come up' as part of interviews. The processes of such 'juggling acts' have the potential to evoke fascination and wonderment among listeners concerning improvisers' abilities.

As this section makes clear, both technological context and the cultural activity that has developed around it have determined the formats on which improvisers rely. Podcasting technologies, for example, facilitate audiences to privately listen to episodes at their convenience; yet it is the cultural formation of narrow yet highly dedicated audiences, which these technological conditions give rise to, that motivate

the production of content designed to appeal to niche groups, such as long-form improv enthusiasts. The following section further indicates how the medium's culture factors into podcasting's long-form improv performances. It shows how podcast recording practices, as well as shared assumptions among improvisers concerning audience behaviour, can influence looser, more relaxed types of improv performances than are typically found in theatrical contexts.

Keeping it loose: informal performances in improv podcasts

In a podcast setting, relatively high degrees of casualness and informality often define long-form improv performances. As Aukerman (Greiving 2016) claims, consuming an episode of *CBB*, for instance, is 'like listening to a comedy album where the people didn't try as hard'. One indicator of this more casual approach is the propensity for performers to break character, thereby undermining the coherence of a presented fiction. Matt Besser (People and Chairs, 2012) acknowledges this with regard to his *improv4humans* podcast. As he observes, there is a tendency for those engaged in long-form improv on his podcast to break into laughter in response to fellow practitioners' contributions. An example of this type of performance can be found in an episode of *WSGLL*, titled 'Generations' (no. 101, 11 November 2016), in which Lapkus, Aukerman and Paul F. Tompkins each play a different member of the same family. Together they discuss aspects of their family history. As pop culture critic Nathan Rabin (2016) observes, the three performers, frequently amused by each other's contributions, go on to 'crack up extensively throughout the episode'. Such 'corpsing' is traditionally frowned upon in a theatrical long-form improv context, as it is perceived as a marker of ill discipline; 'I definitely don't like it on stage', claims Besser (People and Chairs, 2012). Yet, it in a podcast context, the practice is typical.

A further example of a looser approach to podcast performance is the practice of breaking from a presented fiction to self-reflexively refer to the improv craft underpinning a given performance. An example of this practice is evident in the *CBB* episode '2017 Holiday Spectacular' (no. 525, 18 December 2017), in which Ming (performed by Jeremy Rowley) and Keith Jones (performed by Drew Tarver) appear as return guests, joining an already large ensemble of improvisers/characters. As part

of two previous episodes, the pair of characters had reflected on their ongoing involvement as competitors in the fictional 'Hammer Nissan Holiday Naughty or Nice Nissan Sentra Car Giveaway Contest'. Building upon this previously established narrative, Tarver, as Keith Jones, declares that he and Ming are now fighting a '*car*stody battle' for the still yet to be claimed Nissan Sentra. In response, other performers jokingly jeer the perceived weakness of Tarver's wordplay here. 'C'mon now, that's a great premise for a guest appearance', says Tarver defensively, seemingly breaking from the character of Keith.

Moments later Aukerman, affecting a mock weary tone, provocatively implies that the appearance of Ming and Keith is not as successful as those of prior appearances. 'So this isn't working…?', replies Tarver, still apparently adopting his own persona.

Fellow guest Jason Mantzoukas, an actor and improv perfomer who appears as himself in the episode, sarcastically responds, seemingly to Tarver (rather than Jones): 'No, no, it's working great, once you had "carstody battle" everything clicked into place.'

Following further implied critique of Tarver and Rowley's performance, Tarver, affecting exasperation, exclaims to his peers that 'this bit, based on a pun, is hard to do!'. Tarver and Rowley's appearance therefore breaks from an improvised fiction involving Aukerman's interviewing of Ming and Keith Jones, to a playful meta-textual discourse concerning the quality of Tarver and Rowley's created fiction.

The cultural conditions of the podcast medium invite this relaxed and self-reflexive approach to long-form improv. Firstly, the absence of audiences as part of the podcasting recording process transforms improvisers' attitudes. In line with broader contemporary podcast and radio practices, Earwolf producers most typically record long-form improv performances in a small recording studio space rather than in the presence of an audience. This distinctive element of long-from improv in a podcast context appears to influence improvisers to approach performances differently than they do on stage. As Besser (Arthur 2017) notes, in a theatrical context, audience responses serve as a 'gauge' for performers, indicating 'how the scene is going'. With listening audiences unseen and unheard in the podcasting context, however,

improvisers tend to direct performances to their peers within the recording studio, who serve as a proxy audience. This often results in improvisers adopting a more casual and relaxed mode, as their performances come to resemble a group of friends and colleagues sharing jokes, trading insults and laughing together.

As Aukerman (Greiving 2016) observes, with specific regard to *CBB*, the podcast is 'like a genuine hangout with a bunch of friends'. Comedian, impressionist and *CBB* regular James Adomian (Wilstein 2017) draws a similar analogy, claiming that performing on *CBB* corresponds with 'the experience of being backstage as a comedian, doing bits in the greenroom or after a show'. In other words, long-form improv performances in a podcast context are distinct from those that occur on stage, being more akin to interactions that occur privately between improvisers. It is easy to understand how, with such attitudes, improvisers are more likely to 'corpse' in these relaxed conditions than they would do in the more professionalised context of the stage.

The podcast recording studio context is also a factor influencing improvisers to self-reflexively comment on their own performances, and comedy culture more generally, as part of performances. As 'the only audience is the other comedians', suggests actor, writer and improviser Paul Rust (Wilstein 2017) concerning the typical podcast recording context, long-form improv performances are 'more specific to what [fellow practitioners'] sensibility is'. Through breaking from presented fiction to refer to the improv processes they are undertaking, performers address the shared interests of their proxy audience of fellow improvisers. This self-reflexivity as part of performances is therefore a manner of improvisers 'talking shop' with one another within what they sometimes perceive to be an informal context.

By shaping performance as quasi-private 'off-the-clock' discourses, long-form improv podcasts conform to wider trends within the sector. Meserko (2015b, 797), for example, notes that, with *WTF*, Maron aims to communicate intimate and privatised encounters between himself and his guests, as exemplified by Maron's use of his own garage as a recording space. The quasi-private component of long-form improv podcast performance furthermore complements widespread podcast consumption practices. Drawing on audience data, Berry (2016b, 13) observes that podcast

consumption occurs, more often that not, via headphones (or earphones). As part of this consumption practice, Berry argues, a given listener 'creates a deeply personal and highly privatized (and intimate) space in which content is consumed'. By seeming to be informal and akin to private meetings between friends, long-form improv podcast performances are potentially well suited to these intimate spaces that listeners construct.

Improvisers' own understandings of listeners' modes of consumption are a further factor influencing relaxed approaches to long-form improv performance. As noted there is a tendency among long-form improvisers in a podcasting context to consider each other as an immediate audience; yet these improvisers are of course simultaneously aware that listeners will consume their performances once episode recordings are made available. Despite this awareness, however, improvisers feel under less pressure than they do on stage to deliver strong performances to audiences (which is not to claim that they do not regularly perform strongly in a podcast setting). The change in performance conditions no doubt accounts somewhat for this relief in pressure; the fear of failing in front of live audiences can prohibit casual approaches among stage practitioners. Daly (Palumbo, 2016), for example, admits to 'overpreparing' for stage performances for fear of them falling flat; 'when you're in front of an audience, man, you know if it didn't work', he observes.

What further contributes to this reduced pressure, however, is a received wisdom among improvisers concerning podcast listeners and their modes of consumption. Improvisers perceive that podcast listeners are more tolerant of performances that might be deemed flawed, ineffective or just plain unfunny. For example, according to Daly (Palumbo, 2016), who has performed on various Earwolf long-form improv podcasts, 'The feedback I hear about podcasts makes it seem like listeners are very forgiving of… beats that fall flat and false notes'.

This understanding of podcast audiences as being lenient towards misfiring performances complements a pervasive assumption that listeners use podcasts as a means to occupy their minds as they undertake tiresome activities. Aukerman's (Greiving 2016) perception of *CBB*'s audience aligns with this broader view: 'People listen to me and my guests more than they talk to their families... And they're usually

trapped in something — in their car or on the bus or the subway, or they're trapped in their job — and it's the one thing that's getting them through the day.' Listeners are perceived, via this mindset, as being content to settle for performances of varying effectiveness just so as long as they serve as stimulating accompaniments to tedious tasks. Improvisers are therefore encouraged to remain relatively relaxed concerning the quality of their performances.[8]

Certain practices and ways of thinking within podcasting culture therefore combine to cultivate an inclination among improvisers to deliver laid back performances. These practices include improvisers recording in audience-free environments; these lines of thinking include improvisers operating under the idea that audiences utilise performances as background respite from tedious chores. In response to these cultural conditions, improvisers in podcast-recording contexts appear to adopt attitudes that are more devil-may-care than those that typify theatrical long-form improv. The adoption of such attitudes frequently results in performances that are distinctly loose and casual. As the next section demonstrates, podcasting's long-form improv performances are often further distinguished from theatrical performances due to their contributions to serialised fictions spanning many podcast episodes and series.

Character continuities: serialising long-from improv

With a given long-form improv podcast series, it is typically the return appearances of previously established characters that activate serialisation between podcast episodes. For example, between 2013 and 2017, Lauren Lapkus' high-school student character Traci Reardon appeared on 13 episodes of *CBB*. The character furthermore has a regular segment on *WSGLL* and has also guested on an episode of the *Womp it Up!* podcast, which is hosted by Jessica St. Clair's own high-school student character, Marissa Wompler. As return appearances of guests typically result in the referencing of previously established events, the serialised continuity linking the episodes tends to be explicit. This is, for example, apparent in the aforementioned *Womp it Up!* episode ('Spotlight on: Traci Reardon', no. 40, 10 April 2018). As part of her introduction to the episode, Wompler acknowledges the feud that developed between Reardon and herself during their shared encounters on prior *CBB* episodes.

As David Hesmondhalgh (2007, 23) notes, the serial narrative form has proved to be a pervasive storytelling mode across media industries. This is chiefly because the form frequently serves as a default device by which media institutions look to strengthen audience commitment. Through its perpetuation of narrative continuity, the serial form can motivate audience members to engage with successive narrative instalments to learn 'what happens next'. Improvisers' utilisation of the serial form as part of their Earwolf podcasts therefore supports the podcast network's economic aims.

Contrary to wider media conditions, however, the serialisation of narrative is uncommon in theatre due to the obvious impracticalities of the practice within this medium. Were one to structure an improvised narrative to continue over multiple separate performances, it is unlikely that many of the same audience members would be ever present for the multiple performances that would contribute to that narrative. As Berry (2015, 302) observes, podcasting's technological affordances make feasible the serialisation of narrative. By providing listeners with the facility to download new and archived episodes, and consume them at their convenience, listeners are enabled to easily follow improvised comedic narratives spanning many episodes.

Podcasting's cultural practices, however, can further increase the viability of serial narratives in the medium. The curatorial approaches of podcast networks, and the participatory practices of podcast audiences, can increase the ease by which listeners are able to consume such serially disseminated fictional characterisations and event sequences. Earwolf, for example, curates *CBB* episode playlists, available on its Stitcher Premium website and app, that compile serially connected performances of specific characters that were originally released years apart. One such playlist is 'The Best of Comedy Bang! Bang! Featuring Don DiMello'; this playlist consists of seven episodes, released between 2010 and 2014 within each of which Andy Daly portrays his seedy theatre director character, Don DiMello. With regard to online participatory practices, fans' maintenance of wiki databases concerning long-form improv podcasts – such as the highly detailed Comedy Bang! Bang! Wiki – enables audiences to easily seek out the assorted podcast episodes that contribute to a given character's serial narrative.

As podcast episode formats lend themselves to fictional character development, the process of maintaining narrative continuity between separate character appearances typically results in enrichment of character in particular. Each time an improviser returns with a given character, therefore, that character typically accumulates further detail and back story. As actor and improviser Jessica McKenna (Wilstein 2017) observes, this has been the case with her child character of Power Wheels Beth, who has appeared on *CBB* on four different occasions: 'Every time I bring back Beth more and more gets added to her story'.

As the prior section on podcast formats demonstrates, long-form improv podcast formats can influence the development of characters that are more intricately detailed than those created in theatrical contexts. By affording the construction of serial narratives, the podcasting medium permits improvisers to escalate over multiple episodes this process whereby a given character's personality and biography is expanded. This practice whereby fictional characters are serially supplemented with additional detail over weeks, months and years is more akin to serialised television and comic-book storytelling than it is to theatrical convention. As Roberta Pearson (2007, 56) observes of long-running serialised television drama, for example, characters can be 'augmented with any number of biographical details' over many multiple episodes, resulting in 'highly elaborated characters'. Due to their utilisation of the serial mode as part of their podcast performances, improvisers working in the medium can ensure that their characters are detailed to a similarly high degree of intricacy as many television drama characters.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates how podcasting has influenced performers to develop long-form improv practices distinct from theatrical traditions. It shows how podcasting's format conventions motivate improvisers' reliance on the devices of interview and discussion, together with the implementation of decompressed structures. It details how cultural conditions of podcast recording, combined with improvisers' assumptions about their listeners, tend to induce, within improvisers, casual and informal approaches to performance. It furthermore establishes how podcasting

technologies, combined with a curatorial approach to content dissemination and the participatory practices of audiences, can lay conditions for the serialisation of long-form improv narrative. The article therefore shows how podcasting exerts influence upon comedic practices via not only the medium's technological possibilities, but also the cultural conventions that have developed in relation to the platform.

The rise of online media platforms as part of technological convergence within media industries has clearly resulted in new conduits for comedy. The strong presence of comedic approaches in not only podcasting, but also online video and social media, exemplifies this. This article forms part of a burgeoning field of scholarship focussed on connecting these emergent platforms and modes of comedic practice (including the comedy podcast scholarship referenced here). On the basis of this article, scholars conducting further research into comedy practices within online media would be advised to account not only for the determining factor of a given platform's technological affordances; they are recommended to additionally consider the influence of any cultural norms that have developed in relation to that online platform.

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[1] For example, in the case of *Anchorman* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, as part of a production process labeled 'retroscripting', actors were enabled to improvise interactions and conversations in the tradition of long-form improv. Matt Fotis' (2014, 147-177) account of how long-form improv practices has influenced film and television comedy provides these details, among others.

[2] Long-form improv is further defined by its opposition to 'short-form improv'. In contrast to long-form improv, short-form improv performances typically place little emphasis on the substantial development of character and narrative; short-form improv performances are instead typically comprised of a collection of unrelated short scenes and/or games, as exemplified by the popular television format *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, which serves as an enduring showcase for the mode.

[3] *CBB* host Scott Aukerman operates as Earwolf's chief creative officer, having co-founded the company.

[4] Exemplifying the cultural ties between Earwolf and the UCB, Aukerman launched *CBB* (then titled *Comedy Death-Ray*) at a time that he was hosting a long-running weekly stand-up show (also titled Comedy Death-Ray) at the theatre.

[5] See Berry (2016b, 10-11, 17) for a similar conceptualisation of the podcasting medium. These perspectives reflect more general understandings within media studies concerning the defining of media, whereby a given medium is defined by both its technologies and distinct cultural practices that have developed in relation to its technologies (see Gitelman 2006, 7; Jenkins 2006, 13-14; Smith 2018, 11-49).

[6] Prior to the 1980s, theatre improv shows tended to be comprised solely of games or unconnected scenes (Fotis 56).

[7] See itunescharts.net for iTunes podcast download performance data for these titles.

[8] This is not to assert here that listeners actually do always listen to podcasts as part of multitasking processes. As Berry (2016b, 12-13) suggests, some listeners opt to consume podcasts in a more 'focused' way, detached from other tasks.