TV Finales and the Meaning of Endings

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Abstract

What do we want to feel when we reach the end of a television series? Whether we spend years of our lives tuning in every week, or a few days bingeing through a storyworld, TV finales act as sites of negotiation between the forces of media production and consumption. By tracing a history of finales from the first Golden Age of American television to our contemporary era of complex TV, my project provides the first book-length study of TV finales as a distinct category of narrative media. This dissertation uses finales to understand how tensions between the emotional and economic imperatives of participatory culture complicate our experiences of television.

The opening chapter contextualizes TV finales in relation to existing ideas about narrative closure, examines historically significant finales, and describes the ways that TV endings create meaning in popular culture. Chapter two looks at how narrative anticipation motivates audiences to engage communally in paratextual spaces and share processes of closure. Chapter three takes up binge-viewing and the idea of "Netflix Poetics" in order to investigate how on-demand technologies change our experience of TV endings. Chapter four examines the ways that affective energies circulate intertextually within and across fan communities, reshaping our sense of finality. The final chapter explores the concept of "cofactuality" to account for the ways that viewers manage narrative loss by thinking through, and sharing, multiple versions of imagined endings.

This dissertation combines core ideas from Media and Cultural Studies, Narrative Theory, and Fan and Audience Studies to make substantial cross-disciplinary contributions to the study of television and digital culture. I integrate links to images,

video, news articles, and social media posts in order to convey the multimedia textures of TV viewership. By using a series of case studies to rethink the key terms of televisual storytelling and viewer engagement, "TV Finales and the Meaning of Endings" examines how TV endings can help us negotiate loss and come to terms with finality.

Résumé

Que voulons nous sentir lorsque nous arriverons à la fin d'une série télévisée? Que nous consacrons des ans aux programmes hebdomadaires, ou nous passons quelques jours en visionnage rafale, les finals des séries télévisées sont les sites de négociation entre les forces de la production et la consommation des médias. En traçant une histoire des finals, du premier âge d'or de la télévision américaine à notre ère de la télévision complexe, mon projet offrit la première étude en profondeur qui définit les finals des séries comme une catégorie distincte des médias narratives. Cette thèse examine des finals pour comprendre comment les tensions entre les impératifs émotionnels et économiques de la culture participative compliquaient nos expériences de télévision.

Le premier chapitre met des finals des séries dans le contexte des idées existantes sur la résolution narrative. Il examine les finals d'importance historique et décrit la façon dont les fins des séries télévisées créent un sens dans la culture populaire. Le chapitre deux considère comment l'anticipation narrative motive les audiences d'engager collectivement dans les espaces paratextuels et de partager les processus de résolution. Le chapitre trois revient sur la visionnage rafale et l'idée de la "Poétique de Netflix" pour découvrir comment les technologies sur demand change notre expériences des finals. Le chapitre quatre examine comment les énergies affectives circulent intertextuellement dans et à travers les communautés de fans et redéfinissent notre sens de finalité. Le dernier chapitre explore le concept de "cofactuality" pour expliquer les façons par lesquelles les spectateurs gèrent la perte narrative en construisant et en

partageant des versions multiples des fins imaginées.

Cette thèse combine des idées centrales d'Études Culturelles, Théorie Narrative, et Études des Fans et Audiences pour apporter des contributions interdisciplinaires aux études de la télévision et la culture numérique. J'intègre des hyperliens aux images, vidéos, articles, et postes sur les médias sociaux pour montrer les textures multimédias de téléspectateurisme. En utilisant une série de études de cas pour repenser les termes essentielles de la narration et engagement télévisuelle, "TV Finales and the Meaning of Endings" examine comment les fins des séries télévisées peuvent nous aider de négocier la perte et d'accepter la finalité.

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Chapter One:

Introducing Finales

"All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer to death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot."

-Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1985)

I.   Introduction: Mixed Feelings

Endings matter. When we listen to, read, or watch a story, we participate in a drive towards closure that defines our experience of that story. "All plots tend to move deathward," writes DeLillo, and this narrative death drive reflects our real-life anxieties about death and finality. Things end, people die, and we don't always know how to feel about it.

On January 10, 2017, U.S. President Barack Obama delivered his Farewell Address. The contents of the speech, while poignant, were fairly unremarkable. But what struck me about this televised address was the number of social media posts comparing the event to watching the finale of a fictional TV series. While some of these comments are clearly sarcastic, in many cases, comparisons between this political address and fictional finales express a deep emotional experience—one of loss, heartbreak, and grief. Similarly, this comic strip uses a familiar TV finale trope (turning out the lights on an

empty sitcom set[1]) to convey the existential darkness of a Trump America. The fact that so many people equated Obama's farewell speech to the experience of saying goodbye to a TV show demonstrates that our engagement with longform storytelling impacts how we structure other parts of our lives. Peter Brooks writes that "The further we inquire into the problem of [narrative] ends, the more it seems to compel a further inquiry into its relation to the human end" (95). I argue that finales reveal the highest stakes of TV as a narrative medium: they demand that we negotiate desire and loss, forcing us to live and re-live the pains of finality in a recursive loop.

The numbers show that audiences care about TV endings. Super Bowls (the "finales" of the NFL season) and series finales of fiction-based programming[2] make up the vast majority of most-watched TV broadcasts in US history.[3] Even floundering or failing shows often see an increase in viewership for their series finales, with viewers who have otherwise divested themselves from a show tuning in to see how things turn out. And popular shows usually see an uptick in *live* viewership, highlighting our desire to experience finality as a viewing community (and, more practically, to avoid spoilers). Finales of popular series are cultural events suffused with hype, anticipation, nostalgia, and mourning. Meanwhile, finales are some of the most criticized elements of TV, with disappointment and anger being two of the dominant responses to these episodes. This dissertation examines TV finales from historical, formal, and experiential perspectives

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[1] Just a few examples of this sitcom finale trope: *Friends*, "The Last One, Part 2"; *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, "The Last Show"; *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, "I, Done, Part 2."

[2] For the most part, these are instances of planned finales, in which TV creators know that an episode will be the series' last.

[3] This dissertation focuses almost entirely on American television. While there is a complex global television landscape, the US TV industry is, through sheer volume of productions, most responsible for dictating the norms of TV storytelling that I explore in this project.

in order to demonstrate the cultural impact of TV finales and understand the ambivalent desires of TV viewers.

In 1957, a review of *The Nat King Cole Show*'s final episode stated: "From now on six thirty pm will seem strange until we come to realize other programs can be good."[4] What strikes me about this quote is how the hyperbole resembles more recent audience responses to endings, suggesting that finales have been important for most of TV history. Even in the case of musical variety shows, talk shows, reality shows, and episodic shows like sitcoms or procedurals, the End is fundamental to our viewing experiences.[5] But as TV storytelling has become increasingly serialized and "complex" (Mittell), finales have taken on a more significant role—for many shows, finales are the terrain upon which a series fails or succeeds, and these episodes can spark intense emotions—positive and negative—in TV viewers. The social dynamics of finales are at the heart of this dissertation: I combine formal analysis with reception studies to understand finales as cultural events and identify how these episodes frame our relationship to endings.

Some trends in TV storytelling ebb and flow over time, but there are also structural constants. TV finales tend to be longer than the series' average episode, include flashbacks and/or flashforwards, and feature a marriage, death, or change in vocational status for one or more main characters. It rarely behooves creators to close off a storyworld completely, so most finales attempt to strike a balance between closure

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[4] *The Chicago Defender*, 28 December 1957.

[5] Perhaps the biggest exception to this rule would be soap operas, which thrive on their ability not to end. However, even as soap operas avoid finality, this genre tends to feature an "excess of closural procedures" (Mumford 56).

and openness to satisfy viewers but keep the storyworld malleable, setting up potential

spinoffs and inviting fan engagement. The patterns that emerge in analyzing TV finales

across a wide range of genres and time periods suggest that viewers are aware of

similarities across texts, and these conventions create expectations about what TV

closure should be. Jason Mittell writes of the pressure on long-arc serials to "stick the

landing" in series finales (322), but I am equally interested in the pressures that we feel

as viewers when confronted with the end of a beloved series.

Our ambivalence towards TV endings goes something like this: we want our

questions answered, we want to feel a sense of resolution, of satisfaction, but we also

don't want the story to be over. We want the world to continue to exist—in particular, we

want the characters that we've grown to love to keep on existing. But we also enjoy being

surprised, even shocked, by a significant death or major plot twist. Capitalizing on

audience's character attachments by killing particular heroes or villains is a clear way to

generate an emotional reaction and instill closure. In a series focusing more on a single

character than an ensemble, killing that main character creates closure through

synecdoche (e.g. Tony Soprano's implied [death] = the death of *The Sopranos*).

Meanwhile, plot twists, at their best, offer a thought-provoking surprise; at their worst,

they betray the entire storyworld and undermine the potential for satisfying closure.

Indeed, some of the most controversial finales are considered so because of dubious plot

twists. For example, in "Daybreak," the finale of *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci-Fi

2004-2009) a massive temporal jump ("150,00 years later") and a decidedly religious

turn led to fan outrage (Howell). In "The Last One," *St. Elsewhere* reveals that the

show's six seasons have been taking place in the imagination of autistic child, [Tommy Westphall](#), a twist that continues to be discussed and parodied today. In "The Last Newhart," the title character [awakes next to the actor who played his wife](#) on *The Bob Newhart Show* (CBS, 1972-78), rendering the entirety of *Newhart* (CBS, 1982-90) as a dream, ontologically privileging the earlier series.[6] On the one hand, twists tend to be met with suspicion and anger, but these finales are also some of the most memorable in American TV history, suggesting that the sign of an unsuccessful finale might be a lack of post-episode discussion.

Responses to finales vary based on our individual experiences with a particular show, or with TV more generally. They may vary based on our social, religious, and political beliefs. And they vary based on our specific circumstances of viewing (for example, someone who binge-watches vs. someone who dedicates years of incremental viewing time to a series). But when we really care about a show, the conflicting desires for closure and openness, and the intensity of emotion when we reach the conclusion, emerge as common denominators in our experience of TV finales. This dissertation will explore those common denominators and the outliers, considering how developments in TV storytelling, viewing technology, and producer/consumer relationships have influenced the social dynamics of TV endings.

There was a fascinating trend in the tweets comparing #ObamaFarewell to fictional finales: people claiming that they *weren't* watching the address, just as they couldn't bring themselves to watch the finales of much TV fiction. Casual polling

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[6] In [this interview](#), Bob Newhart discusses how the idea of the finale came to be, directly invoking the influence of other series finales. His story is also an example of the lengths to which writers will go to keep finale scripts secret.

revealed that this practice is far more common than I had imagined: on Facebook and Twitter, I received dozens of testimonials from people who deliberately avoid watching finales out of the desire to end the series on their own terms, to spare themselves disappointment at a lackluster finale, or because they just find the experience of finales too sad. This resistance to TV endings is evidence of the power of finales and our ambivalent attitude towards closure and finality. In many ways, our attachment to a TV series feels like a romantic relationship: we invest time and energy, go through ups and downs, threaten to quit, get sucked back in…lather, rinse, repeat. But like any relationship, [breaking up with a TV series](#) is hard to do—even more so when you're the one getting dumped.

With these factors in mind, I argue that TV finales are key sites of negotiation between the forces of media production and consumption. Rituals of narrative closure manage viewer attachment to the medium by simultaneously highlighting the intensity of our emotional investments and the limitations of industry and storytelling structures. By undertaking an extended study of TV finales, my dissertation is the first substantial inquiry into narrative endings in our contemporary mediascape, emphasizing the ways that interactivity and passivity co-mingle to produce complex and often tenuous experiences of closure. In this introductory chapter, I will discuss some of the prevailing theories of narrative closure, provide an overview of existing scholarship on TV finales, offer a vocabulary for speaking about television storytelling, and briefly outline the rest of the dissertation.

II. Televisual Endings

TV finales amplify many of the problems regarding closure put forth by literary and film scholars. Narrative Theory often positions closure as a movement toward (or a return to) "stasis," as in D.A. Miller's influential concept of the "nonnarratable" as a "state of quiescence" (ix) in which there is nothing more worth telling. Laura Mulvey writes that in most films, "beginnings and ends are [...] characterized by stasis. Narrative needs a motor force to start up, out of an *inertia* to which it returns in the end" (70, my emphasis).[7] TV narrative, however indebted to the models established by literature and film, is not governed by a drive towards stasis; quite the contrary, the goal of TV—dictated historically by the industry's economic imperative to stay "on the air"—is perpetual narrative motion. While Frank Kermode notes that "it is one of the great charms of books that they have to end" (23), we might say that it is one of the great charms of a TV series that it could go on forever. So if a key part of narrative experience is the ability to "project ourselves [...] past the End," as Kermode (8) argues we do when reading a novel, this process is complicated by televisual seriality and the uncertain destiny of the textual whole.

What Miller locates as the "problematic of closure" is the need "to justify the cessation of narrative and to complete the meaning of what has gone before" (xi). Televisual narrative is by no means free of this pressure, but the fact that TV creators

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[7] Mulvey offers an alternative to this formulation in her analysis of freeze frame endings: "While the freeze frame brings finality to narrative, the sequence of individual frames can, as suggested by the system of pattern and repetition in the flicker film, lead to infinity" (81). In other words, the freeze frame recalls the ontology of the photograph, which has no end. Mulvey's model is especially concerned with the metonymic potential of the cinematic apparatus, but the implications for her take on narrative dynamics have clear applicability to other media.

often do not know how much time they have to tell their story, or when they might be cancelled, means that such completion is rare at best. Miller concludes his study of literary closure with the following caveat: "We are thus in a paradoxical position of casting doubt on the primacy of a closure to which it is not at all clear we have ceased to adhere" (282). I argue that this paradox is especially true in the case of TV finales, particularly for long-running series. The anger and disappointment that accompanies finales more often than not is a way of "casting doubt" on a finale's ability to impose meaning on a series; but our obsession with finales as such indicates that we continue to adhere to the notion that endings matter above all else. Barthes writes that "what constitutes the denouement, is the truth," (187) in contrast to the wandering plot in which: "nothing is shown [...] but snares, mistakes" (188). While I will ultimately argue against this concept of storytelling, the popular discourse that elevates finales to a special status suggests that this traditional attitude towards narrative meaning haunts the TV viewer and is partially responsible for our fraught relationship with televisual endings. This dissertation argues that we need to shift our notions of narrative ontology and embrace different conceptions of closure to account for the unique affordances of TV storytelling and the social experiences of TV viewers.

Literary narrative theory tells us that the drive towards closure already comprises "two apparently incompatible ideas of the future—the future which is to come and the future which is already there" (Currie 13). Here, Currie situates the phenomenon of reading in relation to the mode of literary production—the End already exists in the reader's hands, and movement towards the End is self-determined. With TV, however,

the mode of production—series are written as they air, rarely with a pre-determined end point—changes the ontology of storytelling and thus our narrative expectations. In other words, for most serial television, viewers have no reason to believe in a "future that is already there" beyond the level of the episode, or perhaps the season. Cancellation always looms in the distance, threatening to end the story without closure. In short, the nature of the TV industry plays a major role in determining what finales can and do look like. Over time, TV viewers have become more cognizant of finale norms, as they recognize trends and patterns across TV genres and compare TV series to one another. This relational approach seems especially common when evaluating finales. I have created a Storify, or curated collection of web content, that offers a sampling of the [discourse surrounding finales in recent years](). These examples demonstrate how television culture situates finales as distinct elements with special significance for how shows get made and what their legacy will be.

As much as TV narrative is characterized by the desire to keep going, every show ends eventually. Mittell offers a taxonomy of TV endings that accounts for the various ways that industry circumstances can dictate televisual finality. He refers to the "*stoppage*, an abrupt, unplanned end to a series" which "result[s] in a premature cessation of a series without narratively motivated closure or finality" (319). He also identifies the "*wrap-up*, a series ending that is neither fully arbitrary nor completely planned," a model that offers "a degree of closure but not outright finality" (320). Next, he writes of the "*conclusion*, when a program's producers are able to craft a final episode knowing that it will be the end" (320). "Conclusions," Mittell argues, "offer a sense of

finality and resolution, following the centuries-old assumption that well-crafted stories need to end" (321). Mittell goes on to argue that a "*finale*" is a "conclusion with a going away party [...] defined more by their surrounding discourse and hype than any inherent properties of the narrative itself" (322). He writes that the "discursive prominence of finales raises the narrative stakes of anticipation and expectation for viewers, and thus finales frequently produce disappointment and backlash when they inevitably fail to please everyone" (ibid). While I disagree that the term "finale" should be reserved for the specific kind of episode that he describes, since the social experience of finales often transcends this categorization, these terms are useful for understanding the variety of finale scenarios that audiences experience and how they relate to industry circumstances.

Still, in each of these finale scenarios, endings do not have to be set in stone. After cancellation, TV series have the ability to reconstitute themselves in a transmedia environment and thus undo the stasis of the official end.[8] For example, as I will discuss further in chapter four, *Firefly*'s migration to the big screen in the cinematic sequel *Serenity* (2005), as well as the storyworld's continuation in comic book form, complicates the finality of the series' premature cancellation by offering multiple official ends. Similarly, the popularity of TV remakes and revivals (Lavigne) means that storyworlds can be resurrected and undermine previously established terms of finality. If closure in the traditional sense is always about the ambiguous restoration of a status quo, the nature of TV storytelling, especially in our contemporary media landscape,

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[8] Mittell refers to a "*cessation*, which is a stoppage or wrap-up without definite finality" and a "*resurrection*, when an already concluded series returns, either on television or in another medium" (321). Both of these terms evoke the flexibility of ending structures.

foregrounds that ambiguity in its very structure. Finales are therefore at the heart of how TV manipulates viewer desire: by instating, undermining, and reinstating forces of closure, viewers are asked to feel everything—or, in some cases, nothing at all.

Audience reactions to particular TV endings are the central occupation of most existing scholarship on finales. Charlotte Howell discusses how fans responded to the religious turns in *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*, ultimately arguing that "[t]hese two recurring readings of the two series' finales reveal the tension created by generic expectations within an ongoing telefantasy series" (303). Joanne Morreale discusses the *Seinfeld* finale as "cultural spectacle," calling it a "unifying national moment, as manufactured by the media" (110). Morreale goes on to argue that "The Finale" was an example of "increasingly postmodern" (ibid) TV storytelling that offered viewers no "redemption" or "resolution" (112), perhaps one of the reasons why audiences reacted so negatively to the episode. Rebecca Williams's theory of "post-object fandom," or "fandom of any object which can no longer produce new texts" (16), is firmly grounded in an ethnographic approach to online fan responses. By drawing a hard line between a living text and a "dormant" one (3), and prioritizing a specific empirical data set, Williams avoids grappling with the complexities of finales and the multiple temporalities of narrative encounter.

Like these scholars, I am interested in our experiences of particular finales, and so audience response is part of my methodology. But I also seek to provide a more comprehensive theory of finales by looking closely at formal and thematic patterns across TV genres and historical moments. In other words, individual case studies can be

illuminating, but they only get us so far in articulating the significance of finales as a distinct category of TV episode. In his chapter on "Ends," Mittell provides a few starting points for this inquiry: he notes the "inward turn towards metafiction" (324) found in many TV endings, as well as how "[h]ype and reception discourses help shape expectations for both viewers and creators" (332). Combining reception histories with textual analysis leads to a more holistic understanding of finales as cultural objects with shared components. I am positioning finales as a specific category of television episode, one that carries with it expectations that have been formed by a history of TV endings. And while I am most interested in series finales, season finales remain essential to this dissertation, as they are imbricated in many of the same concerns regarding anticipation, closure, and audience experience.

One of the few scholars to consider finales as a broader narrative category is C. Lee Harrington. In her discussion of TV finales, she poses the question: "How might we construct an *ars moriendi* for 21st-century US television in light of serials' expectable biographies or life course trajectories?" (580). In other words, Harrington is interested in what a "good textual death" looks like for a TV series. She uses gerontological and thanatological scholarship to map the specific concerns that finales grapple with, such as agency (581), "coherence" (580), and "foresight" (583). Drawing from *ars moriendi*, ancient instructional books on preparing for death, Harrington emphasizes the "active role of the dying in determining [one's] ultimate destiny" (581). In TV industry terms, this concept would mean that the creators of a series must have the freedom to determine when the story will end. As noted earlier, such creative agency has been rare

across TV history. However, in recent years, and in fact more so since Harrington published this article, planned finales have actually become increasingly common. Network executives have now recognized the importance of finales in determining the legacy of a series, as well as potential money to be made in a series' afterlife; as Harrington points out, "from an industry perspective, the only bad ending is that which ends the fandom" (591). Harrington concludes her article with the following suggestion:

> [P]erhaps we would benefit in our increasingly mediated world from a variety of textual deaths that capture the vicissitudes of real-world death. Poet Dylan Thomas urged us to not go gentle into that good night— perhaps the pleasures of fandom would be deepened by embracing a broader range of textual deaths that include accidents and suicides and homicides alongside the gentle endings that fans currently prefer. (591)

While I do not agree that audiences necessarily prefer "gentle" endings, Harrington's call for a "variety of textual deaths" is useful for framing recent developments in TV finales. The increased prevalence of planned finales is no doubt also related to the rise of "complex TV" (Mittell), since the more serialized a plot, the more necessary a dedicated ending will be. As such, the past five years have seen more of the diverse ending strategies to which Harrington alludes. But before discussing the place of finales in our current TV landscape, it is useful to analyze some examples of finales across history in order to see a lineage of televisual endings.

III. Historicizing Finales

I Love Lucy (CBS 1951-1957) is an icon of TV history. Lucille Ball, "The First Lady of Television," challenged industry norms by starting her own production company and pioneering the three-camera sitcom style that is so pervasive in American television. It is no surprise, then, that its final episode would be an important landmark in the history of TV finales. In "Lucy Meets the Moustache," the last installment of *The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour* (CBS 1957-1960, a direct continuation of *I Love Lucy*), Lucy invites her neighbors, Ernie Kovacs and Edie Adams, TV stars both within and outside of the diegesis, to dinner in order to convince them to hire an out-of-work Ricky. The metafictional elements of the episode are exemplified in the first act, when Adams sings the jazz/blues standard "That's All." [Her performance](#), which is filmed in a tight medium shot, only occasionally panning out to include Ethel playing piano, acts as a eulogy for the storyworld and, in retrospect, for Ball and Arnez's real-life romantic and professional partnership. Adams's frequent glances into the camera create the impression of a direct address to the viewer, allowing her to stand in for the show, saying goodbye to its audience. The rest of the episode revels in classic *Lucy* components, hitting some of the show's best notes, such as Ball's cross-dressing disguise and exaggerated (but controlled) physical humour. Lucy's well-meaning caper plot unfolds predictably, but the final kiss between her and Ricky conveys the weight of the series' ending, as does the extended audience applause.

Other finales from TV's first "Golden Age" helped set the standards for how we understand finales today. Since shows usually did not know in advance about their

renewal/cancellation status, there is some conflation between the trends in season versus series finales when we reach back into history. Still, these episodes are instructive, foundational practices in televisual closure that deserve closer study. For example, the *Father Knows Best* (CBS 1954-1955, 1958-1960; NBC 1955-1958) series finale centered upon daughter Kathy's graduation from high school and utilized flashbacks to an earlier episode when her sister Betty had expressed similar worries. Both the use of flashbacks and the trope of graduation are common in finales to this day. In the *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS 1957-1958; ABC 1958-1963) finale, the family flips through a photo album and reminisces via flashbacks about the boys' younger days, steeping the episode in nostalgia. The finale of *The Honeymooners* (CBS 1955-1956) depicts Ralph meeting Alice's ex-boyfriend, who Ralph believes to be wealthy. Worrying that Alice would have been happier with this other man, Ralph schemes to make the man think that he, too, is well-off. Though not thematizing nostalgia per se, this episode invokes a kind of "what if?" storytelling circularity while, in the end, reaffirming Ralph and Alice's relationship and their social position.

While these examples show that final episodes have long stood apart from the rest of a series, the birth of the finale as we know it could be located in *The Fugitive* (CBS 1963-1967). In an [interview with series producer Leonard Goldberg](#), he explains how he had to convince the network to let them create an episode that would answer the show's ongoing mysteries, such as "the one armed man" and the exoneration or imprisonment of Richard Kimble. The series had actually already ended in April, 1967, but Goldberg argued to CBS that audiences would be unsatisfied by the lack of a

conclusion to the story: "They've invested in it for five years, we've gotta come to a conclusion." So CBS allowed Goldberg and team to craft a two-part special episode to air in August, 1967 that would offer the audience a conclusion to the story. The fact that, as Goldberg tells it, the network executives were so bewildered by the concept of a true finale ("they looked at me like I was crazy"), suggests one of two things: executives were out of touch with the desires of TV audiences, or they simply did not care. Goldberg recalls thinking at the time: "What a sad commentary on our business that the people in charge don't believe the power of their own medium." Goldberg went directly to advertisers to fund the episode, and when it aired in August, 46% of *all* television homes in America tuned in, a staggering number and an early indicator of the relationship between finales and TV viewership.

"The Judgement" is a two-part episode which sees the fugitive Dr. Kimble finally caught by his long-time pursuer, Lieutenant Gerard, forcing him to return to Indiana for his overdue capital punishment. Gerard, however, has come to doubt Kimble's guilt over the years, and so he agrees to give the doctor a bit more time to prove his innocence before handing himself over to the police. The episode conveys an awareness of its finale status, starting from the introductory teaser of part one, in which Gerard tells Kimble, "You've run out of time." Throughout both episodes, Gerard combines with the unseen voiceover narration to constantly remind viewers of the impending End. The epilogue of part one mentions Kimble's "appointment with death," and the teaser of part two shows Gerard telling Kimble "we're going to have to be leaving soon." Just following that line, the narrator notes that "This day has come too soon." There are also several references

to the time span of the series ("four years"), and Gerard imposes a "deadline" for Kimble to turn himself in—a construct that frames the pacing of part two. After a few twists and turns, Kimble does prove his innocence, and the final epilogue shows him leaving the courthouse with his new romantic interest (conveniently introduced in part one), as the narrator states: "Tuesday, September 5th. The Day the Running Stops."[9] Audience response to this episode was overwhelmingly positive, and the tropes and tactics it used to generate a sense of closure would set a standard for finale storytelling in years to come.

While the notion of the series finale may have been alien to TV producers in 1967, the final episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS 1970-1977) only ten years later seems to indicate a keen awareness of the importance of finales. "The Last Show" unfolds as a meta-practice in closure, with the firing of our main characters from WJM-TV standing in for the series' cancellation. The characters grapple with their impending unemployment, reflect on their time together, and share a [tearful goodbye hug](). When Lou (Edward Asner) sniffles to the group, "I think we all need some Kleenex," he could be addressing the audience as well. Just as Lucille Ball had impacted the TV industry and served as a strong female figure on and off-screen, *Mary Tyler Moore* was a pivotal series in its depiction of an unmarried, career-oriented woman. It is worth noting that both Ball and Moore play versions of themselves in their respective sitcoms, and perhaps this conflation of person and character adds an extra layer of

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[9] This is the date the finale aired in Canada, and it is the date that the narrator uses in the version of the episode found on archive.org. However, some research indicates that there is another version that uses "August 2," the date the finale aired in the USA. In any case, implicating the airing time with the story time is a significant finale trope.

emotion to their series' finales. The final shot of *Mary Tyler Moore* is a powerful moment of female agency: after the group leaves the studio, Mary returns—is this the character, the actor, or both? She looks around the room with an expression of mixed sadness and satisfaction, then [turns out the lights](#), ending things on her own terms.

"Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen," the series finale of *M*A*S*H* (CBS 1972-1983), is the single most-watched TV episode of all time, viewed by 125 million people—half of the US population in 1983. This impressive number is oft-cited in accounts of TV history, but there is little formal consideration of its achievements as a finale and its impact on finale storytelling today. Here, I would like to draw out some of the characteristics of the episode that have resulted in its status as an example of successful televisual closure. First of all, the finale's hyperextended length (2 full hours) allows it to manage multiple subplots and closural sequences—the episode takes its time to say goodbye, but also takes time to restate the central themes of the series along the way.[10] The episode teaches viewers how to come to terms with endings and what a proper goodbye entails: in the first act, BJ Hunnicut attempts to leave Korea on clearly mistaken orders (a bureaucratic mix-up), only to return to the unit's base camp in the next act to participate in the more extended closural process with the rest of the main characters. This departure fake-out serves the dual purpose of preparing viewers for the end of the series and warning them about the dangers of rushed goodbyes. Each significant relationship in the series gets its moment for reflection, and even the

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[10] Hawkeye's stint in an army mental hospital after watching a Korean woman kill her child to avoid capture condenses *M*A*S*H*'s anti-war message into a few powerful scenes before returning the central protagonist to the series' primary locale, the unit's base camp. Alan Alda's depiction of post-traumatic stress is quite harrowing, played perfectly against the calm demeanor of recurring character Dr. Sidney Freedman (Allan Arbus).

secondary characters get a scene where they each stand up and share their goals for the future. The rest of the episode contains a variety of finale tropes: a "countdown" to the end of the war over the PA system, a wedding, disassembling the set (twice), a passionate kiss between two of the main characters, and [the most famous goodbye note](#) in TV history.

These are only a handful of the series finales that have made significant impressions on TV audiences and impacted the norms of TV storytelling. Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, friends, family, and colleagues would point me to finales that they deemed important. And every time a popular show prepares to end, a fresh batch of articles and top-ten lists about the best/worst/most shocking finales makes the rounds on social media. In order to rein in this large body of textual material and to compare finales across time and genre more easily, I have created a [spreadsheet that charts various elements of finale storytelling](#), such as: running time, formal techniques, thematic patterns, ending types, and reception history. I will continue to add information to this document, with the ultimate goal of producing some soft data about series finales. As we move through the next four chapters, I will draw on a variety of finale examples from the spreadsheet; but first it is necessary to lay some conceptual and structural groundwork for the rest of this dissertation.

IV. Vocabulary

In this section, I offer definitions of key terms that will appear throughout the dissertation. This vocabulary articulates some of my interventions in various scholarly

conversations and sets up the project's methodological leanings, as I build on existing concepts and create a few of my own.

Television

TV scholars and critics have been proclaiming/warning/touting the "death of TV" for years. Even in the "second [or third] golden age of TV," with more "quality"[11] series than ever before, cable subscriptions have fallen drastically, and televisions themselves are becoming, if not obsolete, unnecessary technologies for consuming televisual media. With Video on Demand (VOD) and Streaming Video On Demand (SVOD) technologies and platforms leading the charge of storytelling innovation, the lines between media categories are becoming increasingly blurred.[12] So why is it important to hold on to the concept of "television?" What does it matter if we understand a Netflix original series as TV, or as something else? I argue that, even though the category may be problematic, it is necessary to understand new forms of serial storytelling in relation to the history of television of which they are are part.. Furthermore, the vast majority of viewers cannot help but experience these stories as such—even if we recognize that some digitally native series depart from traditional TV norms, we are still reliant upon those norms to understand them. Television is not dead, it is evolving.

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[11] Discussions regarding the term "Quality TV" have been exhaustive in television studies over the past several years (see McCabe and Akass's 2007 edited collection, for example). The general consensus today is that the term reinforces media and class hierarchies and does not accurately reflect the diverse offerings of contemporary TV. Throughout this dissertation, when I use this term, I am using it to refer to a discourse about TV rather than as an actual indicator of textual quality.

[12] This assertion follows Henry Jenkins' influential 2006 theory of "convergence culture" as "an era of prolonged transition and transformation in the way media operates" (24).

Narrative

While Narrative Theory and Narratology have a robust history in Literary and Film

Studies, TV Studies has, with a few exceptions, tended to shy away from these fields of

discussion.[13] Serious work about TV has often been more concerned with the industry

itself, while textual analysis of TV tends to focus on thematic and representational issues

rather than narrative mechanics. This dissertation is an attempt to fill some gaps in TV

Studies that are created by a lack of narratological attention to the medium in order to

demonstrate how form functions in and as a system with many moving parts. Therefore,

when I use the term "narrative," I am referring to the structures of storytelling:

sometimes the specific structures of a given series, but also the broader structures

available to TV as a narrative medium. Furthermore, my focus on the ways that viewers

articulate their relationships to TV texts reveals a double-narrativity at stake in TV

experience: how do we narrativize narratives, and how do such practices feed back into

primary narrative systems? It is important to note that I am not necessarily invoking

Narrative Theory each time I use the term "narrative," though I will refer to scholarship

from the field when it is useful to the questions at hand. My approach to TV narrative

works productively with Mittell's concept of televisual "poetics." Mittell writes that

poetics "offer a model of formal analysis that is not divorced from issues of content,

context, and culture" (4). He positions poetics broadly as "a focus on the specific ways

that texts make meaning" (5) and emphasizes that "[F]orms and structures […] [are]

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[13] Some exceptions include most of Jason Mittell's work, Sean O'Sullivan's "Broken on Purpose: Poetry, Serial Television, and the Season" (2010), Michael Newman's "From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative" (2006), and Porter, et al. "Re(de)fining Narrative events: Examining Television's Narrative Structure" (2002).

part of a lived cultural practice, not a static, bounded, and fixed creative work" (7). One advantage of widening the scope of narrative analysis is that it helps us understand how storytelling techniques move across generic boundaries, sometimes even beyond fiction and—as in the case of the Obama farewell speech—into the real world.

Binge-Viewing

Generally understood as watching three or more episodes of a series in a row, binge-viewing is one of the most interesting developments in TV culture. Despite the fact that the term has only [become popular in recent years](#), binge-viewing is not a new phenomenon: "marathons" have been a staple of broadcast and cable programming since the rise of syndication in the 1980s, and VHS and DVD box sets have enabled viewer-controlled bingeing for decades. In 2017, however, binge-viewing has become more common, thanks to DVR, PVR, torrenting, and streaming technologies. Bingeing reconfigures our relationship to texts by undermining the forces of serial distribution and facilitating more immersive (some would say addictive) viewing. Despite its negative connotations, binge-viewing enables new and exciting ways of thinking about TV experience: it generates different kinds of televisual "flow" (Williams), and it brings out textual elements that are difficult to glean in traditional viewing contexts. Bingeing can be a solitary or social act, and it can be motivated by a variety of factors: in chapter three, I offer a taxonomy of binge models (complete binge, catch-up binge, re-watch binge), and outline some of the dominant emotional and physical components of binge experiences. Furthermore, I argue that the popularity of binge-viewing has affected

some of the norms of TV storytelling and form, which can be seen most clearly in what I call "Netflix Poetics."

Netflix Poetics:

This term, which I coined while teaching an undergraduate course about Netflix, refers to the ways that SVOD affects the poetic structures of television. I developed the concept to account for the on-demand native series that Netflix produces ("Netflix Originals"), but many of the core elements could be extended to shows that air in a more traditional format and then are placed in an SVOD context. The privileging of "Netflix" in my terminology is a way of paying homage to the streaming service's impact on the media industries, but similar poetic structures can be found in other SVOD platforms. Some of the components of Netflix Poetics are: the absence of commercial breaks and weekly gaps between episodes, varying episode and season lengths, high production value as a result of large budgets, narrational strategies that blur diegetic boundaries, visual and thematic references to addiction (tied to binge-viewing), artistic (often lengthy) opening title sequences, and difficult or edgy subject matter.[14] Netflix Poetics occur at the textual level, but are also dependent upon the ways that SVOD interfaces construct our experiences of TV storytelling, such as through auto-play, suggested viewing, and the ability to skip opening credit and "previously on" recap sequences.

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[14] In a March, 2017 presentation at the annual conference of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, I offered a working theory on the concept of Netflix Poetics. Myles McNutt took up the concept in his blog post about Netflix's *13 Reasons Why* (2017).

Social TV

This term has become an industry (and, as a result, academic) buzzword in the age of second-screen viewing, in which viewers engage with a TV text and/or its audience via social media applications, often at the same time as they are watching the show. When I refer to the social nature or social meaning of television, I am not necessarily invoking this industry conception, though such practices are certainly an important part of the history of audience engagement. But while the prominence of digital tools and social media platforms plays an important role in this project, I am also interested in the offline social dynamics of television viewing. Viewing with other people, for example, generates different textual experiences that are bound up with our relationships. And even a lone viewer can be implicated in the sociality of finales, as the social experience of finality is not only located between or among viewers, but also between viewer and character or viewer and text. In other words, a viewing experience can be social regardless of whether or not a viewer actually communicates with another living person.

Anticipation

Television has always been about anticipation, regardless of storytelling genre. In the episodic and anthology shows of the 50s and 60s, viewers were constantly reminded to "tune in next week" at the same time, on the same station. Shows of all genres and formats, including reality-based programming, often deploy a "tease" of the next installment to keep viewers on the hook. Paratextual materials and "water cooler" conversations fill the gaps between episodes and create shared expectations. The

circulation of anticipation and the ways that it manifests in viewing communities are not unique to TV, but anticipation takes on specific forms that are facilitated by the industry's distribution and consumption patterns. Even as SVOD platforms have begun to normalize other models of distribution, a point that I will explore in chapter three, cable and broadcast networks are clinging to a traditional model that relies on anticipation to generate hype. For example, many networks are building in longer hiatuses for their flagship series (the term "mid-season finale" has become common in recent years) and spending millions of dollars in hype-based marketing. These strategies are attempts to sustain audiences across longer periods of time—making advertisers happy and creating a climate of anticipation for viewers, while raising the importance of finales as such.

The Viewer

Throughout this dissertation, I will often use "the viewer," "viewers," and "the audience" more or less interchangeably. Sometimes, I will refer to "fans," but I have attempted to keep this word reserved for a particular kind of "active fandom" that I discuss more in-depth in chapter four. One of the problems plaguing Fan Studies and, indeed, most forms of Audience Studies, is a focus on the types of viewers who produce visible evidence of engagement, because these are the viewers who can more easily be studied. While I am deeply invested in analyzing fan practices, especially in relation to finales, this dissertation takes a variety of viewer types into consideration: attentive and distracted viewers, cable subscribers and cord cutters, weekly viewers and

binge-viewers, TV connoisseurs and casual viewers. Of course, assuming a universal

"viewer" has many problematic implications and theoretical limitations, as it does not

account for the ways that gender, race, sexuality, and class inflect viewing experience.

Therefore, I am by no means suggesting that there is an actual capital "V" Viewer, but

my goal is to extrapolate how the formal elements of a text (and its finale) might work

on viewers across a variety of demographics.

Paratext

In 1987, Gerard Genette theorized literary paratexts as "thresholds of interpretation," as

"zones not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics

and a strategy, of an influence on the public" (2). In 2011, Jonathan Gray took this

concept and applied it to a wide range of media objects. Gray, like Genette, argues for

the importance of paratexts in shaping meaning, even suggesting that we might think of

something like an "off-screen studies" (4) strand within Media Studies. Gray argues that

paratexts "create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings

that we associate with them [...] a paratext constructs, lives in, and can affect the

running of the text" (6). Though I am committed to formal analysis of TV series, my

conception of finales relies heavily on understanding the paratextual elements that

influence our experience and understanding of a storyworld—for example: reviews,

promotional images, trailers, episode descriptions, interviews, DVD special features, etc.

Most of Gray's *Show Sold Separately* emphasizes official paratexts (those created by the

same entities creating the primary text), but this dissertation broadens Gray's definition

to show how various modes of viewer engagement function paratextually. Gray notes how paratextuality is related to intertextuality (31), and I further emphasize this relationship by noting how our individual experiences with media texts can generate unique and often surprising paratextual functions.

Feeling

Many of the conceptual strands in this dissertation rely on the importance of emotions to our experiences of TV narrative. And so, to a certain extent, I am invested in notions of "affect" and Affect Theory. However, as Eugenie Brinkema notes, one symptom of the recent "turn to affect" (xi) in Humanities scholarship is the "sin of generality" (xiii), a vague vocabulary which forecloses some of the most interesting insights that attention to affect might reveal. She argues: "Critical positions that align affect with what generally and amorphously resists (structure, form, textuality, signification, legibility) hold on to the notion of a transcendental signified, hold fast to the fantasy of something that predates the linguistic turn and that evades the slow, hard tussle of reading texts closely" (xiv).[15] Brinkema offers a bold corrective to this problem by proposing a "radical formalism" (37) that allows for "*reading affects as having forms*" (37, her emphasis). For Brinkema, the only significant bodies are the bodies on the screen—there is no subjective experience of affect, only affect embedded at the level of the image. While I do not fully subscribe to Brinkema's approach—embodied viewership is still central to my project—her model is nonetheless useful for my exploration of how televisual moments

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[15] Indeed, in *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010), a field-defining publication, only two of the 14 contributions perform any degree of close reading narrative texts.

and narrative arcs work at the level of form to produce particular affective conditions.[16]

In addition to embracing Brinkema's call for the formal specificity of affect, I also heed

Raymond Williams's emphasis on the social and historical contexts of affect. In 1977,

Williams described "structures of feeling" as the "affective elements of consciousness

and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought:

practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity" (132).

By combining formal analysis with an understanding of structures of feeling as

historically and socially determined, my approach to affect seeks to situate TV viewing

"in the definite particular" (Brinkema xv) while allowing for multiple trajectories of

experience. While I will tend to use the term "feeling" in this dissertation, when I deploy

"affect," it will refer to those felt senses that cannot easily be labelled: as Williams

describes, the "kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each

in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate" (131).

Interdiegetic Feeling

One application of my version of televisual affect can be seen in the phenomenon of

"interdiegetic feeling," or the transference of emotional attachments across texts. The

intertextuality of our narrative experiences is an important part of my theory of TV

finales, and interdiegetic feeling is one of the ways in which intertextuality operates at

the level of emotion. I argue that we accrue, displace, and redistribute our attachments

to characters, actors, storyworlds, even filming locations, when we consume narrative

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[16] For other examples of affect theory that pays attention to questions of aesthetics and form, see Lauren
Berlant (2011), Sianne Ngai (2012), and Adam Frank (2014).

media. Interdiegetic feeling is, in many ways, a more complex version of the "star text" phenomenon articulated by Richard Dyer in 1980. It can be something that occurs paratextually, or it might be embedded into storytelling through casting, location, or other formal choices. Its source may be easily identifiable, or it might operate more subtly, even subconsciously, on the viewer. This process generates layers of meaning that are highly subjective, since viewers come at texts from different experiences and perspectives. Interdiegetic feeling becomes particularly acute in relation to narrative endings, since the transference of attachment has the potential to either mitigate or exacerbate our sense of loss.

Cofactuality

Literary narrative theory has paid substantial attention to the phenomenon of counterfactual storytelling, in which a narrative depicts "a nonfactual or false *antecedent*" to a previously established historical or ontological logic (Dannenberg 111). Some of the most common examples of counterfactuals can be found in the alternate history genre, which proceed by "'undoing' a real-world event in the past to produce an *outcome* or *consequent* contrary to reality" (ibid., her emphasis). While Dannenberg notes that counterfactuals involve a "clear contrastive relationship" (ibid.), she also concedes that "Historically, an overall development can be observed involving the destabilization of the clear ontological hierarchy of counterfactuality [...] and the construction of more ambivalent hierarchies of alternate worlds" (119). I propose the term "cofactual" to account for these more ambivalent narrative hierarchies. While

counterfactuals usually involve single points of departure and rely on binary logic, cofactuals have multiple points of entry and reject binaries in favor of multiplicities and convergences. Throughout this dissertation, I use cofactual in three ways: 1) Cofactual *thinking* as a process of narrative engagement in which viewers imagine and take seriously multiple variations of a storyworld; 2) Cofactual *interpretation* as a viewer's commitment to the idea of multiple storyworld versions being equally true; and 3) Cofactual *narration* as a storytelling mode that is fully dedicated to multiple versions of reality and which presents these versions without ontological hierarchy. Cofactual narration is rare, though in chapter five, I offer a strong example of such storytelling by analyzing *Fringe*, a series that foregrounds "ontological pluralism" (Ryan) in its structure and themes. Cofactual *interpretation* is also relatively uncommon, since our default approach to narrative (and, indeed, life) is to privilege a single reality over other possible versions, though I will argue that cofactual interpretation is becoming more prominent in the era of complex TV. Cofactual *thinking*, meanwhile, is at the crux of narrative experience: after all, "fiction's very premise is world divergence" ([Saint-Amour]). I argue that such world divergences proliferate when we engage with texts as malleable, permeable, co-constructed entities—and in doing so, cofactuality becomes a powerful way to rethink narrative ontology and storytelling agency, particularly when it comes to the authority of endings.

Closure

It seems generally agreed upon that finales should seek to provide closure, but this

concept is, as evidenced by audience reactions to most finales, quite relative. In many cases, closure gets conflated with satisfaction, an equally nebulous emotion. Just as our responses to finales vary based on our personal experiences with TV and attitudes towards social and political issues, our definitions of closure will also depend on our relationship to a given story and our individual narrative desires. The idea of closure is at odds with the kinds of textual openness that many series aim for in attempts to keep storyworlds available for post-finale narrative extensions. A key problem for finales thus becomes how to instill a sense of closure without foreclosing the continuation of a narrative. Throughout this dissertation, I will interrogate our conceptions of closure, always positioning it as a moving target, and considering it in relation to what I am calling "ending-feelings."

Ending-feelings

TV is a vehicle through which we explore our emotional capacities. Good stories get us to feel things that we either can't or won't allow ourselves to feel in our lives beyond a show. We form relationships with stories and characters, they earn our investment, and we hope this investment pays off with emotionally satisfying moments. We desire many kinds of emotional satisfaction: happily-ever-afters, whodunits, will-they-won't-theys, how-could-theys, what-ifs and why-didn'ts. The key to these moments working on a viewer is the extent to which we feel for the characters. Feeling character loss is one of the ways that stories teach us how to make sense of the world. When a character we care about dies, we learn, through the story, how to negotiate a world without them. Closure

is thus never only about resolving a story arc or answering plot mysteries, but it also requires "ending-feelings," emotional closure that occurs at the level of character, or in some cases, the storyworlds themselves. Ending-feelings, therefore, are not reserved for finales, but can take place at any part of a narrative. I am interested in how a series generates ending-feelings throughout or even after its run, and how the strongest moments of closure can be found elsewhere than in the official endings.[17]

V. Chapter Overview

This first chapter has introduced the overarching goals of the dissertation and demonstrated the significance of finales to TV history and audience experience. It offered a brief overview of existing scholarship on narrative endings, demonstrating the need for an in-depth study of TV finales. It also listed and defined several key terms that will appear throughout the document. To complete this introduction, I will now outline the rest of the dissertation.

In recognizing that a main goal of TV narrative is to avoid cancellation, chapter two argues that *anticipation* is a driving force of televisual storytelling. While suspense has been well-covered by Literary and Film Studies, anticipation is relatively un-theorized. So after parsing how anticipation differs from suspense, the chapter provides a close reading of *Breaking Bad* to reveal how anticipation works on a viewer as they move towards a series finale. "Anticipating Closure in the Planned Finale" is particularly concerned with real-time viewing experiences; that is, watching a show as it

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[17] One example of a storytelling scenario in which ending--feelings may be strongest elsewhere than the official end would be in series that "Jumps the Shark," a term used to describe desperate attempts to keep a story going long past its viability.

airs as part of a viewing community that shares a process of closure. The chapter

considers how awareness of a planned finale structures narrative desire and how official

and unofficial paratexts contribute to anticipation. Through a comparison of *Breaking*

Bad's season finales to its series finale, I also begin to distinguish between these two

types of episodes—while this dissertation is primarily concerned with series finales, it is

impossible to understand them without a thorough understanding of the sister genre of

season finales. Ultimately, chapter two argues that planned finales create pressure on

textual producers and consumers to place closure at the heart of narrative meaning.

 Chapter three, "'Forward is the Battle Cry': Binge-Viewing and Netflix Poetics" is

an exploration of the dynamics of binge-viewing and how this practice changes the

function of narrative endings. Using a close reading of Netflix's flagship original series,

House of Cards, chapter three looks at what makes a series bingeable and how

bingeability affects narrative experience. While *House of Cards* has yet to have its series

finale, the narrative structure of the show is indicative of the unique poetics of Netflix

original series and how these poetics relate to finality. In particular, I argue that the

thematization of addiction throughout the series is instructive for binge-viewers,

revealing a narrative ontology that refigures our models of TV consumption and

enforces but complicates the primacy of teleological storytelling. In the final section of

the chapter, I draw on my personal experience of binge-viewing *Lost* as a way to show

how consumption patterns change our expectations for closure, noting my own

satisfaction with the finale in contrast to more popular readings of the show's ending.

 In chapter four, "Resisting Finality through Active Fandom" I discuss how fan

practices create webs of meaning, challenge authorship, and destabilize the power dynamics that typically structure narrative endings. Using "active fandom" to describe a variety of practices of viewer engagement, the chapter explores fans of The Whedonverse, or the texts that have been authored, to some extent, by Joss Whedon. My conception of active fandom emphasizes how affective networks drive practices in media "play" (Booth 2015) and create communities—both on- and offline—that shape our narrative desires. From fan campaigns to save or renew a series, to transmedia continuations of texts and storyworlds, the Whedonverse offers several examples of how active fandom is implicated in our understanding of closure and finality. In addition, the Whedonverse reveals the power of interdiegetic feeling and intertextual meaning-making, a complex terrain of "trans-fandom" that involves "combining" and "moving across different fandoms" (Hills 2015: 158, 159).

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I explore how the normalization of counterfactual storytelling has made way for the concept of cofactuality, which destabilizes the authority of any particular narrative ending. "Many Worlds, Many Endings" argues that the science fiction series *Fringe* deploys a complex system of counterfactual motifs in the service of cofactual narration, presenting multiple world-iterations that are equally real. The chapter then considers how cofactual thinking and interpretation can be made possible in narratives that do not specifically thematize plural worlds, and it suggests that cofactuality is becoming a more prevalent model of narrative ontology in the age of complex TV, especially with regards to how audiences make sense of finales. In the closing section of chapter five, I return to *Breaking Bad* to

show how serial distribution, social media, and active fandom have a stake in cofactual endings. The dissertation concludes with an epilogue that offers a meditation on ending-feelings through a close-reading of two character deaths that convey the weight of loss in televisual storytelling.

This dissertation is an interactive document. It contains my interventions into academic and non-academic conversations surrounding TV and digital media, and it reflects my own immersions in TV stories. I've watched *a lot* of TV in my life, including an outstanding amount in the past six years, and those narrative experiences have all led to the conclusions presented here. You will notice that I have included a variety of multimedia links (videos, images, Tweets, curated web content, etc.). My intention with these hyperlinks is to convey some of the visual and aural textures of my subject matter and research experience and to enact the fluidity of textual and paratextual signification that I argue is so essential to TV experience. While I believe this document can stand on its own without the hyperlinks, I do hope that readers take some time to explore the variety of embedded media. You need not click on every link, nor is it necessary to read or watch all of the linked content in full; think of this material as supplemental, designed to allow readers to dig deeper into some of the historical evidence and examples that inflect the dissertation. Just as good television gets us to feel what the characters feel, I think good scholarship gets the reader to feel a bit of the process, to trace the journey and sense the act of discovery.

Chapter Two:

"Things left to do": Anticipating Closure in the Planned Series Finale

I. **Theorizing Anticipation**

Tune in next week! To be continued. Next time on...

Anticipation is built into TV's economic and formal structures. The financial

imperatives of the TV industry dictate that television must thrive on the ability to

perpetuate narrative interest, not satisfy it, so anticipation becomes an integral part of

TV viewing—especially in the traditional broadcast context. Keeping viewers invested in

a storyworld goes hand in hand with maintaining ratings and enticing advertisers.

Season and series finales are at the core of this ethos—they generate extra levels of hype,

which usually translates into larger viewership. Season finales produce the conditions

for heightened anticipation during a show's hiatus, while planned (or expected) series

finales generate extensive anticipation during a show's final season. In response to the

demands of an increasingly competitive TV marketplace, gaps between episodes and

seasons involve a slow drip (or, often, a steady stream) of paratexts, such as teaser

images, promos, interviews, trailers, and spoilers, all designed to optimize anticipation.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how anticipation becomes most acute in cases of

planned finales—those in which the content producers know in advance that a season

will be the series' last, thus providing the opportunity to craft a deliberate path towards

some form of closure. Planned series finales give producers the opportunity to focus

audience attention on the End, producing a climate of anticipation that pervades a

show's entire final season. The heightened anticipation that accompanies planned series finales puts unique pressures on these narratives and propels a post-finale evaluative conversation that illuminates the conflicting array of desires involved in TV viewing.

This chapter is about those narrative pressures and expectations that viewing communities place upon planned series finales, as well as the social experience of those finales in the context of a recognized final season. It would be remiss to talk about planned finales as discrete objects outside of the phenomena of anticipation and curiosity that accompanies the journey of the final season, as well as the aftermath of the finale. These situations encourage social viewing: the resurgence of week-to-week appointment viewing instigates a prolonged feeling of anticipation through the communication and sharing of emotional responses between episodes. In addition, the temporal protraction of anticipation becomes exacerbated by extended hype and the proliferation of paratexts that inflate the aura of the final season, always with a teleological drive towards the series finale. In order to explore how anticipation operates in final seasons as a response to narrative, promotional, and social factors, I will use the critically acclaimed series *Breaking Bad* as a primary case study. *Breaking Bad*'s popularity, especially in its final season (which saw a huge ratings increase from previous seasons[18]), along with AMC's 2013 promotional campaign, make it a strong example of the distribution context that I am focusing on this chapter. Furthermore, the currently airing prequel *Better Call Saul* mitigated audience anxieties about the end of

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[18] According to the [Nielsen ratings catalogued on Wikipedia](#), in seasons one through four, *Breaking Bad*'s ratings only broke 2 million viewers once; in contrast, the fifth season breaks 2 million at every episode, with the final eight episodes ranging from 4.41 to 10.28 million for the series finale.

Breaking Bad in 2013, and it continues to embed an additional layer of anticipation in the storyworld as the prequel closes the temporal gap between itself and its source text.

In order to situate anticipation as an essential component of TV viewing, it is useful to consider the limitations of its most discussed narrative form—suspense. Ever since Hitchcock famously hailed its power, film scholars have prioritized suspense as a key element of narrative experience.[19] For example, Susan Smith's exploration of Hitchcock provides a useful theorization of suspense, emphasizing its "ability to provoke both an intellectual *and* affective response [...] [and] to determine how we feel by controlling what we know" (17, her emphasis). Smith goes on to offer a taxonomy of forms of suspense: "vicarious suspense," in which the viewer feels "on behalf of a character" (18); "shared suspense," which "enabl[es] the viewer to fear along with rather than simply for a character" (20); and "direct suspense [...] where we experience anxiety and uncertainty primarily on our *own* rather than on a character's behalf" (22, her emphasis). In each of these cases, suspense is figured as a tightly focused, dread-based emotion that happens during the viewing process. By "controlling our path through the narrative flow of events" (25), the goal of suspense is to keep the viewer immersed in the text.

So, while suspense is textually embedded and inward-facing, I want to focus on the forms of anticipation that happen outside of and between textual installments: those that are paratextually dispersed and outward-facing. The goal of such anticipation is to

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[19] There has also been ample work on literary suspense. Caroline Levine (2003) notes how most 20th-century scholarship positions suspense as a vehicle for "credulity and obedience—*passivity*" (1). She argues, however, that suspense can operate "as a stimulus to active speculation" (2). Levine's conception of suspense is therefore well-aligned with my positioning of anticipation in this chapter.

create a participatory momentum in the viewer and expand the aura of the text into paratextual spaces. Whereas suspense operates as a kind of cognitive freeze, a deeply felt sense of waiting for a particular event to occur (or not), broader forms of anticipation can be rich with analytical possibilities, intellectual meanderings, and emotional uncertainties. My conception of anticipation highlights the social nature of TV experience and the ways that emotions are shared and amplified in viewing communities. The fact that suspense is narratively embedded also means that it comes to you and at you, an emotion thrust upon the viewer; but anticipation can often also involve viewers' active searching, guessing, and sharing. Therefore, while all forms of anticipation are future-oriented emotions, suspense (if executed properly) traps viewers in the same time and space as the narrative, disallowing multiple temporalities and spaces of experience.

Serial storytelling is conducive to both suspense and anticipation more broadly. Suspense, as a narrative tactic, keeps viewers' attention for the duration of the episode or set of episodes (often, this tactic is directly tied to the presence of commercial breaks).[20] But narrative suspense acts as a particular subset of the broader phenomenon of anticipation—the desire to come back for more, and to keep thinking about the show between viewing sessions. If we look at the history of serial storytelling, specifically Victorian serial novels, we can recognize the financial motivations of suspenseful plotting to create anticipation—publishing companies wanted you to purchase the next installment, so serial novels often involved cliffhangers, ongoing mystery plotting, and

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[20] Commercial breaks typically also serve as "act breaks," which contain mini-cliffhangers designed to prevent viewers from changing the channel.

unexpected, often outrageous plot twists (Hayward, Levine). In chapter three, I will

discuss how this history is intertwined with a history of associating serial fiction with

addiction; but for our purposes here, the key thing to note is that anticipation is a major

aspect of the financial motivations of serial storytelling—if viewers feel anticipation, they

will tune in for more.

In order to demonstrate the different registers through which anticipation

operates, let us look at the example of the cliffhanger. Cliffhangers have an inconsistent

reputation: on the one hand, they are considered cheap tricks to keep audiences hooked;

on the other hand, the cliffhanger is a signature element of many complex TV series,

deploying seriality in order to encourage viewers to engage with storyworlds through

discussion and debate.[21] At the level of form, cliffhangers are the epitome of suspense, as

in the literal suspension of a character on the edge of a cliff. But once a viewer moves

away from the text, the cliffhanger becomes a source of broader anticipation, aided by

paratextual hype and excitement for the next narrative installment. Rather than

focusing on whether or not the character will survive (the simple yes/no ontology of

suspense), conversations might expand to consider the various stakes of the cliffhanger:

what fate the character deserves, what events led to their situation, and what the

ramifications of each resulting scenario might be. When the series returns after a hiatus,

the cliffhanger may be formally reignited, reining in the broader modes of anticipation

to re-trap the viewer in the more narrow stakes of suspense. Cliffhangers are good

examples of how the same narrative moment can generate multiple kinds of anticipation

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[21] For more on the history of TV cliffhangers, see my piece at Flowjournal.org.

and how viewers shuttle in and out of texts and paratexts with different affective
consequences.

II. Paratextual Hype: "Remember My Name"

Gray defines "hype" as "advertising that goes 'over' and 'beyond' an accepted
norm, establishing heightened presence, often for a brief, unsustainable period of time"
(5). He also notes that "hype" and related terms like "promotion, promos, and synergy
are also all terms situated in the realm of profits" (5). One key point here is that hype,
from a marketing standpoint, is often about convincing you to watch something that has
not yet been released—the goal is to establish an audience (what Gray calls "anticipatory
paratexts"). Finale hype, on the other hand, is directed toward an already-established
audience; it is about capitalizing on existing emotional investment and managing that
investment in a particular way, delineating the parameters of closure, and defining
expectations on the producers' terms. In some cases, finale hype is designed to regain
lost viewers, to tap into previous emotional investment and reignite it. This goal is
perhaps one of the reasons why finales and final seasons tend to include a lot of
callbacks:[22] these callbacks reward the most dedicated viewers, but they also give
intermittent viewers familiar images, characters, and plot points to grasp onto when
they return to the narrative. Finale hype, then, is often as much about looking backward
as it is about looking forward to the end. As a result, finale anticipation takes on a

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[22] "Callbacks" are references to earlier parts of a story. They are usually designed to reward attentive
viewing and, in some cases, activate memory to produce a specific emotional response.

unique temporal quality, mixing a desire for closure with a desire to hang onto the storyworld—activating existing nostalgia to produce greater nostalgia after the End.

As Gray emphasizes, paratextual hype is by no means a new marketing strategy in the media industries: "film has *never* been (just) film, nor has television ever been (*just*) television" (4, my emphasis); rather, paratexts have always influenced the meaning of texts and contributed to viewer expectations. It seems obvious, however, that the viral nature of our social media does intensify the effects of hype for "connected" viewers.[23] As the same message appears in multiple forms and in a variety of places, anticipation accumulates. Furthermore, audience participation in the sharing and creation of paratextual hype amplifies the affective power of anticipation; therefore, anticipation is not only a top-down phenomenon produced by official paratexts, but it also operates bottom-up with the creative work of fans. There are some forms of paratextual intervention that fall into a grey area between the top-down/bottom-up models: things like reviews from critics, cast and crew social media presence, and medium-budget parodies, for example, all straddle the line between official and unofficial paratext.[24] And here is where Gray's motivation for the terminological privileging of "paratexts" (because it includes materials/objects from all nodes on the circuit of production and consumption) might also be extended to a definition "hype:" by considering hype not only as a financial imperative, but also as an affective one, we can see the variety of motivations for top-down and bottom-up paratextual creation. In other words, hype is not only about producers selling their content, but about entire communities amplifying

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[23] For more on connected viewing, see the Media Industries Project at the Carsey-Wolf Center.
[24] While these paratexts are produced by industry professionals of one kind or another, they are not produced by the same entities responsible for the primary text.

the aura of anticipation surrounding a text. Anticipatory hype creates moments in which

the goals of fans and producers are interestingly if imperfectly aligned. While fans

generate anticipation ostensibly for pleasure and the social connection of shared

excitement, producers generate anticipation primarily to sell ads.[25] In order to see how

these different forms of anticipation operate, let's turn to an analysis of *Breaking Bad*.

As one [parody video quips](#), *Breaking Bad* was "the show that got TV snobs to

finally shut up about *The Wire*." The series enjoyed critical success throughout its

run—including 12 Emmy wins across its five seasons. *Breaking Bad* follows high school

Chemistry teacher Walter White as he enters the New Mexico drug trade, at first to pay

exorbitant hospital bills for his cancer treatment, then to prove his masculine prowess in

the "empire business" ("Buyout"). Creator Vince Gilligan famously referred the series as

Walt's journey "[From Mr. Chips to Scarface](#)," framing the anticipatory stakes of the

show in terms of a predestined characterological transformation.[26] *Breaking Bad* was

integral to developing AMC's reputation for "quality TV," and the style of the show

would significantly influence the network's cross-series narrative and aesthetic brand.

But despite its undeniable critical success and popularity in "high brow" cultural circles,

the show had a relatively small viewership for much of its run.[27] It was a niche show on a

niche cable channel, artistic and slow, beautifully shot and scored, well-written and

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[25] This is one reason why official promotional campaigns for individual Netflix series are relatively sparse—Netflix doesn't need to sell particular shows, but rather its brand (in order to entice subscribers). A single Netflix ad tends to feature several of their Original Series.

[26] This anticipatory framework is also signaled by the gerund in the show's title.

[27] I should note here that ratings expectations for cable shows are quite different from broadcast networks, so *Breaking Bad* didn't have "bad" ratings; but far fewer people were watching it than, say, *Two and a Half Men* or *NCIS*.

acted, and full of moral controversy. It was racking up awards and acclaim, but it still floated outside of the popular mainstream.

When AMC revealed that season five would be the series' last, the network decided to break the final season into two eight-episode stints (a distribution method that has now become commonplace for AMC and other networks). During the hiatus between parts one and two of season five, AMC did something brilliant: they struck a deal with Netflix to make the first four seasons of the show available on the streaming service. The effect was that viewers who had never seen the show, or who had seen some episodes but fell behind, could use Netflix to catch up. Catch-up viewing and platforms that facilitate it enhance the social nature of TV by opening up audiences and fandoms to new members either during or after a series' run.[28] In my own experience, *Breaking Bad* was a regular feature of conversations in my social circles; but until its release on Netflix, I had never seen an episode. My decision to catch up and then participate in the social experience of the final eight episodes was a direct result of the series' availability on Netflix. Of course, these diverse viewing patterns do change the function of anticipation—I can't claim that my anticipation was the same as someone who had watched weekly and endured each season hiatus. I would not, however, say that my anticipation was lesser; in fact, my entire viewing of the series was informed by my knowledge of the upcoming planned finale, so teleological anticipation permeated the whole experience. It would seem that this was the goal of the *Breaking Bad*'s Netflix strategy—using the climate of anticipation surrounding the show's impending finale to

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[28] Jennifer Gillan remarks on how *24* (FOX 2001-2010) used DVDs to achieve the same effect, especially in its early seasons.

draw new viewers into that community and, simultaneously, into that anticipation. The strategy worked, as ratings soared for the final eight episodes and the show's social media presence expanded, putting AMC on the Twitter map. AMC invested heavily in generating finale hype, as this [curated Storify page](#) featuring teasers, trailers, interviews, and other promotional materials demonstrates. This strategy of privileging the road to closure spreads to the audience, growing and validating anticipation.

It would be of little purpose to claim that *Breaking Bad*, or any other show, possessed/s the "most anticipated" finale in TV history (although critics will often make such claims about a variety of series). My decision to use this series as the case study for this chapter is not only due to the intense promotional campaign for the final season (which included the release of back seasons on Netflix), but also due to the nature of the show itself. *Breaking Bad* is an emotionally difficult show, in which narrative pacing and story content combine to produce tensions that never resolve, but only heighten as the narrative progresses. As [one video blogger puts it](#), "One does not simply enjoy *Breaking Bad*". This fraught relationship with the storyworld is best represented through the character of Jesse Pinkman, who acts as an audience surrogate, particularly in the final season. Throughout the series, Jesse is often a reluctant partner to Walt: he tries to get out of the drug-dealing game (metaphorically, the series), but Walt always pulls him back in, trapping him in a life that is, as [this fan-made video](#) demonstrates, one horrible event after another. But season five totally shatters Jesse, eventually reducing him to a literal prisoner, forced to cook meth for a band of neo-Nazis. Jesse's trajectory is an analogue for the viewer's experience of *Breaking Bad*—like Jesse, we've

endured the pain and manipulation that comes with being close to Walt; we are trapped in his story, and in the end, we will be set free—however changed from the ordeal. Understanding Jesse as an audience surrogate allows us to see how our attachments to storyworlds often involve intensely mixed emotions, competing desires to stay and go, a sort of narrative Stockholm Syndrome.

III. Shared Anticipation: "You Like this Product and You Want More"

As I will argue in the next chapter, time-shifted viewing does not preclude viewers from participating in the social experiences of TV. However, since serial distribution remains part of the dominant mode of televisual storytelling, it is worth paying special attention to the particular dynamics of these viewing communities. Appointment viewing is as much about the gaps between episodes as it is the episodes themselves. These gaps are filled by reviews, social media conversations, water cooler chatter, and independent reflection, but also with the many distractions of daily life. In contrast to the storyworld immersion that binge-viewing encourages, weekly appointment viewing involves different degrees and kinds of immersion, in which immersive power shifts towards paratexts. These paratextual encounters shape expectations and make us self-conscious of those expectations. Furthermore, sharing real-time experiences of anticipation in social contexts intensifies and normalizes one's impatience. In this section, I will outline a few of the prevailing ways that audiences share anticipation for a series finale during a planned final season. While some of these modes are reliant upon at least a certain degree of connected viewing, many take place

in non-virtual environments and existed long before the rise of social TV. I began this chapter with the idea that anticipation is a shared experience, and here I will offer some specific examples of how that sharing takes place on and offline.

Twitter conversations, and live-tweeting in particular, are a major vehicle through which audiences share anticipation. The temporal immediacy of live-tweeting means that real-time reactions reveal raw and often unfiltered engagement with an episode.[29] Of course, the concept of "liveness" in this context is problematic, as time zones and international airing schedules mean that there is no one time slot that is the definitive "live" moment of airing (although EST is often privileged in these terms, since it is the most common zone of first airing). Twitter is a unique discursive space in that it facilitates interactions among different kinds of fans, critics, and celebrities. Twitter discourse is consistently multivocal—but the patterns that emerge help us locate dominant attitudes and reactions to various events and texts. In regard to anticipation, the temporal flow of Twitter intensifies the user/fan's emotions—in some cases, because we see our own feelings represented by other users; in other cases, because we see different responses that motivate us to defend or rethink our position.

Another way in which audiences manage and share anticipation is through the acquisition and dissemination of spoilers. I want to suggest that our contemporary media atmosphere is haunted by spoilers—that we are perpetually nagged by a fear of being spoiled (*or* an excitement about spoiling), that we think of narratives in terms of spoilers, and that this conception has actually extended to the ways that we process

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[29] Two-thirds of Twitter conversations about a show occur in what Nielsen considers the live-airing window (three hours before and three hours after a new program airs).

non-narrative information. "Spoiler Alert" has become a ubiquitous phrase, sometimes a joke, but often not, a cliché term that reveals a lot about how we experience anticipation and how we understand processes of knowledge acquisition. The nature of *Breaking Bad*'s storytelling made it especially spoiler-prone, which is one of the reasons why its finale hype was so successful in causing the resurgence of social viewing during season five.

In 2014, Netflix hired cultural anthropologist Grant McKracken to study the phenomenon of spoilers, and he came to some fascinating conclusions regarding our attitudes towards spoilers and the social codes that dictate the practice of spoiling. [McKracken argues](#) that the culture of spoiling has undergone swift change in the face of streaming TV and more heavily plot-driven series. He claims that "the onus shifts from the spoil-er to the spoil-ee;" in other words, if you are not up to speed with a popular series, you put yourself at risk for spoilers. One of the problems with McKracken's argument is that it reinforces the discourse of "quality TV" by assuming that there are particular shows *worth* keeping up with, ones that have accrued enough cultural capital that if you aren't watching, you aren't "in the know" and thus *deserve* to be spoiled. Indeed, *Breaking Bad* was certainly one of these shows. McKracken also points out that the impulse to spoil is a result of TV "breaking rules that used to be an inviolate contract" such as "bad things never happen to good characters." Again, *Breaking Bad* is a perfect example of how this shift in storytelling practice precipitates a [shift in audience behavior](#). The twists and turns of *Breaking Bad* create a "pressure to speech"

(McKracken) because they surprise and shock—these are the narrative elements that allow a "spoiler" to exist as such.

In 2007, Mittell and Gray conducted a study of the spoiler culture surrounding *Lost*, whose fan community thrived on the circulation of spoilers due to the show's reliance on mystery plotting. Mittell and Gray investigate the pleasure that audiences receive from spoilers, arguing that fans use spoilers in order to focus on the "operational aesthetic" (Mittell 2006); in other words, once you know *what* is going to happen, you can focus on the question of *how* it happens. *Breaking Bad*'s narrative form is far from the mystery plotting of *Lost*. While the series thrives on moments of shock, there are very few questions about what is actually going on—of course, this is a product of its genre as a relatively realistic character study. Probably the closest that the series comes to mystery plotting is in its use of flash-forwards in seasons two and five, which I will discuss momentarily. Nonetheless, *Breaking Bad* exists within a media landscape that operates in relation to spoiler culture; so the show's paratexts, especially in the final season, work within a logic of spoiling. It is this same logic that motivates viewers to stay up-to-date on a series, to watch week-by-week rather than wait for the episodes to accumulate to bingeable levels. While Mittell and Gray demonstrate that deliberately seeking out spoilers constitutes a fairly common fan practice, one that complicates the top-down distribution of narrative knowledge, I think it is safe to say that the dominant approach to spoilers is avoidance. But perhaps a middle ground between these two attitudes is helpful: spoilers can often be ambiguous, incomplete, or misleading. Rarely can a spoiler tell the whole story. In this sense, spoilers might be another means of

generating anticipation, of fueling the desire to know what *and* how events will unfold. This perspective may account for why content producers, networks, and even actors sometimes participate in the spoiling process: ambiguous spoilers can be a jumping-off point for processes of speculation: guessing and hoping as another form of shared anticipation and hype.

Before discussing how *Breaking Bad* handled its season five storytelling and series finale, it is worth looking at how the show's previous season finales created narrative expectations for viewers. Season one is somewhat of an outlier compared to the structure of later seasons, mostly due to its length of only seven episodes. However, we can still begin to trace some of the narrative patterns that the series uses to structure its trademark storytelling flow. In the final scene of the season's penultimate episode, Walt creates the first of many homemade bombs, and he uses this one to prove his ruthlessness to drug kingpin Tuco Salamanca. [The explosion at Tuco's headquarters](#) signals Walt's break from his previous life and anticipates the rise of his drug lord persona, Heisenberg. And indeed, in "A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal," Walt and Jesse solidify their roles as drug manufacturers: they complete their first major heist (stealing a barrel of methalamine), they officially partner with Tuco, and Walt dons his famous black pork pie hat for the first time. In a meeting with Tuco in the junkyard, Walt's violent potential is displaced onto Tuco, who beats his own employee nearly to death. Tuco's unexpected outburst reads back onto the series pilot, in which [Walt attacks a teenager](#) who was making fun of his son's physical disability. This scene in the pilot is certainly foreshadowing Walt's capacity for violence, as well as his dual personality—he

exits the department store through a back door, then re-enters through the front door as a different man, Heisenberg before Heisenberg. But only six episodes later, in the season finale, we see Walt embracing his alter-ego, the first step in his transformation from Mr. Chips to Scarface.

The structure of season two feels much more deliberate than its predecessor, likely a result of the critical success of season one and relative security of the future of the show. In the opening of season two, we get an extended scene of proleptic imagery: a black and white sequence showing various kinds of debris in the Whites' backyard (it's worth noting that black-and-white filtering usually indicates a flashback, so the inversion of this formal tactic obfuscates the temporality of this scene). The sequence is visually stunning but thematically opaque, and it sets up an anticipatory thread for the season—what is this debris, and how did it get there? And why is the teddy bear the only item represented in color (also worth noting the series' consistent and well-documented use of colors to code themes, characters, and spaces)? This sequence is repeated with difference three more times over the course of the season, including the finale, when we learn the origin of the debris.

Like the first season, the penultimate episode of season two features Walt's most dramatic turning point—his decision to stand next to Jesse's bed and watch Jane (Jesse's girlfriend) die as she chokes on her own vomit. This scene is one of the most controversial of the series, as audiences were split in the way they interpreted Walt's actions (how deliberate were they? what were his motivations?). A sampling of user comments on the AV Club review for the episode reveals the range of responses to the

scene, including some disturbingly misogynistic contributions. I will return to the

question of misogyny in the show's fandom in the next section, but for now it is just

necessary to understand how this scene sets up the season finale, "ABQ."

"ABQ" opens with a return to the backyard debris sequence, with close-ups of the

mysterious pink teddy bear that had been featured in each of the flash-forward

sequences. Even before Walt's actual connection to that debris becomes evident, the

metaphor of fallout feels present, especially when the camera cuts quickly from the

opening title sequence to a panicked Jesse attempting to perform CPR on Jane's

long-dead corpse. It is significant that this episode includes the first appearance of Mike

Ehrmantraut, Saul Goodman's[30] "cleaner" and an important foil to Walt. The "darker"

Walt gets, the more crucial it is for audiences to see how other participants in the

criminal world conduct their business.[31] Much of the episode deals with Jesse's grief, as

well as the grief of Jane's father. The big reveal comes at the end of the episode, when we

learn that Jane's father is an air traffic controller. Exhausted and grief-stricken, it is he

who makes the mistake that leads to the collision of Wayfarer flight 515 with another

plane. The episode ends with a shot of the explosion (again keeping with the finale motif

of bombs) and the rain of debris into Walt's neighborhood. Here is where we start to see

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[30] Saul Goodman (Bob Odenkirk) is Walt's lawyer. He operates out of a strip mall, wears brightly coloured suits, and tends to represent criminals and other low-income groups. His character, relatively undeveloped beyond his interactions with the main characters, often serves as comic relief in the series. The decision to focus the *Breaking Bad* spinoff on Saul offers an interesting shift in tone for the storyworld.

[31] Mike will also eventually take on a father-figure role to Jesse, so his introduction here, after Walt has done his first unthinkably horrible thing to Jesse, is also key; it foreshadows Jesse's future role as audience surrogate (which he cannot be yet, since he is still oblivious to Walter's actions, and one thing about audience surrogates is that they need to operate on the same or similar knowledge level as the viewer).

the real consequences of Walt's actions, understanding the scale of his influence, the literalized fallout from his quest for money and power.

In an interview about "ABQ," showrunner [Vince Gilligan stated]: "It's not about fooling people. It's about surprising people, and delighting them. 'Delight' is a weird word to use with such awful plot twists. But people like to be surprised." While I would argue that this revelation of the cause of the debris does not really qualify as a plot "twist," since it does not redirect or reframe the course of narrative action per se, it is certainly an instance of narrative surprise, and one that is quite fitting for a season finale. The sheer scale of destruction casts Walt no longer as an underdog fighting for his life—and, importantly, his cancer goes into remission in this same episode—but as a violent force that can precipitate large-scale deaths. We might even read the 167 deaths in the plane crash as stand-ins for all of the overdoses and gang-violence that Walt's meth no doubt facilitates. Therefore, during the season hiatus, viewers were left to anticipate Walt's next move, but also to reflect seriously on the grisly ramifications of Walt's actions.

Season three continues the pattern of introducing a new threshold of violence for Walt in the penultimate episode and spending the finale dealing with the repercussions of that violence. In episode twelve ("Half Measure"), Jesse plots to kill two rival drug dealers who had murdered his friend, Combo. Just as the showdown is about to take place, Walt runs over the two drug dealers with his car, killing one instantly, then executing the other with a pistol. After shooting the second dealer, Walt looks up at Jesse and orders him to "run." There is an unusually long cut to black before the credits

appear on-screen, formally embedding anticipation for the season finale.[32] "Full Measure" prolongs anticipation by beginning with a flashback to Walt and Skyler touring their family home for the first time in hopes of purchasing it; the flashback reminds us of Walt before Heisenberg, emphasizing how much he has transformed over the events of the series. In the last act of the episode, Walt convinces Jesse to kill Gale, the only other chemist capable of replicating their famous meth recipe. Jesse feels obligated to carry out the deed as repayment for Walt saving him from the drug dealers in the previous episode, even though Gale (despite his criminal status) is a relatively kind and gentle man. Killing Gale will haunt Jesse, but the most disturbing aspect of the situation is how Walt has manipulated Jesse to commit this murder—it is Walt pulling the trigger as much as it is Jesse, and Walt thus unlocks yet another level of ruthlessness. This is an important moment in Jesse's trajectory as the primary audience surrogate. Though [we see the gunshot from Gale's POV](), we are most closely identifying with the torment that Jesse feels as he executes this man. And, since the audience knows more than Jesse here—we know how Walt has manipulated this situation—we are also forced to consider how Walt might be manipulating us as well.

"Face/Off," the season four finale, presents Walt's most ambitious murder of the series. Through an elaborate plan, Walt is able to kill his boss, Gus Fring. Fring serves as a key foil for how Walt constructs himself as a criminal. The series goes to great lengths to establish parallels between the two characters, but ultimately, Fring is a more intelligent businessman, and he operates with rules and codes that Walt lacks. Walt

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[32] The series often makes use of the prolonged black screen in moments such as these. While in cinematic language, a cut to black is usually associated with finality or death, in television, it is more commonly used in this anticipatory function, as narrative ellipses.

resents his subordinate position to Fring as well as Fring's belief that Walt is a

dangerous element in an otherwise solid business model. By killing Fring, Walt is

attempting to assert his dominance, but as Mike tells him early in the next season, "Just

because you killed Jesse James does not make you Jesse James" ("Madrigal"). Unlike

previous seasons that used finale episodes to deal with the fallout of events in the

penultimate episode, here the finale sets the stakes of anticipation for season five. Walt

tells Skyler on the phone, "I won," deploying a rhetoric of completion. I would argue that

Walt has, indeed, completed his transformation into Scarface in this episode, and it is

significant that this is also the only time he uses his own gun to kill (by murdering

Fring's associates). The episode ends with a shocking revelation that further supports

this episode as his final descent into evil: in order to plot Fring's death, Walt poisons

Jesse's girlfriend's son and pins it on Fring. After denying it to Jesse in persuasive

fashion (convincing both Jesse and the audience), the final shot of the episode reveals

the poisonous plant in Walt's backyard. There are few other ways to signal the depths of

a character's darkness than child harm, so as the season ends, audiences are forced to

confront the extent to which Walt has "broken bad;" and as they awaited the final

season, audiences would direct their sense of anticipation towards what this

transformed version of Walt would look like.

IV. "All Bad Things Must Come to an End"

Thirteen days before the the second half of season five began airing, AMC

released a teaser promo in which Bryan Cranston reads Shelley's "Ozymandias" over

images of the *Breaking Bad* filming locations (not clips from the show per se, but shots of its important spaces). The video attempts to frame the existential weight of the *Breaking Bad* story through the combination of the sonnet's lyrical power, Cranston's voice (which here evokes the character's darkest moments), and the use of time-lapse cinematography to convey the felt duration of the series' longform storytelling.

The "Ozymandias" promo video is an example of how *Breaking Bad* season five paratexts thematized finality in order to focus anticipation on the series' ending. As I suggested earlier, this rhetoric of closure is by no means unique to *Breaking Bad*; nearly all series that have the advantage of a planned finale turn that knowledge into promotional capital—by appealing to our investment in endings, final seasons act as extended exercises in closure. Each episode of a final season, and the conversations that surround them, are situated in relation to a finale ethos. Once we know that we are watching a planned final season, we interpret the narrative on those terms, evaluating each moment as a signpost of finality. In short, we watch a planned final season differently than we would watch other TV, and creators create different stories for us when they know that they are nearing the end. Gilligan acknowledges the power of fan discourse, [claiming that he avoids reading fan reactions](#) for the sake of his ego; but we can safely assume that the writers' room was well-aware of the dominant attitudes of their fan base as they crafted *Breaking Bad*'s final season. The move towards closure created a climate of anticipation surrounding the series that is reflected in the dozens upon dozens of articles discussing the concept of closure and the prospects of finale success/failure in relation to other series. The *Breaking Bad* finale may not have been

the "most" anticipated finale in history, but it occurred in a media moment in which audiences were particularly aware of the dynamics of finales and thus expected certain things from the end of the series.

The premiere of *Breaking Bad* season five instills anticipation in the viewer by deploying one of the oldest tricks in the narrative playbook: the flash-forward. Flash-forwards are key catalysts of anticipation due to the narrative alienation that they inevitably create. The departure from linearity, the construction of ellipses, and the often vague or ambiguous dispersal of narrative clues all contribute to the anticipatory framework that flash-forwards establish. In "Live Free or Die," Walt, evidently (though not surprisingly) a fugitive of the law, eats his 52nd birthday breakfast at a Denny's. The reference to his birthday is key: whereas flash-forwards are usually about instilling anticipation, this one also relies upon looking backwards—to Walt's 50th birthday in the series' pilot. The privileging of narrative recall here is a key final-season tactic, rewarding viewers for being there since the beginning. At Denny's, Walt meets with a man who provides him with a new car—stocked with an M-60 rifle. As the flash-forward concludes with a POV shot from inside the car trunk, Walt closing the trunk door on us, and then a shot of the New Hampshire license plate ("Live Free or Die"), this scene sets up questions that will only be answered in the series finale, 15 episodes later. We might think of the contents of this car trunk as Chekhov's gun or Hitchcock's bomb—we know this rifle will be used by the end of the series—but how and upon whom? One of the most fascinating elements about this anticipatory tactic is the fact that the series writers and creators [claim to have had no idea](#) upon whom the rifle would be used when they

wrote the episode. While this lack of story planning could be seen as reckless or even disingenuous, it also highlights the fluid nature of televisual storytelling and the potential for viewer discourse to impact narrative direction. Furthermore, we could think of this mutual lack of knowledge on the parts of both producers and consumers as another form of shared anticipation. Importantly, this mutual lack was made possible by AMC's half-season structure; according to the *Breaking Bad Insider Podcast*, Gilligan demanded that the season be split into two parts specifically so that he and the other writers would have more time to craft the final episodes. Gilligan's emphasis on getting the ending right is another example of how the importance of finales impacts industry practices on the creative side.

Since our experience of narrative endings is often tied to the journey of a series' main character, looking at how *Breaking Bad* season five depicts Walt reveals what kind of closure the series is invested in providing. *Breaking Bad* presents a complex set of characters, but Walt is by far the most controversial—is he a hero, an antihero, or a villain? Throughout the show's run, audience response to Walt's actions varied drastically and revealed the diverse ways that character attachment can work on different viewers. In turn, as the final season aired, the question of Walt's fate took primacy over all other questions about the show, distilling narrative anticipation into a few pointed questions: Would Walt be caught or would he get away with it? Would he die, and if so, who would kill him? Like any narrative steeped in moral and ethical controversy, audiences approach these questions by considering what the character deserves, what would realistically happen to a person in this situation, and what makes

for good TV? These tensions generate competing desires that, when expressed and shared, reveal some of the menacing cultural stakes of TV viewership. *Breaking Bad*'s fandom included many hateful elements, most clearly evidenced by viewer attitudes towards Walt's wife, Skyler White.

While audiences were divided over their opinions about Walt, no character provoked more negative responses than Skyler. As the series unfolded, "Skyler hate" became a common term, with memes and discussion threads dedicated to trashing the character. The ["I Hate Skyler White" page on Facebook](#) has over 31,000 "likes," and even more disturbing content can be found on other forums. Anna Gunn, the actor who plays Skyler, received death threats, and she encountered so much abuse that she was motivated to write an [op-ed piece in The New York Times](#) to address her experience. Skyler hate reveals one of the darkest elements of viewers' involvement with characters—rampant misogyny. Gunn writes: "I finally realized that most people's hatred of Skyler had little to do with me and a lot to do with their own perception of women and wives. Because Skyler didn't conform to a comfortable ideal of the archetypical female, she had become a kind of Rorschach test for society, a measure of our attitudes toward gender." While the Rorschach test may not be the most obvious metaphor for audience reactions to Skyler (I might've gone with "litmus"), it is perhaps more apt when considering patterns of identification with Walt. Skyler is a complicated but scrutable character with clear motivations and logical reactions. Walt, on the other hand, is actively, thoroughly deceptive; he plays multiple versions of himself, and it is up to the viewer to decide which one is the "real" Walt—and that is where many choose to

see what they want to see. Viewer perceptions of Walt inflect different trajectories of finale anticipation: depending on the nature of our character attachments, we desire different things to achieve satisfying closure.

The misogyny and racism[33] present in factions of *Breaking Bad*'s fandom is somewhat ironic in light of the ways in which the show is a story about the triumph of intelligence. From the beginning, we see that Walt's intelligence is the source of his resentment and dissatisfaction with his life, but it is also his greatest asset in the drug-dealing business. The show's emphasis on intelligence is part of its broader interest in gender politics. Like much "quality TV," the series is very much about concepts of masculinity.[34] Despite his intelligence, or perhaps because of it, Walt never becomes a fully-phallicized character; he is constantly attempting to establish his dominance, but even in his most "badass" moments, he falls short of attaining full rule over the symbolic order. For example, one of the most ubiquitous visual metaphors for the phallus is the gun, but Walt rarely uses one; when he does, he looks unsure and scared. In one scene, we see a montage of him practicing his quick-draw—always awkward, always a little impotent. The only times he uses a gun are at point-blank range: once on an already-injured gangster, once on an unsuspecting Mike Ehrmantraut, and once on Jack-the-Nazi. In all of these instances, the gun, the phallus, is not his, it is borrowed.[35] The only time that he uses his own gun is in the season four

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[33] Most examples of racist comments about the series stem from discussion of the series' antagonists, who are almost always Latino men.

[34] For more on masculinity in contemporary television, see Lotz (2014).

[35] Also recall that in the pilot episode, Walt uses Krazy-8's gun to attempt suicide, but the safety is on. In the following scene, he makes love to Skyler to salvage his masculinity. Also note that Walt, wielding Krazy-8's gun, is the cover image for the season one DVD.

finale, in which he murders Gus Fring's lackeys after murdering Fring with a bomb. This killing, however, is not depicted visually—we only *hear* Walt shoot the men, as we are situated with Jesse's POV, who is handcuffed in another room.

Walt's phallic lack illuminates the complexity of his position as the central character and the ways that viewers relate to him and anticipate his fate. He is certainly not a classical hero; but even in our age of antiheroes, he doesn't quite fit the bill (even if most people still put him in this category).[36] I would suggest that Walt falls most firmly into the category of the trickster figure (Bassil-Morozow): his intelligence is his greatest weapon, he lacks any real code of honor, he is repeatedly emasculated, and he spreads emasculation through his tricks. Walt's position as trickster also facilitates narrative anticipation by encouraging viewers to guess about his tactics, maybe even to attempt to outsmart him.

One of the ways we can confirm Walt's status as a trickster figure is through analyzing his death and the events leading up to it. Walt's fate is one of the primary sources of anticipation in season five, since the structure of the show makes Walt's death inevitable through the framing narrative of terminal cancer. When Walt attacks the Neo-Nazi compound, he once again uses cunning over brute force, building a robot with both bomb and gun components. He passes up the opportunity to wield the machine gun, the ultimate symbolic phallus (and, of course, [Scarface's famous weapon](#)), instead incorporating it into a device that he will operate remotely. After getting his revenge on the men who stole his money, he wanders into their on-site lab, caressing the

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[36] For more on the trend of TV antiheroes, see Martin (2014) and Vaage (2016).

equipment. It is significant that he remains inside the lab, dying in a technological space that stands in for the various labs in which he developed his trademark meth. This is not a hero's death: heroes die in grand fashion, with pomp and glory. Nor is it an antihero's death: antiheroes die in ambiguous fashion, with the event often suspended or unrepresented (e.g. Tony Soprano). So perhaps this quiet, almost sneaky death (since Walt avoids capture) is a kind of trickster's death, taking place in the same space from which his trickster efficacy had emanated.[37] Walt even gets a cool, joyful song to [play him out of the mortal and televisual coils]. But what kind of closure does "Felina" create with this synechdocal ending, where the hero's last breath coincides with the show's final frame? In the next section, I will use a sampling of responses to "Felina" to demonstrate how *Breaking Bad* audiences managed closure in the immediate wake of the episode. The chapter will end with a discussion of how *Better Call Saul* intervenes in the finality of *Breaking Bad* and undermines a sense of closure by refilling the storyworld with anticipation.

V. Aftermaths of Anticipation

This chapter has made it clear that the pressures on series to fulfill audience expectations shape finales from a creative standpoint and also shape the way that each viewer experiences a finale. In other words, series writers cannot but be affected by those paratextual pressures, whether or not they choose to cater to audience desire. And a viewer who has been exposed to finale hype cannot but interpret the merit of the finale

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[37] One could argue that tricksters, by nature, don't die at all—at most, they fake their own deaths. This take on tricksters works well with some of the theories about *Breaking Bad*'s finale that I will address in chapter five.

through the framing of that hype. In this section, I will present an overview of reactions

to the *Breaking Bad* finale as a way of uncovering commonalities across finale

experiences and, in turn, revealing some of the emotional stakes of TV endings in the

context of serial viewing.

A few days before "Felina" aired, Bob Odenkirk (Saul Goodman) was quoted in

The Telegraph, [claiming of the finale](): "It's an incredible amount of blowback [...] It is a

massive shattering of this character's world, of this universe created by Vince Gilligan. It

is very surprising, you cannot tell where it's going and it's very satisfying and shocking."

The fact that Odenkirk hypes the episode using the concepts of "shock" and "surprise"

suggests that these are some of the elements that we might look for in a finale. But

"Felina," as well as many audience reactions to it and other finales, suggests that most

viewers actually prefer the opposite: neat, tidy, certain closure. In order for a narrative

to surprise a viewer, there is often an accompanying element of confusion, ambiguity, or

at least curiosity—but if there is one thing that the "Felina" accomplishes, it is avoiding

ambiguity. It crams in as many closural gestures as possible while maintaining its slow

cinematography. The episode consists of scenes that each have a clear purpose in

bringing the series to an end. Walt gets his revenge upon the Schwartzes,[38] terrorizing

them and forcing them to participate in his criminal activity by agreeing to launder

Walt's money to his son. Walt and Skyler share a final conversation, one where Skyler

seems to at least partially forgive Walt as [she watches him say goodbye to their infant

daughter](). Walt finally uses the Ricin poison (on Lydia, who had betrayed him), he wipes

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[38] The Schwartzes, a married couple, are two of Walt's college friends. The three friends had formed a company, but the Schwartzes bought Walt out early and then became incredibly wealthy. Walt traces much of his dissatisfaction with his life back to the Schwartzes.

out the neo-Nazi group who stole his money, and he saves Jesse's life (after being the one responsible for all of Jesse's pain and suffering).

It is important that the "villains" of season five are neo-Nazis. I use scare-quotes here, because by season five, Walt should really be taken as the villain of the story. Putting Jack-the-Nazi and his crew front-and-center is a tactic that allows viewers to continue to sympathize with Walt. He might have done horrible things, we think to ourselves, but at least he doesn't have swastikas tattooed all over his body. And this narrative choice reveals the show's bias towards Walt, which I think is perfectly encapsulated by the final page of the "Felina" script, in which Gilligan writes "It's too late. He got away." As Joanna Robinson notes, this framing of those final moments in the script definitely reveals a "team Walt" mentality, one that I think is deeply problematic, but also the reason why the finale falls short of matching the groundbreaking nature of the rest of the series.

"Felina" was widely praised as a successful finale by both critics and audiences. Mittell called it a "Deserving Denouement," writing that the episode "delivered the ending that *Breaking Bad* needed by emphasizing closure over surprise" (despite Odenkirk's claim). This juxtaposition is useful to consider as we attempt to locate what viewers desire from a series finale. Many of the most-loathed finales are the ones that deploy surprise (*Battlestar Galactica, Lost, The Sopranos,* e.g.). I may be an outlier, but I find that closure for the sake of closure, closure that plays it safe by wrapping up the narrative in tidy fashion, generally sells the story short. A lack of narrative risk in a finale forecloses the kind of productive debate and engagement that more controversial

finales allow. Mittell concedes that the events of "Felina" were "predictable," but he asserts that this predictability is conducive to closure, and that "Felina" "is the conclusion that the series and its viewers deserve" (a revealing conflation). Others called the finale "perfect," "stunning," and "astonishing." Praise for "Felina" on Twitter, combined with taunting comparisons to the *Lost* finale, even prompted *Lost* creator Damon Lindelof to delete his account.

There were a handful of critics, however, who voiced some of the same concerns I had over "Felina." Myles McNutt calls the episode "too clean" and suggests that it "is Vince Gilligan and his writing staff giving Walter White the gift of closure […] a gift that I'm not certain Walt deserved." Maureen Ryan of *Huffington Post* and Sean Collins of *Rolling Stone* express similar concerns about the tidy conclusion, the lack of suspense or surprise, and Walt's possibly unearned redemption. Indeed, I argue that Walt does not deserve the happy ending that he receives. The characters whose lives he had destroyed seem to forgive him, and he gets to die on his own terms, avoiding police capture. *Breaking Bad* thus equivocates, riding a fence between the redemption and critique of its main character. While the finale does embrace Walt's trickster identity as an alternative to phallic masculinity, it nonetheless allows his misogyny and violence to go uncorrected by giving Walt the ending he desires. Unlike *Breaking Bad*'s other season finales, "Felina"'s brand of closure fails to generate the kinds of questions that might have facilitated deeper engagement with the series post-finale. In not giving the audience anything to ponder, "Felina" suggests that the text is complete. Nonetheless, those critics who fall in my interpretative camp all conclude that the neatness of the

finale does not undermine the success or brilliance of the show. While I would never go so far as to argue that "Felina" ruins *Breaking Bad*, I do think it sacrifices some of the series' complexities on the altar of closure. The pressure on TV endings and the fear of a failed finale likely led Gilligan and his team to play it safe, an understandable move in a reception climate that is always ready to be harshly critical. But if anticipation for a finale involves at least some desire to be surprised, as much evidence points to, then "Felina" certainly fell short of total narrative success.

VI. Alternate Endings: Anticipation and Cofactuality

In season five, episode eleven, "Confessions," Walt and Skyler record a video in which he fabricates a counter-narrative of the events of the show that pins all of his crimes on his brother-in-law, Hank (a DEA agent). Walt and Skyler use this video to threaten Hank and Marie and prevent them from turning Walt in to the police. This video, which Hank and Marie watch on their living-room TV, creates a metafictional moment of representing TV on TV, but it also works through a counterfactual logic that opens up the narrative to other points of view. As we watch them watch the video, we realize that Walt's story sounds plausible, perhaps even more convincing than the events we know have come to pass. We might be prompted to think through this counterfactual scenario, to imagine how it might have played out. I argue that narrative counterfactuals like these make way for cofactual thinking, where we consider multiple versions of story events at the same time in a process of narrative play. The embedded counterfactual in

"Confessions" primes audiences for cofactual thinking that extends to the show's

paratexts.

As series finales continue to establish themselves as a mini-genre of TV

storytelling, more paratexts arise that engage directly with the logics of endings. Often,

this engagement seems to happen through parody, which suggests that making light of

finales might be a way of coping with both the inevitability of the actual narrative end

and the definitiveness of one version over alternatives. Leading up to and during season

five, several parody videos, along with a slew of fan theories and speculation, emerged in

anticipation of the *Breaking Bad* finale. Here, I would like to analyze a few of these

videos as a way of identifying how audiences managed their expectations about the

series through levity. In turn, I argue that these parody endings, no matter how silly, are

actually quite integral to how audiences deal with the "real" finale—we read the official

ending through these paratextual addresses to finality. In this way, imagined alternate

endings encourage cofactual thinking about narrative: the events of "Felina" happen

alongside the events of these videos, contributing to the emotional negotiation of the

series' end.

In "[Dean Norris Spoils Breaking Bad]," the actor who plays Hank speaks into a

webcam and begins by announcing that he is going to "spoil" the ending of the show

because he is tired of getting asked about it. He then reveals his own finale script, and as

he narrates it, we cut to the scenes, as Norris plays the roles of Hank, Walt, and even

series creator Vince Gilligan. In this video, Norris seems to be playing himself *as*

Hank—he is still in character, and his imagined ending sounds exactly like something

that Hank would cook up: he catches Walt, who commits suicide because Hank is just "too awesome," gains superpowers from his "minerals" that also make him "go reverse bald." He makes out with a "sexy babe" with Marie's approval, and rides into the sunset on his talking skateboard. This alternate ending is perhaps the most ridiculous, but it also performs an interesting refocalization of character that actually mirrors some of the storytelling moves in season five. Hank's machismo personality often provided comic relief in the series, up until he learns of Walt's criminal activity, but we start to take him much more seriously in the last stretch of episodes. Hank proves himself not only a pretty clever cop, but also the true "family man" that Walt has pretended to be all along, and so the humor of this parody works in relation to our changed perceptions of Hank in season five.

One of the richest examples of finale parody videos is "[How *Breaking Bad* Will End: Animated]()," which debuted on YouTube just before the second half of season five began airing. This video balances parody with some useful insights into the various ways that audiences were speculating about the end of the series. As it tests out different scenarios ("Walt gets away with it," "New Super Villain Revealed," "Walt Confesses to Jesse," "Hank Kills Walt," and "Postscript"), it then reveals the most ridiculous version of each scenario. The key here is that these potential finale outcomes are all more or less good guesses made silly. But why? What is the emotional payoff of a video like this? Perhaps the function of these parodies is to redirect the tense energies of anticipating a finale into comedy; but then, does it undermine the seriousness of the show? Or is the message here, don't take TV so seriously, even if it is "quality" storytelling? Another

Breaking Bad parody, its "Honest Trailer," seems to work along similar lines. Though it is not specifically about the question of finality/closure, the tone oscillates between praise for "awesome" moments and critique of several formal elements and thematic patterns in the series. The video begins and ends with jabs about the cultural capital of the show: "Seriously, you better tune in fast if you want to avoid being ostracized by white people; it's pretty much all they ever talk about." This "Honest Trailer" and "How *Breaking Bad* Will End" both engage in parody to mock, but also to reinforce, fan investment in the show. These videos turn anticipation into creative practice, open up the narrative to non-canonical possibilities, and thus sustain anticipation through cofactual thinking. Because the official *Breaking Bad* finale remained so narratively safe, these videos are all the more important for sustaining the creative potential of the storyworld.

VII. Spinning Off Anticipation

As an exemplar of complex television, *Breaking Bad* reveals a lot about how shows come to terms with their ends and how audiences anticipate endings at the levels of episode, season, and series. But as *Breaking Bad* moved towards its planned series finale, the anticipation (and, perhaps for some, melancholy) towards the end of the show was undercut by the knowledge of its (at the time) upcoming spinoff, *Better Call Saul*. Even if many series carry the possibility of resurrection or continuation after the finale, certain knowledge that this story would continue softened the blow of finality for many viewers, myself included. When *Better Call Saul* was announced, AMC and showrunner

Vince Gilligan were cagey about the temporal nature of the series—would it be a sequel, a prequel, or would it take place around the same time as the events of *Breaking Bad*? How would the showrunners manage the shift in tone that would be necessary with Saul at the center of the story? As we were anticipating the end of one series, we were also anticipating the beginning of another.

Now entering its third season, *Better Call Saul* is a prequel to *Breaking Bad* that relies on temporal play, and at times, ambiguity, for audiences to figure how these two stories relate to one another. Anticipation for the events of *Breaking Bad* suffuses *Better Call Saul.* It follows Jimmy McGill (Saul Goodman's prior identity) in his early days of practicing law, and Mike Ehrmantraut in his early days of criminal activity. No dates are given in the first two seasons, so viewers are unaware of the specific temporal relationship between these events and the start of *Breaking Bad.* But numerous clues, allusions, and direct characterological cross-overs keep *Breaking Bad* in the front of the *Better Call Saul* viewers' mind. The series also generates a dialogue with the privileged forms of masculinity in *Breaking Bad*, presenting Jimmy/Saul and Mike as alternatives to Walt's swaggering style. Finally, the prequel complicates notions of closure in the shared storyworld and draws attention to the various temporalities of anticipation that are made possible through different viewing patterns. For example, if one were to watch *Better Call Saul* before *Breaking Bad*, the forms of anticipation would work quite differently.

Over the past several years, the percentage of TV viewers who watch programming nontraditionally (i.e. in any way other than in the moment of initial

airing) has steadily risen; and most industry professionals and TV scholars predict that these numbers will only continue to rise as more platforms and technologies make their way into the media marketplace. I argue that this move towards nontraditional viewing is fundamentally a strategy for combatting the forces of anticipation in traditional viewing contexts. In other words, by circumnavigating a prescribed distribution temporality and taking viewing time and frequency into our own hands, we attempt to mitigate the hold that anticipation has over us. First, audiences want to eliminate the commercial breaks (e.g. fast-forwarding via DVR, subscribing to on-demand services, illegal downloading, purchasing DVDs). Audiences also often want to shorten or eliminate the gaps between episodes and seasons—so much so that it is now a common practice for viewers to wait for an entire season of a show to air, then download it or watch via an on-demand service. Indeed, Netflix's business model is predicated on this desire to control viewing temporality, to normalize distribution patterns that significantly depart from the TV industry's norms. But as we will see in the next chapter, control over the way we watch does not result in a similar control over the emotional responses that TV series initiate. In fact, nontraditional modes of viewing might even produce more acute emotional states, such as in the case of binge-viewing.

Chapter Three:

"Forward is the Battle Cry:" Binge-Viewing and Netflix Poetics

I.   Mapping Digital Flow(s)

In the previous chapter, I discussed series finales as highly anticipated social

events. We saw how digital technologies influence real-time serial viewing by enabling

catch-up viewing and encouraging increased paratextual engagement. The strategic use

of social media by cable and broadcast networks to reaffirm appointment TV and

valorize incremental consumption demonstrates how new technologies are often

tethered to "residual media" forms (Acland). In this chapter, we will look at another

method of TV consumption to see how technology and social practices intermingle in

our contemporary mediascape. With the growing prominence of VOD, and SVOD in

particular, binge-viewing (aka binge-watching) has become an increasingly dominant

mode of TV consumption. Multiple surveys[39] indicate that a large majority of TV viewers

"binge," which has come to be defined as watching three or more episodes in a row. The

growing popularity of bingeing has engendered an entire discourse on the

"transformation" of TV that recalls some of the most central debates in media studies:

passive vs. active consumption, narrative interactivity, and the shifting power dynamics

among media producers and consumers. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how

narrative structures and digital interfaces combine to create binge experiences that

simultaneously work with *and* against several of the historically defining characteristics

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[39] "Tune-In: The Impact of Binge-Viewing"; "Can't Stop, Won't Stop: Binge-Viewing is Our new Favourite Addiction"; "Binging is the new viewing for over-the-top streamers"; "Across the globe, consumers seek increased personalization from entertainment"

of TV. I argue that binge-viewing changes the stakes of narrative engagement and, in particular, closure, by reframing the temporality of viewing experience to optimize emotional intensity and story immersion. The method of my investigation in this chapter is threefold: first, I'll offer a history and general theory of binge-viewing as it relates to televisual traditions. Next, I'll use the concept of "Netflix Poetics" to show how TV production and distribution change with the rise of bingeing, using Netflix's flagship series *House of Cards* (2013-present) as a case study. And finally, I'll explore how bingeing allows for the creation and extension of viewing communities by opening texts up to different temporalities of consumption while still appealing to notions of appointment TV. I argue that binge-viewing is a locus for shifting ideas about what TV is, how we experience it, and how we make meaning from it.

The phenomenon of binge-viewing has revitalized one of the most pervasive terms in the history of TV studies: Raymond Williams' conception of "flow."[40] In 1974, Williams reconfigured how we look at programming by emphasizing the "mobile concept of flow" in opposition to the "static concept of distribution" (71). In other words, Williams posited that analyzing "sequences" rather than "discrete units" of TV could help us understand how the medium functions as a cultural institution. Through an extension of Williams' conception, we can see how digital technologies are creating new kinds of flows, in which viewers gain autonomy over the temporality of the viewing sequence, but not necessarily over the flow of storytelling. Bingeing prompts a shift from a delayed gratification model of narrative relation to one of instant gratification.

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[40] In 2014, I was part of a roundtable discussion, convened by Derek Kompare, on "Streaming the Return of Williams' Flow."

Whereas simultaneity and liveness were once the driving rhetorics of TV (Uricchio 164),

instantaneousness now defines our "on demand culture" (Tryon). I believe that we can

trace a direct line from Tryon's on-demand culture, which thrives on ubiquity and

availability of content, to what we could think of as "binge culture," which embraces

immersive narrative experience. If televisual flow "establishes a sense of the world"

(Williams 110), then bingeing orders our world in ways that are different from previous

media moments.

In describing the pseudo-addictive nature of televisual flow, Williams writes:

[I]t is a widely if often ruefully admitted experience that many of us find

television very difficult to switch off; that again and again, even when we

have switched on for a particular 'programme', we find ourselves watching

the one after it and the one after that. The way in which the flow is now

organised, without definite intervals, in any case encourages this. We can

be 'into' something else before we have summoned the energy to get out of

the chair (86-87).

The rhetorical links between this passage and the way that viewers describe experiences

of binge-viewing are clear. Although Williams refers to getting sucked into a flow that

contains different kinds of programming, it is the same sense of sustained continuity

and addictive pull—heightened when bingeing a single show—that produces "the

impulse to go on watching" (87).

SVOD services provide interfaces that encourage the user to design their own

flow—amplifying what Williams calls the "planned" nature of "an evening's viewing"

(85). Streaming platforms offer varying degrees and kinds of user agency—different levels of control over the rhythm and sequence of the flow. Just as Williams emphasizes the importance of looking at the "whole flow" (84), I argue that narrative analysis that pays specific attention to the operational structures of binge-viewing illuminates how new media practices continue to reflect traditional TV structures, even as they offer different kinds of viewing experiences. As Derek Kompare argues,

> [V]ideo devices are physically and culturally connected to television sets, forcing television—as both a technology and a cultural form, to borrow Raymond Williams' description—into a complex new relationship that foregrounds its function as an audiovisual display device, rather than its more established role as a dominant modern cultural institution. This link destabilizes the direct presentation of scheduled television events, and enables people to use their personal media technology to create or access programming on their own terms. (199)

By analyzing the different models of flow that a given streaming platform allows (e.g. autoplay, suggestions, playlists, etc.), we can see how these models engage television as a residual medium, embracing its "cultural form" while transforming its "technology." In a similar methodological gesture, William Uricchio proposes "reposition[ing] flow as a means of sketching out a series of fundamental shifts in the interface between viewer and television, and thus in the viewing experience" (165). He argues that with digital interfaces, "Neither the viewer nor the television programmer dominate the notion of flow. Instead, a new factor enters the equation: the combination of applied metadata

protocols [...] and filters" (176-177). Therefore, it is important to note that the apparent

user autonomy in the creation of digital flows is still subject to the possibilities and

limitations of a given technology—as well as the logics of algorithms. The promise of

control runs the risk of getting subsumed by the structure of the streaming interface,

immobilizing a powerless viewer—part of what prompts some strands of anti-bingeing

discourse.

I will discuss the negative positioning of binge-viewing momentarily, but I'd first

like to show how bingeing rewrites the teleology of televisual flow. Binge-viewing

induces a fundamental shift in how viewers relate to story pacing, episodic structure,

and—most important for my inquiry—narrative closure. Through the diversification of

viewing temporalities, finales take on new significance that is not simply about textually

embedded closural gestures, but also about the viewing process. When bingeing, finales

are separated from traditional forms of hype, even to the extent that a binge-viewer may

not realize that they have reached a season finale (depending on the viewing interface

and/or the viewer's degree of knowledge about the text). Furthermore, bingeing

amplifies one of the central problems of TV viewing—how to negotiate the

"contradictory desire to find out what happens next and for the story not to end"

(Brunsdon 66). As Mittell argues, "We use our sense of screen time to manage

expectations for upcoming plot points and pacing, following a set of guidelines that have

developed through our accrued experiences of television watching. Shattering these

established expectations can become particularly exciting or frustrating (or both)" (168).

So if much of what we have come to desire from season and/or series finales is a product

of traditional viewing structures, those desires change under bingeing circumstances. Additionally, the more that one binges TV content, the more we might expect *permanently* altered expectations of televisual closure: "History has shown that minor changes in viewing patterns can have enormous cultural spillovers" (Wu, "[Netflix's War on Mass Culture](#)"). Recent statistics demonstrate that viewers who binge on one series are likely to binge on others, suggesting that a large demographic is undergoing a form of re-learning or training regarding how to watch TV. The implicit contracts that once defined TV narrative are being rewritten by binge culture.

Writing in 2004, Uricchio anticipates the telos of SVOD: "[T]he envisioned result would seem to be a prime case for flow—a steady stream of programming designed to stay in touch with our changing rhythms and moods, selected and accessible with no effort on our part" (177). He goes on to argue that "[e]xperientially, the new technologies promise to scan huge amounts of programming and in the process package relevant programs into a never-ending stream of custom-tailored pleasure" (178). While Uricchio's prediction might read as somewhat hyperbolic, the reality of viewing experience in 2017 is not far off from this conception. While SVOD allows for an array of viewing patterns, I will focus on the unique role that bingeing plays in a transmedia environment that promotes diverse experiences of flow. I will demonstrate how serial tv encourages bingeing through "the reiterated promise of exciting things to come" (Williams 87), and I will use the idea of Netflix Poetics to unpack the relationship between narrative form and streaming interface in the production of complex digital flows.

II. From Reruns to Netflix: A Brief History of Binge-Viewing

Although the terminology has only become widely used in the past couple of years, binge-viewing is not an especially new phenomenon: VCRs allowed users to record episodes for bingeing, networks have broadcast marathons of various lengths since the rise of syndication in the 1980s, and DVD box sets have offered full seasons of series since 2000 (Kompare 200). But the proliferation of binge-viewing opportunities is undoubtedly on the rise in 2017, and media scholars are only beginning to scratch the surface of how this shift affects narrative experience. Most of the existing scholarship on bingeing is based on the DVD box set model, so it will be worth exploring how SVOD offers a different kind of experience.[41] For example, Mittell notes that

> Compiling a serial allows viewers to see a series differently, enabling us to perceive aesthetic values traditionally used for discrete cultural works to ongoing narratives—viewing a DVD edition helps highlight the values of unity, complexity, and clear beginnings and endings, qualities that are hard to discern through the incremental releases of seriality. (39)

In considering the difference between bingeing on a DVD and bingeing via an SVOD platform, we must analyze how each interface encourages (or sometimes hinders) what we might think of as "smooth" bingeing. For example, DVD menus provide paratextual packaging, usually including special features, but these interfaces are often cluttered and bulky. With DVD interfaces that do not include the "play all" button, binge-viewing is marked by pauses that require menu navigation to get to the next episode, and there are

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[41] We might also compare the dynamics of binge-viewing to those of a page-turning novel: what are the medium-specific affordances of Netflix that make binge-viewing different from binge-reading?

only a few episodes per disc. On the other hand, SVOD platforms like Netflix, Hulu, CraveTV, and Amazon default to an "autoplay" structure, in which limited user action is needed to continue the binge. By analyzing how particular interfaces encourage bingeing and tracing the development of these interfaces towards smooth bingeing, we can begin to see what TV viewing in binge culture looks like.

Before going further, it is worth spending some time to parse the binge metaphor and how it relates to historical attitudes about TV and the consumption of fiction more generally. There is no doubt that the term "binge" conjures plenty of negative connotations: addiction, excess, guilt, lack of control, gluttony, etc. It is foremost a metaphor of extreme consumption, of ravenous devouring. The metaphor also reinforces a subject/object (and producer/consumer) binary relationship, working against the rhetorics of narrative interactivity that are so prominent in contemporary Media Studies. Charlotte Brunsdon links the "[s]omatic metaphor of 'bingeing'" (64-65) to ideas about the addictive nature of fiction, arguing that "there is, in this metaphor […], the trace of a persistent shame at absorption in an audio-visual, fictional world" (67). Indeed, we can trace this lineage of shame to earlier modes of consumption, as Jennifer Hayward demonstrates in her study of serial fiction from Dickens to soap operas. For example, Hayward analyzes an 1837 sermon by historian and educator Thomas Arnold, who warns of the "evil influence of serials:" "For Arnold, reading in its serial manifestation is explicitly compared to a laudanum-like drug, *one distilled drop by drop* into the brain. It is this slow, steady, addictive process of textual progression […] which is perceived as particularly insidious" (6, my emphasis). Continuing to trace a

history of cultural attitudes towards serial narrative, Hayward notes that "Arnold's terror of the addictive effects of serial fiction reasserts itself, only slightly transformed, among intellectual and cultural critics of the twentieth century, most notably with the Frankfurt School's reaction to mass fiction" (7). So if we combine a nearly 200-year-old stigma towards serial consumption with the lingering conception of television as the "boob tube," we can see why negative characterizations of binge-viewing are so pervasive—a tendency that I hope to counter in this chapter.

Brunsdon writes that "[a]ddiction [...] condenses judgements about television fiction and its viewers. It proposes an involuntary, non-cerebral relation to the medium, an out-of-control habit (65). Brunsdon then goes on to make an interesting, if not entirely convincing, argument about what she considers a historical "move from addiction to bingeing" (65). She argues,

> The metaphors demonstrate the shift from something which is rationed temporally (broadcast television), and which you must therefore get a fix from regularly, to something more like a box of chocolates which you purchase and consume in your own time [...] [B]ingeing describes bad television *watching* ('piggy pleasures'), as opposed to the watching of bad television. (65-66)

While I disagree that we can separate bingeing from the rhetoric of addiction, I find Brunsdon's distinction here useful for thinking about the object of desire in the binge experience. Is it possible to be addicted to bingeing as a mode, rather than to a particular text? Brunsdon is correct that temporality matters here, but addiction need

not be solely tied to incremental cravings. Rather, perhaps what we are seeing with

SVOD is simply an addiction that is more conveniently pursuable: a steady drip of

pleasure derived from a "neverending stream" of readily available narrative drugs.

Reinforcing this addictive ontology, the sense of flow that bingeing creates is

linked to ideas of repetition. In *Rerun Nation*, Derek Kompare argues that "American

television—both as an industry and as a culture—needs repetition" (169). He offers an

astute history of the ways in which modes of televisual repetition have shifted with

changing technologies and industry structures. In his discussion of cable as "boutique

television," he writes that

> Nick at Nite and TV Land […] are methodically constructed *shrines*[42] of the
>
> television heritage, where past programs are immersed in a stylized array
>
> of promotional material and intertextual associations. Through their
>
> selection of programs and aesthetic framing, Nick At Night and TV Land
>
> have foregrounded the historical construction of 'television,' producing a
>
> compelling blend of decades, television styles, and memories. In short,
>
> they are television-themed boutiques, and reflexively function as a kind of
>
> 'living history,' the television heritage incarnate. (181, his emphasis)

Kompare's convincing analysis of cable's "boutique" model raises questions about the

content offerings of SVOD platforms. What version of TV history does a space like

Netflix depict?[43] How do interfaces and algorithms cultivate taste categories for the

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[42] Kompare's use of "shrines" here is interesting, since it evokes the sense of loss that we may feel when a TV series ends. Shrines, as memorials, are a way to mitigate loss and even resurrect "dead" texts.
[43] Here I am referring to all of the content that Netflix licenses, but Netflix Original Series are also invested in certain ideas about TV history, which I will discuss in the next section.

individual user? Just as cable channels' "methodical" repurposing of content creates

different patterns of flow for texts, SVOD platforms are most basically generators of

digital flows, in which one viewer's experience rarely mirrors another. Netflix Poetics is

thus an algorithmic poetics, creating personalized content "boutiques" that enable and

restrict our experiences of flow.[44]

Kompare rightly points out some drawbacks of this boutique model. For example,

"Decades, representations, characters, genres, and plots blur right into each other,

resulting in a multimediated *pastness*, rather than a more specific sense of 'the past'"

(182, his emphasis). This historical conflation certainly occurs in SVOD interfaces, as

offerings are almost always presented in thematic or genre-based categories, minimizing

and even obfuscating historical periods. One benefit of SVOD interfaces with regard to

historical framing, however, is the frequent inclusion of episode and series menu

screens. These convey information such as production year, writers, actors, and

directors (nb: this model is also prevalent in digital cable), but do not mention

production company or original airing network, let alone any below-the-line production

roles. These interfaces thus emphasize certain elements of textual history while omitting

others. Furthermore, the inclusion of platform-internal ratings systems and reviews

prioritizes contemporary user experience over a text's initial reception history.

On the perpetual unfolding of new TV technologies, Kompare notes that "each of

these sleek boxes, ranging from the first VCR to the latest PVR, are not mere

enhancements of media; they are *reconceptions*, profoundly altering our relationship

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[44] It is also worth considering the notion of content choice and the "boutique" ontology of Netflix in regards to film. Netflix is often credited (and/or condemned) for its role in the death of the brick-and-mortar video store, which would generally provide a much more comprehensive browsing experience.

with dominant media institutions, and with media culture in general" (199, his emphasis). SVOD is reconceiving TV as primarily a bingeable medium, forcing industry structures to accommodate prevailing viewing methods. According to Kompare, "the DVD box set [became] the ultimate bearer of televisual repetition, placing television programming in a more direct, repetitive, and acquisitive relationship with its viewers" (200, my emphasis). He goes on to posit that "DVD box sets are perhaps the ultimate form of television repetition under capitalism, crystallizing the concept of the ephemeral rerun into a physical commodity" (214). Meanwhile, just as Kompare predicted, SVOD has reconceived TV with a different ontology: non-material acquisition, repetition via algorithmic suggestion, and (more) mobile consumption. As Wu writes, SVOD seeks

> to replace the traditional TV model with one dictated by the behaviors and values of the Internet generation. Instead of feeding a collective identity with broadly appealing content, the streamers imagine a culture united by shared tastes rather than arbitrary time slots. Pursuing a strategy that runs counter to many of Hollywood's most deep-seated hierarchies and norms, Netflix seeks nothing less than to reprogram Americans themselves. What will happen to our mass culture if it succeeds?

The history of bingeing is unfolding every day, with the development of fleetingly new(er) technologies, shifts in industry structures, and the writing of media policy that will shape the future of television and the internet. But in 2017, binge culture has arrived; and while it continues to fight a bad reputation, the lived experiences of bingeing reveal a more complex story.

III. Social Structures of TV Bingeing

Despite its addictive connotations, bingeing affords more control over viewing schedules and limits the number of imposed viewing interruptions (such as commercials and distribution gaps). Indeed, I argue that bingeing is a transformative mode of viewing that opens up an array of different experiences and textual relations. But as we will see in this chapter, the psychological (and physiological) state induced by binge-viewing does mean that increased control over the flow of consumption often entails a corresponding surrender to the flow of the story. As Michael Z. Newman notes,

> television affords intense engagement with characters. We get to know the people on the screen so intimately that they become our TV friends. Sometimes we know them better than our real-life friends, because we get so much insight into their psychology, their secrets, their hopes and fears and dreams. Spending years with characters, they become regular visitors to our living rooms, like pals we see week after week at the same hangout. Binging (sic) intensifies the pleasure of this engagement by making characters all the more present in our lives. The relationship becomes more like a passionate but doomed affair, a whirlwind that enlivens us so well for a time, only to leave us empty and lost when it sadly, inevitably, ends. (FlowTV.org)

Newman's use of a romantic relationship metaphor is useful on several levels for understanding our attachments to TV narratives and the emotional stakes of binge-viewing. In comparing various modes of serial consumption, we can consider the

differences between friendship and romance, short and long-term relationships,

monogamy and polygamy, and even co-habitation vs. long-distance. These models of

social interaction offer a productive lens for charting how our viewing habits induce

various levels of commitment and create different kinds of narrative expectations.

Newman's metaphor is especially useful for reconsidering the role of narrative closure in

the binge context; various kinds of relationships require different kinds of closural

gestures. Just as every social relationship operates as a form of implicit contract, so too

do we enter into narrative contracts with the texts we consume. And the factors that

contribute to our viewing circumstances play a major role in circumscribing those

contracts. For example, if we invest a single week in bingeing a series, our expectations

of closure will be vastly different from a series to which we have dedicated multiple

years of our lives.

I propose that we can divide bingeing into three categories: the complete binge,

the catch-up binge, and the rewatch binge. Each of these forms of bingeing indicate a

range of motivations, benefits, and drawbacks, and each suggests a different pattern of

flow. The complete binge means that one watches an entire series after its initial run has

ended. DVD box sets certainly made complete binges possible, but quite expensive,

especially for long-running series with many seasons. SVOD platforms that continue to

acquire rights to a range of series from all historical periods now make complete

bingeing more affordable and commonplace. In addition, these full series offerings build

a televisual archive—an extension of the "boutique TV" offerings of cable channels that

Kompare discusses. The juxtaposition of series on SVOD platforms establishes

nonlinear intertextual relationships (via algorithmic "suggestions") across historical, genre, and network boundaries, obfuscating the nature of these services' links to established industry structures.

Catch-up bingeing is perhaps the form of viewing that has the most direct impact on the TV industry's programming model. DVDs and SVOD platforms allow viewers to catch up on a currently-airing show in order that they might watch forthcoming seasons in real time. This practice can create a boom in ratings for particular shows, as was the case with *Breaking Bad*'s final season (discussed in the previous chapter). Catch-up bingeing rejuvenates fandoms, allowing more/new viewers to participate in the "initial conversation" about a show. Now, I want to put some pressure on this privileging of the initial conversation. One of the recurring arguments about the drawbacks of bingeing is that "we lose our connection to the larger viewing audience as community and to the temporality of broadcasting that unites a program with the moment of its airing" (Newman).[45] As we saw in the previous chapter, that temporality of communal viewing is indeed important. I argue, however, that even if binge technologies remove viewers from some conversations, they also create other ones. When we look at social media interactions, we see multivocal discussions of a given series based on the diverse ways of watching represented in that community. As some viewers are catching up, others are rewatching, others are awaiting the next season, and these perspectives generate new ways of seeing and experiencing the text for everyone involved in the conversation. Our viewing experiences become remediated through the experiences of others.

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[45] This argument is reiterated by Todd Sodano (2012) and Mareike Jenner (2014), among others.

The third form of bingeing, the rewatch binge, seems to be almost always a gesture of fandom, since the devotion of so much time indicates a high level of textual commitment. Factors like anticipation, curiosity, and surprise mutate in the context of rewatching: complex narratives invite what Mittell calls the "analytic rewatch" in which "we look to past moments of story with knowledge of narrative futures—we rewatch with the mindset of 'now that I know what will happen, it looks different.' Thus when we rewatch a puzzle film or reread a mystery novel, we do so with full knowledge of the ending and analyze the twisty plot accordingly" ("[Notes on Rewatching](#)"). The prevalence of rewatch bingeing also supports the claims of Mittell and Gray in their exploration of spoilers: that viewers are often more interested in the "operational aesthetic" than in the plot events themselves.

Perhaps a more common motivation for rewatching is nostalgia—returning to a series that recalls an earlier time in your life, a narrative security blanket.[46] Or rewatching can be a gesture of community: sharing a favourite text with a friend or loved one, relishing the experience of watching someone watch for the first time. In other cases, rewatching might be a tactic of achieving mastery of a text: memorizing the ins and outs of a narrative to demonstrate the intensity of one's fandom. In all of these cases, rewatching revives texts, repositions them in new ways for the viewer. On the analogous process of rereading, Roland Barthes writes,

> [R]ereading [...] saves the text from repetition [...], multiplies it in its
>
> variety and its plurality [...] [R]ereading is no longer consumption, but

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[46] Re-watch bingeing can thus take the form of "background noise," in which fans who are familiar with a series can engage in distracting viewing.

> play (that play which is the return of the different). If then, […] we
>
> *immediately* reread the text, it is in order to obtain, as though under the
>
> effect of a drug (that of recommencement, of difference), not the *real* text,
>
> but a plural text: the same and new. (16)

Barthes' argument here certainly applies to the rewatching of TV, and it's worth noting his invocation of the addictive qualities of a text. Furthermore, his juxtaposition of "consumption" and "play" is a useful model for recuperating the negative connotations of bingeing. Even if the metaphor is primarily about *consuming more*, conceiving of the practice as "play" emphasizes viewer agency and indicates a more active mode of narrative engagement.

With all three forms of bingeing, we can trace common elements in the viewing experience. Most basically, there are situational requirements for a binge to take place: free time, access to the technology and the textual material, and commitment. Therefore, bingeing opportunities are at least partially a product of socioeconomic status and physical location, as well as our individual relationship to a given text. Despite widespread depictions of binge-viewing as the epitome of couch-potato syndrome, bingeing is not an easy task, physically or psychologically. The bodily demands of bingeing are real: viewers often forego meals, personal hygiene, and exercise during a binge. They also risk that kind of intense emotional immersion that Newman gestured to above.

In a 2011 episode of the hipster comedy *Portlandia*, two of the main 30-something characters (played by Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein) [engage in an](#)

[unplanned binge](#) of the cult science fiction series, *Battlestar Galactica* (*BSG*). The central montage scene hyperbolically depicts several major characteristics of the binge-viewing experience. When Armisen proposes watching *BSG*, he employs a mild form of "quality TV" rhetoric: "I heard really good things about it. It's not just regular science fiction. It's actually good." Brownstein has also "heard good things," and so it is clear that part of the motivation for their binge is about the influence of peer groups on our viewing decisions. Once the binge begins, the characters move from a rhetoric of denial (tentatively succumbing to "one more episode"), to a rhetoric of enthusiasm (chanting "next one! next one!" in unison). Furthermore, the binge-viewing experience takes a serious toll on their hygiene and health: neither character showers or brushes their teeth, and Brownstein's character admits that she "might have a bladder infection," but will get antibiotics "after the next episode." Finally, the characters prioritize the narrative over other events in their lives: they neglect to go to work, pay their bills, or interact with their friends. Upon suddenly realizing that they've completed the final episode of the series, Brownstein's character erupts in a psychotic scream of anger: "NOOOOOOOO!." This outburst is certainly a gesture to the *BSG* fandom's general dissatisfaction with the series finale, but that anger gets simplified here as simply a *desire for more*. The rest of the episode involves Armisen and Brownstein seeking out series creator Ronald Moore and several of the lead actors and attempting to force them to make more story—an interesting incarnation of fans determining stakes of narrative closure, which I will address further in chapters four and five. In line with the absurdist comedy of *Portlandia*, these scenes are played to the extreme; but the experiential

elements of bingeing that Armisen and Brownstein portray are not far from reality for a growing number of TV consumers.

But how can we know what others' binge experiences are like? Based on recent studies and my extensive explorations of Twitter as an archive of viewer experience, I am able to put forth a number of hypotheses regarding common elements of bingeing, which are supported by the variety of content in [this Storify](#). First of all, since bingeing requires large chunks of time, viewers tend to binge while sick or injured, on holiday or unemployed, and during times of emotional distress or isolation. Bingeing gives structure to unstructured time, bestows order and provides distraction. Secondly, bingeing causes an array of common physical effects, many of which are captured and exaggerated in the *Portlandia* piece cited above: muscle stiffness/soreness, eye strain, and the various repercussions of a forgotten or minimized personal hygiene routine. Finally, bingeing seems to induce similar kinds of psychological responses in many viewers: immersion to the point of invasion (into dreams, for example), intense character identification, astute plot comprehension, and a tendency to relate external events to the narrative world.

The growing number of TV viewers who utilize "bingeing" and other terms of obsession to describe their user habits signals a reframing of the discourse of addiction and a claiming of the process as active and intentional. As much as depictions of binge-viewing like to emphasize a condition of uncontrollable addiction, and as much as we may in fact surrender to the flow of a narrative during a binge, I argue that bingeing is an active, often deliberate, and sometimes subversive mode of viewing. Therefore, I do

not seek to completely reject the discourse of addiction, but rather to utilize that discourse to uncover how narrative relationships operate in our binge culture.

In addition to the shared elements of binge-viewing, we can identify a number of factors that create variations on the binge experience. First: size matters. The number of consecutive hours that one sits in front of the screen determines levels of emotional/psychological immersion, physical exhaustion, and the overall intensity of narrative addiction. Watching three or four episodes in a row might count (statistically speaking) as bingeing and cause some binge effects, but that experience is quite different from completing an entire season in a day or pulling an all-night binge. Therefore, I propose that we keep in mind various degrees of bingeing and acknowledge the spectrum of experiences that fall into this viewing category.

The next point of variation in bingeing is whether or not the practice is undertaken alone, with a partner, or in a larger group. I posit that solo bingeing tends to foster a more intimate relationship to the narrative, as we feel more free to laugh/cry/scream without external judgement. Bingeing with a partner, meanwhile, creates a romantic triangle in which a text becomes a shared object of desire, and sharing in that addiction produces another form of narrative intimacy. Meanwhile, bingeing in a larger group might cause individual viewers to be more emotionally restrained, but the communal dynamic provides opportunities to discuss and consider multiple interpretive perspectives throughout the viewing process. Furthermore, group and partner bingeing modes are not limited to face-to-face interaction; synchronized individual binges combined with social media and/or virtual communication engender

shared narrative experiences as well, much like in real-time viewing communities.[47]

Another important variable in binge experiences is the question of access. Peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing and free streaming sites facilitate a huge amount of illegal bingeing. As noted earlier, DVD and Blu-Ray box sets are expensive, and subscription streaming services, while more affordable, offer limited content. Torrents provide a degree of textual ownership, albeit in digital form. Illegal downloading and streaming also present a variety of bingeing interfaces. Streaming sites are usually cluttered with advertisements that the user must sift through to get to the text, and video quality is often poor compared to legal streaming services. Downloaded files, on the other hand, can be viewed via any number of media-playing software, most of which have "playlist" functions that facilitate smooth bingeing. Of course, there are ethical concerns with illegal content access; for my purposes, though, the important thing to consider is whether the experience of bingeing through illegal means differs from legal forms of narrative consumption, and how those differences might influence the future of SVOD. P2P file sharing does amplify the subversive component of bingeing (at least in the basic sense of defying the law), but the use of P2P can diminish the viewer's power to influence industry structures by not "counting" those viewers in any ratings systems. Experientially, P2P sharing can include a lot of frustrating hiccups, like downloading bunk files or acquiring malware; but using SVOD subscription services limits viewing options, restricts video quality based on internet connection speed, and subjects viewers to behavioral surveillance. The idea of surveillance of our online behaviors makes many

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[47] There are a growing number of online applications that facilitate social viewing through SVOD. These apps indicate a desire to reinstate some of the elements of TV viewing that might be lost in SVOD contexts.

internet users uncomfortable, but there is some positive potential of these forms of data collection: for example, Netflix's use of algorithmic analysis allows the company to adjust their content offerings based on user preferences and patterns of activity. For example, Netflix offered *House of Cards* an initial two-season pick-up because they knew the specific percentage of their subscribers who liked both "Kevin Spacey" and "Political Drama." In the next section, I will establish *House of Cards* as the prototype of Netflix Poetics and investigate what makes a show more or less bingeable.

IV. "Forward is the Battle Cry": Anatomy of a Bingeable Show

In her analysis of bingeing, Brunsdon poses the question, "Can 'bingeability' also be seen as a textual quality?" She argues that "for the viewer to want to view in this way, the fictional world must be imagined and realized with sufficient intensity to make it hard to resist returning. That is, there are aesthetic preconditions [...] which reward return" (66). Brunsdon relates these aesthetic preconditions to the cultural positioning of "quality TV." And while it is true that the "most binged" shows all fall into that nebulous category of "quality" programming, as the practice becomes more common, bingeing of all kinds of TV (including highly episodic shows and reality series[48]) seems to be increasing. In this section, I will demonstrate how certain textual characteristics can invite bingeing, but I'll argue that the overall bingeability of any show relies on a combination of textuality and viewing interface. In order to construct an anatomy of bingeable shows, I'll look at two case studies: *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-present), a

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[48] Good evidence of this can be found in Netflix's recent investment in *Ultimate Beastmaster* (2017-), a competition-based reality show catered to international audiences.

series created with the explicit goal of bingeability, and *Lost* (ABC, 2004-2010), a complex series that reads in new ways when placed in a binge context.

Before the release of *House of Cards* season one, creator Beau Willimon stated: "Our goal is to shut down a portion of America for a whole day" (Stelter). This hail to binge-viewing represents a key shift in TV distribution: by releasing all 13 episodes at once, *House of Cards* invited, even challenged, its viewers to immerse themselves in the storyworld and race to the finale. Though, as noted in previous sections, this was not the first time that TV viewers had access to the entirety of a season at once, it was the first time that a series had been crafted with this method of distribution in mind, and the first time that the initial release of a series took the form of a full-season "dump." Such on-demand native programming is becoming increasingly common, with Netflix's $5 billion investment in original programming in 2016, and several other online distribution companies (e.g. Amazon, Hulu, CraveTV) all producing their own series—and in many cases, releasing entire seasons at once. The full-season dump model departs from the traditional industry logic of offering viewers a slow drip of content, hyping appointment viewing, and using distribution gaps and hiatuses to generate anticipation and demand for more "product." These financial imperatives trickle down into the formal structures of television, affecting plot and character pacing, season and episode length, and expectations regarding narrative resolution. In 2015, TV critic Todd VanDerWerff wrote about how "Netflix thinks more in terms of seasons than episodes." TV critic Alan Sepinwall has bemoaned such storytelling structures, arguing that many of these series have "no interest in differentiating one episode from the next, and just

offe[r] up 13 amorphous hours of… *stuff*." Sepinwall's criticism is rooted in a deep

loyalty to the television medium and an aversion to TV positioning itself as "like"

literature or film. VanDerWerff, on the other hand, recognizes the Netflix model as a

"new art form" that will "require a fair amount of trial and error." The proliferation of

Netflix original programming over the past two years has certainly given creators the

opportunity to experiment with this storytelling form, and so the growing library of

Netflix originals invites us to think about Netflix poetics as a specific set of tools and

tactics for creating meaning in televisual narrative with binge-viewing in mind.

      Reflecting on how they are changing TV, Netflix's Chief Content Officer Ted

Sarandos explains:

> [W]hen we launched *House of Cards*, we took on a bunch of the
>
> conventions of television […] One of them was international release
>
> simultaneously. The other, certainly, was launching 13 episodes at one
>
> time of a show that you produced without a pilot and that you committed
>
> to two seasons for up front. So I think that was the first wave of kind of
>
> convention challenging or convention breaking. ("The Story Behind
>
> Netflix's biggest Show")

Sarandos goes on to praise the storytelling possibilities afforded to the writers of Netflix

original content, such as the lack of a need for recaps or forced cliffhangers: "And you

really do get more storytelling, more richness. And by the time you get to 13 hours, you

have spent more time with those people." Sarandos' use of "those *people*" is interesting;

we can return to Newman's relationship metaphor and remember that bingeing forges

more intense viewer/character attachments. Here, Sarandos's casual acknowledgement of the value of narrative encounters reworks the historical stigma associated with immersion in fictional worlds. Sarandos, Willimon, Netflix, and other SVOD content producers are forging new ways of presenting serial narratives that privilege user/text relations over advertising and monolithic, unidirectional structures of flow.

My reading of *House of Cards*' bingeability relies on structural and thematic analysis, combined with the role of the Netflix interface and distribution model.[49] First of all, *House of Cards*' temporal structure reflects the trajectory of the binge experience: there is a distinct forward momentum in the narrative, with various amounts of time passing between episodes, no flashbacks or flashforwards, and a season roughly amounting to a calendar year. Each season finale carries the narrative momentum to a climax that rewards the viewer's commitment and fulfills a major plot telos, while also instilling a desire for *more* narrative in the next season by leaving significant questions unresolved. Furthermore, the show's thematic emphasis on addiction, power, and bodily exhaustion draws attention to the physical and psychological components of a TV binge. *House of Cards* consistently evokes the binge experience to incite a form of hyperdiegetic play—the viewer must confront the intensity of immersion while in the midst of the consumption process. By examining the text, its influence on the TV industry, and its reception trends, I will demonstrate how *House of Cards* is wholly steeped in the culture of binge-viewing.

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[49] I should note that at the time of this writing, four seasons have aired, and the fifth has completed production. There is no indication that the upcoming season will be the series' last.

From the first episode, *House of Cards* establishes narrative parameters that mark it as a bingeable text. First of all, episodes do not have unique titles, but are instead represented as "Chapters" by the Netflix interface. This gesture to another narrative medium (books) serves several functions: it links the show to a history of serial fiction, it separates it from the dominant way of organizing TV, and it creates continuity across seasons (season 2 begins with "Chapter 14"). Furthermore, the use of a chapter format implicitly marks the text as a "quality" or "good" cultural object—associating *House of Cards* with literature instead of TV. This conflation of media in the formal presentation of the series is echoed by widespread associations of the simultaneous release model with "a 13-hour movie," again linking the narrative to what has historically been considered a more "quality" medium.[50] Finally, on a basic structural level, the show's complexity and its associations with the political thriller genre, in combination with the Netflix interface, all prime the text for bingeing.

I posit that complex temporality and temporal play encourage bingeing by drawing attention to the concept and function of narrative time. Paul Booth has argued that nontraditional presentations of narrative temporality are a key feature in the broader trend of complex TV. The temporal momentum of *House of Cards* creates story gaps that require negotiation through attentive viewing, since the narrative usually provides only subtle clues as to the amount of time that has passed since the last episode and what events may have occurred in those ellipses. Furthermore, the series plays on

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[50] As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, and as many media scholars argue (Newman and Levine, 2012, e.g.), the cultural hierarchy between film and TV has dramatically shifted in the past 5-10 years, though remnants of that hierarchy persist. David Fincher's directorial role in Chapters 1-2 emphasizes the series' link to film, as does Kevin Spacey's casting as the lead.

an interaction between story time and real-world time by propelling viewers into the future. Each season's narrative begins very close to the actual date of its release, and then carries the viewer well beyond that date, engendering a kind of time travel that evokes the temporality of bingeing. This accelerated passage of time also draws attention to the way that time works on the body. We see the characters' bodies change at a rate that, on the one hand, contrasts with our own relatively static bodies, but on the other, visualizes the emotional and physical changes that might occur while bingeing (such as exhaustion, muscle pain, and neglected hygiene). Of course, these temporal effects are dependent upon when and how quickly a viewer consumes the series. If, for example, one were to begin the series now, one would be traveling backward—not forward—in time. And if a viewer chooses *not* to binge, the diegetic gestures to the passage of time do not produce the same effects. The fact that the show's creators (and Netflix more generally) have placed such an emphasis on bingeing as an ideal mode of consumption, however, sets up a preferred reading that is reliant upon accelerated temporality and the play between story time and actual time.

Another important tactic that amplifies the show's bingeability is the use of direct address, or Shakespearean asides, from Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) to the viewer. Frank, the aspiring congressman and central anti-hero of the series, breaks the fourth wall to implicate viewers in his ruthless quest for power. While these asides were also a part of the British version of the series (and the original source material of *Richard III*), they take on new meaning in the Netflix context.[51] Recent statistics reveal that the

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[51] And indeed, forms of narration that blur diegetic boundaries are present in many Netflix original series and should be considered a characteristic of Netflix Poetics.

majority of SVOD users watch content on their computers, despite a growing number of methods for connecting SVOD technologies to televisions. Therefore, we can assume a certain degree of *screen intimacy* when analyzing the Netflix viewing experience. The screen is likely closer to the viewer, perhaps even in her lap or bed, and this screen is the same one used for various forms of personal communication.[52] So when Frank looks into the camera and says "welcome to Washington" just before "Chapter 1"'s opening title sequence, the text has already established a particular relationship to the viewer. We might even think of Frank's asides as generating a sense that we are video-conferencing with the story, or with Frank himself. This structural choice seems to emphasize the dream of narrative interactivity—without, of course, actually allowing the viewer to speak back to Frank. Nonetheless, these direct addresses, amplified by Spacey's powerful gaze, establish a textual intimacy that encourages bingeing.

The thematic elements of the show that evoke binge-viewing are also present from the first episode. In "Chapter One," after forging his revenge plot, Frank tells his wife, Claire, "We'll have a lot of nights like this. Making plans, *very little sleep*." She responds, "I expected that—it doesn't worry me," and then the couple shares a cigarette. This scene implicates Frank and Claire in a grueling process analogous to bingeing, and thus acts as a call for preparation. The scene also reveals one of the couple's addictions—nicotine—which will become an ongoing motif throughout the series. Another motif that we see in the first episode is Frank's addiction to videogames: as he plays, he wears headphones and appears completely immersed. In addition to evoking

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[52] Amelie Hastie discussed the relationship between interface and embodied viewing at the #flow14 conference.

themes of attention and immersion, Frank's gaming emphasizes media interactivity and narrative play. Finally, towards the end of "Chapter One," after he has begun to plant the seeds of his plot to power, Frank looks directly into the camera and tells us: "Forward is the battle cry;" if the episode has done its job, the viewer adopts this battle cry as their own.

Other key thematic trends that reflect the binge experience develop throughout season one. In addition to the ongoing theme of addiction, the motifs of consumption, exercise, and fatigue are all prominent. "Chapter One" ends with Frank agreeing to a second helping of ribs at his favorite BBQ joint, proclaiming, "I'm feeling hungry today." Frank's eating and drinking habits continue to reflect the consumptive desire of the binge-viewer, as he alternates between restraint (eating a salad in "Chapter 4") and gluttony (going on a alcohol bender in "Chapter 8"). In "Chapter Two," Claire insists that Frank take better care of himself and buys him a rowing machine—prioritizing exercise, but also evoking the idea of simulated forward momentum. When the rowing machine breaks in the season finale, simulated momentum is exchanged for actual momentum when Frank joins Claire on a run. As the two protagonists go for a jog on a chilly D.C. evening, the viewer also experiences a sense of renewed freedom of mobility, released from the hold of the narrative—until the next season.

One of the most effective and complex devices that *House of Cards* uses to address the audience as binge-viewers is through the deployment of surrogate characters. Surrogates are a common device in narratives (of any medium) for reflecting the viewer's perspective. In *House of Cards*, all of our surrogate characters are addicts of

one kind or another, and the ways that they deal with their addictions represent a

spectrum of "good" and "bad" addiction. This spectrum of addictive behavior

simultaneously serves as a kind of instruction manual on how to be a good binge-viewer.

As new surrogates are introduced and then killed off, we come to see their failures as

warnings, or at least as hyperdiegetic gestures to the viewer's experience. In season one,

for example, congressman Peter Russo is one of our primary surrogates. His addictive

tendencies are what lead Frank to incorporate him into the main plot, since Frank needs

someone he can control. As we watch Peter struggle with his addictions to alcohol,

drugs, and sex, the narrative positions him as a regular guy ("Can a corporate sellout roll

a joint like this?"). When Frank encourages Peter to run for governor of Pennsylvania,

Peter is forced to publicly reveal his addictive past—much like the viewer of *House of*

Cards might acknowledge (via social media or elsewhere) her own history of

binge-viewing. Peter gets clean, but not for long; and when he falls off the wagon,

completely succumbing to his addiction, the viewer might also recognize their own

immersive behavior as a kind of "giving in." When it becomes clear that Peter is too far

gone to be of use, Frank takes swift action. As the two men sit in Peter's garage, Frank

explains, in a soothing voice:

> I know you're in a lot of pain, Peter. But I don't want you to feel any pain
>
> tonight. Here, you can start fresh tomorrow [*hands him the bottle of*
>
> *booze*]. Go ahead, I won't judge ya. Hell, I'll even join you. Just relax.
>
> You're home now. Whatever it is you have to face tomorrow, you don't
>
> have to face it now. Right now is just you and me, the rest of the world

doesn't matter. Your children, Christina, they will forgive you. Because

you're loved, Peter. [...] Just close your eyes, let it all go. We have all the

time in the world. ("Chapter 11")

While this speech might read on one level as an invitation to succumb to addictive

viewing, the fact that Frank murders Peter right after reveals the disingenuousness of

Frank's seemingly comforting words. Instead, we realize that we cannot "let it all go"

and that we do not "have all the time in the world;" rather, this is a moment to refocus

attention for the final two chapters of the season.

Another primary viewer surrogate in season one is Zoe Barnes, the journalist that

Frank uses to manipulate public opinion in the service of his political power grab. In

contrast to Peter's straightforward (and more culturally recognizable) substance

addiction, Zoe is addicted to information. To emphasize her actions as addictive, we see

the consumption metaphor utilized when she asks Frank to "feed her" information

("Chapter 4"). Her desire for knowledge reflects that of the viewer, reinforcing the

puzzle nature of the show's complex narrative. Just as Mittell argues that complex TV

turns viewers into "amateur narratologists" (2006: 38), identification with Zoe turns

viewers into amateur journalists—particularly if that viewer is connected to a second

screen, reporting her activities via social media. But as was the case in our identification

with Peter, the viewing methods that we see reflected by Zoe are similarly punished. In a

well-executed moment of narrative surprise, Frank pushes Zoe into a moving train in

the first episode of season two, abruptly severing our tie to her as a viewer surrogate.

This use of a shocking twist in what would traditionally be the "season premiere"

suggests an inversion of televisual models of anticipation and surprise—it is a narrative move traditionally suited for a season finale. Furthermore, this unexpected character death creates the opportunity for a huge spoiler right off the bat, perhaps teaching viewers to watch new seasons as soon as they are released on Netflix.

Doug Stamper, Frank's Chief of Staff and closest ally, also functions as a viewer surrogate, although his insider knowledge of (and complicity with) Frank's plotting differentiates him from Peter and Zoe. Doug is a former alcoholic, 14 years sober, and so his initial ability to control addictive tendencies makes him a model candidate for the ideal viewer. As the narrative develops, however, he becomes obsessed with the character Rachel, a young prostitute who is implicated in the Peter Russo scheme. In "Chapter 24," Doug attends an AA meeting and explains to the group:

> I work hard. I keep things simple. I know what my priorities are. There's this…this person. She's not even in my life except on the edges, making things blurrier. It doesn't tempt me to drink. It's more like, more like she feels like what it was like when I was drinking. When I couldn't get enough. No matter how many drinks I had, I wanted another.

During this monologue, the camera starts behind Doug's head, so that we are positioned with him, then slowly circles around and stops on a close up of his face for the final line. This monologue works on two levels: setting up Doug's impending fall off the wagon, *and* describing the binge-viewing experience. Furthermore, the fact that Doug is addicted to a person might be a warning to the viewer not to get too attached to any particular character. In "Chapter 26," Doug is literally beaten down by the object of his

addiction as Rachel bludgeons him almost to death with a rock, and the camera [positions us at ground level with him](), a close up of his immobile body, eyes open and glazed over.

This chilling shot of Doug's near-death experience follows an established pattern in the series of visually reinforcing our bonds to surrogate characters by positioning us with each of them during their deaths. During Frank's pre-murder monologue to Peter, the camera [situates us inside of the car]() with them, and the monologue seems addressed as much to us as to Peter (in part because he is more or less unconscious). After Frank stages the suicide scene and exits the garage, the camera remains inside, entombing the viewer with Peter. In Zoe's murder scene, we are situated even more closely with her perspective. The camera places us at her level as she and Frank converse on the train platform. Then, when Frank suddenly grabs Zoe and turns her 180 degrees, we get a [brief but traumatic POV]() of falling onto the tracks. This tactic of repeatedly killing the viewer along with their surrogates reinforces my argument that these characters are also models of "incorrect" viewing strategies.

The release of season two of *House of Cards* garnered even more social media hype than the release of the first season a year earlier. By February, 2014, the ripple effect of the success of season one (as well as *Orange is the New Black*, *Arrested Development*, and other Netflix original programming), combined with the growing visibility of binge-viewing more broadly, primed *House of Cards* season two to be a true binge event. The day before the release, President Barack Obama even tweeted, "[Tomorrow: @*HouseofCards*. No spoilers, please]()," acknowledging the fact that many

viewers would tear through the season quickly and potentially ruin key plot points for those lagging behind. Indeed, in my own experience, I had to watch my virtual step on Twitter for 48 hours for fear of spoilers (I then binged all 13 episodes in one sitting on February 16th). This instance of planned bingeing represents an interesting variation on the viewing practice, one that is clearly tied to Netflix's brand identity. Most importantly, it reasserts an appointment TV model and the social elements of viewing that many scholars argue is lost in binge culture. In contrast to the shared experience of watching a serial unfold across weekly or seasonal temporal gaps, the planned binge creates different kinds of communal bonds. Social media dialogue is not only about what's happening in the narrative, but what is happening to *us* (physically and emotionally) as we watch the narrative. Earlier, I posited that there are experiential differences between solo and couple/group bingeing, and so the mass binge that takes place on the premiere weekend of *House of Cards* brings the benefits of group bingeing to a different level. As my partner and I binged season two, I monitored #houseofcards to see how people were reacting to both the plot and the viewing experience. Some of the trends that I discovered were: 1) Nonspecific spoilers, such as expressing shock at the end of chapter 14, but not outright saying what had happened (apparently people had heeded Obama's warning); 2) Declarations of how many episodes one had watched in a certain amount of time; 3) Jokes about Valentine's day; 4) Quotations from the show, almost always derived from Frank's Shakespearean asides; and 5) Desire for/looking forward to season three.

In addition to increased paratextual hype, season two of *House of Cards* intensifies the narrative motifs of season one that mark the text as bingeable. Consumption becomes a more prominent theme, represented literally by the enlargement of BBQ restaurant owner Freddie's role in the narrative. Discourse on addiction becomes more complicated, and a single surrogate character emerges as the embodiment of the ideal viewer. Over the course of season one, Edward Meechum, the Underwoods' personal security guard, undergoes training to become what is essentially a professionalized addict, and the object of his desire is the Underwoods themselves. The first words Frank says to Meechum are "Do you drive fast?" ("Chapter 3"), one of many references to speed and momentum throughout the series. Then, after failing to protect the Underwoods' home in "Chapter 6" (a mistake that was actually orchestrated by Frank), Meechum begs for a second chance. Frank concedes to rehiring Meechum, but issues the following caveat: "I want you to listen very closely to what I'm about to say. From this moment on, you are a rock. You absorb nothing, you say nothing. And nothing breaks you. Is that clear?" This warning to Meechum and the viewer seems harsh, but it's perfectly in line with the hyperdiegetic training motif. Frank is strict with Meechum to prepare him for the challenge, and he eventually rewards Meechum for his attentive dedication. In "Chapter 24," Frank, Claire, and Meechum engage in a threesome. Similar to the ways that the camera positions the viewer with character surrogates during their deaths, here [we are positioned as Meechum in the threesome](), and thus become part of their sexual dynamic. So if Meechum is being rewarded with

this intimate connection to the Underwoods, the viewer is simultaneously being

rewarded for her own viewing dedication.

Frank's position as Vice President in season two results in President Garrett

Walker playing a more prominent role in the narrative. While it might seem odd to

identify with the POTUS, Walker emerges as another viewer surrogate, albeit one that

represents the most disappointing and pathetic model of viewership. Despite his

position of power, the narrative reveals Walker as weak, manipulable, and even an

addict. The most interesting part about Walker in season two is his trajectory of

exhaustion—he simply can't keep up with the narrative. In "Chapter 23," Frank

convinces Garrett to take a nap on the oval office couch, then turns to the camera and

declares: "I've always loathed the necessity of sleep. Like death, it puts even the most

powerful men on their backs." Walker continues to look increasingly haggard as the

season wears on, reflecting the exhaustion of the viewer while simultaneously warning

of the consequences of giving into that exhaustion. Walker faces impeachment and

resigns in the season finale, creating a correlation between giving into exhaustion and

losing one's power over the narrative.

I am limiting this reading of *House of Cards* to the first two seasons, since these

had the strongest impact on the formation of Netflix Poetics. And although the series

has yet to conclude, it offers useful insights into the role of endings in Netflix Poetics.

For example, the infamous "auto-play" function is one of the ways that Netflix subverts

the power of endings, instantly reminding us that there is more to be watched. At the

level of the episode, the auto-play countdown gives us roughly 15 seconds to decide

whether or not to keep watching. Recently, Netflix has extended the reach of the auto-play function, so the closure (or cliffhanger) of a season finale is immediately undercut by the start of the next season—if it exists. Sometimes, as a result of auto-play functions, we may not even realize that we've reached a season or series finale. Furthermore, the full-season dump distribution model means that there's no special paratextual hype for the episodes, so imperatives of finale storytelling come from the internal narrative structure (and historically ingrained expectations) rather than the external pressures faced by cable and broadcast networks.

These conditions allow Netflix Poetics to emphasize season finales in the purest narrative sense: "Chapter 13" of *House of Cards*, for example, contains no cold open, and the first shot after the credit sequence is of a slowly dripping faucet, which Frank then breaks out of frustration. Here, we can read a narrative metaphor of breaking the steady drip of story as we move towards closure—bursting the pipes, so to speak. In terms of narrative milestones, the finale finds Frank attaining a key step in his plan—becoming the Vice President. Yet, the last scene complicates his success as Doug attempts to contact Frank and warn him that Zoe may be closing in on discovering their plot. The season ends with the intercutting of Frank's ringing cell phone in the Underwood's empty house and Frank and Claire going for a run through a park. Thus, the finale provides gestures of closure while inciting new narrative momentum—crystallized in the final close-up image of Frank pulling ahead of Claire during their run.

"Chapter 26," the season two finale, operates through a similar balance of closure and momentum. As I've demonstrated, the second season is even more narratively self-conscious than the first, and the finale is no exception. After the opening credits, we see a shot of Frank and Claire sleeping—the first time we've seen both of them asleep, together. This gesture puts the season's emphasis on exhaustion and lack of sleep into relief—teasing the viewer with a depiction of the rest that they are no doubt craving at this point in the binge. Later, we see Frank continuing to work on his Civil War diorama, one of the central narrative metaphors in the season.[53] As his manipulation of President Walker comes to a climax, Frank closes in on what has apparently been his goal from the beginning—usurping the Presidency. It's hard to imagine a more clear narrative telos in a plot about political power than becoming the leader of the free world, and so Frank's success is a clear closural gesture. Knowing that Netflix guaranteed *House of Cards* two seasons up front, we could conceive of this episode as a potential series finale. However, the show's renewal for a third season was announced before season two was even released. Therefore, when Frank enters the oval office, stands behind his new desk, pushes the chair to the side, and gives his trademark knuckle tap, this end becomes another narrative beat, carrying momentum towards the next season.

Very few Netflix originals have ended their series runs.[54] Once we get a wider array of examples, it will be interesting to see how Netflix series finales stack up against a history of TV endings. Following *House of Cards*, the Netflix Poetics of season finales

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[53] In "Chapter 25," as Frank lets Jackie Sharpe in on his plans, he shows her the diorama, explaining: "It's something I've been working on for a long time. Help us finish it."

[54] As of May, 2017, only *Marco Polo* (2014-2016), *Hemlock Grove* (2013-2015), and *Bloodline* (2015-2017) had been cancelled. In the past few weeks, however, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings has discussed plans to cancel more series.

tend to strike a balance between utilizing traditional closural gestures—answering

season-spanning questions, setting up the conditions for subsequent seasons—and

maintaining stylistic loyalty to the rest of the series. Personally, I've found Netflix season

finales less disappointing overall, but nonetheless underwhelming. I'm rarely angered

by them, but I am rarely satisfied. It seems that on-demand viewing emphasizes a drive

towards finality by encouraging binge-viewing, but Netflix original series have yet to

solve the problem of what it means to make a "good" finale.

V. "There is No 'Now' Here:" Bingeing and Temporalities of Fandom

Now that we have seen how a show that was deliberately made to be binged hails

the viewer, let's look at how a complex series that originally aired on a major broadcast

network changes in the binge context. *Lost* (ABC 2004-2010) is a textbook example of

Mittell's complex TV, and indeed he and others often analyze the series as such. While I

also take the show's complexity as an analytical starting point, my focus will be on the

effects of bingeing this text which had originally relied upon a specific temporal

unfolding—both internally in each episode (commercial breaks), and externally (weekly

release and season hiatuses). In the previous chapter, I mentioned how the availability

of *Breaking Bad* on Netflix allowed viewers to catch up with the show and then watch

the final season as it aired. *Lost*, on the other hand, was made available on Netflix as a

complete series in 2010, providing access to 121 episodes that would have otherwise cost

hundreds of dollars in DVDs or Blu-Rays.

Aside from its reputation for narrative complexity, one of the reasons that I have chosen *Lost* as an example here is due to the intensity of its fandom and the influence of social media on the text's reception, particularly the series finale. I am interested in the permeability of televisual fandoms and the practices of inclusion and exclusion at stake in live viewing vs. "later" viewing. The widespread anger and disappointment at *Lost*'s series finale, an episode that remains a [benchmark for the difficulties of finale storytelling](), makes consideration of the series' bingeability especially useful. I argue that the perceived failure of the finale was largely a product of real-time viewing conditions; when experienced via bingeing, the finale is more likely to work as a successful vehicle of emotional closure—supporting creators [Damon Lindelof and Carleton Cuse's claims]() that the show was more about character than plot. This discrepancy regarding the perception of the series finale is a perfect example of how our expectations for closure change in short-term vs. long-term commitment. The dominant opinion of "The End" as a failed finale demonstrates that demands for closure in a long-term narrative relationship have more to do with the answering of questions, with solving the puzzle. In the binge context, *Lost* remains a puzzle narrative, but emotional commitment (made more intense by the compression of viewing experience) overrides specific plot concerns. Of course, real-time viewers were also highly invested in the emotional stakes of the series, but after years of narrative frustration, the thing they craved most was assurance that the commitment had been "worth it," and so the need for explicit answers to the narrative puzzles would have been the most clear-cut way of measuring that payoff.

Instead, many fans felt "duped or tricked into a religious ending" and expressed a "sense of betrayal" (Howell 305, 306) in response to "The End."

I binge-viewed *Lost* on Netflix in December of 2010, seven months after the finale aired on ABC. Although I'd never seen a full episode of the show, I was familiar with its reputation as a soap opera-y sci-fi mystery with a variety of dubious plot moves—particularly the finale. I had avoided the show due to the evident (on social media, via word-of-mouth, etc.) widespread viewer frustration throughout the run. But I was on Winter break, procrastinating on my Master's thesis, and so my roommate and I decided to watch the entire series as quickly as we could. In retrospect, we were negotiating a narrative contract with Netflix that reflects how notions of temporal investment shift in bingeing. We were willing to experience the frustrations, wanderings, and probable disappointment that has become the oft-mocked trademark of *Lost*—as long as we could do it on our own terms. After watching all six seasons in the span of a month, averaging about nine hours of viewing per day, we walked away completely satisfied with the experience. The binge context had allowed the show's weakest moments to fade into the totality of the expansive narrative, never giving us a chance to dwell on any particular flaw. One-off episodes that fail to forward the overall plot were far less frustrating when immediately followed by better ones. Torturous season finale cliffhangers that would have caused live viewers months of anticipation were quickly subverted by our ability to click on the next season. Just like those Victorian readers who waited for Dickens' serial stories to be compiled into novels, our viewing method meant that we had the means of narrative closure "literally in the palm

of [our] hand" (Hayward 137). As a result, those negative reactions from broadcast viewers did not manifest in the same way: betrayal is only made possible by trust built up over a long period of time, and we hadn't known the series long enough to establish such parameters of betrayal.

Did we miss something of the essence of *Lost* by watching this way? Possibly, but we also had access to an equally intense relationship with the show, albeit a different kind of intensity. Mittell argues that bingeing *Lost* "does not allow for a viewer to focus on the puzzle-solving process," therefore missing out on "the ludic sense of play that fills the gaps between episodes and seasons" (40). He concludes that "Watching *Lost* via boxed sets is inherently isolated from the larger fan community and its rich network of paratextual materials" (ibid). I do not wish to diminish the importance of Mittell's argument, as the experiences of real-time serial viewing are important to fandoms (as chapter two demonstrated); but I also think there is value in looking at what *other* kinds of experiential and interpretive possibilities open up in SVOD and binge contexts. For example, the emotional immersion involved in binge-viewing can create more acute character attachments: those "passionate but doomed affair[s]" (Newman) can contain all the emotion of a long-term relationship (especially one marked by the frustrations so many real-time *Lost* viewers complained of). Furthermore, the text takes on a level of cohesion and continuity that is difficult to achieve in serial release, and intricate plot connections become more powerful as they stay fresh and present in the binge-viewer's mind.

To complicate further Mittell's depiction of *Lost* fandom, my roommate and I have not felt isolated from the show's fan community. In fact, the *Lost* binge bolstered our cultural capital and inclusion in the increasingly interwoven community of TV fandoms. I posit that the affordances of binge culture are changing the nature of fandom, with a general acknowledgement that timeshifting is now commonplace, or perhaps even essential, for attentive serial narrative consumption. Fan communities have become more temporally permeable, and they reflect the experiences of multiple viewing patterns, making for rich and diverse interpretive possibilities. Bingeing has always played a role in fandom—we can almost certainly trace the first binge-viewing to the fannish desire to re-watch (or, to think of other media, bingeing on a particular film director's oeuvre, or rapidly re-reading a favourite book). But with SVOD, and especially with the simultaneous distribution model, bingeing can be part of the initial fan experience—as we see in the [days following the release](#) of Netflix original content.

SVOD and the practices that have arisen from these technologies destabilize the structures of mass culture and the ways in which individuals are interpellated by the media industries. More diverse TV content, and more methods of access to that content, do allow for the kind of "tailored pleasure" that Uricchio predicted in 2004. Wu argues:

> Community lost can be community gained, and as mass culture weakens, it creates openings for the cohorts that can otherwise get crowded out. [...] Smaller communities of fans, forged from shared perspectives, offer a more genuine sense of belonging than a national identity born of geographical happenstance. ("Netflix's War on Mass Culture")

This move towards a more dispersed media landscape and the communities that form around nearly every TV series undermine the mass cultural hegemony that critics and theorists of the 19th and 20th century deemed so toxic. Furthermore, digitally connected interpretive communities establish social connections that open up textual experience and the temporalities of fandom. Narrative closure (or a lack thereof) becomes a process that can be re-lived, reframed, or rejected as the text and its paratexts continue to unfold over time and space. So as much as binge culture relies upon speedy consumption, texts do not end when we reach the finale. In fact, the intensity of binge experiences might suggest that finales can be starting points of interpretation— particularly when a binge prompts us to seek out fan communities after we finish a series. In the next chapter, I will continue to build on these ideas about the temporality and spatiality of fandoms as I analyze the transmedia narratives of The Whedonverse. I will look at how closure is repeated, revised, and deferred as narrative worlds and fandoms proliferate across media platforms.

Chapter Four:

Resisting Finality Through Active Fandom

I. Activating Fandom

Now that we have seen how distribution and consumption methods affect our experience of finales, let's turn our attention to the televisual afterlife—to the spaces of post-finale engagement within and across viewing communities. As I noted in chapter one, "active fandom" works as an umbrella term for a variety of participatory audience practices—from reading an episode review to tweeting about a show, writing fan fiction or waiting hours in line at Comic-Con for a glimpse of your favourite stars. By considering these actions as part of the same family of fannish engagement, while also recognizing the varying intensity and duration of any given gesture, my conception of active fandom seeks to identify the patterns of desire that motivate participation in media culture, particularly in response to endings. How do fans preserve, extend, and mash-up storyworlds, and how do these practices complicate notions of narrative closure? This chapter investigates the ways that fan communities negotiate—and, often, resist—finality after a TV series "ends." This resistance takes different forms: campaigning, paratextual production, attending conventions, and rewatching, to name a few. I argue that finales fuel fan intensity: by generating and manipulating narrative desires, endings activate fans.

To explore active fandom in practice, this chapter looks at Whedonites—fans of works created (to a greater or lesser extent) by cult auteur Joss Whedon. As a self-proclaimed "Whedonite," I will offer reflections on my own experiences as a longtime fan and scholar of this media world. I am interested in how certain texts act as anchors in an expansive, interconnected "Whedonverse," while fan energies circulate across texts and paratexts, connecting disparate storyworlds and undercutting narrative teleology. Whedonverse storyworlds also tend to be transmedia in nature, moving from TV to comic books or film while maintaining narrative continuity.[55] The transmedia nature of the Whedonverse creates the conditions for multiple official endings to a given narrative: for example, the TV finale of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* may act as the final installment for some viewers, but if a fan follows the story into comic books, then the episode becomes another narrative pivot point rather than a definitive ending. Furthermore, Whedon[56] is known for a particularly sudden and difficult brand of character death, making narrative loss and grief a recurring element of Whedonverse fandom. And finally, Whedon fandom has a unique relationship to endings, as the cult status of his televisual projects created, on multiple occasions, a burden on fans to resist finality through "save/bring back our show" campaigns.

Fans resist finality because of lingering emotional investment, and lingering emotional investment reanimates storyworlds. The result, in the case of the

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[55] Most academic discussions of transmedia storytelling focus on its economic motivations, as a way to engage fans across multiple platforms for the purposes of further monetizing a storyworld. However, in this chapter, I am more interested in transmedia migration of TV texts after cancellation as a way of resisting and undermining endings.

[56] In this chapter, "Whedon" will refer to Joss Whedon unless otherwise specified, despite the fact that his father and brothers boast lengthy resumés in the creative industries.

Whedonverse, is a system of narrative and emotional connections—sometimes this system reveals quite specific relationships, other times the connections are more nebulous. The idea of "the Whedonverse,"[57] as well as the fandom's tendency to proclaim certain things "Whedony," are conceptual embodiments of this tenuous connectivity. What do we mean when we call something Whedony? To a large extent, Whedony is like pornography: you know it when you see it. On the other hand, there is a whole set of specific narrative tactics, visual aesthetics, and thematic inflections that are evoked when we use this term. I conducted some casual polling on Twitter and Facebook, and Whedonites cited elements such as strong female protagonists, rag-tag ensembles, dark humor, self-referentiality, unlikely and/or lonely heroes, apocalyptic stakes, and unexpected character deaths as some of their associations with the term. Of course, none of these elements are exclusive to The Whedonverse, but somehow they co-mingle to create a "[Whedony feeling.](#)" Whedony. Whedonite. Whedonverse. This fandom has created an array of neologisms to account for the intertextual nature of their narrative attachments. It seems nearly impossible to speak of the storyworlds in question without these words, but they also perpetuate a problematic single-auteurist impulse (even as most fans recognize the sort of dispersed auteurism at work in Whedon texts).[58] I suggest that the creation and use of this lexicon is a practice in active fandom that

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[57] The biannual Whedon studies conference is called "The Slayage Conference on the Whedonverses," plural. At the event's 2012 iteration, I argued in favour of a singular Whedonverse for the same reasons I outline here. In 2014, there was an increase in scholarly papers that used the singular; but in 2016, the plural seems to have regained dominance. I remain convinced that a singular 'verse is essential for understanding Whedon narratives and fandom.

[58] This form of auteurism is a hangover from Film Studies, but it is also a result of more recent trends in media culture that encourage creators to project their own fan identity. Suzanne Scott refers to this figure as the "fanboy auteur" who "equates his close proximity to the fans to an understanding of their textual desires" (2012: 44). Whedon is certainly a strong example of this phenomenon.

establishes a cohesiveness within the fan community, reinforcing the idea that these

stories exist in one big, interconnected Whedonverse. Furthermore, this articulation of

narrative and emotional connectivity is part of how fans resist the finality of any

particular Whedon text—the excess energies when one story ends carry over into other

parts of the Whedonverse and are recycled through rewatching and transmedia

continuation.

The idea of The Whedonverse as a singular narrative entity is apparent in many

aspects of Whedon fandom, even if individual fans do not explicitly or consciously

articulate the connectedness of storyworlds. In a 2012 Slayage Conference keynote,

Whedon scholar Alyson Buckman discussed the importance of "hyperdiegetic casting" in

Whedon texts, how the repetition of actors creates levels of meaning that can only be

understood intertextually.[59] I have extended this concept to account for what I've been

calling "interdiegetic feeling," or the emotional spillover that results from intertextual

comprehension. Interdiegetic feeling can (and does) occur across many kinds of texts,

but the Whedonverse is particularly incenstuous in this sense. Interdiegetic feeling in

the Whedonverse generates a contradictory interpretative position: at the same time as

it reinforces the connectivity of these narratives, it also reminds viewers that the

storyworlds are distinct. For example, we may not be able to watch Nathan Fillion as the

sadistic, misogynistic preacher Caleb in *Buffy* without thinking of his righteous, loyal

Captain Reynolds from *Firefly* (and vice-versa), but our attachments are so vastly

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[59] Buckman is riffing off of Matt Hill's notion of hyperdiegesis as "a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text" (8). However, I argue that my formulation of *inter*diegetic feeling more properly accounts for the intertextual stakes of this casting technique. The emotional payoff is not "hyper" (beyond the storyworlds), but deeply and relationally embedded.

different that this interdiegetic moment creates a cognitive dissonance for the

Whedonite. Similarly, when Amy Acker and Alexis Denisoff, star-crossed lovers in *Angel*

who both died before they could consummate their love, appear as Beatrice and

Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* (2012), Whedon fans negotiate the pain and loss

from the series with the joy of resurrection and union displaced into another storyworld.

Interdiegetic casting demonstrates the complexity of intertextual fandom at stake in the

Whedonverse, as well as the ways in which audiences' mental work frames

interpretation, revealing one form of active fandom. In addition, interdiegetic feeling is

a form of emotional redistribution, reigniting emotional attachment to characters and

allowing audiences to resist characterological finality.[60] This tension between

character-based and plot-based closure pervades the Whedonverse, as we will see

throughout this chapter.

It is important to note that the temporality of intertextual experience varies from

viewer to viewer. Fans come to different parts of the Whedonverse in different orders.

While I could chart out a dominant temporal logic based on the order in which

Whedon's texts have been produced and distributed, I am more interested in the variety

of possible temporal approaches to the Whedonverse and how these intertextual

associations can take on different meanings for each fan. Furthermore, those meanings

can morph during the rewatching process or at any other point in the televisual afterlife.

For example, Fillion appeared in *Buffy* as Caleb first, then as Captain Reynolds in

Firefly; so the dominant temporal logic of interdiegetic feeling is a movement from

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[60] Tanya Cochran's examination of "cross-textual catharsis" (2015) is one example of how Whedon fans use intertextuality as a way to negotiate finality.

villain to hero. But if one were to view these series in opposite order, the logic of interdiegetic feeling becomes inverted. By acknowledging the flexibility of interdiegetic feeling, we locate the phenomenon outside of authorial intent; such casting techniques may have specific affective goals at the time of production, but they accrue more varied significance when understood as instigators of active fandom within multiple, diverse patterns of consumption that complicate notions of beginnings and endings.

Active fandom describes a wide range of modes of engagement, but the common denominator is that there must be a degree of emotional investment that motivates the individual to move from passive consumer to active producer of *something*. This "something produced" could take physical or digital form, or it could take linguistic, discursive, or affective form. So, while active fandom is not a new phenomenon, digital technologies extend the temporalities of fandom and diversify the ways that audiences can respond to media texts. Whedon fandom is thus imbricated in the larger phenomenon of "digital fandom," as articulated by Paul Booth (2010). Booth writes of how digital fandom encourages a "philosophy of playfulness" in which digital technologies enable fans to *do* a variety of things with texts: this philosophy "represents a new way of looking at the practices of contemporary media studies that takes into account, and uses, the technologies that audiences are using to engage with media" (29). Many elements of the Whedonverse rely on internet culture to sew the fabric of connectivity, but non-digital practices are also significant. Since active fandom is fundamentally an emotional phenomenon, we could say that the impulse to activity really has nothing to do with digital technology; rather, these technologies are vehicles

through which fan emotion manifests and, importantly, spreads. The "spreadability" (Jenkins) of certain fan texts, often through transmedia extensions, and the viral nature of fan affect, is key to locating the kind of dispersed energies at stake in active fandom.

As I stated in chapter one, this dissertation is invested in a sort of affective turn in how we understand narrative consumption; but, as I suggested, I am also wary of "affective turns" as such, which is why I have tended to use "emotion" or "feeling" to describe audience/storyworld relationships up until this point. However, as we move into this discussion of fandom, "affect" is useful to distinguish the complex layers of experience that often separate the fan from a more casual viewer.[61] So in keeping with my established terminological framework, this chapter positions "emotions" as those responses which can be labelled and contained by a given narrative, but "affect" as the felt excess energy produced by fannish attachments that can not always be clearly named.

My focus on the affective dimensions of active fandom builds on Louisa Stein's work on "millennial fandom" and what she calls "feels culture," which "thrives on the public celebration of emotion previously considered the realm of the private" (156). "Feels culture" is perhaps best exemplified by the popularity of the phrase "all the feels," a way of expressing an intense mix of affective energies that cannot be contained by naming specific emotions. Stein writes that

> In feels culture, emotions remain intimate but are no longer necessarily
>
> private; rather, they build a sense of an intimate collective, one that is

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[61] I do not want to suggest a false dichotomy here; there may be a fine line between viewer and fan, and that line may be crossed at any time. But it is worth drawing a distinction between someone with years of active fandom towards a text and someone who chooses it at random on their Netflix queue.

bound together precisely by the processes of shared emotional authorship.

In this equation, emotion fuels fan transformative creativity, and

performances of shared emotion define fan authorship communities. (156)

Stein's emphasis on the emotional core of fannish activity is a key contribution to Fan

Studies, one that identifies the affective and creative potentials of digital fandom. For

example, vidding, a process in which fans mash-up and remix parts of texts, relies on

existing affective attachments to comment on or pay homage to fan objects. This "vid"

by YouTube user MrMorda898, entitled "The Whedonverse: This is War," blends scenes

from *Buffy*, *Angel*, *Firefly*, *Serenity,* and *Dollhouse*, using thematic continuities that

correspond to the accompanying song, as well as clever visual continuities using a series

of matches-on-action. MrMorda898's vid appeals not to fans of one or two Whedon

texts, but to the Whedonite who can contextualize thematic associations through very

brief visual cues. The vid thus capitalizes on existing affective iconography in the

Whedonverse, distilling fan energy into only a few frames.[62] By including several major

character deaths and other significant narrative moments, "This is War" compounds

pain and loss so that it manifests and feels differently—a refamiliarization of emotional

moments that creates a layer of affect only attainable by the knowledgeable fan. There

are a handful of similar vidding projects, as you can see from a quick youtube search for

"The Whedonverse." These vids eschew textual boundaries to generate interdiegetic

feeling, as various texts bleed into one another, and the narrative significance of each

shot works on the affective experience of the vid as a whole.

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[62] This is similar to the way that .gifs operate as short, affectively-charged loops, where the affective charge relies on a certain degree of visual and situational recognition.

Recalling Eugenie Brinkema's warning about the "sin of generality" (xiii) in affect

theory, this chapter heeds her call to locate the "formal dimension[s] of affect" (xv).

Brinkema looks to a "radical formalism" (37) that involves "*reading affects as having*

forms" (37, her emphasis). The issue of locating affect in form, however, is that it

forecloses the possibility of multiple affective relationships to a given formal moment.[63]

Therefore, when reading for the form of affects in this chapter, I will assume the

subjective position of the Whedonite—here is where I can deploy my own fandom in the

service of close reading. In addition to the formal specificity of affects that Brinkema

champions, it is important to recognize how social and historical contexts situate

affective experience in particular ways. As Raymond Williams writes,

> We need, on the one hand, to acknowledge (and welcome) the specificity of
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> these elements—specific feelings, specific rhythms—and yet to find ways of
>
> recognizing their specific kinds of sociality, thus preventing that extraction
>
> from social experience which is conceivable only when social experience
>
> itself has been categorically (and at root historically) reduced. (133)

In this chapter, therefore, I will deploy an affective lexicon to analyze some of the

experiences that Whedon texts generate for fans, while recognizing how specific formal

moments are affectively charged and socially constructed. Finally, I will use these

readings to show how resistance to finality is a fundamental affective drive of fandom,

especially in an interconnected Whedonverse in which transmedia migration mitigates

finality and loss.

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[63] Brinkema does away with the spectator and is not interested in textual "experience" as such (36), so she would not abide my concern—indeed, this foreclosure is her goal.

II. *Buffy The Vampire Slayer:* **BtVSGal21**

Before scholars spoke of such as thing as "Whedon Studies," there was "*Buffy*

Studies," an international academic conversation surrounding the landmark series that

made Joss Whedon a household name. *Buffy* is the foundation of the Whedonverse. Its

expansive storyworld includes a feature film, seven TV seasons (144 episodes), a spinoff

TV series (*Angel,* WB 1999-2004, 110 episodes), and multiple comic book runs.[64] It is

consistently invoked as a key series in the advent of television's "second golden age" of

storytelling, and its emphasis on female power is oft-cited in discussions of feminist

media (see, for example, Wilcox 2005; Jowett 2005; Sepinwall 2013). The timing of

Buffy's initial release is significant in that it coincided with the launch of AOL (America

Online) service, which brought user-friendly internet into the home and made digital

fandom more widespread than it had ever been. Chat rooms, fan sites, and spoiler

boards proliferated—trust me, my first AOL handle was BtVsGal21. I recall voraciously

seeking out spoilers, "shipping"[65] Buffy and platonic friend Xander, and reading all

variety of fan fiction that the series generated (in addition to "authorized" companion

novels). I was an active fan long before I knew what fandom meant or how it differed

from other forms of viewership.

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[64] While there are a variety of comic book runs based on the storyworld, some of which ran concurrently with the series, not all of them are perceived as equally canonical. However, *Season Eight* (2007-2011), *Season Nine* (2011-2013), and *Season Ten* (2014-2016) are generally considered part of the core *Buffy* canon. Their use of the term "season" encourages this perspective, as well as the direct involvement of several writers from the TV series.

[65] Fannish term, derived from "relation*ship*" to describe fan investment in a particular romantic coupling in a storyworld. Its use as a verb across fan cultures connotes the active process of "rooting" for the coupling, something that is often done communally via hashtags, fan fiction, and fan art.

As noted in the previous section, digital fandom is not a distinct break from earlier forms of fannish behavior, but rather a rearticulation of the relationship between fan and text that normalizes (to an extent) audiences as active producers of meaning.[66] Most importantly, digital fandom facilitates community-building on a scale previously impossible to achieve. My conception of active fandom, therefore, does not hold digital practices above other forms of engagement, but it does recognize the increased opportunities for community-building that social media create. *Buffy*'s historical location at the verge of digital fandom is key for understanding how fans participate in the creation and perpetuation of the Whedonverse.

In addition to its implications for fan activity, *Buffy* also impacted the history of TV finales over the course of its 144-episode run. Each season of the series follows an episodic-serial formula that combines monster-of-the-week and "Big Bad"[67] plots, culminating in epic showdowns with major villains in the season finales.[68] *Buffy* helped shape what finales would look like in the age of complex TV: they were often two-parters, often written and directed by Whedon,[69] even if his involvement in the season was minimal, they almost always feature significant character deaths and major turning points for the story, and so they strike that balance of closure and ellipses that makes season finales effective. In addition, *Buffy* season finales generated for fans a

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[66] And so digital fandom, "media play" (Booth), "feels culture" (Stein), and my own "active fandom" take the early claims of audience studies (Jenkins, Fiske, et al.) as givens.

[67] "Big Bad" is a term used diegetically and across the fandom to describe the central villain of each *Buffy* season. The term has migrated to describe recurring villains in other Whedon (and non-Whedon) texts.

[68] The only exception to this formula is season 4: the final showdown with the Big Bad happens in the penultimate episode, and the finale, "Restless," is a surreal exploration of our main characters' dreamworlds. I recall my own confusion after "Primeval" aired, wondering what could possibly happen in the following episode.

[69] Creators/showrunners' involvement in the writing and/or directing of season and series finales is another trend that contributes to the valuation of finales as such.

now-common brand of finale hype: I recall, for example, the extra buzz on the spoiler boards whenever a season finale was approaching. Twice, I even accessed bits of leaked finale scripts in the weeks leading up to the episodes. I remember how season finales would fuel speculation during hiatuses, how they would spark anticipation in the fan community that circulated textually back through the previous season(s) (encouraging re-watching as fannish behavior) and paratextually through production news (hype). In particular, the season five finale, in which Buffy dies a grand heroic death in what might have been the series finale, required negotiation between the storyworld and the production world, as knowledge of the series' migration to a new network, UPN, led fans to anticipate the necessary resurrection of the protagonist and star.[70] Season six would indeed see Buffy and *Buffy* come back to life, a double resurrection.

Season seven of *Buffy* is an excellent example of a planned final season. As I discussed in chapter two, planned finales are especially significant for fans, as communities share in the process of preparing for the End. Just as *Buffy* had helped write the rules of season finales, season seven demonstrates what final seasons can do to reward fans, thematize closure, and encourage the continuation of storyworlds in the televisual afterlife. In "Chosen," after defeating "The First Evil" in an epic battle, complete with a special effects-laden just-in-time getaway and the total destruction of the series' primary setting, Buffy looks out at the giant crater that was once Sunnydale. Her sister asks, "What are we gonna do now?" and Buffy stares into the distance, silent, smiling, motionless but for her signature blonde hair blowing in the wind before the

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[70] Buffy's death in "The Gift," therefore, was not understood by fans as ultimate loss—though on the level of form, we could read the episode in these terms.

final cut to black. The *Buffy* finale has all of the trappings of a planned ending, including the way that it both resolves and perpetuates its storyworld. It is at once decidedly final—decimating Sunnydale—and outward-looking: "what's next?" Indeed, this series finale marks the end of but one node in the storyworld's transmedia matrix—*Angel* was still airing at the time (though it would be cancelled the following year), and the *Buffy* comic book series would pick up where the show left off, producing three more "seasons" and continuing its run as I write this dissertation. Interestingly, the *Buffy* finale consciously anticipates the perpetuation of its storyworld by thematizing an exponential distribution of power. Buffy's group defeats The First (Evil) by imbuing a team of "potential" slayers with the sacred mystical force that was previously reserved for a "Chosen One" in "each generation." In the start of the second act of the episode, we see the meeting where Buffy begins to divulge her plan to the group; but the details of the plan are deferred, setting up the cut back to the meeting at the start of the final act as a sort of narrative twist. It is worth noting that this revelation overtly punctuates the show's feminist agenda: "Every generation there is a chosen one because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago said so. They were powerful. This woman [points to Willow] is more powerful than all of them combined." While Buffy explains (in what is, in narrative time, a flashback) the plan for Willow to bestow slayer powers upon "any girl who *could* have the power," shots of familiar "potentials" receiving the mystical strength are intercut with unknown young girls presumably also being affected by the spell. In this scene, the storyworld gestures outward, breaking the series' microcosmic

dedication to the small town of Sunnydale and hailing viewers—especially young female

ones like myself at the time—as bearers of slayer identity and power.

The series finale is one official ending to *Buffy*, but its continuation in comic book

form means that there are (and/or will be) multiple official endings to this story—and

we could likely say the same of any transmedia text. Not all viewers will follow *Buffy*

into the comic book world or engage with Whedon fandom; so for some, the TV finale is

the End. Others might read the comics but not participate in the fan community, or vice

versa. And it is certainly possible that someone may encounter the comics without

having seen the show. Jenkins notes that a key element of transmedia storytelling is the

way in which it creates "different points of entry" for audiences, and, from a marketing

standpoint, this multiplicity is imperative for appealing to different demographics who

gravitate towards different storytelling platforms. While the goal of transmedia

storytelling might be the creation of a "unified, coordinated entertainment experience"

(Jenkins), the reality of transmedia narratives is that they are experienced in a variety of

ways, depending on the individual. And, as we saw in chapter three, digital viewing

technologies create diverse temporalities of narrative encounter; for example, *Buffy*'s

availability on Netflix over the past few years has hailed a new generation of fans. I have

seen my students, most of whom are roughly a decade younger than myself, binge *Buffy*

on Netflix with fannish intensity. They will not have the same experiences with the text

as I did, but rather they will navigate an existing fandom and contribute fresh insights to

the community. *Buffy*'s finale aired 13 years ago, but I suggest that the end of the

storyworld will only come when the fandom is nonexistent, which, according to the

logics of media repetition (Kompare), may not happen for a long time to come.

RIP Joyce

> *"It's always sudden"* -Tara Maclay

In season five, Buffy's mother, Joyce, is diagnosed with a brain tumor. Her health

problems form a sustained B or C-plot for several episodes, but she appears to be on an

upswing after successful surgery. Episode 16, "The Body," opens as Buffy opens the front

door to her home. She calls out to her mother, who doesn't answer. As she continues to

call out, a body comes into deep focus against Buffy's profile. It is Joyce, pale,

motionless, lying dead on the couch. "Mom? Mom? Mommy?" then cut to the opening

title sequence. After the titles, we jump to an unspecified holiday dinner, normal

conversation, a moment between Buffy and her mom—then an abrupt cut to an extreme

close-up of Joyce's lifeless face. For nine minutes, we watch Buffy's frantic actions

through a series of long takes that alternate between following Buffy closely and

assuming her POV. The camerawork conveys the surrealness of her experience: calling

911, attempting CPR (and breaking Joyce's sternum in the process), watching

emergency responders fail to revive Joyce, struggling to place a phone call to her

"Watcher" (mentor) Giles, vomiting on the carpet, attempting to the clean the vomit,

and then shouting upon Giles' arrival "we're not supposed to move *the body*!" [71] It is one

of the most harrowing sequences in television history, treating the suddenness of death

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[71] Buffy's shock at her use of the term "the body," when moments before she'd insisted to the 911 operator that "[her] mom" (not "the body") was "cold," presents an ontological question of bodies vs. objects that I'll explore more in the next section.

and the impact of loss with remarkable authenticity. Brinkema writes that "grief […]

poses a unique set of problems for any system of representation predicated on

presencing: tarrying with grief requires representation to negotiate an affect that results

from a loss and thus requires a representation to invent a visual vocabulary for the

in-visible absent" (94). Brinkema posits the "tableau" as the visual "structure that *is* the

affect of grief" (99), offering a reading of the living room in Michael Haneke's film

Funny Games (1997) as an exemplar of this formal strategy. Perhaps it is no

coincidence, then, that the opening sequence of "The Body" creates a couch-based

tableau to convey the intensity of Joyce's death—the "living" room recast as morgue,

couch as coffin, a place where people become bodies, where movement is exchanged for

stasis.

Beyond its visual negotiation of loss, the episode extends its meditation on grief

in the [now-famous monologue](#) from vengeance demon-turned-human fan favourite

character, Anya:

> I don't understand how this all happens. How we go through this. I mean,
>
> I knew her, and then she's- There's just a body, and I don't understand
>
> why she just can't get back in it and not be dead anymore. It's stupid. It's
>
> mortal and stupid. And-and Xander's crying and not talking, and-and I
>
> was having fruit punch, and I thought, well, Joyce will never have any
>
> more fruit punch ever, and she'll never have eggs, or yawn or brush her
>
> hair, not ever, and no one will explain to me why.

"The Body" is widely regarded as a televisual masterpiece, both formally (especially for the opening long take, a rare cinematographic technique in TV), and thematically. The episode takes a break from the season's story to carefully consider the experience of loss and the grieving process. In a moment that shows how the universal experience of loss both can and can't be shared between two people, Buffy asks her friend Tara if *her* mother's death was sudden. "No. And yes. It's always sudden," Tara replies.

While I do not dare evacuate this episode's potential to speak to our real-world experiences with death, "The Body" also directs us in how to understand the loss of characters from storyworlds. Joyce's death serves no narrative necessity—it is presented suddenly and dwelled upon as pure, felt loss. The Whedonverse, especially after this episode, is invested in conveying the reality of grieving that throws into relief more prevalent modes of representing death—with grand visual gestures and sanitized or metaphorized loss. As we will see in this chapter's epitaphs, the Whedonverse uses character death not only to reflect our lived experiences of death and dying, but also to thematize finality and loss and generate ending-feelings, even as its storyworlds unfold, expand, and resist closure.

III: *Firefly:* "You Can't Take the Sky From Me"

Though *Buffy* is the longest-running storyworld in the Whedonverse, *Firefly* generated an intensely active fan community that is central to the popular cultural perceptions of Whedon fandom. Due to its short and ill-fated network run, fan campaigning to motivate a cinematic sequel, and a persistent cultural narrative of its

tragic cancellation, *Firefly* boasts a sacred aura in the Whedonverse. In many ways, it came to define Whedon's relationship to mainstream media culture—its cancellation was proof of the oppositional meaning of "cult" in his "cult auteur" status. *Firefly* was also an important factor in the demographic expansion of Whedon fandom; unlike *Buffy*'s target demographic, *Firefly* was marketed as a series for adults, and its combination of sci-fi and Western genres appealed more to males than *Buffy*'s designation as female-led teen drama/fantasy.[72] In this section, I will demonstrate how *Firefly* generates an affective excess in the Whedonverse that spreads and intensifies the series' aura and inflects fan experience in other Whedon texts.

The broadcast history of *Firefly* is a well-known anecdote to TV scholars and fans. FOX's refusal to air the two-part pilot in favor of a more action-packed episode, the show's scheduling in the "Friday night death slot,"[73] and the fact that some episodes never aired or aired out of intended order, all contributed to the series' early demise. The show's low ratings and dark, complex story led FOX to cancel *Firefly* before the first season had finished production. Behind-the-scenes interviews describe how Whedon announced the cancellation to the cast, who proceeded to drown their sorrows at Nathan Fillion's house that night before returning to the set to complete the episodes that were still in production (Pascale 219). Somewhat ironically, the remaining two episodes to shoot, "The Message" and "Heart of Gold," both feature funeral scenes for minor characters. When rewatching the series with the knowledge of what was playing out

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[72] *Buffy* was unique in that it had a much broader appeal than its initial marketing intended: the fandom comprised many adults and males.
[73] Friday night is considered the "death slot," as it is generally believed that Nielsen's key 18-34 demographic does not watch TV during this time.

behind the scenes, these episodes, and the funeral scenes in particular, take on a double sense of mourning that is accessible to the dedicated *Firefly* fan.

"Objects in Space" may have been an unplanned finale, but it does a lot of work to address the notion of loss. The story takes place "at the corner of 'no' and 'where,'" as the ship Serenity is infiltrated by a demented bounty hunter (Jubal Early) searching for Simon and River Tam.[74] The episode is, as Whedon states in the DVD commentary, an existential meditation influenced by Satre's *Nausea* (1938). Just as "The Body" questions how people become objects/things, "Objects In Space," asks if things have "purpose" in themselves, or if we "what's the word? Imbue" them with meaning. Bodies as such are also implicated in this question, when River tricks Jubal (and, for a moment, the audience) into believing that she has *become* Serenity. In the opening sequence of the episode, River claims of a gun, which appears to her (and us) as a forked twig in her hand: "it's just an object. Doesn't mean what you think." These existential riffs on meaning and agency set up the final scene of the episode as an interrogation of "thingness:" after Mal shoves Jubal off the roof of Serenity, the camera returns inside the ship for a reunion of key characters. Then, we end with a cut to Jubal floating in the emptiness of deep space, as he remarks in a flat, affect-less tone: "[well, here I am.](#)" Brinkema argues that "[g]rief [...] co-opts bodies for form, makes them materially vulnerable to the image of gravity's effects on flesh" and notes that "what it means to be a mortal body" is "to be weighted down to earth" (110). In this moment, then, in the

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[74] Simon and River Tam are fugitives of the Alliance (intergalactic government agency) after Simon freed his sister from a lab that was experimenting on her brain. The nature of these experiments is explained more fully in *Serenity*, but the mystery surrounding her psychic abilities and the Alliance's interest in her forms an ongoing storyline in *Firefly*.

literal absence of gravity, Jubal is a person-become-body-become-thing, suspended, waiting...much like *Firefly*.[75]

Firefly's intense fandom is most remarkable in how it relates to the question of scale. The wild discrepancy between the amount of canonical narrative material and the emotional impact that it has in the Whedonverse reveals some important aspects of fan attachment. Scarcity becomes a key factor—we want what we can't have, or what we don't have enough of. Each episode becomes a rare commodity: as series regular Adam Baldwin puts it, the scripts were "like gold" (*Done the Impossible*). Purity is also a consideration—the brevity of the series signifies a lack of superfluous material that is considered common in longer-running series (*Buffy* included). In short, the textual boundaries of *Firefly* cannot contain the emotional energies of its fandom. And so those energies disperse into paratexts and intertexts; but what distinguishes this outward movement from the same patterns in other storyworlds is how little with which the fandom had to work.[76]

Done the Impossible is a fan-made documentary that draws on an intersection of *Firefly* fans to tell the story of campaigning after the series' cancellation, ending with the grand triumph of 2005's *Serenity*.[77] Like other accounts of Whedon fandom, the film is invested in the tropes of a Cinderella story, in a narrative of intimacy (among fans, and

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[75] The 2013 film *Gravity* presents an interesting analog to this scene in its depiction of Matt's (George Clooney) cosmic phone call to Ryan (Sandra Bullock). Though he, like Jubal, has become a doomed object in space, his access to a line of communication allows him to maintain subjectivity and convey his and Ryan's grief at the level of form. In *Firefly*, meanwhile, Jubal's total loss of personhood means that the final shot is not an image of *his* grief, but instead that of the audience. This is one example of how Brinkema's model of formal analysis can be complicated by attention to fan affect.

[76] For one example of how premature cancellation of a TV series impacts fan practice, see Francesca Musiani (2010), in which she analyzes narrative temporalities of fan fiction.

[77] For an academic take on *Firefly*'s fan campaigning, see Stacey Abbott, "'Can't Stop the Signal': The Resurrection/Regeneration of Serenity" (2008).

between fans and creators), and in a valorization of cult media that pushes back against all things mainstream. *Done the Impossible* pulls on the Whedonite's heartstrings—I had to fight back tears several times while watching—but it is an uncritical picture of *Firefly* fandom. In particular, it glorifies fan labour with no consideration of how active fans are often exploited by the media industries. Here, I would like to explore how an affective economy drives fan campaigning, while also recognizing how fan affect can be flattened and co-opted to serve producers' needs. In other words, we can celebrate the pleasures of fandom, but we should be critical of how those pleasures fuel a media ecosystem in which audiences still remain relatively powerless to control which series are cancelled or renewed.

Campaigning is certainly one of the most proactive incarnations of active fandom. It implies collective, organized efforts to achieve a specific goal. Most often in media fandom, campaigning means trying to keep a show on the air, or attempting to get it resurrected in some form. Therefore, campaigning is one category of active fandom that directly engages with notions of finality, ending-feelings, and a desire to control the terms of narrative endings. Fan campaigns may also (though less commonly) take on more widespread systemic issues, such as [queer representation in popular media](#). Campaigning techniques across history include letter-writing, coordinated tweeting, petitions, and even guerilla advertising. In *Done the Impossible*, one fan explains how she created a large sign and placed it next to the *Firefly* DVDs in her local Wal-Mart in an attempt to increase sales. As she recounts the experience, she seems giddy remembering the sense of power that this tactic gave her. This example demonstrates

how campaigning can involve embodied, non-digital forms of active fandom that turn commercial spaces into affective territories.

In 2015, series stars Alan Tudyk and Nathan Fillion traded in on the cultural capital of *Firefly* and [launched an IndieGoGo crowdfunding campaign](#) to produce a web series entitled *Con Man*. The series layers meta upon meta, following Wray Neeley (Tudyk), star of a cancelled sci-fi TV show, as he begrudgingly travels to fan conventions and bemoans his lack of career success post-*Spectrum*.[78] Neeley resents his fan base and everything about convention culture; fans are depicted as entitled and sometimes unhinged, and the convention space is little more than a place for commodity exchange. When it comes to understanding fandom, *Con Man* misses the mark in unsettling ways, failing to capture the complexities of fan practice and the sociality of convention spaces. There is an uncomfortable tension, then, between the fact that this project was paid for by fans and that it goes on to misrepresent and even attack fans as such. Booth writes that "Crowdfunding is the industrial commoditization of affect" (203), and Tudyk and Fillion certainly capitalized on the emotional spillover from *Firefly* to produce a text that positions such affective attachment as absurd, if not completely deranged. *Con Man* is thus instructive regarding the perception of fans from a non-fan perspective, as well as the drawbacks of affective economies when fans don't know exactly what they are buying into. As Myles McNutt writes:

> Fans are exploited every day. When they tweet about a show using a
> hash tag, or when they tell a friend about that show, they're

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[78] *Spectrum* is, of course, a thinly-veiled stand-in for *Firefly*, though oddly, *Firefly* still exists in the storyworld of *Con Man*.

completing free labor for the television network whose show they're watching. Of course, we subject ourselves to this exploitation because we've accepted that the value we get from participation—the enjoyment of social media, the satisfaction of sharing things we love with other people—is worth giving part of ourselves over to the industry. ("[Dialogue: *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter and Crowdfunding](#)")

Con Man demonstrates how labor and love in the Whedonverse do not always work in the service of fan communities and can be misunderstood and appropriated by the very objects of fan attachment. For Whedon fans, the web series offers an outlet for negotiating the pain of *Firefly*'s cancellation—as interdiegetic feeling works through Fillion and Tudyk—but it also seems to throw that pain into fans' faces and trivialize their loss.

RIP Wash

"I'm a leaf on the wind. Watch how I—" -Hoban Washburne

The return of the *Firefly* crew in *Serenity* was a resurrection. The fans had resisted finality by refusing to accept the series' cancellation. At the same time, however, we might read this refusal as a desire—whether conscious or not—*for* finality in the form of more overt closure. "Objects in Space" may be a stellar episode of TV, but it was not written as a series finale and is therefore not invested in generating ending-feelings (though, as my reading of the episode's final shot demonstrated, fans may read

ending-feelings, such as grief, into the text retroactively). When Universal agreed to make *Serenity*, one of the stipulations between Whedon and the studio was that the film should appeal to *Firefly* fans as well as newcomers to the storyworld. The extent to which the film succeeds in this imperative is debateable, but there is no doubt that particular scenes carry layers of signification that is only accessible to the fan. This layering of meaning is most perceptible in the two major character deaths—Shepherd Book and Serenity's pilot, Wash. Book's lack of screen time in the film makes his death fairly meaningless to the uninitiated viewer.[79] Wash's death is likely still meaningful regardless of prior character knowledge, but its impact on the fan is far stronger. For Whedon fans, it is one of the most affectively charged moments in the Whedonverse.

In the final act of the film, the Serenity crew devises a plan to sic the Reavers[80] on the Alliance in order to distract them while Mal attempts to access an intergalactic transmission system.[81] The scenario creates a near-impossible piloting challenge for Wash, who weaves among the fighting ships, repeating his mantra "I'm a leaf on the wind. Watch how I soar." After successfully landing the ship, he turns to Mal and his wife Zoe (both of whom just let out a sigh that performs the audience's tension relief) and says: "I'm a leaf on the wind, watch how I—" but before he can say "soar," a jagged spear flies through the windshield and plunges through his chest, killing him instantly and impaling his lifeless body against the pilot's seat. Unlike Joyce's death in "The

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[79] Actor Ron Glass's death in 2016 adds an additional layer of meaning to Shepherd Book's death.
[80] Reavers are deranged humans whose origin is a key mystery in the series. In *Serenity*, it is revealed that they are actually the victims of a failed biochemical experiment on an outlying planet.
[81] The team's goal here is to broadcast a holographic message describing how the Alliance used a chemical to subdue the population of a planet, a tactic which backfired, killing most of the settlers and turning the rest into hyper-violent cannibals.

Body," which uses tableau to convey grief as a "heavy form of duration" (Brinkema 105),

Wash's death is sudden (it "always" is), jarring, and narratively parenthetical. Zoe cries

out only briefly, then, like a good soldier, leaves her husband's body (it's "just a body"),

and moves on to the next stage of the plan. Several minutes go by before Kaylee asks

"what about Wash?" and Zoe only replies "he ain't comin'." There is no time for grief,

either for the characters or for the audience. Ending-feelings are deferred to the final

moments of the film, when we see a short, wordless funeral ceremony[82] before returning

to a repaired Serenity, with a slightly smaller crew, heading back into space for their

next adventure. The film offers very little finality with regards to the storyworld, but this

open ending is nonetheless undercut by the death of two main characters. This tension,

between narrative closure and characterological finality, is key to identifying ending

feelings as a category of experience that is not always dependent upon plot-based

finality.

IV. *Dollhouse*: Always Already Cancelled

In the previous section, I highlighted the offline components of *Firefly* fandom to

show how resistance to finality is made possible by active fandom that does not rely

upon social media. This section will look at Whedon's next TV venture, *Dollhouse*, which

premiered in 2009 and resulted in a "save our show" campaign that looked quite

different from *Firefly*'s fan efforts of only a few years earlier. Embodied fandom was still

key to *Dollhouse* campaigning, especially in its emphasis on getting fans to watch the

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[82]At the funeral, cement pillars are capped with holograms of the deceased that mimic the formal structure of .GIFs (a short loop of each character's facial expressions).

show during its initial air time. But the ease with which fans could organize and vocalize their attachment to the show via social media (especially after the 2007 launch of Twitter) resulted in a visibly dedicated fandom, and FOX renewed *Dollhouse* for a second season despite low ratings. It was an early example of networks learning the value of a "small but dedicated audience" (Mittell 31) and a moment in which the value of Nielsen ratings was put into serious question across the TV industry.

Nonetheless, *Dollhouse* was, from the outset, framed by discourses of cancellation. Whedonites even launched "save our show" pages months before the pilot aired on FOX, indicating their lack of trust in the network after *Firefly*. Indeed, like *Firefly*, *Dollhouse* was scheduled in the Friday night death slot. The complex subject matter of the series also signaled its potential difficulties on broadcast TV: the Dollhouse is part of a megacorporation that convinces people to give up their identity for five years and work as "dolls" that are imprinted with various personalities to serve the whims of the rich and famous. Further stoking fan anxieties, as the series debut neared, news broke that FOX had forced Whedon to scrap his original pilot for the series and rewrite the first several episodes to emphasize narrative accessibility via a more episodic structure. These adjustments muddled the tone of the series (even to a dedicated viewer), and dismal ratings throughout season one had fans—and Whedon—preparing for cancellation. Whedon then commissioned his brother Jed and sister-in-law Maurissa to write "Epitaph One," a "secret thirteenth episode" that revealed the narrative telos of *Dollhouse*—a techno-apocalyptic event—to act as a potential series finale.

FOX had already paid for thirteen episodes, but they were only going to air twelve of them; "Epitaph One," therefore, was not as beholden to the desires of the network executives as the rest of the season. After the season one finale aired, there was a great deal of internet buzz about the mysterious episode thirteen, which eventually appeared as a special feature on the season one DVD. So when, for [fear of fan backlash](#), FOX renewed the series, season two had to negotiate the information revealed in "Epitaph One" while maintaining continuity with the storyworld established in the first season. The result is an intensely metatextual storytelling approach in which knowledge of the ultimate fate of the Dollhouse haunts every moment. Each narrative turn can be read through knowledge of "Epitaph One," creating a layer of significance for *Dollhouse* fans that would have been inaccessible to a casual viewer. Elsewhere, I have argued that this storytelling structure, combined with the thematic implications of the series, creates a model for posthuman narratology, in which complex temporality and destabilized narrative ontology prompt viewers to embrace multiple subject positions during the viewing process (McCormick 2012, Hawk 2010). The events of season two would, arguably, make sense without having seen "Epitaph One," but they take on different meaning for those who purchased the DVD or otherwise accessed the episode— activating the semiotic potential of active fandom.

While there were a variety of campaigning efforts before, during, and after *Dollhouse*'s 2-season run, one element of the *Dollhouse* save/renew campaign that deserves special attention is the ["Why I Watch" website](#), launched by Dessy Levinson. "Why I Watch" collects short testimonials from fans documenting their love of the show,

and then places each testimonial into a box with a "doll" avatar. The visual organization

of this website, transforming fans into dolls, creates an online space for fan performance

of "interreal identity," similar to how Booth conceives of fan/character amalgamations

in Myspace profiles (131). Booth argues that there is a particular kind of performativity

at stake when fans identify *as* (rather than *with*) characters (136). The "Why I Watch"

site deploys this interreal identity formation in the service of campaigning, staking a

claim on *Dollhouse* by positioning fans as part of the storyworld even as they speak from

outside of it.[83] Fan performance as dolls on "Why I watch" presents an interesting

complication of the agency that campaigning is meant to achieve: on "Why I Watch,"

bids for fan empowerment are, curiously, enacted through a script of submission.

Though fan efforts failed to garner *Dollhouse* a third season, campaigning played a

major role in establishing the fan community, and "Why I watch" remains an important

artifact of *Dollhouse* fandom that demonstrates some of the ways that digital

technologies enable different forms of fan identity.

The complex subjectivity of *Dollhouse* fans on "Why I Watch" suggests an

interesting parallel with the thematic arc of *Dollhouse*. The series challenges humanist

notions of Cartesian dualism by emphasizing the virtual construction of identity. The

Rossum Corporation—a nod to *Rossum's Universal Robots*, the first story of robot

rebellion—is able to imprint and wipe personalities at will, and imprinted human dolls

then carry out whatever narrative their programming demands. Throughout season one,

we get hints of the dangerous implications of this technology, which are made explicit in

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[83] Booth also observes how fan performance of identity blurs diegetic boundaries in his reading of mySpace profiles. For example, a fan-made profile for Jim from *The Office* performed as the character but also spoke about the existence of the show (119-120).

"Epitaph One" and developed further in season two. But while there are clear strands of technophobia in *Dollhouse*, that position is overshadowed by a decidedly posthumanist conclusion in which interreal identity is privileged over a Cartesian model of mind/body dualism: as the series progresses, we move from seeing the dolls as victims deprived of personhood to seeing them as persons in their own right. We go from wanting the main character/doll (Echo) to reclaim her original identity to rooting for her as a fully formed hero.

RIP Caroline

In the final moments of the *Dollhouse* series finale ("Epitaph Two), Echo, who gained the ability to retain dozens of personality imprints during her time in the dollhouse, chooses not to return to her original personality (Caroline Farrell), instead embracing a rhizomatic self. A few scenes earlier, her longtime friend and sometimes lover, Paul, was fatally shot before she could convey her true feelings for him. After she shares her decision to remain as Echo, another doll-turned-person, Alpha (played by Alan Tudyk, aka Wash from *Firefly*) gives her a gift: Paul's consciousness, fully mapped on a hard drive, ready for Echo to take or leave as she chooses. Ever the good posthuman, Echo does not hesitate to download Paul into her brain. After completing the new addition to her rhizomatic identity, Echo crawls into her sleeping pod, closes her eyes, and converses with Paul, who quickly realizes (and accepts) the fact that his body is dead and his mind is embedded in Echo's. She closes her eyes and rests her hands on her stomach, appearing content with, and even aroused by, her new virtual

romance. Through a teleological shift in the series from the goal of "finding" Caroline to positioning Echo as the hero, *Dollhouse* seems to champion interreal identity at a moment in which media fans were also learning to negotiate new ways of constructing themselves in virtual spaces.

V. The Edges of the Whedonverse

So far, I have analyzed three storyworlds that play pivotal roles in the geography of the Whedonverse. But the 'verse is expansive—other cornerstones include *Angel, Much Ado About Nothing, Cabin in the Woods, Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, and, of course, Whedon's contributions to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU).[84] The degree of Whedon's involvement in these storyworlds varies, but they all boast "that Whedony feeling" that I discussed at the start of this chapter, due to the sense of dispersed auteurism at play in the Whedonverse. In addition to Whedon-authored texts, the 'verse expands into other storyworlds via references and visual allusions. In the *Battlestar Galactica* pilot miniseries, for example, one of the ships that evacuates Caprica during the Cylon strike *is* Serenity (an allusion made possible by the two series' shared visual effects company). In season two episode six of *Castle*, Nathan Fillion's character dons his iconic Malcolm Reynolds outfit from *Firefly* as a Halloween costume, prompting his daughter to remark, "Didn't you wear that, like, five years ago? [...] Don't you think you should move on?" ("Vampire Weekend"). In an episode of the postmodern comedy

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[84] MCU is the commonly accepted term for the recent wave of Marvel storyworld output, though MTU (Marvel Transmedia Universe) is really a more appropriate moniker. Whedon wrote and directed *The Avengers* (2012) and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). He also produces the MTU flagship TV series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (ABC 2013-present).

Community, Troy and Abed ("nerdy" best friends) [disclose their plan](#) to blame their deaths on the "unjust cancellation of *Firefly*." On YouTube, there's a [twelve-minute mashup of *Buffy* references](#) on shows ranging from *South Park* to *Gilmore Girls*, *Farscape* to *Daria*.

But what effect do all of these moments have on the Whedonverse? Are they inside or outside of the expansive intertextual realm that I have identified in this chapter? When considered together, do these allusions add up to more than the sum of their parts? The spillover of emotional investment from the Whedonverse into these other spaces demonstrates one of the ways in which fans resist finality at the level of emotion. Indeed, they resist finality so strongly that they may create meanings and identifications that would barely be perceptible to a non-Whedonite. Even without direct allusions, interdiegetic feeling seeps out of The Whedonverse, for example when Seth Green (Oz from *Buffy*) appears on Alyson Hannigan's (Willow from *Buffy*) series *How I Met Your Mother* as a former college friend. These moments create opportunities for fans to reflect upon and refigure The Whedonverse in ways that casual viewers of a particular series would not have access to. Whedonites, as Jubal Early would say, "imbue" these moments with meaning.

VI. A Cult By Any Other Name...

In an April 2011 *New York Times* interview, Whedon explains of his musical internet miniseries *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, "I still believe it's a viable financial model, and a creative playground and I miss it. But in the year I was supposed to [make

a sequel], I instead decided to make this little Sundance movie that I'm making"
(Itzkoff). The "Sundance movie" that Whedon jokingly refers to is, of course, *The
Avengers* (2012). No matter what your opinion of the cinematic quality of *The Avengers*
and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), there is no denying that this blockbuster success
signaled a breaking into the mainstream for both Whedon as a writer/director and for
Whedonverse fandom. The film's massive success brings attention to other Whedon
texts, but potentially endangers the cult status that has defined The Whedonverse for so
many years. In a *Huffington Post* article posted after the opening weekend of *The
Avengers*, Pulitzer prize-winning TV critic Maureen Ryan writes, "*Our* Joss Whedon,
the man whose brain-bending, word-playing, heartbreaking shows needed constant
care, attention and 'save this show' campaigns from legions of TV devotees in order to
survive, is an entertainment industry superhero now. Will he forget about *us*? I sure
hope not" (my emphasis).

Three days after Ryan's piece hit the web, Whedon posted a letter to his fans on
Whedonesque.com, writing, "This is me, saying thank you. All of you. You've taken as
much guff for loving my work as I have for over-writing it, and you deserve, in this time
of our streaming into the main, to crow. To glow. To crow and go, 'I told you so,' to those
Joe Blows not in the know." Now, of course we could take this letter as a tactical move
on Whedon's part to hang on to his cult fan base against the potential threat of being
seen as selling out. Whedon is attempting to validate and comfort Whedonites, assuring
us that he intends to use his newfound powers for good, and that the cult may get a little
bigger, but it's still one big happy family.

Nevertheless, the thing about making a blockbuster is that once you do it, "the world's all different."[85] And indeed, since Whedon took the reigns of the MCU, the Whedonverse just isn't the same. Stein writes that "the call for a third wave of fan studies can be both a call to recognize the deepening relationship between fandom and mainstream culture and a call to be aware of the cultural, historical, political, and personal negotiations that color that relationship" (11). The increasingly blurred line between cultish and mainstream fan practices is essential to my conception of active fandom. The cult show is no longer tied to an aura of obscurity, but rather to its visibility across a variety of discursive spaces. Therefore, I argue that paratexts form the foundation of cult television by spawning expansive networks of narrative engagement. My position relies on the assumption that within our participatory mediascape, the "cult" label becomes more about viewer activity than about the particular aesthetic or narrative elements of a series. It is true that many of the shows that come to mind when we think about cult television (*Star Trek*, *Twin Peaks*, *Firefly*, etc.) tend to fit a specific bill in terms of genre and industry status (including early cancellation). But it is no coincidence (nor any great insight) to say that these shows are canonically cult because of their intense fandoms. Whether or not we can assign any inherent artistic markers to "the cult series" is, in my opinion, secondary to the more basic point that the fans make the cult.

In addition to the obvious fact that a fandom comprises a physical cult of viewers, the various kinds of paratexts that fans consume (and produce) form the creative

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[85] From the opening line of *Buffy Season Eight*. "The thing about changing the world is that once you do it, the world's all different." The line invokes the idea of transmedia migration changing the shape of a storyworld.

foundation of the cult series and generate an affective aura around a text that resists finality. This emphasis on paratexts demonstrates how the bar for cult television has been lowered in a major way. If we understand the fundamental element of cult TV as a high level of fan engagement that extends into spaces beyond the text, then nearly every show on television could, theoretically, qualify as a cult phenomenon. Amidst the surge in social TV platforms and transmedia marketing and storytelling practices, it seems to me that we can now say: to every show, its cult, though each has unique and varying intensities. But what does it mean for television studies if the old ways of distinguishing a cult object no longer render the same results? If we level the playing field and concede that *American Idol* is as much a cult show as *Battlestar Galactica*, then has the word "cult" lost all meaning? Yes and no. If we recognize that active fandom is, at least in many cases, a normalization of cult fan practices, then communities that form in relation to highly varied texts destabilize previously established assumptions about cult TV. Similarly, using "cult" as a genre signifier becomes increasingly problematic for the same reason. Perhaps most importantly, if "cult" once denoted some kind of opposition to mainstream TV fare, it seems that this distinction is falling away almost entirely, complicating the cultural signifiers of popular vs. niche programming. But the death of cult TV as we know it opens up media fandom to a broader array of participants and encourages a reconception of "the fan" as a pathologized figure.[86] If we understand active fandom as a widely embraced way of media life, it is easier to see how narrative engagement feeds into social engagement in a potentially transformative way.

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[86] Some notable depictions of the pathological fan include *Misery* (1990), *The Fan* (1996), and *The Bodyguard* (1992).

VII. Active Fandom and Cofactuality

One of the persistent questions in many fan communities involves the notion of

canonicity: in expansive, transmedia, "collectively authored" (Stein) storyworlds, which

bits count as part of the "real" story? Some fans reject the notion of the canon

altogether, embracing fan work and other paratexts as powerful narrative elements

worthy of attention and negotiation within existing storyworld parameters. But many

cling to the canon, casting all forms of fan fiction aside or relegating them to a space

outside of their interpretive framework. Still others use the canon as a flexible

benchmark for the impact of fandom; if fans can *make* their ideas canonical, they have

succeeded in establishing a feedback loop with media producers. A flexible conception of

narrative canonicity generates new ways of thinking about storytelling. In the next

chapter, I will explore how the science fiction series *Fringe* uses alternate universes and

timelines in the service of cofactual narration—presenting a multiverse cosmology in its

storyworld. While *Fringe*'s narrative structure explicitly thematizes cofactuality, I also

argue that active fandom, at its core, involves the practice of cofactual thinking. The

various modes of narrative engagement that I have discussed in this chapter

demonstrate how multiple versions of the story can impact audiences' understanding of

a storyworld. The Whedonverse's commitment to transmedia storytelling creates

multiple official endings to stories and undermines finality, but it also invites active fans

to participate, to speculate, to experience the Whedonverse on their own terms. When

active fans resist finality, they have to put something else in its place; and these turns,

twists, and forks generate a cofactual Whedonverse that is collectively authored through

points of contact between fans and texts. The next chapter will pose the question: how

does cofactuality reframe our relationship to storyworlds and help us manage narrative

loss?

Chapter Five:

Many Worlds, Many Endings

I.   Negotiating Counterfactuals

In chapter one, I argued that the popularity of counterfactual storytelling makes way for a theory of cofactuality, and I identified the stakes of this concept on three levels: *thinking*, *interpretation*, and *narration*. In chapter two, I discussed how anticipatory paratexts for the *Breaking Bad* finale allowed viewers to use cofactual thinking to negotiate their sense of loss at the end of the series. In the previous chapter, we saw how transmedia storytelling and fan-created paratexts destabilize canonicity to encourage cofactual thinking and, in some cases, cofactual interpretations that fully commit to the idea of ontological pluralism—or multiple, equally true versions of reality (Ryan). This chapter analyzes a rare example of cofactual narration in the science fiction series *Fringe* (FOX 2008-2013). Through its use of time travel and alternate dimension plotting that depicts several world-iterations, *Fringe* leads viewers to cofactual interpretation, presenting a complex narrative system that engages with the implications of cofactuality.

Recall that Hilary Dannenberg describes the counterfactual as those narrative elements which are "generated by creating a nonfactual or false *antecedent*. This is done by *mentally mutating* or 'undoing' a real-world event in the past to produce an *outcome* or *consequent* contrary to reality" (111, her emphasis). She goes on to point out: "The term *consequent* or *outcome* refers to the result of the alteration farther on down the

counterfactual time path. A counterfactual therefore involves a *clear contrastive relationship* between a real event belonging to a factual world and a hypothetical one that counters this fact" (111, my emphasis). *Fringe* engages in counterfactual tactics along the lines of what Dannenberg describes; but by reinvigorating these tropes, the result of the narrative system as a whole is one of *cofactuality*, in which the lack of a clear ontological hierarchy undermines the "contrastive relationship" among diegetic worlds. Each world-iteration in *Fringe* deploys familiar counterfactual plot devices that thematize ontological difference, but those contrasts produce multiplicities and convergences of reality rather than definitive oppositions. Dannenberg's study alludes to the increasing prominence of narratives that blur the counter/factual distinction, positing this trend as part of a postmodern narratological impulse. She also notes the role of science fiction as an important terrain for experimental narrative practices, since the genre offers a "freedom from the constraints of the ontological hierarchy of realism" (70). Dannenberg concludes her "History of Narrative Fiction" with the observation that

> in the postmodernist science fiction of writers like Dick and Le Guin, the virtual is everywhere because it is part of culture itself—and so the battle between the virtual and actual, and between the factual and counterfactual, cannot ever be truly fought and won because it has already been permanently lost. Seen in terms of the counterfactual, the historical development of fiction therefore centers on the gradual evolution of increasingly ontologically pluralistic and ambivalent forms of narrative discourse. (224)

This sublimation of the virtual/actual binary is certainly present in the late-20th-century science fiction literature that Dannenberg cites, but it is also highly present in 21st-century complex TV. Formal affordances such as storytelling duration and cinematography make TV especially equipped for cofactual narration. A series' visual commitment to, and formal representation of, plural worlds facilitates the viewer's emotional bond to that multiplicity, encouraging cofactual interpretation. For example, the more that we *see* a particular world-iteration in *Fringe*, the more we begin to *feel* for its inhabitants and their stories.

Dannenberg cites Claude Bremond's idea that plot "includ[es] virtual events that may be desired or strived for by characters but that never actually occur in the narrative world" (7). Ned Schantz makes a similar move in his use of "shadow scenes" to describe those scenarios that are "felt but not seen" (3) and that generate a "proliferation of alternatives" to the official version of the story (ibid). Schantz describes how characters in Hitchcock haunt each other's films via "lures and recognitions that explode the concept of diegesis only to multiply its stakes in a refracting social phantasmagoria" (14). I am extending Bremond and Schantz's claims by including the paratextual interventions of TV audiences: the outcomes that viewers imagine through cofactual thinking can become part of the narrative frame, and the more that these possibilities are shared and discussed over time, the more important they become in relation to the text itself.[87] Social media discourse elevates fan theories and predictions to newsworthy

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[87] For example, when watching the much-anticipated *The Walking Dead* season seven premiere, it is difficult to experience those story events without having been exposed to the many fan theories and predictions that saturated social media and water cooler discussions during the show's hiatus.

items that add paratextual hype, and our exposure to these theories colours the lens

through which we experience a narrative. While there are plenty of anecdotes about how

fans have influenced TV writers' decisions regarding certain characters or plot events,

the actual degree of interactivity in contemporary TV storytelling (or any other narrative

medium) is debateable. However, I argue that the immense popularity of this kind of

paratextual work is evidence of how audiences impact storyworlds beyond the control or

sanction of TV creators. When we revel in possible outcomes and spend our mental

energies on multiple narrative trajectories, we are thinking cofactually; but when an

imagined alternative gains force enough to change our understanding of a storyworld,

cofactual interpretation becomes viable. It is important to note that narrative theories of

counterfactuality typically rely on a particular model of storytelling: positing one single

event (for example, the birth/death of Hitler) as a catalyst for a new world-iteration.

Cofactuality, meanwhile, is more flexible in its accommodation of multiple entry and

exit points and more invested in a proliferation of possible worlds that accumulate,

rather than displace, other versions.

My theory of cofactuality thus works productively with Marie-Laure Ryan's

application of possible worlds (PW) theory to narratology. Ryan outlines several

premises derived from quantum physics in order to demonstrate how "PW theory [...]

explains the imaginative experience that we undergo when we immerse ourselves in a

fictional world" (646). Writing of the cognitive potential of PW storytelling, Ryan

asserts: "[I]t offers new points of view on such fundamental questions as identity, ethical

responsibility, and free will; it encourages questions regarding the nature of space and

time; it rejuvenates the old theme of the double; and it creates narrative situations which would not be possible in a system of reality limited to one world" (666). *Fringe*'s cofactual narrative system is deeply invested in these ontological issues, presenting a complex, layered storyworld that requires different interpretive strategies than those typical of traditional storytelling modes. Ryan notes that

> [f]or a text to impose a multiverse cosmology, it must be based on a decision tree or on a diagram with parallel branches [...] and all the branches must possess *equal ontological status*. But this is not sufficient to create situations of narrative entanglement. In order to do so, the text must not only move up and down along the branches, it must also perform lateral jumps from branch to branch, and there should be a consciousness within the narrative multiverse that is aware of the jumping. (656, my emphasis)

Ryan's emphasis on the structural imperatives of PW narratives is useful for understanding how audiences make sense of *Fringe*. The world-iterations in the *Fringe* multiverse operate through a process of informational and affective accumulation: as the story "moves" and "jumps" among worlds, the audience situates those worlds and their inhabitants relationally, allowing signification to accrue and bleed across world boundaries and creating multiple sites of closure and openness throughout the text. Whether or not these branches possess the "equal ontological status" that Ryan mentions is the most difficult question in figuring the cofactuality of *Fringe*. The series certainly dedicates different amounts of screen time to its world-iterations, and in some

instances, asks viewers to bestow loyalty to one world over the other; however, the key here is that the world-iterations are all presented as equally *real*, if not equally important to the story. So while counterfactuality relies on an "either/or" narrative ontology, cofactual narration presents multiple world-iterations as being real while leaving room for audiences to impose relational significance across narrative branches.

In order to see how the normalization of counterfactual storytelling has precipitated a turn towards the cofactual, consider one of the most visible ways that counterfactuality has infiltrated popular narrative experience—through the prominence of "alternate endings" as a genre of special feature on film DVDs. While alternate endings were present in Victorian serials and in the early days of Hollywood film, the DVD era marks a shift in accessibility to these narrative elements. Including alternate endings as DVD special features achieves two somewhat contradictory results: they sanction these counterfactuals as "official," but they also reinforce the binary between "actual" and "alternate" ending. Sometimes, alternate endings reinscribe authorship, such as with the director's cut of *Blade Runner* (1992). Alternate endings are also significant when analyzing studio-era Hollywood films, since regulatory bodies often required endings to project particular cultural values.[88] But most importantly for this dissertation, alternate endings reveal the importance of endings as such, the lengths writers and directors will go to in order to "get it right," and the ability of endings to retroactively inflect a story with different meanings.

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[88] For more on how content regulation affected film endings in the studio era, see Thomas Schatz's *The Genius of the System* (1988).

Alternate endings are also present in TV storytelling, in deliberate and accidental ways. Lack of certainty regarding a series' renewal leads many creators to consider multiple possible storylines for a season finale, as they attempt to provide enough closure in case of cancellation while still perpetuating narrative interest in the case of renewal. Especially with more precarious network shows, season finales often become series finales, whether the writers intend them to be or not, due to little or no notice regarding cancellation. Even in the case of planned finales, many writers and showrunners will disclose (via interviews or other paratexts) the variety of ways that they considered ending a story.[89] These authorial musings become fodder for active fans to consider how different endings reshape storyworlds while diminishing the authority of a particular ending. In other words, knowing that a showrunner chose one of many potential endings makes the official one less inevitable, less sacred, and more open to revision. When active fans debate and discuss narrative possibilities, these new trajectories produce cofactual thinking that grapples with multiple versions of a storyworld and, thus, multiple endings. And while endings are in fact a key locus for this kind of thinking, it is important to recognize that the cognitive play of cofactuality can occur at any point in a TV narrative, aided by structures of seriality and the ethos of anticipation.

By the time viewers reach the series finale of *Fringe*, they have travelled across two spatially-distinct universes, three versions of the future, and at least four different timelines, with each world-iteration populated by different versions of the show's

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[89] Recall Vince Gilligan's disclosure that he did not know how he wanted to end *Breaking Bad*, even when he started writing season five.

central characters. Through its creative use of science fiction tropes, such as time travel, alternate realities, and temporal resets, *Fringe* asks viewers to re-evaluate typical models of narrative world-building. The series constructs a multiverse through repeated counterfactual intrusions upon the plot. Viewer engagement with this system involves frequent interpretive and affective realignments: the plurality of worlds in *Fringe* creates an interplay of narrative ontologies that builds and intensifies as the series protracts across five TV seasons, three comics series, a companion book, and a slew of fan fiction and fan speculation. By continually presenting viewers with "what if" and "yes, and" scenarios (as opposed to the "if only" scenarios traditionally dominating counterfactuals), the proliferation of timelines and universes in *Fringe* creates a unique storyworld that invites viewers and fans to participate in a process of cofactual world-building.

I argue that cofactuality, as a mode of narrative interpretation, destabilizes storytelling authority by encouraging a non-hierarchical understanding of multiple temporal and spatial iterations within a storyworld. Rather than presenting its multiple worlds as clear alternatives to one another, *Fringe's* narrative system accommodates all world-iterations within its multiverse to encourage cofactual interpretation. My analysis of this complex narrative will help us understand the competing desires that emerge when we actively engage with the notion of cofactuality, particularly in regard to finality. In *Fringe*, moments of closure proliferate across world-iterations to provide ending-feelings while simultaneously inducing new narrative trajectories. In other words, in multiverse narratives, storylines do still come to an end, even as other versions

of them continue. With *Fringe* as a case study, we can see how cofactual interpretation does not reject experiences of closure, but rather produces the conditions for a multitude of ending-feelings that are not necessarily contingent upon plot-based or structural finality.

II. Building *Fringe*'s Multiverse

Fringe does not begin as a cofactual narrative. The first season follows a relatively standard *X-Files*-esque procedural format, as FBI agent Olivia Dunham (Anna Torv) investigates bizarre cases involving "fringe" science with the help of Walter Bishop (John Noble) and his son, Peter (Joshua Jackson). Walter is a brilliant scientist who spent 16 years in a mental institution after a self-prescribed lobotomy. He is psychologically unstable and unable to remember much of his past—most importantly, that in 1985, he tore a hole in the fabric of space/time to steal Peter from another universe, and that he conducted traumatic experiments on Olivia as a child using a brain-enhancing drug called Cortexiphan. The dynamics among these three characters form the foundation of *Fringe* on both emotional and plot-based levels: Walter's actions in 1985 precipitate many, if not all, of the events of the story, while coping with and understanding those actions is the emotional crux of the series for characters and viewers alike. But it is not until the season one finale that we learn of an alternate universe ("There's More Than One of Everything"), and it is not until the season two finale ("Over There") that we start to explore another world-iteration (World 2). Seasons three and four deal with new timelines, and season five takes place in a version of the

future that is eventually rewritten by a temporal reset in the series finale. Each world-iteration gives us new character-iterations, and as these layers proliferate, the series shifts away from the procedural format towards the kind of serial storytelling that thrives in a cofactual narrative framework. Each counterfactual turn necessitates some kind of loss—as new worlds open up, others close, and so *Fringe* is a series with multiple world-endings, training viewers to reject counterfactual substitution in favor of cofactual accumulation.

Fringe underscores the relationality of world-iterations by deploying repetition-with-difference as a narrative tactic throughout its storyworld. By repeating characters, images, dialogue, objects, even entire plotlines, and recontextualizing them in new ways, the narrative draws attention to the links between world-iterations. These repetitions create ontological constants that signal the series' investment in cofactual narration,[90] providing anchors by which audiences remain invested in the story's plural worlds and situate the connections among them. One of the most emotionally charged examples of a recurring object across *Fringe*'s multiverse is the white tulip, which first appears in season two, episode seventeen, and which goes on to exemplify the contradictory impulses of closure and openness upon which *Fringe*'s storyworld depends. "White Tulip" presents the events of a fringe case in multiple iterations, each time repeating scenes, dialogue, and cinematographic POVs with difference. Guest star Peter Weller plays astrophysicist Alistair Peck, who discovers a means of practically applying theories of time travel. Peck turns his body into a time machine and attempts

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[90] And in cofactual thinking—fan theories/predictions must use ontological constants in order to be viable.

to travel back to the day that his fiancée was killed in a car crash (in order to undo her death). Only two episodes earlier, we learned the details of Walter's similarly desperate attempt to thwart fate ("Peter"). Thus, in addition to implementing a complex cofactual structure (especially for a single episode), "White Tulip" also advances the central moral quandaries of the show: what boundaries are we willing to cross to save our loved ones, how do we live with the burdens of our decisions, and how can we be forgiven for our heinous actions? The idea of forgiveness is particularly central to the emotional trajectory of the series, as it is the moral process with which viewers are able to engage most directly—we may never be faced with the decision to break through space/time to save a version of our child, but we can decide whether to forgive Walter for doing so.[91] Walter tells Alistair his story as a cautionary tale, admitting that he is waiting for "God" to bestow a sign of forgiveness, a white tulip. After the men share this conversation, however, Alistair resets time, erasing the interaction from Walter's memory.

At the end of the episode, when Walter receives a drawing of a white tulip from Alistair in the mail, he looks upward, teary-eyed, believing that "God" has answered his prayer. Walter's ignorance of the origin of the tulip introduces a gap between viewer and character knowledge, bestowing a certain degree of ownership of the tulip to the audience, which will become important when the object reappears later in the series. This episode's immediate popularity would motivate showrunner Joel Wyman to expand the mythology of the white tulip, inserting it into other places in the multiverse

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[91] Forgiveness is also an important concept for television viewing more generally—in our relationships with a given series, we are often asked to "forgive" certain narrative transgressions (such as a bad finale). Perhaps this is one reason why so many shows thematize forgiveness (recall that *Breaking Bad* is heavily invested in this notion as well).

and allowing it to accrue significations with each new iteration. White tulips would go on to span the series and its paratexts, becoming a cherished symbol to be passed back and forth between creators and fans—a mutating feedback loop that exemplifies the cofactuality of *Fringe*'s storyworld.

In the season one finale, "There's More Than One of Everything," after the immediate narrative conflict of the episode resolves, with the defeat of the villain in dramatic fashion,[92] the episode cuts to a montage of Olivia arranging a meeting with the elusive scientist William Bell.[93] The scene acts as a kind of epilogue to the action of the rest of the episode and signals the series' departure from the procedural format: conventionally, a procedural show would have ended with the resolution of the main conflict. But the quietness of this scene sets the tone for a major revelation, and as we watch Olivia waiting for Dr. Bell in the empty restaurant, her impatience mirrors our suspense. When Dr. Bell does not show up, Olivia leaves the restaurant via an elevator. Inside the elevator, we see the narrative's first representation of trans-world travel. The aesthetics of trans-world travel are worth tracing throughout the series, as these representations are part of the process through which the show trains viewers to accept ontological pluralism. The elevator is an interesting transportation vessel in this case, as the idea of vertical movement among worlds suggests a metaphor of layers, appropriate

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[92] David Robert Jones is the central villain in season one, and in this season finale, Olivia and Peter are able to kill him before he can cross into World 2. Jones will reappear later as a villain in another timeline.
[93] Although William and Walter were once friends and partners, Walter holds a grudge against William for establishing Massive Dynamic, an immensely profitable corporation whose ventures are based on the pair's research. Throughout the first season, Massive Dynamic seems to be at the root of many fringe cases, and despite her best efforts, Olivia is unable to meet William Bell face-to-face for questioning.

for the cofactual system.[94] A receptionist leads Olivia off of the elevator and into an

office, where her glance and the camera's rests on a newspaper that reads "Obamas Set

to Move into New White House." As Olivia looks around, confused, a figure enters the

room, his face obscured. "Where am I? Who are you?" she asks. "The answer to your

first question is: it's very complicated. The answer to your second: I'm William Bell,"

and the figure steps into the light, revealing Leonard Nimoy, revered sci-fi star.[95] Olivia

steps over to the window, and the camera reverse zooms out to reveal the location of the

office: the World Trade Center.

The final image of this episode deploys one of the most overt and emotionally

charged counterfactual gestures available in the early-21st-century zeitgeist by

representing the Twin Towers as still standing. The image establishes similarity and

difference between World 1 and World 2 and suggests an uncertain transworld

ontological relationship. Dannenberg writes of "upward" and "downward"

counterfactuals: the former refers to a scenario that is understood as better than reality,

the latter refers to a scenario that is worse (this formulation is a logical response to

counterfactual ontology, whereas cofactuality imagines a variety of ontological

relationships among world-iterations). The image of the Twin Towers still standing,

produced through the reverse zoom, which places the viewer's perspective in an

impossible position of floating omniscience, suggests the possibility of World 2 as an

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[94] Verticality typically implies a hierarchy; and though cofactuality accommodates multiple versions of reality, there is still often a hierarchy of importance among world-iterations, even if such a hierarchy does not necessarily entail an ontological hierarchy.

[95] The incorporation of Nimoy's star text was celebrated in the *Fringe* fandom—deploying interdiegetic feeling in the service of validating the series' plural worlds. In addition, *Star Trek*'s role in popularizing counterfactual narration adds another layer of intertextuality to this scene.

upward counterfactual. "There's More Than One of Everything" becomes an invitation to consider all of the possible explanations for this counterfactual scenario. Thus, season one ends with the first significant narrative forking of the series, and that divergence marks the first demand for interpretive realignment on the part of the viewer. The episode provides closure of one major plot line, but opens up a literal new world of narrative potentiality. One [reviewer of the episode writes](#), "In the tradition of the best television finales, 'There's More Than One Of Everything' wrapped up a few mysteries, but asked twice as many questions." The idea, reiterated throughout this dissertation, that season finales thrive on the ability to perpetuate narrative interest—not satisfy it—is key to understanding the ways that a cofactual system operates in relation to endings. *Fringe* season finales, however, do not rely on what we might think of as traditional cliffhanger tactics; instead, they operate by allowing for ending-feelings even as they initiate new plots. The narrative interest that each season finale sustains is not a matter of leaving specific plot points unanswered, but of opening up entire worlds that allow viewers to recontextualize the narrative system through cofactual thinking.

Over the course of season two, we learn that the attacks on September 11 still occurred in World 2, but the White House was the primary target (thus explaining the newspaper headline in Bell's office). This narrative bait-and-switch is one major example of the ways in which World 2 becomes what we could call, extending Dannenberg's terminology, a *sideways counterfactual*. It is a world where civilians can take daily flights to the moon, but coffee is a beverage of the past. Cholera is still a dangerous epidemic, but medical advancements can heal a gunshot wound in a matter

of hours. Personal technology is more advanced, but citizens are constantly surveilled

via their "Show Me" identification cards. The concept of the sideways counterfactual

invites cofactual interpretation, as the inability to define World 2 as either better or

worse than World 1 encourages a game of perpetual comparison and consideration of

the simultaneity of these two versions of reality. Any attempt by the viewer to situate

this new world into an ontological hierarchy is doomed to fail, or at least to require

revision as the layers of the cofactual system proliferate.

As I have argued in previous chapters, our emotional bonds to any narrative rest

fundamentally upon character relationships: we care about a storyworld only to the

extent that we care about its inhabitants. *Fringe*'s use of multiple character sets

produces a unique form of interdiegetic feeling (perhaps, in this case, *intra*diegetic), as

our emotional attachments to one set of character-iterations bleeds through into our

feelings towards another set of character-iterations. *Fringe* utilizes the power of this

interdiegetic feeling in a variety of ways, including killing off some character-iterations,

adjusting character positions along the protagonist/antagonist spectrum, and creating

romantic tensions among different versions of characters. Furthermore, the emotional

spillover from one character set to another allows the narrative to introduce new worlds

in media res and makes viewers care about those worlds right away (though not always

in a positive sense, as some viewers could resist new character iterations as imposters).

In any case, interdiegetic feeling is an important part of how we experience cofactual

narration—in particular, how we become emotionally invested in more than one version

of a character. Counterfactual logic dictates that character doubles are

substitutions—one version is the "real" version—but *Fringe* presents a more complicated model of attachment that encourages cofactual interpretation.

III. Cofactual Characters

"Over There," the two-part finale of *Fringe* season two, introduces the series' first set of "characterological counterfactuals" in which we see "antecedents" to our original set of characters (Dannenberg 120). The opening scene throws the viewer into a process of defamiliarization and *realignment*—we see a cast of new but familiar characters engaging in witty banter and exuding an immediate chemistry that helps establish World 2 as a diegetic whole. This strategy creates ontological realignment and invites us to see the inhabitants of World 2 in relation to, rather than opposed to, our World 1 characters. Particularly in this two-part episode, which alternates between the two worlds and the perspectives of their inhabitants, often using clever matches on action, *simultaneity* becomes key to the ontological status of the narrative. As much as viewers are invested in discovering the differences between these worlds and the reasons for those differences, we are also constantly reminded of their similarity, coexistence, and cofactuality.

While the series itself invites the kinds of pluralistic readings that emerge from a cofactual system, there are also certain paratextual elements that work against the idea of ontological pluralism and attempt to contain *Fringe*'s cofactual potential. For example, the pamphlet that accompanies the season three DVD encourages a distinctly binary relationship between World 1 and World 2. Preceding each episode description,

we find either the words "Our Universe" or "The Parallel Universe" in italics—a clear

ontological privileging of World 1. Furthermore, some of the episode descriptions refer

to Olivia 2 as "Fauxlivia." The fact that this official paratext enforces hierarchy does

complicate my argument that the text itself strives to dissolve such distinctions, but the

hierarchy remains more emotional than ontological. Perhaps the paratext resorts to

these categorizations as a means of instilling clarity—indeed, one major complaint from

viewers in season three was that the narrative was too difficult to follow, as the episodes

jumped back and forth between World 1 and World 2.[96] But does clarity necessarily

require ontological hierarchy? It seems fair enough to assert that most consumers of

narrative are acclimated to the existence of such hierarchies, suggesting a fundamental

conservatism in the way we have learned to experience stories. *Fringe* attempts to

challenge this conservatism by training viewers to question their desire for a clear

ontological hierarchy among world-iterations. And indeed, perhaps reflecting that

training process, the season four DVD jacket eschews the possessive pronoun when

referring to the two Worlds.[97]

Season three also addresses the emotional possibilities and limits of

characterological cofactuality when Peter engages in a sexual relationship with the

undercover Olivia 2, forming a love triangle with two versions of the same character.

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[96] Attentive viewing became especially mandatory in season three, which is likely the primary reason for the significant drop in ratings between seasons two and three. It is not particularly difficult to follow the jumps between Worlds when watching carefully, but I can understand the confusion of some casual viewers.

[97] Another good example of *Fringe* viewers' tendency to interpret the show's plural worlds as nonhierarchical is the array of plot diagrams produced by the fandom. These maps, which bestow the same amount of detail to each world-iteration, are excellent visualizations of cofactual plotting. Example 1; Example 2; Example 3.

This triangle causes the Peter/Olivia relationship to be repeated with difference, and, while watching Peter court the wrong Olivia is upsetting, the affair also allows viewers to indulge in a cheating fantasy that relies on ontological pluralism. Fan response to this plotline was, expectedly, mixed: some viewers were infuriated that the show could betray the Peter/Olivia 1 pairing, while at least a portion of fans supported the Peter/Olivia 2 relationship. As if responding to this fan debate, the season three episode "Subject 13" re-deploys the white tulip, imbuing it with new meaning. In a flashback to 1985, a recently kidnapped Peter meets a young Olivia 1, who is undergoing the Cortexiphan trials in Walter's research facility. This episode is strange in that its events have major impact on the emotional trajectory of the season, but they are never acknowledged by any of the characters and don't tangibly affect the plot. Therefore, the coincidental childhood meeting of our protagonists in a field of white tulips seems entirely for the sake of the fans. This second iteration of the white tulip motif, which decisively claims Peter/Olivia 1 as the series' "OTP" ("one true pair"), presents a beloved symbol to the fandom, repeated with a different signification: fate. "Subject 13" thus attempts to contain and even foreclose Peter/Olivia 2 supporters by reaching back in time, muddying narrative causality and offering audiences two ontological constants—Peter and Olivia 1's romantic destiny, and white tulips.

Despite the fact that "Subject 13" enforces Peter and Olivia 1's OTP status, elements of the paratextual realm destabilize that position. Vidding, as discussed in chapter four, is a process through which fans mash-up scenes and images from a text and set the re-organized bits to music, then post their work on YouTube or another

content-sharing site. There are a variety of *Fringe* vids, including an entire subgenre

that addresses the Peter/Olivia 1/Olivia 2 love triangle. These vids range in their

approach to the triangle, some [highlighting key moments in both relationships](#), some

[privileging one relationship over the other](#). Those that [support the Peter/Olivia 2 pairing](#)

are strong evidence of the series' success in representing characterological cofactuality:

in almost any other alternate universe story, the "other" versions of characters are

understood as evil twins.[98] But even though Olivia 2 commits questionable acts during

her undercover mission in World 1, fans interpreted her as a complex and sympathetic

character, worthy of paratextual attention. In addition, some of these vids underscore

the similarities between the two Olivias, while others emphasize their differences,

evidence of fans' differing modes of evaluating ontological pluralism at the level of

character. These paratextual engagements with multiple character sets reveal audiences'

desire to think cofactually; and in turn, the fandom's investment in Olivia 2 would be

re-deployed in new contexts later in the narrative to generate interdiegetic

ending-feelings.

  Fringe's season three finale engages a complex set of tactics to complicate its

cofactual system—time travel, alternate futures, and temporal resets. "The Day We

Died" begins with Peter entering a large and mysterious machine whose construction

had been at the center of season three's narrative trajectory.[99] In this episode, we learn

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[98] Think, for example, of the famous *Star Trek: TOS* episode "Mirror, Mirror."

[99] The exact purpose of the machine was unknown, only that it held the power to create and destroy universes. When conflict between World 1 and World 2 escalates and Walter 2 builds a machine of his own that threatens to destroy World 1, Peter believes he can use the machine to preemptively destroy World 2. The machine is also a metaphor for narrative, as the season revolved around putting the pieces together. In season five, *Fringe* returns to this metaphor-based tactic as the characters search for pieces of a plan, which turns out to be a time machine.

that it was in fact primarily a form of time machine, designed in the year 2026 by

Walter, sent back through a wormhole to the Cretaceous era so that our characters could

discover it in 2011. The machine transports Peter's consciousness to the year 2026 so

that he can see the repercussions of choosing to destroy World 2 and return back to 2011

to "make a different choice" ("The Day We Died"). The explicit invocation of individual

agency as the determinant of history aligns well with a possible worlds approach to

narrative, suggesting that every choice can create an ontological fork. The way that this

explanation unfolds, however, is what makes this episode's relationship to the cofactual

system of *Fringe* so interesting.

When we awake with Peter in 2026, he is not immediately aware of his 2011 self.

In fact, he possesses all of the memories of a future version of Peter, who is married to

Olivia and employed by Fringe Division. Just as "Over There" had immersed viewers *in

media res* in World 2, "The Day We Died" crafts an entire ontology of its future world by

dropping us into the daily routine of its characters. Although we only see this world for a

single episode, our attachments to the characters and the dramatic events that take

place—including Olivia's death—render it crucial to the cofactual system. Indeed, in all

of the fan-created narrative maps of the series, this episode spawns its own branch. In

this version of 2026, Peter's destruction of World 2 has caused significant deterioration

in the fabric of space/time, and it appears inevitable that World 1 will soon be destroyed

as well. Walter was blamed (by the media and government) for the situation and has

spent the past 15 years in prison.[100] Peter and Olivia are married, and Olivia has gained

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[100] Walter's situation in this episode brings the themes of guilt and forgiveness to the foreground again. In this cofactual representation, viewers experience what it would be like if Walter were held fully

complete control over her Cortexiphan-enabled powers; but these "upward" counterfactual gestures are eventually undermined by Olivia's death. Her funeral scene is particularly important—the melodramatic tone asks viewers to experience what it *might be like* to mourn Olivia, all the while knowing in the back of their heads that this horrific event must be rewritten somehow.[101] And indeed, in the following scene, as Peter grieves in his apartment, Walter bursts in and reveals the master plan (which has already been taking place) to build the machine and bring Peter's consciousness forward from 2011. Walter's explanation is extremely convoluted, and when Peter asks the obvious question on behalf of the viewer, "Why not just never build the machine?" Walter provides the completely unsatisfying response, "[....] It's a paradox."

If, at this moment in the episode, a critical viewer might be angered by the explanatory cop-out, worried that the show has fallen into one of the most rehearsed traps in science fiction, the final scene of the episode offers a bold narrative twist: when Peter's consciousness returns to 2011, he uses the power of the machine to build a stable bridge between World 1 and World 2. As he begins what seems to be a sappy speech about how the two worlds need to work together, he suddenly disappears from the frame, and the other characters continue to converse as if he hadn't been there at all. The camera cuts to outside of the government complex on Liberty Island, and we see a

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accountable for his actions.

[101] The idea of rewriting events through temporal manipulation is a common sci-fi trope, so *Fringe* fans would certainly be attuned to this possibility (and "White Tulip" also prepared them for this form of cofactual intrusion). Catherine Gallagher outlines two forms of time travel plotting, the "circular loop" and the "Y-shaped pattern" (16). In both instances, the goal is "undoing […] which is an attempt to change the present by subtracting a crucial past event" (11).

group of Observers[102] gathered around the Statue of Liberty. December remarks to September, "You're right. They don't remember him." September responds, "How could they? He never existed." With that statement, season three ends by seeming to delete one of its central protagonists. This abrupt narrative forking, in which we are jolted into a new timeline, was a hot topic in the *Fringe* fandom. The fact that the network was cagey about Joshua Jackson's return to the show fueled discussions about what the world of *Fringe* would be like without Peter and how the creators might plot his return. This twist again highlights the relationship between character and world in a cofactual system—Peter's deletion creates an entirely new world-iteration (World 3), suggesting that individual characters can power the engines of ontological pluralism.

In season four, *Fringe* begins to fully foreground cofactual narrativity and embrace the ontological layers of its previous seasons. It starts by immersing viewers in World 3—we meet versions of our characters that are all profoundly different due to the absence of Peter from their lives. Lincoln 1 replaces Peter in the ensemble, and the romantic tension between him and Olivia—which is facilitated by the interdiegetic feeling accumulated via Lincoln 2/Olivia 2—teases the viewer into thinking that Peter might be out of the picture. In fact, Peter would barely be absent from the show, as he appears in hallucinations for the first three episodes of the season, and emerges from Raiden Lake at the end of the fourth episode of season four. The remainder of the season addresses the dynamics of temporal versus spatial worlds, as Peter believes he is in the

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[102] The Observers are a mysterious presence in the series. Donning simple black suits and trilby hats, they seem to possess special powers, and they tend to appear at significant moments in history. In season five, we learn that the Observers are humans from the future sent back to observe their cultural origins. One Observer, September, has a special relationship with Walter.

wrong place, when really he is in the same place but a different temporal trajectory. I posit that this confusion of space and time in the show indicates a conflation of these ontological concepts in terms of how they affect our approach to plural worlds. Whether or not Peter is in the same physical space that had characterized World 1 throughout the first three seasons, he (and the viewers) are indeed navigating an entirely new world. This scenario sets up an interesting balance of power in terms of knowledge: Peter and the viewer are the only ones who remember the events of World 1 (at least at first),[103] but the viewer is the only one who knows that Peter is in the same physical space with the same physical people.

Since the stakes of spatial and temporal movement are narratively similar, we can infer that the emotional payoff of possible worlds originates from a fundamental desire to think cofactually when we engage with stories. Indeed, season four confronts the concept of cofactuality most directly, as Olivia regains her memories of World 1 and, for a time, possesses two sets of memories. However, the explanation for Olivia's ability to access the experiences of another timeline is vague: Walter attributes it to Cortexiphan, September blames "love." In any case, Anna Torv's nuanced performance, in which she gradually transitions from a version of her character who never met Peter to one who remembers all of the events of their prior relationship, sells the psychology of plurality in an emotionally satisfying fashion. Season four also depicts familiar fringe cases, repeating them with differences,[104] and revives the central villain of season one, David

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[103] As Olivia spends more time with Peter, she begins to regain memories of World 1 until that is the only timeline that she can recall. In season five, Walter will gain at least flashes of memories from World 1 during a psychic link with a special "child Observer."

[104] For example, season four, episode 16, "Nothing As It Seems," repeats (with difference) the events of a fringe case from season one, "The Transformation."

Robert Jones. With Olivia and Peter's bond reestablished, echoing the ontological

constant presented in "Subject 13," the season four finale keeps in the series' tradition of

creating yet another layer of cofactuality.

Before discussing the events of the season four finale, it is important to note that

plummeting ratings put a fifth season of *Fringe* in serious jeopardy. In fact, most media

buzz predicted that the series would almost certainly be cancelled. In the special

features of the season four DVD, the creators acknowledge that they went into the

season believing it to be their last.[105] Therefore, they crafted season four in a way that

would set up what they deemed to be adequate closure for the series. However, as the

future of the show hung in the balance, episode 19, "Letters of Transit," aired. This

episode followed a tradition that the show began in season two of using the nineteenth

episode to do something narratively or aesthetically bizarre. "Brown Betty" (season two)

contains an embedded noir-style musical detective plot (creating another

world-iteration, played for fun). "Lysergic Acid Diethylamide" (season three) involves

several of the characters dropping acid and entering an animated projection of Olivia's

mind.[106] "Letters of Transit" jumps to 2036 to reveal a dystopic future where the

Observers have taken control of the world, and Olivia and Peter's daughter, Etta, is a

leader of the resistance movement. The episode was met with immediate acclaim, and

network executives cite it as a major factor in the show's renewal for a 13-episode fifth

(half) season. Still, a question regarding the intended dynamics of closure in the series

remains: the creators did not know if they would be renewed or cancelled when they

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[105] Season Four DVD special feature, "A World Without Peter."

[106] These episodes, as well as "Letters of Transit," utilize cofactuality by departing from the series' storytelling norms and further complicating notions of narrative reality.

filmed the season four finale. Joel Wyman has admitted that they toyed with a few different ideas for the end of the season, but he does not say whether the show's renewal factored into the finale episodes that aired.

"Brave New World" is the two-part finale of season four. The science fiction reference is obvious, as is the corresponding dystopian inflection, but the title also gestures to the new worlds that *Fringe* has introduced in each season finale (thus, the title funnels anticipation through the question of "*which* world?). These episodes have all the makings of a series finale: the return of a fan-favourite character (William Bell), the peaking of Olivia's telekinetic powers, the death—and resurrection—of the protagonist (Olivia), vindication of Walter's morality, Walter getting Astrid's name right, and the group celebration of a Peter/Olivia pregnancy.[107] However, immediately following the happily-ever-after scene, the episode cuts to Walter in his laboratory, making a sandwich. Walter is interrupted by the arrival of September, who tells Walter, "They are coming." The camera pans to a close-up of Walter's face as he asks, "Who's coming?" and the episode ends. This gesture obviously refers to the events of "Letters of Transit," effectively tying that glimpse into the future to the ontology of World 3. This grim confirmation and cofactual gesture to the 19th episode undermines the celebratory ending that viewers just experienced, as we know that Olivia and Peter's child is now destined to grow up as an orphan in a totalitarian social order. Had the series ended here, it would have been a bleak conclusion indeed, closing the loop between the present World 3 and the dystopian version of the future depicted in "Letters of Transit." The

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[107] Astrid is a Fringe Division agent who works in the lab with Walter and forms a strong familial bond with the core characters, particularly Walter. Throughout the series, there is an ongoing joke about Walter calling Astrid the wrong name—for example, Astro, Asgard, Agnes, Aspirin, etc.

defiant tone in Walter's final line, however, offers a sense of hope for the ability to change the future—both diegetically in terms of plot, and extradiegetically in terms of the series' renewal.

The *Fringe* fan community responded to the 13-episode renewal by invoking a potent gesture of hope to reflect the show's Cinderella story. In the Summer between seasons four and five, the *Fringe* cast appeared with Wyman at San Diego International Comic Con, the largest and most widely mediatized fan convention in the world—the veritable mecca of nerd culture. After the actors and showrunner took the stage, the moderator gestured to the audience, who all (several hundred) simultaneously held up identical white tulip drawings that mimicked the image from the eponymous episode. The fans' gesture was a complete surprise to the stars on stage, who reacted with delight and, in an interesting role reversal, took pictures of the audience with their phones. In this moment, the fans appropriated a symbol from the text and presented it back to the creators with all its layers of cofactual signification, including a new meaning—thank you.

IV. Love Letters

In the months leading up to its final season, the media buzz surrounding *Fringe* highlighted the role of fan support in the show's renewal, and Wyman declared season five "a love letter" to the fans. Since Wyman and the other writers knew that this season would definitely be the last of the series, all 13 episodes are invested in building feelings

of closure. The season begins where "Letters of Transit" left off, with Walter, Peter, and

Astrid recovered from amber (the old-fashioned way to travel to the future) and teamed

up with Etta in 2036 to fight in the resistance against the Observers (who are sometimes

more accurately referred to as the Invaders at this point). Thus, the show creates a

massive temporal gap in the viewers' narrative knowledge. Our characters, too, are out

of time/place, since they've been stuck in amber since 2015. The season orchestrates a

scavenger hunt, in which the characters navigate the future of World 3 with the ultimate

goal of rewriting history to create World 4. As with other planned final seasons, these

episodes are especially filled with Easter Eggs,[108] and paratextual gestures. An extensive

advertising campaign leading up to and during the original run of season five, and the

fan support that accompanied it, worked together to construct an atmosphere of

anticipation and engaged with the stakes of closure for the series. As I argued in chapter

two, knowing that we are counting down the final installments of a narrative changes

our expectations for closure and demands that we take a step back to consider the

cofactual system as a whole. Indeed, the impact of the "love letter" discourse on the

Fringe fandom creates a useful case study for thinking about closure in complex TV. By

studying the structure of the televisual love letter of season five, we can infer some of the

basic elements of narrative closure that a contemporary television show strives for when

it has the opportunity to produce a series finale. Recall that Mittell talks about how the

pressure on long-arc serials to "stick the landing" in their conclusions precipitates the

kind of "inward turn towards metafiction" that we see in *Fringe* season five. Also recall

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[108] "Easter Egg" is a term used in a variety of media fandoms to describe subtle visual clues or references that reward attentive viewing. The term was first used in the early days of DVDs, when users would have the ability to navigate an interactive menu to unlock hidden content.

my argument that these pressures extend to viewers who prepare to come to terms with endings of serial narratives. In the months leading up to and during season five, interviews with the show's cast and creators fueled the build-up to the finale. The paratexts worked together to set the conditions and tone for ending-feelings in *Fringe*.

One major characteristic of the season five love letter is that it would recall many elements from the series and appropriate them in ways that would applaud the careful viewing of an attentive fan. This onslaught of narrative callbacks is clearly designed to appeal to a certain set of emotions: the satisfaction of recognition, the pride of commitment, and the pleasure of re-familiarization. Furthermore, each specific callback has the potential to reignite a previous response that is linked to a particular narrative element (imagery, dialogue, etc.). In short, the love letter draws from the entire cofactual system of the series, and it asks viewers to engage with layers of significance as they prepare to find whatever kind of closure they are seeking. The callbacks also create visual instantiations of cofactuality: as elements from various nodes in the cofactual system appear onscreen simultaneously, ontological plurality operates through oscillating processes of familiarization, defamiliarization, and refamiliarization, leveling the narrative's plural worlds by emphasizing ontological constants. The appropriation of elements from across the cofactual system into season five embodies the goal of a love letter: invoking memory to induce emotion. But by placing those elements in new scenarios, re-organizing and re-ordering their significance, the cofactual layering becomes more complex.

Season five's focus on the teleology of the Observers brings questions of agency and inevitability to the foreground of the cofactual system. Until "Letters of Transit," the ontology of the Observers is quite unclear. In season one, Brandon (a scientist at Massive Dynamic) uses blue liquid in a glass vial as a visual aid to demonstrate his hypothesis that

> They're not limited by our perception of time [...] We think of time as linear, right? Life is a journey. You're born, and then you die. And to get from one end to the other, there's only one way through [pours liquid into one end and out of the other]. Unless you look at it like this: [plugs vial at both ends and wobbles the liquid back and forth]. And then, you can see, at any point, it's all happening at once. ("August")

Olivia then asks, "So, they're travelling through time?" and Brandon responds, "No, it's more like they're observing time." This idea of "observing time" is an apt metaphor for television viewers, at least in their traditionally passive role.[109] The one clear piece of the Observers' ontological puzzle throughout the first four seasons is that they are never supposed to interfere in events, which is what makes the backstory of September pulling Peter and Walter from Raiden Lake in 1985 a problem that the Observers attempted to correct by erasing Peter from the World 1 timeline. Of course, in thinking about a quantum theory approach to observation, the idea that the act of observing inherently changes the subject of observation effectively furthers the metaphor in discussion. But the invasion plotline that becomes the ultimate revelation of the Observer puzzle

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[109] In addition, the idea that, for the Observers, everything is happening all at once, gestures to the temporal control of TV on-demand. The allegory thus becomes stronger when considered in the context of binge, rather than appointment, viewing.

renders September's preoccupation with Peter and Walter as misdirection. My concern

with the ontological trajectory of the Observers is that they become cliché science fiction

villains. But if we want to extend the Observer-as-viewer metaphor, the way in which the

Observers take control of the narrative in season five can be read as a gesture to the

activism of the *Fringe* fandom. The question then becomes, what does it mean that the

Observers are the villains? Does it mean that fans asserting control over a narrative

results in a less interesting story? While we may never know for certain how far in

advance writers planned the invasion arc, I imagine that the Observers were more likely

a convenient vessel through which to relocate narrative focus back to the main

characters for the final season. Nonetheless, the evolution from the passive Observer to

the tyrannical Invader enacts a realignment in which a marginal force becomes a

narrative focal point, and their ability to experience all points in time simultaneously

reinforces cofactuality as a mode of narrative engagement.

"Liberty," the first episode in the series' two-part finale, begins with the problem

of an impenetrable security system on Liberty Island, where the Observers are holding a

key piece of our protagonists' master plan. With the credits still rolling across the

screen, the characters brainstorm tactics, until Olivia suggests "the other side." Astrid

chimes in, "the other side of what?" The omission of World 2 from season five until this

point is one of several details that I read as a plot deficiency, although most fans seemed

willing to cut the show some slack in terms of narrative logic. I find this tendency of fans

to hold finales (and in this case, a final season) to a lower logical standard as an

indicator of the overriding desire for closure and the recognition of the difficulty that

televisual narratives encounter when they attempt to create closure. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, various trade-offs seem to take place when it comes to TV finales: fans are willing to give up certain elements of narrative desire in exchange for others. Usually, as is the case with *Fringe*, this trade-off takes the form of storytelling logic versus romantic emotion (and I use "romantic emotion" here to refer to feelings derived from traditional melodramatic scenarios: love stories, family plots, heroic death, etc.). Naturally, the privileging of romantic emotion means that the narrative focus must rest on the characters, so the confinement of season five to a single world with single versions of our characters (and a significantly pared down central cast) is one way that the show backs away from complex plotting in favor of more straightforward emotional gestures. This tension between reason and emotion at stake in narrative experience is also foregrounded thematically in season five, as the fight against the Observers enacts the standard science fiction trope of a battle between an emotionless, robot-like totalitarian oppressor and the scrappy humans, stricken with tragedy and driven by "love" to save the world. Thus, it is an appropriate yet predictable twist that the savior figure in this plotline is Anomaly XB-6783746 ("Michael"),[110] who possesses the advanced intelligence of the Observers along with the complex emotions of humans.

In order to retrieve Michael from the Observers' research facility, Olivia crosses over to World 2. This plot move allows for a pleasurable callback, revisiting Olivia 2 and Lincoln 1 one last time. The first image we see after Olivia 1's transition is the camera

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[110] Anomaly XB-678746 is the genetic offspring of September. When the Anomaly did not develop according to normal Observer standards, he was supposed to be destroyed. September stole him and hid him in the past. After the invasion, September left his offspring with a husband and wife who were part of the resistance. The couple called the anomaly "Michael."

panning up to reveal a blimp in the sky—immediately recalling the whole set of cofactual

possibilities that World 2 offered the narrative in previous seasons. The special effects

that this episode uses to portray Olivia 1's trans-world experience differ from any

previous representations of this phenomenon in the series. As Olivia navigates World 2,

her vision fades in and out between the activities of both worlds. She is experiencing two

worlds simultaneously, embodying ontological cofactuality, and the camera situates us

with her during this experience, visualizing plural worlds. After Olivia transitions from

World 1 to World 2, back to World 1, back to World 2, and finally back to World 1, our

team believes they have the final piece of the master plan to stop the Observers from

ever invading. When the goal of "resetting time" ("The Boy Must Live") becomes the

clear trajectory of the plan, viewers begin to recall the ontological stakes of this narrative

device, first introduced in "White Tulip," then reiterated in "The Day We Died." By

drawing on previous experiences within the series, viewers may prepare for the

emotional complexity of yet another temporal reset by situating this logic within a

cofactual framework.

"An Enemy of Fate" pulls out all of the stops to craft an exciting, emotional

episode, similar in many ways to "Brave New World." Both of these episodes exhibit

elements from our taxonomy of closural gestures found across TV finales. The question

that arises for me in my evaluation of *Fringe* is whether or not "An Enemy of Fate" gets

us somewhere different than we were at the end of season four, whether it attempts to

offer a different kind of closure. The season five finale gives us several gestures: 1) Olivia

and Peter exchange the phrases "I love you" and "I love you too" for the first time, 2)

Walter has a tender moment with Astrid in which he says her name correctly, 3) Walter

sacrifices himself for the sake of his son's happiness, 4) Olivia uses her Cortexiphan

powers to help save the world and 5) Peter and Olivia are married with a child. The only

significant departure here from the closural gestures of the season four finale is #3.[111]

Walter's sacrifice in "An Enemy of Fate," in which he must accompany Michael to 2071

to ensure that scientists in Norway do not follow the path that leads humans to become

Observers, is certainly one of the most emotionally charged gestures of closure in the

finale. We get a scene (about halfway through the episode) in which Peter and Walter

watch a video that Walter had recorded in 2016 explaining his decision to sacrifice

himself. After the video, the father and son share a poignant conversation and tearful

embrace. Later, as Walter enters the wormhole to 2071, Peter mouths the words "I love

you, Dad," thus completing the process of forgiveness that spanned the series. These

gestures of familial closure offer ending-feelings to the father/son relationship that is so

important to the show, but those feelings are complicated by the ontology of the

temporal reset, since none of our characters are supposed to remember the events of

season five.

"An Enemy of Fate" ends where season five began, in a park on a sunny afternoon

in 2015. This idyllic scene was one of the most repeated motifs of season five, as we see

Olivia, Peter, and Etta's remembered experience of the perfect moment that was stolen

away when the Observers invaded.[112] We see the now-familiar scene repeated a final

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[111] Walter's sacrifice, however, doesn't seem to offer any more moral vindication than did the final scene in "Brave New World, Part Two," in which he renounced his will to godlike power after seeing the way that Bell had manipulated his research.

[112] The first iteration of this scene was actually part of the promotional campaign before the season aired. Then, in various episodes in season five, Olivia and Peter's perspective of that day is conveyed via

time, but repeated with difference: the Observers do not come marching over the horizon as buildings collapse, but instead a young Etta leaps into her father's arms, and he spins her around as Olivia looks on with contentment. This overly predictable heteronormative happy ending is, in proper *Fringe* style, subsequently undermined by the final scene. When the family returns home, we see Peter alone in the kitchen of their house, where he finds a letter from Walter in a stack of mail. He opens the envelope to find only a drawing of a white tulip. He stares at the paper, then shoots a [knowing glance directly into the camera](), and then a quick cut ends the series.

This final cofactual turn begs the question, did the year 2036, as we just witnessed it, actually happen? My answer, of course, is yes. In a cofactual system, everything that happens actually happens. The events of season five spawned the creation of World 4, and so this new cofactual layer rests atop—but does not erase—the struggles of World 3 (just as World 3 did not erase the significance of World 1, nor did the resetting of time in "The Day We Died" diminish the power of the episode). The ontology of a cofactual system thus departs from other examples of plural world storytelling. Writing of time travel narratives, Catherine Gallagher argues that "the […] proliferation of plot possibilities diminishes the consequentiality of any particular track. Just as a river divides and loses force if it splits into branches when nearing the sea, the narrative that bifurcates as the result of crisis inevitability sacrifices dynamic power" (18). While Gallagher is correct that investment in plural worlds has its limits, the depth of each world-iteration in *Fringe* demonstrates that meaning and attachment can form

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dreams. Before Etta dies, we see her memory of that day through the mind-reading power of the Observer/Invader Windmark.

in relation to multiple worlds within a single narrative.[113] Just as everything that happens actually happens, everything that the viewer feels actually *feels*. Furthermore, I propose that oftentimes, as in the case with season five, cofactual intrusions can amplify the emotional stakes of a given world-iteration: viewers must hold onto their experience of an "alternate" world, because the characters may not be able to do so. Therefore, we might extend Gallagher's river metaphor to say that a river that divides, causing individual branches to "sacrifice power," has the potential to re-converge and accumulate meaning by emphasizing ontological constants, such as the white tulip, across storytelling branches.

In the last few seconds of *Fringe*, the familiar symbol of the white tulip takes on yet another signification in its final diegetic iteration—memory. Peter's look of recognition upon receiving the tulip suggests that the symbol has the power to evoke memories that he should not have access to, to allow him to transcend world-iterations; the tulip also invites intradiegetic recall on the part of the viewer and reinforces the object as an ontological constant, validating the multiple world-iterations of the series. This moment also reasserts the imbalance of knowledge between viewer and character, positioning the viewer as both repository and relayer of knowledge: when Peter looks into the camera, it is as if he is asking the viewer to confirm something he should not be capable of knowing. Finally, Walter's gift of the white tulip to Peter—in the form of a (love) letter—becomes a gift to the viewers, a return gesture to the fans who had presented white tulips to the cast at Comic Con months earlier. Thus, in proper cofactual

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[113] Had *Fringe* continued, it could have further tested the emotional limits of cofactual narration—how many world-iterations does it take to breed viewer apathy? Is there a point at which the viewer's ability to recuperate or invent worlds diminishes the importance of canonical narrative worlds?

form, the white tulip accumulates rather than displaces meanings with each new iteration. The white tulip retains all its power as a diegetic symbol of forgiveness, love, and hope, but to the viewer it also says *thank you* and *remember*.

My analysis of *Fringe* demonstrates that a cofactual narrative system allows for a proliferation of closural gestures and ending-feelings, while plot ambiguity defers the narrative ending indefinitely. The gaps of knowledge in *Fringe*'s multiverse create a textual openness that is not merely a matter of possible interpretations, but of actual unknown information that can never be decisively settled. Therefore, finales may deliberately neglect to provide an end to the plot, but they can still offer intense ending-feelings. *Fringe*'s many world and character iterations create opportunities for closure throughout the series' cofactual system. Closural gestures include deaths, temporal resets, resurrections, callbacks, displays of heroic power, and romantic coupling (including the production and/or promise of offspring). Just as gestures of closure can operate in relation to individual characters or entire worlds, ending-feelings can occur in response to varying degrees of diegetic closure. In her analysis of soap opera narrative, Mumford posits that "[t]he arc [...] represents a narrative level *between* the individual storyline and the larger fictional web of community relationships, and like those ongoing ties, arcs do not easily reach closure. Instead, as old storylines are resolved, new ones tend to be incorporated into an existing arc so that its content changes gradually over time" (62, her emphasis). Mumford's use of the term "arc" in this formulation aligns with my use of "World" in analyzing *Fringe*. So while I agree with Mumford that resolution occurs simultaneously with the introduction of new narrative

trajectories, I would refine her argument to say that arcs *do* produce ending-feelings—in fact, arc/world layering is the very thing that allows for proliferating moments of closure in *Fringe* and for the richness of cofactual narratives.

The temporalities of knowledge at play in the cofactual dynamics of *Fringe* place the viewer in a uniquely privileged position, and the narrative uses these imbalances of power to address the viewer as the ultimate repository of narrative information. Discrepancies in knowledge—among characters, but especially between character and viewer—complicate notions of truth status within the narrative universe. In many cases, such as when Olivias 1 and 2 switch places or when Peter disappears from World 1, the viewer is the sole bearer of this knowledge and therefore has access to emotional responses that are unavailable to the characters. The varied distribution of information thus contributes to the show's complex relationship to closure. The revelatory moments that pervade each season finale are only partially revelatory, since certain parties are always left ignorant in some way. In the series finale of *Fringe*, Peter receiving the white tulip from Walter produces an ending-feeling, a sense that an important narrative loop has been closed. But Peter's glance initiates several key plot questions: how much does Peter remember? Will he act upon his memories to retrieve Walter from the future? Has the Observers' invasion been permanently averted, or merely postponed? Therefore, the viewer's status as repository of exclusive narrative knowledge allows ending-feelings to occur in the absence of plot-based finality.

As the fifth season was airing, *Fringe* fans learned of a companion book titled *September's Notebook* that was to be published shortly after the finale air date. A copy

of the physical book actually appears in the eleventh episode of season five ("The Boy Must Live"), effectively blurring the ontological hierarchy between text and paratext. In other words, the existence of the paratext within the show situates the book as part of *Fringe*'s narrative canon, and vice versa. Thus, the resistance to ontological hierarchy within the narrative is reflected in a similar dissolution of hierarchy among the nodes of the transmedia narrative. The series itself—that is, the 100 episodes that comprise its five seasons—is only part of the *Fringe* storyworld. *September's Notebook*, multiple comic book runs, and various other paratexts provide a plurality of media forms that intersect in the narrative's cofactual matrix.

  September's Notebook is a three-dimensional, tactile extension of the plural worlds of *Fringe*. It includes several removable inserts, such as propaganda posters from the dystopic 2036, a diagram of the machine from season three, classified documents from Fringe Division, and the envelope in which Walter received the first white tulip in World 1. In "The Boy Must Live," September explains that he had taken the white tulip from World 1 and given it to Walter after the invasion as a sign of hope that they could defeat the Observers. He then hands Walter the envelope, but the tulip is missing. When Walter asks where it is, September replies, "only you would know that." Walter doesn't remember, but we learn the answer at the end of "An Enemy of Fate"—the white tulip was not in its envelope because Walter had already sent it to Peter in 2016. The empty envelope in *September's Notebook*, therefore, performs narrative continuity with "The Boy Must Live," but it also presents an opportunity for viewers to fill the envelope by producing their own white tulips. Thus, *September's Notebook*

validates the cofactuality of *Fringe*'s narrative system by referencing events from each world-iteration and reminds viewers that "there is more than one of everything," including endings and white tulips.

V. Cofactual Endings and Narrative Play

Cofactual interpretation, and especially cofactual understanding of finality, is, as [this Storify demonstrates](#), not limited to narratives like *Fringe* that explicitly thematize plural world ontology. I have offered a close reading of *Fringe*, because I think it provides an important training ground for how to think cofactually, how to accommodate multiple versions of reality into a single storyworld. But fan theories and fan revisions occur in response to all story genres, especially in relation to endings, and these interventions are strong examples of cofactual thinking. Recall that in chapter two, I suggested that online videos about the *Breaking Bad* finale were a critical part of how audiences made sense of that storyworld and its narrative ending. These were anticipatory paratexts, created before the final episodes aired. Parody videos offered versions of endings that seemed ridiculous in comparison to the actual finale, but they nonetheless inflected how audiences prepared for and came to terms with the series' end. I also discussed how showrunner Vince Gilligan publicly revealed his own uncertainty regarding the end of *Breaking Bad*, and his discussion of other possible endings in effect destabilizes the authority of the actualized finale. Yet another destabilizing force in this series' attempts at narrative closure came via a popular fan theory, articulated and disseminated by comedian Norm MacDonald.

In a series of tweets a few days after the finale aired, [MacDonald outlined a reading of the the episode](#) that fundamentally changes *Breaking Bad*'s approach to closure. In the opening moments of "Felina," Walter White attempts to leave the secluded New Hampshire cabin that had shielded him from police capture. He steals and attempts to hotwire a vehicle, and as he is doing so, we see an extended scene of him inside the car, freezing cold, police car lights refracted through the frosty windows. In a straightforward interpretation of the episode, the police cars pass Walter by, he finds the car keys in the windshield visor, and he then embarks on a cross-country revenge mission, which he successfully completes before dying in the final frame. In MacDonald's theory, he suggests that Walt actually dies in the car at the beginning of the episode, and the rest of "Felina" depicts his imagined revenge fantasy—so, as the theory goes, nothing after the cold open really happens.

MacDonald's theory is compelling. He uses visual and thematic evidence to back it up, and in effect, he produces a reading of the narrative that is more complicated and more interesting than what the episode seems to offer at face value.[114] After reading his theory, I find it impossible to watch "Felina" without considering the possibility that MacDonald is, in some sense, right. Or, perhaps more importantly, even if we accept that his theory is not at all what Gilligan intended, I can't help but think that this interpretation would make for a better conclusion to this complex story of a man struggling to negotiate his identity in the face of his mortality. The theory is compelling because it posits a less heroic ending for Walt, emphasizing that he was only ever a hero

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[114] Recall that in chapter two, I argue that the finale of *Breaking Bad* falls short of the same kind of risk-taking that the rest of the series had displayed. And as a result, the ending is predictable, tidy, and uninteresting.

in his own imagination, thus offering a different final word on masculinity and power than the official version of "Felina." But who owns an ending? Can we wrest control of narrative endings from creators through thoughtful active fandom? If we accept that cofactual thinking is fundamental to our processes of narrative engagement, then yes—stories can have many endings, and we have the power to create and negotiate multiple—and, sometimes, contradictory—versions of the End.

But are all narratives open to this kind of cofactual play? Is all narrative experience rooted in a logic of multiple possibilities? Are all stories, in essence, gaming territories? Ryan cites "continuously expanding worlds" as a core characteristic of narrative-based gaming (2009: 170). This expandability is the essential requirement for a storyworld to facilitate cofactual thinking. The spatial dimension of cofactuality is key—fans explore the topography of a story, they fill the landscape with possible objects, characters, and situations, and these possibilities layer upon each other to produce a rich narrative ontology. As I claimed in the previous chapter, Booth's notion of "media play" is the foundation for active fandom. And in her discussion of how fictional worlds relate to games, Ryan notes: "[H]ow enduring is the need to combine the imaginative pleasures of narrative […] with the social pleasures and active involvement of games" (2009: 164). I would argue that this combination, this intermingling of storytelling and game creation, is in fact the crux of narrative engagement in contemporary media culture. Ryan concludes that "[t]he fusion of reality, game, and narrative could be viewed as the Holy Grail of game design" (2009: 175), but isn't this fusion exactly what we are seeing every day in TV fan communities? In a moment in which complex

storytelling feeds the economic goals of the TV industry and the social desires of the TV fan, nearly any show can take on game-like qualities that inspire cofactual thinking. Furthermore, the anticipation that defines serial narrative positions fan theories and predictions as an essential part of TV experience. Our obsession with endings, our simultaneous desire for closure and openness (another aspect of gaming ontology), demands cofactual negotiation between text and paratext, between imagined and actualized plots, between official and unofficial storytelling. We play with and in storyworlds, pushing against the boundaries of a text, claiming parts of it as our own.

Therefore, above all else, cofactual thinking is a tool of emotional resistance. We resist the End, but often, more specifically, we resist loss. And as I have argued throughout this dissertation, our strongest narrative attachments are to characters, and our most intense experiences of loss come in response to character death. Cofactual thinking is a way of combatting this loss, of imagining alternate versions of the story in which a character lives on. *Fringe* grounded its cofactual storyworld in the multiple sets of characters that it presented: by getting the audience to care about more than one version of a character, it was able to depict loss, then recuperate those characters through other world-iterations, then make viewers feel that loss all over again.

If *Fringe* was about training viewers to think cofactually, it was also about training viewers to negotiate and manage loss over the course of a long-running series. In the following epilogue, I offer a reflection on character death that demonstrates how collective desire and imagination work against loss to generate scripts for embracing uncertainty. Character death allows to convey ending-feelings at any point in a

narrative. But when these deaths occur at the end of a series, they become the primary means through which audiences negotiate finality; and these instances of loss inflect our understanding of death, grief, and endings, even after we turn off the TV.

Epilogue:

The Dying Leader and The Harbinger of Death

This dissertation has provided an expansive theory of TV finales—how they shape the arcs of televiewing experience, and how they generate opportunities for social connection through a shared sense of loss. But I have also emphasized that finales are intensely personal, that affective forms can be inflected, deflected, and re-inflected through subjective interpretation. And so I would like to end this dissertation by focusing on two scenes in the series finale of *Battlestar Galactica* (*BSG*) (Sci-Fi 2004-2009) that, for me, truly register the stakes of televisual grief. Recall that in chapter one, I listed *BSG* as one of the series finales that resulted in widespread disappointment, specifically as a response to the massive temporal jump (150,000 years later) in the episode's final moments. Before this much-disparaged coda, however, the finale offers two potent gestures of closure that are worth considering as models for representing death and loss in serial TV, which I would like to explore here.

BSG is the story of a fleet of human survivors from twelve planets fighting a race of sentient machines (Cylons) as they search for a "a place to call home," and, along the way, learn that their human/Cylon conflict is but one iteration in an ancient cycle of repeated history: "All of this has happened before, and all of this will happen again." At the core of this epic story are two women: Laura Roslin, the former Secretary of Education who becomes President of the human fleet after the Cylon attack; and Kara Thrace, call sign "Starbuck," the best fighter pilot in the fleet, and an unapologetic,

irrepressible force of female strength. Both characters resist death throughout the series: Roslin fights terminal cancer and undergoes debilitating treatments that sometimes cause the fleet to doubt her ability to lead; Starbuck appears to die in the season three finale, mysteriously returning months later, causing the fleet to question who, or what, she is. Roslin and Starbuck are also connected by their shared religious beliefs and their commitment to finding "Earth," the fabled home of their ancestors. They both become subjects of prophecy: the priestess Elosha declares Roslin "The Dying Leader" who will guide her people to their new home; and a Cylon/human hybrid tells Starbuck that she is "The Harbinger of Death" who will lead the group "to their end." In fact, both of these prophecies come to pass, but only at great cost.

In "Daybreak, Part Three," the ambitious 103-minute series finale, the fleet makes a desperate final navigation to a set of coordinates that Starbuck had gleaned from a vision. They arrive at a habitable planet—not the Earth of their ancestors, but a new "Earth." As Roslin, very near death, struggles to breath, her lover (Galactica's Admiral Adama) offers to take her on a final ride in his Raptor (a small scouting ship) so that she can see more of the planet before she dies. Adama lifts her up to put her in the ship, literally carrying the weight of impending loss. From inside the Raptor, Roslin waves to Starbuck, who is standing in a field beside her friend and lover, Lee (Admiral Adama's son). [Video: "Adama Carries Roslin"]

After Adama and Roslin fly away, Lee says to Starbuck, "He's not coming back this time," and she replies, "No, he isn't. Neither am I." Confused, Lee asks where she is going. "I don't know," Starbuck says, "I just know that I'm done here. I've completed my

journey, and it feels good." Lee looks at Starbuck, initiating a cut to a flashback of the characters' first meeting, charging the next moment with a sense of history and duration. When we cut back to the field, the camera begins to hover slightly, as if blowing in the wind. Starbuck asks Lee what he will do next; he begins to discuss his plans to explore Earth, and the camera shifts from a medium two-shot to a close-up of Lee's face as he turns away from Starbuck, her profile lingering at the left edge of the frame. Then, a 180-degree pan slowly cuts Starbuck out of the frame, and when he turns back towards her, stopping mid-sentence, a quick cut to a long shot reveals Lee standing alone in an empty field—Starbuck is gone. [Video: "Starbuck Vanishes"]

The next scene returns us to Roslin and Adama in the Raptor. The camera shifts from Roslin's POV to situating us as a third party in the Raptor, then to a medium two-shot that recalls the previous scene with Starbuck and Lee. Sensing that Roslin is in her final moments, Adama speaks of happy things like building the cabin they always dreamed of. As he speaks, he looks not at Roslin but out the windows—watching Roslin is the job of the audience. As we watch her take her last breath, close her eyes, and go limp, the sequence exposes the suddenness in the inevitable—a gentle death that feels anything but for the viewer. Unlike Starbuck's unexpected ethereal vanishing, here we are forced to watch this person become body, to stay with her and feel the weight of loss. Adama even builds a stone cairn for Roslin's corpse, reiterating the heaviness of her death. [Video: "Roslin Dies"]

These two depictions of character death are formal and existential inversions of one another, offering different models for representing grief. Whereas Roslin's death is a

powerful take on a relatively familiar scene, Starbuck's mystical disappearance is more complicated. Her unexplained resurrection in season four had caused mixed emotions for characters and viewers alike, her presence an uncomfortable gift. She was there because she was needed to get the fleet to "their end." So once the series' overarching narrative telos is met, once the galactic orphans find a suitable place to live, she vanishes. Starbuck was to the *BSG* storyworld as television is to us: it's there when we need it, it disappears when we don't, and it can be resurrected on-demand, but always in slightly different form, always shaded by loss. And this loss—of characters, of people, of storyworlds, despite the work of finales and fans—happens in a blink of an eye. Death, after all, is always sudden.

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[115] Please note that, for sake of visual clarity, I have not included the URLs of online sources; however, they are all linked to in the body of the text.

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