

The Ethics of Accountability in Christopher Sebela's *Crowded*

In the current era of Kickstarter, GoFundMe, and other crowdfunding campaigns, where people can make money with just a computer, a good story, and a savvy social media campaign, it's easy to see how Christopher Sebela came up with the concept for *Crowded*. Published by Image Comics, *Crowded* takes place in a universe where "ten minutes in the future the world runs on an economy of job shares and apps" ("Crowded, Vol. 1 TP," n.p.), and Sebela cleverly turns the concept of crowdfunding to the dark side, writing an interesting commentary on crowdfunding and the ethics of accountability. Sebela's world is a well-written commentary on how the public takes civility, good behavior, and public shaming into their own hands.

Readers are immediately confronted with the possibility of crowdfunding gone wrong, when the main character, Charlotte (Charlie) Ellison lives through two assassination attempts only to find out that someone has started a Reapr campaign, and she's the target (Sebela, Chapter One, 3-4). Reapr is a crowdfunding platform that allows people to anonymously start campaigns to fund legal assassinations, and someone has started a campaign to kill Charlie. After the attempts on her life, Charlie hops on Dfend (an app that lets you hire personal bodyguards) and contracts the services of one Vita Slatter, the lowest-rated bodyguard on the entire app, to help protect her. Because according to the terms of Reapr campaigns, Charlie has to stay alive for one month, and she's going to need help.

With *Crowded*, Sebela has created a universe that explores the possibilities of crowdfunding gone sinister, and it's clearly not going well for Charlie. And because these campaigns start anonymously, Charlie has to deal with the fact that someone she knows wants her dead, and she has no idea who. As the volume continues and more of the story is revealed, readers are continually faced with the fact that in this universe it is dangerous to be disrespectful to others, and even more so to be a governmental official trying to run the country. Because one day, someone might get just offended enough that they start a Reapr campaign, with anyone as the target.

Crowdfunding: Positives and Negatives

Reapr itself is a fascinating concept; it's crowdfunding for murder made legal. Readers are told that Reapr originated "when the secretary of state and two other members of the cabinet were assassinated," (Sebela, Chapter Two, 20-21), and the FBI traced the money back to a crowdfunding platform. Supposedly, governments were unable to stop these campaigns (they even shut off the internet for a week and caused riots). Instead, they wrapped the process up in laws to involve red tape and paperwork, and now, as soon as campaigns convince at least one other person to put up money, the campaign goes live. This is an obviously fictional and sensationalized turn on the concept of crowdfunding, but it does raise some eyebrows and some interesting parallels.

There have been instances of current crowdfunding services being used for projects that may be unethical. There is currently an Indiegogo campaign for Vaxxed II, a sequel to an anti-vax documentary (*Vaxxed II*, n.p.). In 2013, Kickstarter hosted a campaign for “Above the Game: A Guide to Getting Awesome With Women,” a book that “includes advice on “getting awesome with women” that constitutes harassment and even rape.” (Kapur, n.p.), which Kickstarter later apologized for hosting. These crowdfunding platforms, while usually used to raise money for medical expenses or to fund cool projects or even to fund entire movies, can be used to fund unethical things. We can recognize Reap as an immoral, unethical platform. Crowdfunding assassinations is reprehensible, illegal, and creates a dangerous mutation of cultural principles and implicit societal contracts.

Platforms like Kickstarter and Indiegogo have strict terms of service that are meant to prevent campaigns that promote things like hate, personal injury, violence, and more. Kickstarter also employs people to review each campaign before it can be posted on their site. According to Rodrigo Davies in his article “The Ethics of Crowdfunding,” these platforms have an “ethical and moral responsibility toward existing institutions and broader social impacts” (Davies, n.p.). While Davies directs this more towards looking at how crowdfunding services overlap with federally-funded services, it can also be applied to the Reap campaigns, which, when allowed to exist, impact society by changing behaviors and introducing deadly consequences into common societal interactions.

Kickstarter and Indiegogo are meant to be used for positive things, but any platform can be twisted. Here, readers don’t get a look behind Reap’s curtain. Crowdfunding has helped people accomplish many good things. It has allowed people to afford transition surgeries, pay for their bills during hard times, and fund their dream games. It has helped created music, entertainment, and art. But where platforms like Kickstarter place the accountability on the person who starts the campaign, Reap puts the accountability on the target of the campaign, and thus the society as a whole.

The Ethics of Accountability

Johannesen et al. say “There are some general unspoken assumptions, some implicit expectations, which seem to characterize most instances of public discourse,” (Johannesen et al., pg. 12). When the concept of Reap is explained for readers, it becomes clear that Reap is one of the unspoken assumptions that society in this universe became more polite. In essence, because of the possibility of becoming a target of a Reap campaign, people started treating others better. In this universe, the “general unspoken assumptions” are that if, at any moment, someone feels wronged by another person, they can pull out their phone and start a Reap campaign. Thus, in order to avoid possible death, the social contract becomes more strict.

The readers are given examples of previous Reap campaigns to get a look at how this world reacts to other people’s actions and behavior, like “some lady tweets something stupid that goes viral, gets off the plane to a price on her head,” (Sebela, Chapter 2 pg. 20), something based off a real-life

example of public shaming that had real-life consequences (Ronson, pg. 68-71). Public shaming in the *Crowded* universe is based on good behavior and the desire to not be targeted—if someone can put out a bounty on you, you have to be nice to everyone, because breaking the normal social contract has much more serious consequences.

Reapr's first iteration was used to kill the Secretary of State and two other cabinet members. In this way, Reapr gives the people a greater influence over their government. Fearful of the consequences of their actions, members of the government started listening more to their constituents, and their "President makes decisions that help and don't hurt" (Sebela, Chapter Two, 20). On one hand, this may sound tempting. The push and pull between governmental power and the accountability that the people deserve has long been viewed as lacking. While people can donate to political campaigns, once a person is in power they are more often influenced by people (or corporations) with money known as lobbyists, people who attempt to "influence business and government leaders to create legislation or conduct an activity that will help a particular organization," ("Lobbying"), than by the people they serve. So where in modern society the people may not have direct action to influence their representations, with Reapr, the average person can take a more hands-on approach to influencing their governmental officials. Rather than a top-down organizational structure, people are able to hold those above them accountable for their actions (Johannesen et al., 165). Some would see this as an advantage, but Sebela tells us the potential consequences of having such permanent solutions to maintain accountability are that people may die.

In this universe, failing to please someone can earn a person a death sentence; if a person in a position of power makes a decision that a number of people don't like, even if that decision is supported by others, they are still at risk of a Reapr campaign. Because those people in power are held accountable for their actions through the threat of a Reapr campaign, any decision they make can have actionable, permanent consequences. There may also be people who would take advantage of the system just because they could to get rid of rivals. The person who starts a Reapr campaign is anonymous, so there is, presumably, no accountability on their part. The only form of accountability comes from the forms that the actual killer has to fill out, and the legal hoops they have to jump through in order to not get charged with murder. Meanwhile, Kickstarter has very clear rules about who can launch campaigns on their platform, one of which is "you are creating a project in your own name" ("Who Can Use Kickstarter?", n.p.). These varying standards emerge from the very different expectations for ethical accountability.

Concluding Thoughts

Charlie's predicament is, of course, unique to *Crowded* and Reapr. But the ethics of accountability are something that we are familiar with. We expect people to be held accountable for their actions, we expect people to follow implicit social contracts, and we expect not to have a

campaign started that calls for our death if we commit a social faux pas or two. We continue to use crowdfunding campaigns to raise money to create art, to pay for an upcoming surgery or an overdue bill, and to support each other.

But where the most recent record broken by a Kickstarter campaign was a campaign raising the most money for a TV or film project (Spangler, n.p.), Reapr's record is the million dollar (and rising) price on Charlie's head. There has only been one volume of *Crowded* released so far, although the series is ongoing, and is currently being developed for a movie adaptation. And while we still don't know who started the campaign to kill Charlie, there's sure to be quite a bit more social commentary in the upcoming arcs. And as platforms like Kickstarter continue to grow, we can only wonder what inventors, artists, and creators will come up with next.

Avenues for Further Inquiry

Charlie is a busy woman; she's on a number of money-making apps, doing everything from dog walking, to driving people around, to loaning out her car, to renting out clothing from her own closet, and more. Because of this, she is the epitome of a busy millennial; she doesn't have a steady job, and instead relies on income from several sources. Charlie embodies "busy culture," never stopping, always looking for the next way to make money, constantly selling her services so she can make a living, moving forward and never looking back. But what are the effects of working like this? Johns Hopkins Health Review says that busyness has emerged "as a significant health concern," (Dickinson, n.p.). Did Charlie's lifestyle lead to the Reapr campaign? This would require reading the rest of the as yet unpublished story, but it would be interesting to consider how Charlie's busy life has affected the perception of herself by people around her. How ethical is it to judge the behavior of others as worthy of punishment without being able to truly know that other person's intent, or the context they operate from? What is the line between judging a person and judging their actions? What is the intersection of intent and impact? How does that lead into *Crowded*, where implicit social contracts more deeply inform a person's actions?

It would also be interesting to take a closer look at the intersection of public shaming and social contracts. Is there a place where public shaming can do social good? Does bringing these issues up, and confronting the people who step over the line, result in new social contracts? How soon after an incident of public shaming is a person allowed to rejoin society? Does the social contract, and the social expectations that people place on them, change afterwards? In the case of *Crowded*, will Charlie ever be able to return to her normal busy life if she survives Reapr campaign? As Charlie continues her search for the person responsible, what will she do when she finds out? Will their actions equal her reaction? The person who initiates a Reapr campaign is anonymous, but will Charlie reveal that information, and turn the shame onto that person? Will that result in a series of changes to the society of *Crowded*?

Sebela has also written for comics like Harley Quinn and Hitman 47, both of which are distinctly amoral characters who have committed heinous crimes and killed many people. There is a possibility to explore morality in comics, and how the questionable accountability of professional killers intersects with them living their daily lives. What other ethical issues do these comics address? What social expectations do they follow? Are they even part of the society they work within? Do their actions preclude any form of membership within that society? And, since comics are such a vivid and potentially visceral medium, how does considering these issues through a fictional lens help people get more comfortable considering things that may be taboo subjects?

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