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Complex TV

The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling

Jason Mittell

University of Nottingham
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"All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling and Procedural Logic," in *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, 429–438 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

"Sites of Participation: Wiki Fandom and the Case of *Lostpedia*," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 3 (Fall 2009), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/118/117>.

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"Serial Boxes: DVD-Editionen und der kulturelle Wert amerikanischer Fernsehserie," in *Serielle Formen: Von den frühen Film-Serials zu aktuellen Quality-TV- und Onlineserien*, edited by Robert Blanchet, Kristina Köhler, Tereza Smid, and Julia Zutavern, 133–152 (Marburg, Germany: Schüren, 2011). (Translated into German from English original.)

"Serial Orientations: Paratexts and Contemporary Complex Television," in *(Dis)Orienting Media and Narrative Mazes*, edited by Julia Eckel, Bernd Leiendecker, Daniela Olek, and Christine Piepiorka, 165–182 (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript-Verlag, 2013).

"The Qualities of Complexity: Vast versus Dense Seriality in Contemporary Television," in *Television Aesthetics and Style*, edited by Steven Peacock and Jason Jacobs, 45–56 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

"Strategies of Storytelling on Transmedia Television," in *Storyworlds across Media*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noel Thon, 253–277 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

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Introduction

In the fall of 2001, three espionage-themed dramas debuted on American network television: *The Agency*, *Alias*, and *24*. Notably, all three survived low ratings in their first season to make it to a second, a fairly rare accomplishment for a new series.¹ Surprisingly, the highest rated of the three, CBS's *The Agency*, was canceled after its second season in 2003, while ABC's *Alias* garnered a respectable five-season run and Fox's *24*, which had the least successful first season of the three, lasted for much of the decade as one of television's most prominent scripted programs. The fate of these three series is an instructive window into the changes in television storytelling emerging in the 2000s, the topic of this book.

The Agency was by far the most conventional of the three programs, following an episodic procedural model that CBS had successfully ridden to ratings success with the growing *CSI* franchise and the hit *JAG*, followed by future hit crime procedurals in the 2000s, such as *NCIS*, *Without a Trace*, and *Cold Case*. Long-held assumptions about what makes for successful television would suggest that *The Agency*'s formulaic approach and noncontroversial take on contemporary issues would resonate with audiences (or at least generate high ratings), but the opposite proved to be the case—the CBS series's viewership declined in its second season to the point that the network canceled it with little fanfare or protest.

The other two spy programs were far more innovative in their narrative approach and, despite the conventional wisdom that popular television must be formulaic, generated sufficient audience interest to justify their longer runs. *Alias* was one of the flashiest programs yet to appear on network television, with high-style visual and sonic flair, elaborate plotting, and a complex mythological backstory that attracted a small but dedicated audience that embraced the series as an heir to the cult phenomenon *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. While *Alias*'s ratings never

matched ABC's hopes for the high-budget program, the program's critical praise and high-profile stardom of Jennifer Garner led the struggling network to continue it for five seasons until it found greater success with hits such as *Desperate Housewives* and *Lost* in 2004.

24's run was even more surprising, given its highly unusual narrative format: each episode features an hour of story time told in "real time" (minus commercial breaks) via split screens, counting clocks, and other self-conscious devices atypical of conventional television. Even the program's title refers to how the story will be told—in 24 hour-long installments constituting a single day in the life of hero Jack Bauer—rather than anything notable about the story itself. *24*'s popularity grew from a weakly rated first season and slowly developed a strong enough following to last eight seasons (and even return to the air in 2014) and consistently rank in the top 30 yearly ratings for much of the decade. *24* particularly benefited from DVD sales and rentals, a relatively new phenomenon for television series in the early 2000s, as viewers who caught up with the first season on home video helped increase second-season ratings by a rare 25%.² Taken together, the story of these three spy programs points to a changing landscape of American television, where complex and innovative storytelling can succeed both creatively and economically, while a series with a safe, conventional approach can become a commercial failure.

Complex TV is about this shift, exploring how television storytelling has changed and what cultural practices within television technology, industry, and viewership have enabled and encouraged these transformations. Often these changes are framed as television becoming more "literary" or "cinematic," drawing both prestige and formal vocabulary from these older, more culturally distinguished media; however, we can better understand this shift through careful analysis of television itself rather than holding onto cross-media metaphors of aspiration and legitimization. In the past 15 years, television's storytelling possibilities and practices have undergone drastic shifts specific to the medium. What was once a risky innovative device, such as subjective narration or jumbled chronology, is now almost a cliché. Where the lines between serial and episode narratives used to be firmly drawn, today such boundaries are blurred. The idea that viewers would want to watch—and rewatch—a television series in strict chronology and collectively document their

discoveries with a group of strangers was once laughable but is now mainstream. Expectations for how viewers watch television, how producers create stories, and how series are distributed have all shifted, leading to a new mode of television storytelling that I term *complex TV*—this book tells the story of this narrative mode.

The book also chronicles a shift within the field of television studies. Back in 2001, when I first experienced this trio of espionage programs as a viewer, the field was not particularly interested in exploring television's narrative form. Back then (and still today), the key questions that these three programs would have raised for television scholars concerned issues of cultural representation—after all, these programs appeared at a transformative moment in American history and were perfectly poised to tackle current events. All three series were created, scheduled by their networks, and well into production at the time of the September 11 terrorist attacks, but critics and pundits framed the programs, which debuted in October and November as part of a delayed television season, as direct responses to America's proclamation of a "War on Terror" following the attacks. One useful line of inquiry would be for television scholars to explore the meanings circulated by these programs, especially in how they articulate norms of American cultural identity, the role of the state, and perceptions of foreign threats in the reconfigured cultural landscape.³

Likewise, these series all offer interesting possibilities for the representational analysis of identity, arguably the most active research area within the field of television scholarship in the 1990s. *Alias* presents a particularly evocative vision of gender politics, with a nearly omnipotent lead heroine, Sydney Bristow, globetrotting and kicking ass in high style while negotiating her strained relationships with male father figures, potential romantic partners, and a succession of villainous female friends, rivals, and an evil mother returned from her presumed grave. *24* also foregrounds gender norms, although in a more conventional form, with a hypermasculine hero working in the first season to rescue his wife and daughter in jeopardy from what turns out to be a treasonous former lover, a conventional example of a sexualized demonic woman. Both programs also portray a range of ethnic and racial others defined in opposition to their white heroes, charting an array of representational strategies for 21st-century television.⁴

While I would never suggest that scholars should ignore such questions of representation or nation, this book is not focused on analyzing meanings as conveyed by television narratives. Instead, I aim to explore how such meanings are given expressive possibility through the form of televised stories, analyzing how such content is conveyed via storytelling. One reason why television's formal narrative properties have been so ignored is the assumption that television storytelling is simplistic. Previous accounts of the medium's narrative tendencies tend to focus on the centrality of genre formulas, repetitive situations, redundant exposition suited for surfing viewers, and structural constraints based around commercial breaks and rigid schedules. While many contemporary television programs follow such patterns, albeit with more nuance and subtlety than dismissive critiques admit, new developments over the past two decades have led to the rise of a particular model of narrative complexity on mainstream commercial American television, one that is unique to the medium and thus must be examined on its own terms.

As a television scholar in 2001, I felt that the field was not equipped to answer my questions about the successful narrative innovations featured in *Alias* and *24* and the comparative failure of *The Agency*'s conventions.⁵ However, in the years since such programs debuted—arguably motivated in large part by earlier examples of complex television series from the 1990s, including *Twin Peaks*, *Seinfeld*, *The X-Files*, *Babylon 5*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The West Wing*, and *The Sopranos*—television studies has broadened its account of the formal and aesthetic dimensions of television storytelling.⁶ This book, along with numerous pieces I have written over the past decade both in formal academic publications and informally on various websites, represents my own attempt to engage with television's formal dimensions in concert with a broader approach to television as a cultural phenomenon, where form is always in dialogue with cultural contexts, historical formations, and modes of practice. This book strives to offer a model of formal analysis that is not divorced from issues of content, context, and culture but rather is a vital component of those concerns that are more central to media and cultural studies.

The guiding concept for my approach is *poetics*, building on a model that has emerged within literary and film studies. Poetics can be defined

broadly as a focus on the specific ways that texts make meaning, concerned with formal aspects of media more than issues of content or broader cultural forces—in short, the guiding question for poetics looking at a cultural text such as a television series is “how does this text work?” This focus on poetics is different from more common questions of interpretation, which seek to answer “what does this mean?” or of cultural power, asking “how does this impact society?” As suggested earlier, questions about meaning and power are not off-limits within a poetic analysis but rather operate on a different analytic level. Throughout the book, I point to ways that poetics might lead to more nuanced understandings of broader social issues that often concern cultural scholars, but the focus of my analysis is understanding the way television tells stories, not the cultural impact or interpretation of those stories. Looking at storytelling from a poetic approach can be quite similar to narratology, as developed by literary scholars, but I prefer labeling my approach as poetics to distance myself from the structuralist and strictly textual model often found in narratology—although certainly many narratologists and their analytic work has shaped my own thinking, and like poetics, narratology can encompass a wide range of issues and methods. My own approach to poetics is influenced by a model of cultural circulation, in which practices of the television industry, audiences, critics, and creators all work to shape storytelling practices, and thus questions about form are not restricted to the realm of the text but deeply connected to contexts.⁷

The poetic approach has been adopted and adapted by scholars in three crucial ways that have inspired my work. First and foremost, the concept of *historical poetics* developed by film scholar David Bordwell provides an essential contextual anchor for the study of narrative form. Historical poetics situates formal developments within specific contexts of production, circulation, and reception, where innovations are viewed not as creative breakthroughs by visionary artists but at the nexus of numerous historical forces that work to transform norms and possibilities. Such an analysis examines the formal elements of any medium alongside the historical contexts that helped shape innovations and perpetuate particular norms. If we are to understand how complex television works today, we need to contextualize its development within the

technological, industrial, and reception shifts of the 1990s and 2000s, functioning not as straightforward causes of these formal innovations but certainly as essential factors to allow particular creative strategies to flourish. Throughout the book, I connect creative choices to these crucial contexts both to account for how complex television emerged and to suggest why it may have developed as it has.⁸

Bordwell's model of historical poetics focuses primarily on the interplay among industry, technology, and the creative choices of filmmakers, downplaying the reception contexts of cinema; instead, he models an approach that others have more broadly termed *cognitive poetics* to account for how viewers engage with texts.⁹ According to this model, we can best understand the process of viewing (or reading literature) by drawing on our knowledge of cognition and perception and then positing how the formal elements in a text might be experienced by such a viewer—while viewers are not reduced to their mental mechanics, the insights of cognitive psychology inform how we imagine the possible ways that viewers engage with film or television. For some facets of viewing practice, such as processes of comprehension and memory, a cognitive poetic approach is well suited to understand how viewers might engage with television serials.

We can complement a cognitive approach by studying actual viewing practices of ongoing serial television consumption, especially for cases that are not easily explicable by cognitive norms, such as fans consuming narrative spoilers or contributing to fan wikis. Thus I draw on Robert Allen's notion of *reader-oriented poetics* that fuses literary reader-response criticism with close analysis of televisual form in his landmark study of daytime soap operas; Allen explores the genre's formal elements as creating potential pleasures, interpretations, and modes of engagement for its viewers, and he cross-references that analysis with a history of the genre's reception.¹⁰ In looking at the texts of contemporary complex prime time serials, I try to connect their narrative strategies with the broadly circulating reception practices of these popular programs. One of the chief reasons that complex television has become a mainstream trend is the broad availability of online fan sites to facilitate collective discussions and decoding practices among fans, so these sites can provide research resources for accessing and understanding consumption practices among a program's dedicated and engaged viewership.

Typically, poetics are a form of textual analysis, where the primary (or sometimes sole) object of analysis is the bounded creative work, whether a poem, a film, a novel, or a television program. But as my three modifiers to poetics suggest, we cannot isolate a text from its historical contexts of production and consumption—but also we cannot treat a text as a bounded, clearly defined, stable object of study. Especially (though not exclusively) in the digital era, a television program is suffused within and constituted by an intertextual web that pushes textual boundaries outward, blurring the experiential borders between watching a program and engaging with its paratexts. Similarly, the serial text itself is less of a linear storytelling object than a sprawling library of narrative content that might be consumed via a wide range of practices, sequences, fragments, moments, choices, and repetitions. Media scholars have explored a range of terms and concepts to iterate these fluid and changing modes of textual engagement, including "convergence," "overflow," "paratextuality," and "televisual moments," all of which have challenged traditional notions of bounded, self-contained texts.¹¹ Although I refer to such concepts throughout the book, I consider all of these elements of variable engagement as part of serial television textuality itself—texts only come to matter in their consumption, circulation, and proliferation, and thus when I discuss the forms and structures of complex television programs, I treat them as part of a lived cultural practice, not a static, bounded, and fixed creative work. To understand television textuality, we must look beyond what appears on a single screen to explore the range of sites where such texts are constituted, and serially reconstituted, through practices of cultural engagement.¹²

My research within these sites warrants a bit of methodological discussion—I have spent the past decade as a participant-observer among various television-viewing communities centered around complex television series. I have avidly read (and written) episode-by-episode television criticism, read (and written) comments on blogs and discussion forums, referenced (and edited) fan wikis about ongoing series, read (and written) academic analyses of serial narrative, read (and conducted) interviews with television producers, and watched (and reread) over a thousand hours of television programming and associated paratexts. I bring this immersive experience as viewer and fan to my analysis and hope to accurately represent experiences that many

others have in watching these programs and engaging with their paratexts. Although much of the research material I have gathered was publicly available online or in television programs, I have not documented every single example with a citation to a fan forum or specific moment in a program. I have made the choice to be less citational than much scholarship to emphasize readability and flow; hopefully the account of television textuality and viewer practices that emerge from this account is sufficiently convincing not to require hundreds of links to now-defunct fan forums or specific episodes of television programming.

When doing such research with online fans, it is vital to remember that the type of die-hard fan who participates in forums, creates remix videos, or seeks out spoilers is not a typical television viewer. But the rise of online fandom has made a fan who does embrace such practices less of a fringe outlier and more one who resides on one end of a spectrum of engagement. We have little concrete information about how representative fan practices might be, but one example is instructive: the active fan wiki *Lostpedia* reports that since it was set up on the wikia.com server in 2008, more than 28,000 registered users have edited the site at least once.¹³ This is obviously a small portion of the millions of viewers who watched *Lost* every week and the uncounted more who caught up on DVD or downloads. However, factoring in the large size of *Lostpedia's* assumed nonediting readership, following the typical pattern of high reader-to-editor ratios at most wikis, plus the active traffic on numerous other *Lost* fan sites, it seems fair to imagine that the practices of this comparatively small number of participatory viewers represent broader interests that matter to a significant segment of the program's viewership.¹⁴ Moreover, it is a highly influential minority, as reader-oriented poetics can highlight how series address such participatory viewers directly, which I discuss in depth in chapters 8 and 9. Throughout the book, I assume that the behaviors exhibited by small groups of active online fans are indicative of broader tendencies among many less participatory television viewers, on the basis of how they fit with poetic textual strategies and broader cultural trends, making such fans an important and influential minority viewership. There are certainly many other viewing practices for such programming, and I do not explore those that I do as a prescriptive norm to be followed—I hope other critics build on this foundation to offer accounts of other

ways that viewers (and nonviewers) engage with complex television to broaden our understanding of reception practices.

With these poetic approaches as my guide, this book explores the formal dimensions and cultural practices of contemporary television serial storytelling. I do not claim to be comprehensive in my analytic scope, as there are far more programs that I do not consider that might support or contradict some of my claims. I focus exclusively on prime time television, operating on the model of weekly episodes aired on networks or cable channels in seasonal units typically ranging between 10 and 24 episodes—certainly there are newer forms of online serials that might be relevant to the programs I explore here, and the older tradition of daytime soap operas is a major site of television seriality that I discuss in chapter 7. However, I am limiting my focus to the prime time serial because I believe its weekly installments constitute a distinctive narrative mode worth considering in depth, and the wide reach of both prime time cable and network programming still makes it the most culturally prominent form of television. I focus almost exclusively on American television, as I believe its unique industrial norms need to be understood on their own terms; additionally, the global circulation of American television has made many of these programs highly popular and influential around the world, even in the form of American remakes of foreign originals such as *The Office*, *Ugly Betty*, *In Treatment*, and *Homeland*. I do consider a range of examples spanning comedies and dramas, but only scripted programming—while the simultaneous rise of reality television alongside this form of complex television is an interesting and probably related phenomenon, the role of storytelling on reality programming is outside my purview here.

In choosing the programs to analyze, I have decided to focus in depth on a few key texts while referencing a broad corpus, rather than trying to cover every series that might be relevant. This is in large part due to the challenges of studying long-form serial texts—a successful series can run for over 100 hours of programming, and such analysis can require multiple viewings, as well as immersing in broader paratextual circulation and reception practices. Thus much of my analytic focus is aimed at the three series I know best, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Lost*, with more compact analyses of other programs including *Veronica Mars*, *The Sopranos*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Arrested Development*, *Dexter*, *Six Feet*

Under, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Mad Men*, and *Homeland*, among many more. To help understand the examples explored throughout the book, readers can access a library of video clips and images at the NYU Press website for the book. There are numerous other series that might be understood as key examples of complex television or that might counter some of my analytic claims. I hope that some readers use this book to launch their own analyses of such examples to strengthen our understanding of the poetics of contemporary television storytelling, as I believe the concepts and claims I develop here are broadly applicable to a wide range of programs and genres.

My narrative analyses consider the storytelling process whereby a storyworld is conveyed by a television text and constituted in the minds of its viewers. A basic definition of television serial storytelling charts out this terrain: *a television serial creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time*. I am most interested in exploring how this fictional world is told via serial television, highlighting the distinction between the fictional *story* and its telling via *narrative discourse*, a core difference established by narrative theorists across media. The book considers different storytelling strategies used by serial television to create engaging storyworlds through a range of complex techniques of narrative discourse, including playing with temporality, constructing ongoing characters, and incorporating transmedia. While the use of visual and aural techniques to convey narrative is an essential part of television, with many complex television programs embracing a broader palette of stylistic techniques to help make them distinctive innovators, I only consider such elements in service of other storytelling goals such as atemporality or character development.¹⁵

What I try to do in this book is tell the story of television's changing narrative paradigms. In 2011, one of the year's most popular new network programs, *Revenge*, opened its pilot with a party scene that climaxes with a murder. It then flashed back five months to chart how the narrative arrived at this climactic point, a major event that would only be reached in the season's 15th episode, with the rest of the pilot incorporating voice-over narration and multiple flashbacks to various time frames. What was most remarkable about this pilot was how unremark-

able it was—critics and fans found this style of complex storytelling commonplace and undistinguished, generally classifying the series as a decent “prime time soap” or belittling it as a “guilty pleasure.” But prime time soaps of previous decades, such as *Melrose Place*, were much more conventional in their narrative techniques, and such complex chronology was reserved for more “prestigious” niche programs such as *Six Feet Under* or *Alias*. This device of starting a narrative at a moment of climax and flashing back was fairly uncommon a decade ago—as discussed in chapter 2, it features prominently in the pilots for *Alias* in 2001 and *Veronica Mars* in 2004. The first instance that I remember seeing was in 2000, when *The West Wing* opened its episode “What Kind of Day Has It Been” with a hard-to-comprehend scene that concludes with a moment of tension, with the rest of the episode flashing back to lead up to and explain that climactic moment—I remember being struck by how atypical the device was, especially for such a fairly “realistic” series, but today such a device is practically a cliché.¹⁶ Narrative complexity has suffused television to the degree that *Revenge*'s temporally fractured narrative technique can go unnoticed; the rest of this book aims to explain how and why.

How to Read This Book

This book was written and published serially. We normally think of a scholarly manuscript as emerging as a singular, bound statement all at once, but most humanities research is a long-term, ongoing process in which pieces emerge first in conversations, classrooms, conference presentations, blog postings, and stand-alone articles or book chapters. Seeds of this project were planted in my first book, especially in discussing how *Soap* reworked narrative form as an innovative serial sitcom of the 1970s.¹⁷ Some core ideas of *Complex TV* first got public airing in 2004 at a small colloquium presentation at Middlebury College, where feedback from colleagues transformed it significantly. Since that time, I have presented and published versions of these ideas numerous times, each time gathering feedback to (hopefully) strengthen and nuance my arguments; additionally, a few of my terms and analyses have been picked up by other scholars, making “narrative complexity” and

“forensic fandom” seem like less novel concepts (at least to me) than on their first appearances. I have built on other scholars’ work on such issues, using them to bolster my ideas and to provide additional wrinkles, and in some cases I leave topics to others who have covered similar ground better than I could have. On top of this more typical model of serial release and revision, I published a draft online in serialized installments over a 15-month period in 2012–2013 via MediaCommons Press; the online version serves as the penultimate draft of the final book, which was significantly improved in reaction to readers’ commentary and criticisms. Making the serial facets of the book’s own writing and publication process visible calls attention to the ways that all scholarship is written in dialogic installments over time, through multiple versions and iterations, less like an episodic lecture than a serialized conversation. Much like serial television itself, such ongoing scholarship is written for a variety of readers—those who are casually dropping in on the topic, those who have been actively participating in the conversation for years, and a range in between. I hope there is something interesting to discover here for every type of reader, no matter where you fall on that spectrum.

Although the print version of this book proceeds in a linear fashion, page after page, it is not essential to read it that way. Chapter 1 should be read next, as it outlines key ideas and terms running throughout the book by explaining what narrative complexity is and how it fits into the contemporary television context. However, the rest of the chapters can be read in any order; while I have provided a sequence that can be followed, none of the chapters depend on having read the previous chapters beyond the first two. The final chapter on “ends” is in some ways just another topic but also is the most reflexive discussion of the book itself, making an appropriately meta-conclusion. Although together the chapters do tell the story of complex television, they are more episodic and self-contained than the cumulative sequential storyworlds they analyze—so feel free to chart your own path through chapters, eschewing chronology for topicality. Each chapter is far from a definitive and comprehensive take on its topic, as each could easily serve as the launching point for its own entire book; instead, treat each chapter as a probe that opens up avenues for future exploration. The following brief recaps preview each installment so you can jump ahead if you are so inclined, or feel free to explore on your own unspoiled by what is to come.

Beginnings

Although long-form television serials are notably marked by their potentially eternal narrative middles, they all must start somewhere; this chapter explores how serials are launched with television pilots, considering the core functions of pilots as setting up the direction of a serial’s narrative thrust, teaching viewers how to watch the ongoing narrative, and inspiring them to commit to ongoing serialized consumption. The chapter uses a detailed case study of the *Veronica Mars* pilot to demonstrate how serials establish intrinsic norms for ongoing narratives, with references to strategies found in pilots of *Twin Peaks*, *Arrested Development*, *Alias*, *Awake*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Pushing Daisies*, and *Terriers*.

Authorship

Contemporary television has fostered a unique form of creative authorship, establishing the role of “showrunner” within its production contexts. This chapter discusses the technologically enabled paratexts of podcasts, making-of documentaries, DVD commentaries, Twitter feeds, and blogs that have enabled television creators to speak directly to viewers, and it discusses how such paratexts have helped constitute star showrunners such as *Buffy*’s Joss Whedon, *Community*’s Dan Harmon, and *Lost*’s team of Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse. In exploring the textual and paratextual presence of showrunners, I discuss theories of authorship and posit that viewers rely on an inferred author function to make sense of contemporary television serials.

Characters

This chapter considers how serial characters work within the constraints of the television medium and the limits of presenting character change over time, considering how *The Sopranos*, *Angel*, *Lost*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Dexter* create compelling, complex characters. Many complex serials have embraced antiheroes as lead characters, using the long-form narrative structure to layer psychological traits and key elements of backstory. This chapter uses the case study of *Breaking Bad* and its

antihero protagonist to explore how serial dramas construct changing characters with different approaches to relationships, flashbacks, memory, narration, and performance.

Comprehension

One of the challenges of a long-form serial narrative is maintaining viewer comprehension throughout a variety of viewing practices, whether it is weekly and seasonal installments through broadcast schedules or the more variable patterns afforded by DVDs, online viewing, and DVRs. This chapter builds on cognitive theories of narrative comprehension to consider how television serials have created methods to both maximize understanding and play with knowledge differentials between characters and viewers in programs including *Dexter* and *Veronica Mars*. I focus on issues of viewer memory as addressed both within the core narrative text and in associated paratexts, considering the varying ways programs trigger memories and exploit viewers' fading memories to create unusual surprises in programs such as *Battlestar Galactica* and *Lost*. The chapter also analyzes different approaches to suspense, surprise, anticipation, and curiosity that have emerged for long-form serial television and how viewers thwart such narrative pleasures through spoilers. Finally, it concludes with a detailed account of the serial viewer's activity in watching an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.

Evaluation

Television studies, as forged by the influence of cultural studies, has been loath to include critical evaluation in its toolbox, as television's own spot on the receiving end of numerous aesthetic condemnations has pushed evaluative criticism off the field's agenda. In this chapter, I explore a model of contextualized evaluation that does not re-create universal aesthetic values but rather looks at how a series can define its own terms and parameters of evaluation and how television scholars might productively engage with questions of value. Using the examples of *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Mad Men*, all of which have been hailed by critics as among the greatest television series in the medium's history, I discuss how we can enter into medium-specific debates over value

without re-creating a canon or exclusionary critical practices, considering how complexity can function as an aesthetic asset in multiple ways.

Serial Melodrama

This chapter explores the role of melodrama within contemporary serial narratives, starting with the soap opera's debatable connection to this mode of storytelling. By separating out the narrative norms of soap operas from the emotional appeals of melodrama, I argue that soaps' textual form is less vital to prime time serials than is the discursive history linking seriality to the soap genre for decades. Instead, I consider how the emotional responses triggered by serial melodrama help forge the mixed-gender appeal of narratively complex series, with programs such as *Veronica Mars*, *Friday Night Lights*, *Lost*, *The Good Wife*, and *The Wire* playing with such conventions to complicate well-established assumptions about genre categories and their gendered appeals.

Orienting Paratexts

Along with shifts in the television industry and technologies, viewer practices have adapted to the digital era with new developments in how people consume narrative television. This chapter explores the range of paratexts that have emerged to help viewers make sense of complex television's temporality, characters, plot, and spatial orientation, spanning a wide range of programs from *St. Elsewhere* to *Game of Thrones*. Through a detailed account of the fan wiki *Lostpedia*, I explore the complexity of how people watch television and foreground notions of forensic fandom and drillability as modes of television spectatorship.

Transmedia Storytelling

As television series have become more complex in their narrative strategies, television itself has expanded its scope across a number of screens and platforms, complicating notions of medium specificity at the very same time that television seems to have established a clearer sense of distinct narrative form. This chapter explores how television narratives are expanded and complicated through transmedia extensions,

including videogames, novelizations, websites, online video, and alternate reality games. With specific analyses of transmedia strategies for *Lost* and *Breaking Bad*, I consider how television's transmedia storytelling is grappling with issues of canonicity and audience segmentation, how transmedia reframes viewer expectations for the core television serial, and what transmedia possibilities might look like going forward.

Ends

American commercial television differs from much of the world in how it privileges a narrative model in which a successful series never ends, with a final episode typically regarded as a sign of commercial failure and/or creative exhaustion, and often programs end by abrupt cancellation more than planned conclusion. In the past decade, more series have planned their conclusions, creating a set of precedents for serial endings that variously embrace ambiguity, circularity, reflexivity, and finality. This chapter looks at the concluding seasons and episodes of *Lost*, *The Wire*, and *The Sopranos* as exemplars of both narrative strategies and the divergent viewer and critic reactions triggered by various finales. The book concludes by discussing notions of "ends" in terms of the goals of serial criticism using case studies from *Homeland* and *Breaking Bad*, infusing some questions of politics back into the book's poetic approach. Finally, it reflects on the book's own seriality in its online prepublication.

While these chapters offer a broad span of topics and examples of the complex television phenomenon, I make no claims toward comprehensiveness—there are many more series, historical connections, viewer practices, and analytic angles to be explored. I hope this book offers a solid understanding of how we might think about contemporary television storytelling on its own terms, rather than in the language of literature or film, and provides a critical vocabulary for both television scholars and viewers to understand the ongoing shifts in what remains our most influential and popular storytelling medium.

1

Complexity in Context

This book's main argument is that over the past two decades, a new model of storytelling has emerged as an alternative to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified most American television since its inception, a mode that I call *narrative complexity*.¹ We can see such innovative narrative form in popular network hits from *Seinfeld* to *Lost*, *The X-Files* to *How I Met Your Mother*, as well as in critically beloved but ratings-challenged programs such as *Arrested Development*, *Veronica Mars*, *Boomtown*, and *Firefly*, not to mention series that failed both commercially and critically, such as *Reunion*, *Day Break*, *Flash-Forward*, and *The Event*. HBO has built its reputation and subscriber base on narratively complex series, such as *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *The Wire*, and *Game of Thrones*, and cable channels Showtime (*Dexter*, *Homeland*), FX (*The Shield*, *Justified*), and AMC (*Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*) have followed suit. Clearly these programs offer an alternative to conventional television narrative form—the purpose of this chapter is to explain how and why. As a background for the rest of the book's more topically focused investigation, this chapter outlines the formal attributes of this storytelling mode, explores its unique pleasures and patterns of consumption, and suggests a range of reasons for complex television's emergence in the late 1990s and continued growth throughout the 21st century.

In trying to understand the storytelling practices of contemporary American television, we might consider narrative complexity as a distinct *narrational mode*, as suggested by David Bordwell's analysis of film narrative. For Bordwell, a "narrational mode is a historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and comprehension," one that crosses genres, specific creators, and artistic movements to forge a coherent category of practices.² Bordwell outlines specific cinematic modes such as classical Hollywood, art cinema, and historical materialism, all of which encompass distinct storytelling strategies while still referencing

one another and building on the foundations of other modes. Kristin Thompson has extended Bordwell's approach to television, suggesting that programs such as *Twin Peaks* and *The Singing Detective* might be usefully thought of as "art television," importing norms from art cinema onto the small screen.³ Although certainly cinema influences many aspects of television, especially concerning visual style, I am reluctant to map a model of storytelling tied to self-contained feature films onto the ongoing long-form narrative structure of series television, where ongoing continuity and seriality are core features, and thus I believe we can more productively develop a vocabulary for television narrative on its own medium terms. Likewise, contemporary complex serials are often praised as being "novelistic" in scope and form, but I believe such cross-media comparisons obscure rather than reveal the specificities of television's storytelling form. Television's narrative complexity is predicated on specific facets of storytelling that seem uniquely suited to the television series structure apart from film and literature and that distinguish it from conventional modes of episodic and serial forms.

Complex Serial Poetics

So what exactly is narrative complexity? At its most basic level, narrative complexity *redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration*—not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres. Complex television employs a range of serial techniques, with the underlying assumption that a series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time, rather than resetting back to a steady-state equilibrium at the end of every episode. While today's complex narratives can be markedly different from their 20th-century predecessors, they built on numerous innovators from the 1970s forward. This new mode is not as uniform and convention driven as episodic or serials norms traditionally have been—in fact, complex television's most defining characteristic might be its unconventionality—but it is still useful to group together a growing number of programs that work against the conventions of episodic and serial traditions in a range of intriguing ways.⁴

The key prototypes for complex television emerged in the 1990s, setting precedents that more recent programs adopted and refined. The cult hit *The X-Files* exemplifies what may be the hallmark of narrative complexity: an interplay between the demands of episodic and serial storytelling, often oscillating between long-term arcs and stand-alone episodes. As Jeffrey Sconce discusses, any given *X-Files* episode might focus on the long-term "mythology," an ongoing, highly elaborate conspiracy plot that endlessly delays resolution and closure, or might offer self-contained "monster-of-the-week" stories that generally exist outside the arcing scope of the mythology.⁵ Although *X-Files* features an influential array of narrational innovations, the program's eventual creative and critical decline highlights one of the key tensions inherent in narrative complexity: balancing the competing demands and pleasures of episodic and serial norms. According to many *X-Files* viewers and critics, the series suffered from too great a disjunction between the overly complex and endlessly deferred serial mythology and the detached independence of monster-of-the-week episodes that might ignore or even contradict the accrued knowledge of the conspiracy. For instance, the highly regarded reflexive episode "Jose Chung's *From Outer Space*" mocks the program's nested conspiracies, while its events undermine some of the revelations of the ongoing mythology concerning alien presence on Earth. Despite viewers' cultish devotion for unraveling the mysteries driving Agent Mulder's endless quest, this episode (as well as many others) left viewers unsure as to how to consistently fit events into the storyworld. Viewing tastes thus divided between conspiracy buffs, who saw the sometimes reflexive and tonally divergent monster-of-the-week episodes as distractions from the serious mythological mysteries, and fans who grew to appreciate the coherence and range of the stand-alone episodes in light of the increasingly inscrutable arc—personally, I found myself in the latter camp before abandoning the series entirely.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer and *Angel* are arguably more adept at juggling the dual demands of serial and episodic pleasures. While both programs (together and separately) present a rich and ongoing mythology of a battle between the forces of good and evil, plotlines are centered on season-long arcs featuring a particular villain, or "big bad" in *Buffy's* parlance. Within a given season, nearly every episode advances the season's arc while still offering episodic coherence and resolutions. Even

highly experimental or atypical episodes balance between episodic and serial demands; for instance, *Buffy's* "Hush" features a literal monster-of-the-week, known as The Gentlemen, who steal the voices of the town of Sunnydale, leading to an impressively constructed episode told virtually without dialogue. Yet despite the episode's one-off villain and highly unusual speechless mode of storytelling, "Hush" still advances various narrative arcs, as characters reveal key secrets and deepen relationships to move the season-long plot forward; many other *Buffy* and *Angel* episodes similarly offer unique episodic elements with undercurrents of arc narration. These programs also interweave melodramatic relationship dramas and character development with story arcs—*Buffy*, at its most accomplished, uses forward plot momentum to generate emotional responses to characters and allows relationships to help advance plots, as exemplified by how "Hush" simultaneously offers closure to a monster-of-the-week, furthers the relationship between Buffy and Riley, and adds new wrinkles to the season-long arc concerning the Initiative. Numerous other series have found their own distinct patterns for interweaving long-term story arcs within the frameworks of clearly defined episodic parameters, such as individual character flashbacks on *Lost* or *Orange Is the New Black* or the case-of-the-week structure of *Veronica Mars* or *Pushing Daisies*.

But narrative complexity cannot simply be defined as prime time episodic seriality; within the broader mode of complexity, many programs actively work against serial norms but also embrace narrative strategies to rebel against episodic conventionality. For instance, *Seinfeld* has a mixed relationship to serial plotting—some seasons feature an ongoing situation, such as Jerry's NBC sitcom pilot, George's impending wedding, or Elaine's new job. These story arcs work primarily to offer backstory for in-jokes and self-aware references, as when George suggests a potential story for an episode of his and Jerry's sitcom "about nothing" based on the night they waited for a table at a Chinese restaurant, the plot of an earlier episode. However, these arcs and ongoing plots demand little cumulative knowledge, as actions and events rarely matter across episodes—arguably a result of the infrequency of significant actions and events on a series committed to chronicling insignificant minutiae. While certainly a viewer's appreciation of the storyworld is heightened the more alert one is to ongoing references such as Art Vandelay or Bob

Sacamano, narrative comprehension does not require engaging in any long-term arcs as with *X-Files* or *Buffy*. Yet *Seinfeld* offers a wealth of narrative complexity, often through its refusal to conform to episodic norms of closure, resolution, and distinct storylines. Many episodes leave characters in an untenable situation—Kramer arrested for being a pimp, Jerry running into the woods after becoming a "wolf-man," George stuck in an airplane restroom with a serial killer—that function not as cliffhangers as in serial dramas but rather as comedic punch lines not to be referenced again.

Seinfeld and other narratively complex comedies such as *The Simpsons*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Arrested Development*, and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* use television's episodic form to undercut conventional assumptions of returning to equilibrium and situational continuity, while embracing conditional seriality—some storylines do in fact continue, while others are never referred to again. *Arrested Development*, a more explicitly serialized comedy, subverts these conventions even more, as most episodes end with a "next week on *Arrested Development*" teaser, showing scenes continuing that episode's stories. However, regular viewers soon learn that neither will future episodes portray these scenes nor will they have actually occurred within the ongoing storyworld (although in the third season, the series varies this norm by allowing some of the teaser material to occur diegetically). Likewise, *The Simpsons* generally embraces an excessive and even parodic take on episodic form, rejecting continuity between episodes by returning to an everlasting present equilibrium state of Bart in fourth grade, Maggie as perpetual toddler, and a dysfunctional family stasis. However, there are exceptions to these norms: Apu gets married and has octuplets that grow from in utero to toddlers over the course of many seasons, suggesting that at least three years have passed in Springfield's life cycle, yet nobody else has aged. Often making jokes about the need to return to equilibrium state, *The Simpsons* offers ambiguous expectations over which transformations are "reset" after each episode (frequent losses of jobs, destruction of property, and damaging of relationships that will be restored by next week's episode) and which will be carried over serially (such as Apu's family, Skinner and Krabappel's relationship, and Maude Flanders's death). Thus these complex comedies selectively engage serial norms, weaving certain events into their backstories while

ambiguously discarding other moments into the more commonplace realm of forgotten episodic histories, a distinction that viewers must either overlook as inconsistency or embrace as one of the sophisticated traits of narrative complexity; evidence of fan practices online suggest that the latter is more common once viewers accept the shifting rules as one of the pleasures offered by these complex comedies.

Such examples highlight why we should conceive of contemporary television seriality not just as a simple marker of continuity but as a multifaceted variable, with a range of potential storytelling possibilities. We traditionally think of television seriality as typified by the endlessly deferred openness of soap operas, with decades of narrative accumulating within the memories of their multigenerational fan communities. As I discuss in chapter 7, soap operas were synonymous with American television seriality for decades, but there are different elements of serial continuity beyond the model pioneered by daytime melodrama. In the introduction, I suggested that serial narratives are composed of the four main elements of storyworld, characters, events, and temporality—by breaking down seriality into its constitutive elements, we can see that even highly episodic programs are serialized in certain ways. Nearly every fictional television series has a serialized storyworld and characters, meaning they are an ongoing, consistent narrative element.⁶ Every episode of the classic episodic procedural *Dragnet* takes place in a fictionalized version of Los Angeles and features the same central character of Joe Friday, even if that episode's events are not cumulative with previous installments. Contemporary programs regarded as highly episodic, such as the crime procedural *Law and Order* or the sitcom *Two and a Half Men*, still maintain consistent and persistent storyworlds and characters so that viewers recognize the places and people they encounter each week. It is rare for a program to violate such serialized characters and world building, such that it becomes noteworthy when *Louie* plays with the form by having the same actress play Louie's date in one episode and his mother in another episode's flashback—a decision that creator Louis C.K. says was motivated not for thematic commentary but just because he liked the actress for both parts, and he treats the series more like an anthology of short films rather than a continuing series.⁷

When we talk about a serialized program, we are usually referring less to the ubiquitous persistence of storyworld and characters and more to

the ongoing accumulation of narrative events—what occurs in one episode will have happened to the characters and storyworld as portrayed in future episodes. Most classically episodic programs are ambiguous on this front, simply choosing to ignore previous events rather than explicitly to deny their existence, while more playfully reflexive series will acknowledge this lack of event serialization, as with *South Park*'s weekly death of Kenny, only to be reborn the following week. Programs whose narrative events do accumulate serially usually articulate this buildup through the memories of characters—people reference previous occurrences such as a romantic connection or personal discovery, expressing continuity through dialogue and character actions, as discussed more in chapter 4. Settings also have memories, where the physical evidence of narrative events can be seen, as with the wreckage of a space battle on *Battlestar Galactica* or characters moving apartments on *Community*. Oftentimes, frustration with a serialized program stems from moments when viewers' memories are more acute than those of characters or the storyworld, as a viewer might wonder why characters do not seem to remember what happened previously to them and behave accordingly or why the set does not reflect the aftermath of the last episode's events. A challenge for serial television is conveying consistent norms for how much narrative continuity viewers should expect in a given program, which is generally established by the degree to which characters reference previous events and the storyworld displays the impacts—the more a series reminds us that narrative events have a cumulative impact, the more we expect strict continuity and consistency. Thus when the first season of *Heroes* concluded with some illogical discontinuity concerning a character's powers and fans critiqued this inconsistency, creator Tim Kring commented in an interview, "theoretically you're not supposed to be thinking about that"; however, Kring's statement directly overlooks that the entire season had been focused on characters discovering and discussing the mechanics of their powers, establishing our expectations for consistency within the series.⁸

Of course, there are different types of narrative events that may or may not be serialized. One key distinction is between major and minor events, or what Seymour Chatman calls "kernels" and "satellites." The major kernels are central to the cause-and-effect chain of a plot, while minor satellites are inessential to the plot and thus could be omitted

without impacting narrative comprehension; however, satellites provide texture, tone, and character richness.⁹ One of the pleasures of consuming a serialized narrative is trying to figure out whether a given event might be a kernel or a satellite in the larger arc of a plotline or series as a whole. Critics, fans, and television writers frequently reference Chekhov's Gun as a storytelling axiom: playwright Anton Chekhov's oft-repeated advice that if you hang a gun over the mantle in the first act, it must be fired by the end of the play. In Chatman's terms, Chekhov's Gun might be called a kernel initially presented as a satellite; thus serial viewers can attune themselves to look for Chekhov's guns, searching for apparent satellites that might eventually turn into kernels in later episodes. Sometimes satellites resolve in fairly quick succession within a given episode or in the next, as with a seemingly inconsequential moment in *Breaking Bad*'s "End Times" when Walt spins a gun on a table; this scene first seems to exist solely to portray Walt's emotional state, but it is revealed in the next episode to portray a subtle but crucial narrative event only comprehensible in retrospect. Other such moments can hang over the life of a series—in the third episode of *The Wire*, we are told that Lieutenant Daniels is "dirty," with a dormant FBI file on corruption charges. This character revelation serves as a dangling cause for years, finally triggering a power struggle that prompts Daniels's eventual resignation late in the fifth season, with more than 50 hours of screen time between putting this gun on the mantle and firing it.

Major events move the narrative forward, but with differing repercussions. Most kernels are straightforward occurrences that clearly change the narrative in evident ways: Jim and Pam marry on *The Office*, Jason Street gets paralyzed during a football game on *Friday Night Lights*, Nathaniel is hit by a bus and dies on *Six Feet Under*. Such events clearly matter to the ensemble of characters and change the status quo of the storyworld, but the narrative questions they raise are only about future events: what repercussions will this event have within the continuing story? There is no real ambiguity about what happened, how it happened, or even why it happened; thus we can call such events *narrative statements*, as they assert a story element without raising questions about the actual event beyond the ubiquitous "what next?" In contrast, some events function as *narrative enigmas*, raising uncertainty as to what precisely happened, who was involved, why they did what they did,

how this came to be, or even whether it actually happened at all. Laura Palmer's body being discovered on *Twin Peaks*, Starbuck returning from presumed death on *Battlestar Galactica*, and 24's Jack Bauer finding evidence of a mole within the Counter Terrorism Unit all function as narrative enigmas about what previously happened to lead to these events and raise mysteries concerning the details of the present narrative situation. For example, in the second season of *Lost*, the episode "Two for the Road" ends with Michael shooting Ana Lucia and Libby to release the prisoner then known as Henry Gale. Like all kernels, this event raises questions for the future (Will Ana Lucia and Libby survive? Will their friends discover Michael's betrayal?) but also poses questions about the narrative present (Why did he betray his friends? Did Michael intend to shoot Libby?) and past (What happened to Michael while he was away from the camp?). These questions are all answered to some degree in the following three episodes, making them fairly small-scale enigmas within *Lost*'s complex web of serialized mysteries and long-lasting ambiguities.

Many people conflate the term "highly serialized drama" with long-form serialized mysteries innovated by *Twin Peaks* and *The X-Files* and popularized by *Lost*, but most programs predicated on such central narrative enigmas fail to live up to their concepts, as demonstrated by the failure of numerous enigma-driven programs such as *Harsh Realm*, *Reunion*, *Harper's Island*, *FlashForward*, and *The Event*. Instead, the majority of serial plots focus more on questions about future events triggered by narrative statements rather than focusing on enigmas from the narrative past. Even for programs in which characters' backstories matter significantly, as with *Breaking Bad* and *Revenge*, the narrative thrust is primarily forward moving, with minor insights and flashbacks peppered throughout the series revealing key aspects of a character's history rather than creating deep mysteries for viewers to piece together. The most common model of event serialization found on television is the forward-moving accumulation of narrative statements that create triggers for future events to come in subsequent episodes—whether on contemporary complex programs, as with Avon Barksdale putting a hit on Omar on *The Wire*, or on traditional daytime or prime time soap operas, as when Luke rapes Laura to instigate a problematic but compelling romance plotline in 1980s *General Hospital*, these are nonenigmatic narrative moments that keep audiences engaged in hypothesizing what

will happen next, not looking backward to solve mysteries. As discussed in chapter 5, narrative enigmas and statements lead to differing modes of engagement for viewers, prompting various forms of suspense, surprise, curiosity, and theorizing. All of these events highlight the importance of temporality in grounding seriality, as viewers and creators alike aim to manage the multiple time frames of narrative past, present, and future in making sense of ongoing storyworlds.

Time is an essential element of all storytelling but is even more crucial for television. We might consider three different temporal streams within all narratives. *Story time* is the time frame of the diegesis, how time passes within the storyworld, and typically follows real-world conventions of straightforward chronology and linear progression from moment to moment, with exceptions such as when characters time travel in *Lost* or *Heroes*. *Discourse time* is the temporal structure and duration of the story as told within a given narrative, which almost always differs from story time via ellipses skipping over uneventful moments. Complex narratives often reorder events through flashbacks, retelling past events, repeating story events from multiple perspectives, and jumbling chronologies—these are overt manipulations of discourse time, as we are to assume that the characters experienced the events in a linear progression. Mystery plotlines often play with discourse time to create suspense concerning past events, waiting until the end of the narrative to reveal the inciting incident that diegetically occurred near the beginning of the story, and many complex narratives play with chronology to engage viewers and encourage them to try to actively parse the story. Finally, there is *narration time*, the temporal framework involved in telling and receiving the story. For literature, this is quite variable, as everyone reads at a different pace and might read a book in installments over a period of days or weeks or more. For film and television, narration time is strictly controlled, as a two-hour film takes the same for all viewers, and television restricts narration time even further through its schedule of weekly installments and commercial breaks; even with the variability and control enabled by DVDs or online video as discussed later, it still takes the same amount of narration time for everyone to consume a given moving-image narrative. For film and television, *screen time* is a better term for narration time, as it highlights the medium as part of the narrative experience.

Understanding narrative time is vital to serial storytelling, because seriality itself is defined by its use of time. The essential structure of serial form is a temporal system with story installments parceled out over time with gaps between entries through a strictly regimented use of screen time. As discussed later, collecting episodes into bound volumes of DVD box sets drastically changes the serial experience, as screen time becomes far more controllable and variable for viewers, as well as eliminating the cultural experience of simultaneously watching an episode with millions of other viewers. But television series in their original broadcast form alternate between episodic installments and mandatory temporal gaps between episodes—it is these gaps that define the serial experience.¹⁰ Serial temporality is thus lodged primarily within the realm of screen time through the material reception contexts of television broadcasting, which enables the regular and ritualistic consumption of a series that lies at the core of the serial experience. Additionally and importantly, these gaps allow viewers to continue their engagement with a series in between episodes, participating in fan communities, reading criticism, consuming paratexts, and theorizing about future installments, all vibrant practices that I discuss throughout the book.

Arguably the most crucial aspect of screen time's role in balancing episodic and serial forms is the opening and closing brackets of each episode, as screen time defines an episode as a discrete installment of storytelling and constitutes the gap between episodes. Most episodes begin with some crucial markers, such as recaps of previous events, an opening title sequence of variable length, and credits that might run over the titles or early scenes; likewise, an episode almost always ends with closing credits, bumper cards identifying the production companies, and a preview of future narrative moments.¹¹ Even when published on DVD, such framing material is still retained to demarcate individual episodes, and DVD menus themselves help delineate episodic unity through titles, graphics, the choice of episode-specific paratexts such as commentary tracks, and occasionally episode summaries. All of these screen-time elements exist outside the storyworld or its narrative discourse, operating in the realm of paratexts or extradiegetic embedded graphics to define the boundaries, length, and (via act breaks to accommodate advertisements) rhythm of each episode, and virtually every television series must squeeze its serial storytelling to fit into the constrained parameters

of episodic screen time. Even when a highly serialized program strings its plots and arcs across a full season, the producers always conceive of each episode as a discrete narrative unit following the established terms of screen time. Effective storytelling uses episodic screen time to prompt viewer responses, as with *Alias's* ritualistic cliffhangers: producers broke stories into a conventional four-act structure but shifted each episode's final act into the first 10 minutes of the next episode, creating a compelling bridge between episodes while still offering (deferred) resolution of most individual plotlines.¹²

Seriality in story or discourse time is less prominent than for screen time but is still important. Given that one of the key temporal aspects of seriality is its ritualistic pattern of engagement, some programs extend that ritual into their treatment of discourse time. Both *Twin Peaks* and *Deadwood* embrace a structured use of discourse time where nearly every episode takes place over the course of a single day, providing a clear rhythm to its serialized narrative flow. *24* foregrounds this regimented use of discourse time even more fully by structuring each season as a pseudo-real-time day in the life of Jack Bauer, highlighting that temporality through its use of on-screen clocks and split-screen simultaneity. Serialized story time is much more rare, as real life lacks the gaps and repetitions that typify seriality—the short-lived *Day Break* was exceptional, presenting the infinite looping of a single day inspired by the film *Groundhog Day*, while framing the story as a mystery to be solved by the program's protagonist and viewers. *Lost* draws a connection between story and screen time by anchoring its twisty, temporally complex storytelling around the core narrative event of the crash of Flight 815, which took place on September 22, 2004—the actual date of *Lost's* television premiere. But more frequently, complex television plays with story and discourse time through episodic variations on the serialized routine—as discussed later, one of the most exciting pleasures of contemporary fictional television is when a series breaks from its intrinsic norms to offer a new take on its conventional storytelling mode.¹³

We can see the multiple facets of episodic and serial storytelling at work in two of complex television's landmark innovators and trend-setters: *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*. While today the former series is regarded both as the breakthrough program that made HBO the pre-eminent channel for innovative television and as the narrative template

for the complex serialized dramas that emerged throughout the 2000s, in retrospect *The Sopranos* was far more episodic than it is typically remembered to have been. Like nearly all fictional television, characters and storyworld on *Sopranos* were persistent, and certainly it was more cumulative than typical 1990s crime dramas such as *Law and Order* or *NYPD Blue*. But most episodes had at least one bounded storyline that began and ended within the episode, often offering thematic resonance or ironic counterpoint to longer character arcs or event-driven struggles between mobsters, while some of its most celebrated episodes, such as "College" or "Pine Barrens," are highly self-contained in a monster-of-the-week format resembling *X-Files* or *Buffy*. *The Sopranos'* story arcs were far less sweeping than on *Buffy* or *Lost*, often lasting less than a season and resolving with little future resonances, and there were virtually no mythological enigmas that would encourage viewers to probe backward to try to parse out what happened within any individual event—save for the infamous final scene, discussed more in chapter 10. Creator David Chase has said he was much more interested in creating short films about the characters and their world, but HBO pushed him toward greater serialization; nevertheless, many episodes would still make sense if watched out of order without their serial contexts.¹⁴ Each season does add up to something more than a collection of stand-alone episodes with major plot arcs that define each season, but that seasonal unity is far more tied to theme or character than to plotting or the rise and fall of a specific "big bad" as on *Buffy*. In short, *The Sopranos* exemplified the model of serially infused episodic television that typifies most complex television, with fairly episodic plots building into a serialized storyworld and character arcs.

The Wire takes a starkly different approach to its episodic structure, as there are almost no stand-alone plotlines within any given episode. All of the program's narrative events are either independent moments illustrating characters but lacking larger arc importance—McNulty enlists his kids to play "front and follow" in pursuit of Stringer Bell, D'Angelo takes time to pick out his wardrobe—or contribute to the slow accumulation of the central plotlines that run throughout a given season. Individual episodes are defined less by their narrative events or plot revelations and more by their notable tonal moments: we remember an episode for the scene where Bunk and McNulty investigate a crime scene using only

varieties of the word “fuck” for dialogue but can easily forget how that scene’s events are crucial in the larger story arc that takes the entire season to reveal. Episodes of *The Wire* are virtually impervious to brief plot summaries, as each event scattered over the large cast of characters may or may not be important to the larger story arcs, whereas “Tony Soprano discovers and hunts down a mafia informant while taking his daughter on a college tour” is an apt summary of the main story in “College.” This is not to suggest that episodes of *The Wire* are just random collections of character moments and unrelated narrative events that happen to fall in the narrative sequence of the program’s plot arcs—individual episodes frequently feature thematic and character-related parallels across plots, and often an episode’s unity comes more from its consistent mood and tone than from a contained story. For instance, the third episode, “The Buys,” presents moments paralleling McNulty’s and D’Angelo’s roles as midlevel players in their games, unable to effect change, reinforced by D’Angelo’s monologue about chess, as well as portraying the dealers in the pit being watched by both police and criminal rival Omar, creating a feeling of pervasive threat and surveillance. Such thematic and tonal unity is reinforced with each episode’s epigrammatic quotation that highlights a key theme within the episode’s storytelling, as with “The Buys” quoting D’Angelo, “The King stays the King.” Thus we can see HBO’s dual landmarks operating with differing structural logics: *The Wire* crafts season-long plots composed of thematically and tonally connected episodes, while *The Sopranos* compiles more discrete episodic stories into larger thematically unified but less plot-driven seasons.

While there are certainly other models available to television storytellers, most complex television operates within these various options of locating events, time, characters, and storyworlds within the spectrum between contained episodes and ongoing seriality. There are other crucial poetic elements to raise in this overview of narrative complexity, but first it is important to understand how the rise of this narrative mode both was enabled by and helped transform the industrial, technological, and reception contexts of television in the 1990s and 2000s, with a consideration of why narrative complexity might not have emerged earlier. While none of these shifts in industry, technology, and viewing practices directly caused the rise of complex television, they all served as enabling conditions, helping to shape these storytelling strategies that

have become more prevalent. Following the paradigm of historical poetics, we must consider the interplay between the formal features of complex television and its contextual surroundings.

The Contexts and Constraints of Complexity

Narrative complexity is sufficiently widespread and popular that we might consider the 1990s to the present as the era of complex television. Complexity has not overtaken conventional forms within the majority of television programming today—there are still many more conventional sitcoms and dramas on-air than there are complex narratives, not to mention many popular nonfictional or semifictional genres such as reality television, satirical news, and “lifestyle programs” that grew in dominance during this same era. Yet just as 1970s Hollywood is remembered far more for the innovative work of Altman, Scorsese, and Coppola than for the more commonplace (and often more popular) conventional disaster films, romances, and comedies that filled theaters, I believe that American television of the past 20 years will be remembered as an era of narrative experimentation and innovation, challenging the norms of what the medium can do.¹⁵ Even though this complex mode represents neither the majority of television nor its most popular programs (at least by the flawed standard of Nielsen ratings), a sufficiently widespread number of programs work against conventional narrative practices to justify such analysis.

Some key transformations in the media industries, technologies, and audience behaviors coincide with the rise of narrative complexity—a brief overview of crucial changes in 1990s television practices points to both how these transformations impact creative practices and how formal features always expand beyond textual borders.¹⁶ One major influence on the rise of narrative complexity on contemporary television is the changing perception of the medium’s legitimacy and its resulting appeal to creators. Many of the innovative television programs of the past 20 years have come from creators who launched their careers in film, a medium with more traditional cultural cachet: Aaron Sorkin (*Sports Night* and *West Wing*), Joss Whedon (*Buffy*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*), and Alan Ball (*Six Feet Under* and *True Blood*) as screenwriters, and David Lynch (*Twin Peaks*) and J. J. Abrams (*Alias*, *Lost*, and *Fringe*) as

writer-directors.¹⁷ Part of television's appeal to such figures is its reputation as a producer's medium, where writers and creators retain control of their work more than in film's director-centered model, as discussed more in chapter 3. Additionally, as reality television has emerged as a popular and cost-effective alternative to scripted programming, television writers seem to be offering innovations to demonstrate what is unique to fictional television; narrative complexity highlights one limit of reality programs, asserting the carefully controlled dramatic and comedic manipulation of plots and characters that reality producers find more difficult to generate (although many attempt their own forms of narrative manipulations). Many television writers embrace the broader challenges and possibilities for creativity in long-form series, as extended character depth, ongoing plotting, and episodic variations are simply unavailable options within a two-hour film—notably, Whedon's film *Serenity*, which extended the narrative of the canceled single-season cult series *Firefly*, compressed an entire season's plot into two hours, minimizing storytelling variety, character exploration, and ongoing suspense. While innovative film narration has emerged as a "boutique" form in recent years via puzzle films such as *The Sixth Sense* and *Inception*, the norms of Hollywood still favor spectacle and formulas suitable for a peak opening weekend.¹⁸

However, television's embrace of complexity has been a long time in the making due to long-established obstacles to complex storytelling. The commercial television industry in the United States has historically avoided risks in search of economic stability, embracing a strategy of imitation and formula that often results in a model of "least objectionable content."¹⁹ For decades, the commercial television industry was immensely profitable by producing programming with minimal formal variety outside the conventional genre norms of sitcoms and procedural dramas. Serial narratives were primarily confined to the devalued genre of daytime soap operas, with more legitimated prime time offerings avoiding continuing storylines in lieu of episodic closure and limited continuity. Economic strategies privileged the episodic form for prime time programming—in large part, serialized content posed problems for the industry's cash cow, syndication. Reruns distributed by syndicators might be aired in any order, making continuing storylines an obstacle to this lucrative aftermarket. Additionally, network research departments

believed that even the biggest hit series could be guaranteed a consistent carryover audience of no more than one-third from week to week, meaning that the majority of viewers would not be sufficiently aware of a program's backstory to follow continuing storylines—oddly, contemporary television producers still repeat this statistic unchanged, suggesting that it is grounded more in industrial folklore than in empirical research.²⁰ But given these assumptions that viewers were inconsistent, coupled with networks' general risk-averse attitudes and the ongoing success of episodic programming, there was little economic rationale for broadcasters to undertake the risks necessary to embark on experiments in more serialized and complex storytelling.

Television's mechanisms of storytelling also provide some important constraints on how stories can be told. More than almost any other medium, commercial television has a highly restrictive structured delivery system: weekly episodes of precisely prescribed lengths, often with required breaks for advertisements—a parallel would be if publishers demanded the exact same word count for every chapter of every novel, regardless of genre, style, or author. A given season will have a specific number of episodes, with variable scheduling for how long breaks between episodes might be—often producers cannot plan on precisely when a series will be aired or even in some extreme cases in what order episodes might appear. Additionally, the series is consumed as it is still being produced, meaning that adjustments are often made midstream due to unexpected circumstances. Such adjustments can be due to casting constraints, as in an actor's pregnancy, illness, or death, or feedback from networks, sponsors, or audience in reaction to an emerging storyline. Constraints such as these make television storytelling distinct from most other media, although there are some similar limits on length and structure for comics and dime novels. Such constraints work to limit how television stories can be told but also provide clear structures within which innovations can flourish, creatively challenging well-established norms.

Finally, most successful television series typically lack the crucial element that has long been hailed as of supreme importance for a well-told story: an ending. Unlike nearly every other narrative medium except comics, American commercial television operates on what might be termed the "infinite model" of storytelling—a series is deemed a success

only as long as it keeps going. While other national television systems might end a successful series after a year or two, American programs generally keep running as long as they are generating decent ratings. This becomes a significant issue for storytellers, who must design narrative worlds that are able to sustain themselves for years rather than closed narratives plans created for a specific run, an issue discussed more in chapter 10. Not surprisingly, this need to accommodate an infinite run privileges episodic content with little continuity and long-term story development, with recyclable characters and interchanging situations typical of police dramas and sitcoms. These constraints of how the industry conceived of television's viewing and storytelling norms posed obstacles to the innovations that constitute complex television, with a gradual shift in narrative possibilities emerging throughout the 1990s, largely in response to industrial and technological transformations.

One factor that opened up storytelling innovations was the recalibration of industry expectations for what a hit series looked like. As the number of channels have grown and the size of the audience for any single program has shrunk, networks and channels have recognized that a consistent cult following of a small but dedicated audience can suffice to make a series economically viable. The overall audience size of *Buffy* and *Veronica Mars* did not make them hits, but the measured expectations of newer networks such as UPN and WB, as well as the youthful demographics and cult-like dedication drawn by such series, encouraged networks to allow such experimentations to grow an audience. Many complex programs expressly appeal to a boutique audience of more upscale educated viewers who typically avoid television, as with programs such as *The West Wing* or *The Simpsons*—needless to say, an audience composed of viewers who watch little other television is particularly valued by advertisers. For cable channels such as HBO, complex programs such as *The Wire*, *Deadwood*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* might not have reached *Sopranos*-like popularity, but the prestige of these programs furthered the channel's brand image of being more sophisticated than traditional television and thus worthy of a monthly premium (and generating future DVD sales). And on nonpremium cable channels, complex prestigious programs such as FX's *The Shield* and *Justified* or AMC's *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* helped establish such channels as legitimate and appealing to cable operators and consumers

alike, even if ratings for such series might not be as lucrative as other options—notably, FX makes more off reruns for *Two and a Half Men* than its original programs, and AMC's arguably least complex original series, *The Walking Dead*, has been its highest rated by far. But because cable channels get steady income from every subscriber whose cable or satellite system carries the channel, high-profile prestigious programs can work to raise a channel's status and thus its carriage fees, even if those programs do not produce much advertising revenue. In all of these instances, programs with comparatively small ratings can provide lucrative results for the industry under their recalibrated new measures.²¹

This era's technological transformations have accelerated this shift in similar ways. Audiences tend to embrace complex programs in much more passionate and committed terms than they do most conventional television, using these series as the basis for robust online fan cultures and active feedback to the television industry (especially when their programs are in jeopardy of cancellation). Online television criticism has risen during this era, in both forums such as *Television Without Pity* and commercial sites such as *The A.V. Club*, providing thoughtful and humorous commentaries on weekly episodes and serving as sites of fan engagement and conversation. The Internet's ubiquity has enabled fans to embrace a "collective intelligence" for information, interpretations, and discussions of complex narratives that invite participatory engagement—and in instances such as *Babylon 5* or *Community*, creators join in the discussions and use these forums as feedback mechanisms to test for comprehension and pleasures, as discussed in chapter 3. Videogames, blogs, online role-playing sites, Twitter, fan websites, and other digital technologies enable viewers to extend their participation in these rich storyworlds beyond the one-way flow of traditional television viewing, extending the universes of complex narrative creations such as *Buffy*'s Sunnydale or *The Simpsons'* Springfield into fully interactive and participatory realms. Steven Johnson claims that this form of complexity has offered viewers a "cognitive workout" that increases problem-solving and observational skills—whether or not this argument can be empirically substantiated, there is no doubt that this brand of television storytelling encourages audiences to become more actively engaged and offers a broader range of rewards and pleasures than does most conventional programming.²² The consumer and creative practices of fan

culture that cultural studies scholars embraced as subcultural phenomena in the 1990s have become more widely distributed and participated in with the distribution means of the Internet, making active audience behavior even more of a mainstream practice.²³ While none of these new technologies directly caused the emergence of narrative complexity, the incentives and possibilities they provided to both media industries and viewers encourage the success and innovations of many such programs, as explored in chapter 9.

One shift that seems less radical but may be as or more important than any of these other transformations is the rise of TV-on-DVD box sets, a development that warrants more in-depth discussion. Releasing television onto home video formats is certainly not new to the 2000s, as many programs were released on VHS in the 1990s and even Laserdiscs in the 1980s. Although the shift to DVD might be more of an acceleration of degree than a transformation to an entirely new kind of distribution, DVDs allowed television to be consumed and collected in new ways that drastically changed the place of the television series in the cultural landscape, as well as altering the narrative possibilities available to creators.²⁴ For the first 30 years of the medium, American television watching was primarily controlled by networks, offering limited choices of programming on a tightly delimited schedule with few other options to access content. While reruns proliferated in syndication, they typically were shown out of order, encouraging episodic narratives that could accommodate an almost random presentation of a series. Since the mainstreaming of cable and the VCR in the early 1980s, the balance has shifted more toward viewer control—the proliferation of channels has helped routinize repeats, so that viewers can catch up on a series in chronologically aired reruns or catch missed premium-cable programs multiple times throughout the week. Time-shifting technologies such as VCRs and digital video recorders enable viewers to choose when they want to watch a program, but more importantly for narrative construction, viewers can rewatch episodes or segments to parse out complex moments. Although self-recording via VHS tapes or burnable DVDs allows viewers to create their own collections of an ongoing series, such recordings are an archive of an event, an example of recorded flow capturing a moment designed to be ephemeral. Recordings are bound to an original time and place, marked by the station identifications and

advertisements as belonging to a broadcast, with the flow between programs as a strategy designed to yield high ratings and audience continuity. In short, self-recordings were what television had always been but frozen in the amber of a collection yet still ephemerally at risk to be taped over.

With TV-on-DVD, a television program is now a tangible object that can be purchased, collected, and catalogued on your shelf, much like books, musical albums, and films. This helps raise the cultural value of television programming, detaching it from the industrial-controlled, commercially saturated flow of broadcasting, as well as surrounding a series with the paratextual framing of packaging, design, and video extras that comment on and expand the text.²⁵ The physical collectibility of DVD boxes adds to their aesthetic positioning—the ability to shelf a television series next to a classic film or novel creates the possibility of aesthetic equality in a way that the ephemeral system of broadcasting never did. Probably the most critically praised television series of all time, *The Wire*, has been hailed as a modern-day Dickens or Tolstoy, a claim that is bolstered by its status as a bound collectable object much as the 19th-century novel gained cultural legitimacy in its shift from serialized to bound form.²⁶ The serial publishing of Dickens and Tolstoy certainly garnered these authors both popularity and acclaim, but had they not been bundled and compiled into published novels, *Bleak House* and *War and Peace* would probably be regarded less as timeless masterpieces and more as ephemerally tied to their historical moment, if remembered at all. This pattern of validation through bound publication extends to other serialized media as well, such as the rise of graphic novels republishing more ephemeral serial comic books such as *Cerebus* and *Watchmen* in the 1980s or the compilation of Louis Feuillade's serialized short films of the 1910s at La Cinémathèque Française in the 1940s. Thus the emergence of boxed TV-on-DVD sets has enabled contemporary television to be judged and valued as part of a larger aesthetic field, and television's rising evaluative stock over the past decade has been fueled by positive comparisons with other narrative forms, as discussed in chapter 6.

TV-on-DVD also changes the terms by which viewers might consume their narrative texts, moving away from broadcasting and toward a publishing model, as convincingly argued by Derek Kompare.²⁷ Although

such publishing is increasingly manifested as digital files downloaded via iTunes or streamed on Netflix instead of the waning DVD market, the effects on viewing practices are quite similar, providing viewers the opportunity to control how they watch more than with previous media formats. Serial continuity can be greatly enhanced by this publishing model, as viewers owning DVD sets or downloaded files can mimic the flexibility and control of books to consult and replay moments from episodes or seasons past. If most television storytelling for its first few decades was designed to be viewed in any order by a presumably distracted and undiscriminating viewer—a strategy that many programs and viewers challenged but was certainly encouraged by the industry—today's complex narratives are designed for a discerning viewer not only to pay close attention to once but to rewatch in order to notice the depth of references, to marvel at displays of craft and continuities, and to appreciate details that require the liberal use of pause and rewind. Complex comedies such as *Arrested Development* encourage the rewind and freeze-frame power of DVDs to catch split-second visual gags and to pause the frantic pace to recover from laughter; this type of viewing was fully enabled during the program's Netflix-distributed fourth season, as all viewers had even more control of screen time than they did on the broadcast original. Serial mysteries such as *Lost* invite us to stop screen time to parse a complex on-screen image or to consult with a community of fellow viewers to ensure full comprehension. These televisual strategies are all possible via scheduled flow but are greatly enhanced by the viewing possibilities of published DVDs or streaming.

Additionally, TV-on-DVD makes the published version definitive and canonical over both the original broadcast and typically shortened syndicated rerun versions. Publishing can enable continuity corrections and edits as needed—for instance, the *Lost* episode "Orientation" features a photograph of Desmond and Penny, but it was produced before Penny was cast as an actual character and thus features the image of another actress. In the postbroadcast versions of "Orientation," the photograph is replaced by an image of Sonya Walger, who was later cast to play Penny. Such details would be insignificant in the broadcast-flow era, but for fans encouraged to freeze-frame and parse the images of *Lost*, details matter and DVDs allow producers to make such course corrections throughout a series. DVDs can also include footage cut from

original broadcasts for time or content restrictions, making some of television's broadcast constraints irrelevant upon publishing. As I discuss in chapter 2 in the case of *Veronica Mars*, DVDs can override the original broadcast version of a pilot, reasserting authorial intent over network control as part of the medium's broader legitimation. Thus while the broadcast original is what makes a program an example of "television" as it is traditionally understood, the DVD version serves as the long-term record of a series as it will be consumed and remembered in the future.

For many series, the ability for viewers to watch on their own schedules has opened up storytelling possibilities, as DVD viewers typically watch episodes more quickly in succession, working through a season over a week or two, which fosters a more immersive and attentive viewing experience. For some series built on cliffhangers, such as *24*, the DVD viewing becomes a mad rush for narrative payoff, prompting a binge mentality comparable to the compulsive "eatability" of a bag of salty snacks—and certainly *24* prompted such binges, in which viewers would consume an entire season in a 24-hour marathon session. At the other end of the storytelling spectrum, *The Wire*'s slow-moving plotting, lack of exposition, and vast ensemble poses challenges for a new viewer to appreciate on a weekly basis—there are too many opportunities to forget connections and lose track of the copious details vital to appreciating the complexity of the storyworld for many, so DVD viewing helps establish more momentum and continuity. Compiling a serial allows viewers to see a series differently, enabling us to perceive in ongoing narratives aesthetic values traditionally used for discrete cultural works—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. A series such as *Lost* asks viewers to believe that the twisty, looping narrative is guided by a master plan exhibiting continuity and consistency. Because many revelations and explanations are deferred for numerous episodes and even seasons, the long gaps in a serial broadcast can make it feel like the series is avoiding resolution and even "making it up as they go," a clear aesthetic condemnation for many viewers who value perceived unity and continuity in a complex narrative.²⁸ While revelations may still take multiple seasons, watching *Lost* via DVD keeps the pace moving sufficiently as to downplay the issues of deferred resolution and answers.

We might consider this drive toward unity and complexity as fulfilled by bound volumes such as DVD sets as a *boxed aesthetic*, tied together and treated as a complete whole comparable to similarly unified forms such as novels and films.

Of course, there are aspects of a serial aesthetic that might be lost in the shift to a boxed aesthetic, with *Lost* as a prime example of these trade-offs. Even though the quicker pace of DVDs highlights how all of *Lost*'s puzzle pieces come together (or fail to), this mode of binge viewing does not allow for a viewer to focus on the puzzle-solving process. One of *Lost*'s chief pleasures is the ludic sense of play that fills the gaps between episodes and seasons, with fans congregating in online forums and wikis to theorize, investigate, evaluate, and debate, as discussed more in chapters 8 and 9. This mode of fan engagement is dependent on simultaneous viewership, with everyone at the same point of the story, enabling a collaborative group process of decoding and engagement. Although *Lost* will continue to be watched via DVD, downloads, and streaming (and future distribution technologies) for years to come, the broader experience of communal serialized viewing is tied to the original broadcast moment. Watching *Lost* via boxed sets is inherently isolated from the larger fan community and its rich network of paratextual materials, suggesting that the truly ephemeral aspect of the series was not the initial textual broadcast but the experience of serialized spectatorship. When the next generation of media historians look at the series, all that will remain from the original airing is the program and the archived paratexts—the aesthetic experience of collectively making sense of *Lost*'s complex narrative will be lost. The structure of broadcast flow may be replaced by the control of boxed publishing, but there is a palpable experiential loss that cannot be artificially retained.

Such serialized consumption practices are not unique to television, as readers of 19th-century serial fiction regularly discussed ongoing stories as they were released, published critical commentaries within letters to periodicals, and even corresponded with authors throughout the writing process.²⁹ The experiences of Dickens's readers who followed his novels through the serialized publication process were unique and unable to be replicated by those who read his bound volumes; similarly, the serialized television viewing experience is ephemeral compared to the repeatable practice of boxed viewing. As Sean O'Sullivan discusses in

relation to both Dickens and *Deadwood*, the gap between installments is the constitutive element of serial fiction, the space between available story units when both writers and readers imagine new possibilities and reflect on old tales.³⁰ While a boxed or streaming viewer can re-create this gap by self-pacing a series, the normal model of consuming a bound serial is to move forward as time permits, not as dictated by a forced schedule. Although the broadcast schedule is ultimately arbitrary and artificial, it is also productive, creating the structure for collective synchronous consumption and providing the time to reflect on the unfolding narrative world. Recently, Netflix's move into original programming has embraced the boxed aesthetic even without DVD boxes, publishing entire seasons of *House of Cards*, *Arrested Development*, and *Orange Is the New Black* all at once to its digital libraries, forgoing the gap-filled serial broadcast experience altogether—and raising the question as to whether these multiepisode narratives can be considered serial at all.

This discussion of TV-on-DVD sets the stage for understanding narrative complexity, as it foregrounds the interplay of industrial strategies, technologies, viewer practices, and poetic form that constitute the phenomenon of complex television. Using the new technologies of home recording, DVDs, and online participation, viewers have taken an active role in consuming complex television and helped it thrive within the media industries. While it would be hard to claim that any of these industrial, creative, technological, or participatory developments explicitly caused the emergence of narrative complexity as a narrational mode, together they set the stage for its development and growing popularity—and collectively forge the backdrop for understanding the poetics of complex television.

Television's Operational Aesthetic and Spectacular Storytelling

Complex television is marked by greater variations in serial form than is found in traditional episodic programming or soap opera models, enabled by shifts in the television industry, technology, and viewing practices. One of the more interesting ways that creators have responded to such shifts is by creating a more self-conscious mode of storytelling than is typically found within conventional television narration. *Seinfeld* is a key innovator here, as the series revels in the mechanics of

its plotting, weaving storylines for each character together in a given episode through unlikely coincidence, parodic media references, and circular structure. In conventional television narratives, episodes feature two or more plotlines that complement each other: a main A plot that dominates screen time and secondary B plots that may offer thematic parallels or provide counterpoint to the A plot but rarely interacts with it at the level of action. Complexity, especially in comedies, works against these norms by altering the relationship between multiple plotlines, creating interweaving stories that often collide and coincide. *Seinfeld* typically starts out its four plotlines separately, leaving it to the experienced viewer's imagination as to how the stories will collide with unlikely repercussions throughout the storyworld. Such interwoven plotting has been adopted and expanded by *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Arrested Development*, and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, extending the coincidences and collisions across episodes in a way that transforms serial narrative into elaborate inside jokes—for instance, only by knowing Larry's encounter with Michael the blind man from *Curb*'s first season does Michael's return in the fourth season make sense. Likewise, *Arrested* expands the number of coinciding plots per episode, with often six or more storylines bouncing off one another, resulting in unlikely coincidences, twists, and ironic repercussions, some of which may not become evident until subsequent episodes or seasons.

While this mode of comedic narrative is often quite amusing on its own terms, it does suggest a particular set of pleasures for viewers, one that is relatively unavailable in conventional television narrative. The viewers of such complex comedies as *Seinfeld* and *Arrested Development* not only focus on the diegetic world offered by the sitcoms but also revel in the creative mechanics involved in the producers' abilities to pull off such complex plot structures, a mode of viewing that Jeffrey Sconce labels as "metareflexive" but warrants more detailed consideration.³¹ This set of pleasures evokes an influential concept offered by Neil Harris in his account of P. T. Barnum: Harris suggests that Barnum's mechanical stunts and hoaxes invited spectators to embrace an "operational aesthetic," in which the pleasure was less about "what will happen?" and more concerning "how did he do that?"³² In watching *Seinfeld*, we expect that each character's petty goals will be thwarted in a farcical unraveling, but we watch to see how the writers will structure

the narrative mechanics required to bring together the four plotlines into a carefully calibrated, Rube Goldberg-esque narrative machine. There is a degree of self-consciousness in this mode of plotting, not only in the explicit reflexivity offered by these programs (such as *Seinfeld*'s program-within-a-program or *Arrested Development*'s winking acknowledgment of television techniques such as product placement, stunt casting, and voice-over narration) but also in the awareness that viewers watch complex programs in part to see "how will they do it?" This operational aesthetic is on display within online fan forum dissections of the techniques that complex television uses to guide, manipulate, deceive, and misdirect viewers, such as the highly popular TV Tropes wiki, suggesting the pleasure of unraveling the operations of narrative mechanics. We watch these series not just to get swept away in a realistic narrative world (although that certainly happens) but also to watch the gears at work, marveling at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics.³³

The operational aesthetic is heightened in spectacular moments within narratively complex programs, specific sequences or episodes that we might consider akin to special effects. Accounts of cinematic special effects highlight how these moments of awe and amazement pull us out of the diegesis, inviting us to marvel at the technique required to achieve visions of interplanetary travel, realistic dinosaurs, or elaborate fights on treetops. These spectacles are often held in opposition to narration, harking back to the cinema of attractions that predated narrative film and deemphasizing classical narrative form in the contemporary blockbuster cinema.³⁴ While such special effects do appear on television—although arguably television's dominant mode of visual spectacle highlights the excessive display of beauty norms found on beer commercials and *Baywatch* more than the explosive pyrotechnics of the large screen—complex television offers another mode of attractions: the *narrative special effect*. This device occurs when a program flexes its storytelling muscles to confound and amaze a viewer, as in the major temporal leaps forward seen on *Alias* ("The Telling"), the revelation of flash-forwards on *Lost* ("Through the Looking Glass"), or the incorporation of the backstory-retrofitted main character Dawn on *Buffy*'s fifth season. These moments of spectacle push the operational aesthetic to the foreground, calling attention to the narration's construction and

asking us to marvel at how the writers pulled it off; often these instances forgo strict realism in exchange for a formally aware baroque quality in which we watch the process of narration as a machine rather than engaging in its diegesis.³⁵ The temporal control of DVDs and digital files greatly enhances viewer engagement with the operational aesthetic, allowing pausing, rewinding, and slow-motion analysis to ferret out narrative clues from twisty mysteries on *Lost* and *Alias* and to replay past moments to highlight exemplary moments of narrative construction.

One such moment of spectacular storytelling is found in the second-season finale of *Battlestar Galactica*, “Lay Down Your Burdens (Part 2)”: the narrative of the human survivors of an apocalyptic war trying to outrun their Cylon enemies has portrayed around 300 days of story time over the course of the initial miniseries and two seasons, amounting to more than 27 hours of screen time. At this climactic moment, the Cylon-collaborating human Gaius Baltar has been elected president and has chosen to colonize a planet instead of running from a potential Cylon attack. With Baltar left alone sitting in his presidential office, the camera slowly pulls in for 45 seconds toward an anguished Baltar trying to cope with his guilt and stress, eventually stopping on an extreme close-up of his head down on his desk. After a subtle dissolve through his black hair, designed to be unnoticeable, the camera pulls back to reveal that although Baltar looks mostly the same, his office has changed and the dialogue suggests that he is deep into his presidency; after 30 seconds, a caption appears to orient us: “One Year Later.” This is a remarkable ellipsis, jumping forward a full year in the course of what appears to be a single shot, a moment so shocking and affecting that I needed to pause and rewatch it upon the first viewing and have repeatedly returned to it via DVD as a marvel of storytelling construction in creating a narrative special effect and the operational aesthetic. Its power stems from the program’s manipulation of its own *intrinsic norms*, or the patterns and expectations that a given series establishes for itself—because the first two seasons of *Battlestar* had taught us that the story time moved more slowly than the scheduled screen time (with weekly and seasonal gaps not mirrored in story time), viewers came to expect that same pattern of gradual-moving narrative moving forward. This ellipsis works as a narrative special effect by effectively shocking us out of our expected patterns and norms, forcing viewers to think about how the storytelling

might proceed, raising questions about what might have occurred during the yearlong ellipsis, and leaving us unsettled for the shocking story turns still to come in the final act of this episode. This moment of spectacular storytelling was memorable for television producers as well, as *Parks and Recreation* paid homage to *Battlestar* with its own three-year time jump to conclude season 7.³⁶ While such moments encourage viewers to think about formal construction, they do not distance us from the emotional pull of the storyworld, as per the operational aesthetic.

As programs become established in their own complex conventions, we also marvel at how far creators can push the boundaries of complexity, offering baroque variations on themes and norms; these narrative special effects can be episodic climaxes, as when all the divergent *Seinfeld* or *Arrested Development* plots collide or when a plot twist on *Lost* or *24* forces us to reconsider all that we have viewed before in the episode. Or narrative spectacles can be variations on a theme—*Six Feet Under* begins every episode with a “death of the week,” but by the second season, the creators vary the presentation of these deaths to offer misdirections and elaborations to keep viewers engaged once they understand the program’s intrinsic norms. Thus the episode “In the Game” begins with a scene in which a woman’s preparations for a romantic night are interrupted by an axe-wielding maniac, before cutting to a movie theater to reveal her as an actress watching her own film debut in a horror movie, only to follow her to the premiere party, where she dies from a drug overdose in the club bathroom. Other episodes play on our expectations for who will die, as in the baroque example of “In Case of Rapture”: a pair of young men fill inflatable sex dolls with helium to deliver to a porn awards party, but their truck almost hits a kid on a skateboard, causing the payload to come loose and rise into the air. We cut to a middle-aged woman driving a car with a bumper sticker reading, “I Brake for the Rapture”—when she sees the dolls floating up to the heavens, she exits her car and runs into traffic, yelling, “I’m ready Jesus!” only to be hit by a car. These variations on the program’s established formal patterns offer a set of playful pleasures that depend on viewers’ long-term commitments and operational expectations, which are unique to serialized storytelling.

A particularly telling moment of narrative spectacle comes from *Lost*’s episode “Orientation”: after discovering what is hidden beneath

the mysterious hatch, two characters watch an old training film that details the origins of the facility as part of a research institute. Once finished with the enigmatic film containing many obscure details that recast events of the program's first season in a new light, Locke gleefully exclaims, "We're going to have to watch that again!" mirroring the reaction of millions of viewers prepared to parse the film for clues to *Lost*'s diegetic and formal mysteries. This is not the reflexive self-awareness of Tex Avery cartoons acknowledging their own construction or the technique of some modernist art films or Brechtian theater asking us to view the narrative artificiality from an emotional distance; operational reflexivity encourages us to simultaneously care about the story and marvel at its telling. A comparable model within classic film would be found in a number of Hitchcock films, such as *Rear Window*'s referential lines to watching and decoding visual action or *Psycho*'s shocking murder of the presumed main character midway in the film, calling attention to our thwarted narrative expectations—but the lack of seriality in such examples minimizes the long-term impact on viewers when compared to television fans, who fill the gaps between episodes analyzing and theorizing about such moments for many years of a series.

Another level of narrative spectacle centers on entire episodes. *Buffy* is probably the most accomplished series for narratively spectacular theme episodes, with individual episodes predicated on narrative devices such as starkly limiting storytelling parameters (the lack of speech in "Hush"), genre mixing (the musical episode "Once More with Feeling"), shifts in perspective (portraying an adventure from the vantage point of habitual bystander Xander in "The Zeppo"), or foregrounding an unusual narrator (Andrew's pseudodocumentary in "Storyteller"). While each of these episodes and others like them in *X-Files* ("Monday," "Triangle"), *Angel* ("Smile Time," "Spin the Bottle"), *Seinfeld* ("The Betrayal," "The Parking Lot"), *Scrubs* ("His Story," "My Screw Up"), *The Simpsons* ("Trilogy of Error," "22 Short Films about Springfield"), *Lost* ("The Other 48 Days," "Expose"), *Community* ("Paradigms of Human Memory," "Remedial Chaos Theory"), *Supernatural* ("The Real Ghostbusters"), and *Breaking Bad* ("Fly") may offer diegetic thrills and laughs, the more distinctive pleasure in these programs is marveling at the narrational bravado on display by violating the program's own storytelling conventions in a spectacular fashion. Through the operational aesthetic, these complex

narratives invite viewers to engage at the level of formal analyst, dissecting the techniques used to convey spectacular displays of storytelling craft; this mode of formally aware viewing is highly encouraged by these programs, as their pleasures are embedded in a level of awareness that transcends the traditional focus on diegetic action that is typical of most mainstream popular narratives.

Individual episodes can trigger the operational aesthetic through narrative spectacle, but whole programs can also be predicated on such storytelling pyrotechnics, through either their larger arcs or their inherent structure. For an example of the former, *Alias* is a strong example of narrative complexity, juggling both ongoing and episodic stories of espionage with arcs of relationship dramas mapped onto both family and spy politics. But its boldest moments of narrative spectacle occur when the plot makes unforeseen sharp twists that cause the entire scenario to "reboot," changing the professional and interpersonal dynamics of nearly every character. The first, and arguably most effective, of these reboots occurred midway through the second season in the episode "Phase One," which aired in the high-profile post-Super Bowl time slot; over the course of this episode, *Alias*'s entire espionage scenario was reconfigured, with the main character's status as a double agent shifting to becoming an outright CIA agent, chasing down the same main villain but with different alliances and motives. Additionally, the relationships between characters transformed, with Sydney's innocent-bystander friend Francie being replaced by a transfigured nefarious agent and her long-simmering crush on Vaughn finally coming to fruition—all within one hour! While much of this reboot's effectiveness was in breathing life into a premise that may have been on the verge of becoming too repetitive, it also was impressive in how the producers were able to reconfigure the scenario in a way that was diegetically consistent (at least with the program's own outrageous norms of espionage technology and convoluted mythology), narratively engaging, and emotionally honest to the characters and relationships. Similar series revisions were pulled off in subsequent seasons of *Alias*, as well as in *Buffy* (through the introduction of Buffy's sister Dawn), *Angel* (with the heroes taking over their arch-enemy's law firm), and *Lost* (as the castaways left the island and discovered time travel). In each of these cases, audiences take pleasure not only in the diegetic twists but also in the exceptional storytelling techniques

needed to pull off such machinations—we thrill both at the stories being told and at the way in which their telling breaks television conventions.

Narrative spectacle can be built into the core scenarios of programs as well—24 is often heralded for its real-time narrative structure, with parallel story, discourse, and screen time frames (excepting commercial breaks and gaps between seasons). Even more interesting here is that it may be the only television series ever named for its storytelling technique, not in reference to its diegetic world or thematic concerns—the number 24 refers to nothing notable in the storyworld but rather to the number of hours (and episodes) needed to tell the story. Notably, the 2014 resurrection *24: Live Another Day* still retains the titular 24 reference, even though it only consists of 12 episodes and eventually did violate its intrinsic norm by including an ellipsis jumping forward in the final episode. *How I Met Your Mother* is also defined by its storytelling mode, with Ted allegedly telling his children the story referenced in the program's title via narrated flashbacks, but Ted only meets this legendary mother in the ninth season, as he is a serial digresser. Yet many fans continued to watch for years in hopes of the promised narrative resolution to solve the teased-at mystery of the mother's identity and role within the program's complex mythology. Other programs are similarly notable for their storytelling discourse (how the story is told) more than the story itself—*Boomtown* offers fairly typical police stories, but when told through changing, multiple, limited perspectives among an ensemble of characters, the cases become more nuanced and complex than they first appear. *Jack and Bobby* tells a typical tale of teen brothers, but through the conceit of frequent flash-forward interviews in the 2040s, a future tale emerges of one of them becoming U.S. president, with future events and relationships resonating with adolescent family drama. *Reunion* highlights a group of high school friends, with each weekly episode charting one year in their lives over a 20-year span, while *Day Break* limits its temporality to a repetitive loop. In all of these mostly short-lived series, what is arguably most compelling and distinctive is not the stories that they tell but the narrative strategies used in the telling.

Complex narratives also employ a number of storytelling devices that, while not unique to this mode, are used with such frequency and regularity as to become more acceptable narrative norms rather than

exceptional outliers. Analepses, or alterations in chronology, are not uncommon in conventional television, with flashbacks either serving to recount crucial narrative backstory (as a detective narrates the solution to a crime) or framing an entire episode's action in the past tense (such as the dramatization of Rob and Laura meeting on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*). Similarly, conventional programs have often used dream or fantasy sequences to explore possibilities of other scenarios (such as *Roseanne* reframed as a 1950s sitcom) or to probe a character's inner life (the experimental *St. Elsewhere* episode "Sweet Dreams"). Another device, found in episodes of conventional programs such as *All in the Family* and *Diff'rent Strokes*, is retelling the same story from multiple perspectives, often called the "*Rashomon* effect" after the landmark Kurosawa film. Voice-over narration is atypical in most television, but conventional programs such as *Dragnet* or *The Wonder Years* use it to set the emotional tone and provide expository transitions. Yet all of these devices, which vary from the "exceedingly obvious" mode of conventional television storytelling, typically maximize their obviousness by explicitly signaling them as differentiations from a norm, predicated by expository narration ("I remember it well . . .") or contrived scenarios (such as hypnosis, courtroom testimonies, or recollections over a photo album) to highlight how the series is using nonconventional conventions.

In contemporary complex television, such variations in storytelling strategies are more commonplace and signaled with much more subtlety or delay; these series are constructed without fear of temporary confusion for viewers. Fantasy sequences abound without clear demarcations or signals, as *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *Buffy*, and *Battlestar Galactica* all present visions of events that oscillate between character subjectivity and diegetic reality, playing with the ambiguous boundary to offer character depth, suspense, and comedic effect. Complex narration often breaks the fourth wall, whether through visually represented direct address (*Malcolm in the Middle*, *The Bernie Mac Show*, *The Office*) or more ambiguous voice-over that blurs the line between diegetic and nondiegetic (*Scrubs*, *Veronica Mars*, *Arrested Development*, *Desperate Housewives*), calling attention to its own breaking of convention. *Lost*, *Jack and Bobby*, *Boomtown*, and *How I Met Your Mother* offer analepses in nearly every episode with few orienting signals, while *Alias* and *The West Wing* frequently begin episodes with a teaser at the climax

of the story, then turn back the clock to explain the confusing situation with which the episode began, as discussed in the introduction. In all of these programs, the lack of explicit storytelling cues and signposts creates moments of disorientation, asking viewers to engage more actively to comprehend the story and rewarding regular viewers who have mastered each program's internal conventions of complex narration, as discussed in chapter 5. These strategies may be similar to formal dimensions of art cinema, but they manifest themselves in expressly popular contexts for mass audiences—we may be temporarily confused by moments of *Lost* or *Alias*, but these programs ask us to trust in the payoff that we will eventually arrive at a moment of complex but coherent comprehension, not the ambiguity and questioned causality typical of many art films.

The “Noël” episode of *West Wing* exemplifies the complex use of such storytelling strategies: the episode is framed by Josh Lyman’s therapy session to process his posttraumatic stress reactions to being shot, which allows for the conventions of repeated flashbacks via Josh’s narration. However, the flashbacks are rampant and not clearly signaled as chronological, with sound bridges between the present-tense therapy and past-tense events adding to a sense of disorientation that the episode uses to increase tension and anxiety. Additionally, we see frequent dramatizations of Josh cutting his hand on a glass, an accident he claims to have happened but his therapist correctly suspects is a lie masking a more self-destructive act; these lying flashbacks are not differentiated from other past events until the end of the episode, leaving the audience to decode the contradictions and confusing chronology. The episode climaxes with a five-minute sequence interweaving disjointed sound and image from five different time frames (including one that never actually happened), rhythmically edited to convey a robust emotional arc—a presentational mode more common to European art cinema than American television but ultimately in service of a coherent ongoing narrative. This sequence is set to a White House performance of Yo-Yo Ma playing a Bach cello suite, a musical choice that highlights complex television’s baroque style, with themes and variation, elaborate ornamentations, multiple threads weaving together in counterpoint, and an invitation to examine and appreciate formal systems and innovation rather than classical norms.³⁷ While much of the episode’s pleasure is serial, as the more

we know Josh, the more we can emotionally engage with his breakdown, the episode stands alone as a dramatically compelling character portrait (which won actor Bradley Whitford an Emmy), but only if we accept its distinct storytelling conventions, a competency that regular viewers learn over time. Complex television programs invite temporary disorientation and confusion, allowing viewers to build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement.

This need to gain competency in decoding stories and comprehending diegetic worlds extends across a number of contemporary media. Certainly videogames are predicated on learning how to understand and interact with a range of storyworlds and interfaces—nearly every game contains its own diegetic training module, as players learn to master the controls and expectations for this particular virtual world, as well as intuiting the procedural logics demanded by a given game.³⁸ Cinema has also seen the emergence of a popular cycle of “puzzle films” that require the audience to learn the particular rules of a film to comprehend its narrative; movies such as *The Sixth Sense*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Memento*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Adaptation*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Run Lola Run*, *The Matrix*, *The Prestige*, and *Inception* have all embraced a game aesthetic, inviting audiences to play along with the creators to crack the interpretive codes to make sense of their complex narrative strategies.³⁹ But crucially, the goal of these puzzle films is not to solve the mysteries ahead of time; rather, we want to be competent enough to follow their narrative strategies but still relish in the pleasures of being manipulated successfully. I doubt anyone who predicts the twists of these films could say that they enjoyed them more than the willing (but still active) spectator who gets taken on an exciting ride. Puzzle films invite us to observe the gears of the narrative mechanisms, even flaunting them in a display of storytelling spectacle—think of the climax of *Sixth Sense*, as the twist is revealed through flashbacks demonstrating the film’s mastery in fooling its viewers. Although few television programs have followed the puzzle-film model fully—individual episodes of *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, *Buffy*, *Scrubs*, and *Lost* have mimicked these films, which themselves are influenced by the seminal anthology television program *The Twilight Zone*—what seems to be a key goal across videogames, puzzle films, and complex television series is the desire to be both actively engaged in a story and successfully surprised through

storytelling manipulations. This is the operational aesthetic at work, enjoying the machine's results while also marveling at how it works.

Thus complex television encourages, and even at times necessitates, a new mode of viewer engagement. While fan cultures have long demonstrated intense engagement in storyworlds, policing backstory consistency, character unity, and internal logic in classic programs such as *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who*, contemporary programs focus this detailed dissection onto complex questions of plotting and enigmatic events in addition to storyworld and characters. We watch *Twin Peaks*, *The X-Files*, *Alias*, *Lost*, *Veronica Mars*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Dexter*, *Fringe*, or *The Killing* at least in part to try to crack each program's central enigmas—look at any online fan forum to see evidence of such sleuths at work. But as in any mystery-driven fiction, viewers want to be surprised and thwarted as well as satisfied by the internal logic of the story. In consuming such series, viewers find themselves both drawn into a compelling diegesis (as with all effective stories) and focused on the discursive processes of storytelling needed to achieve each program's complexity and mystery. Thus these programs convert many viewers into amateur narratologists, noting patterns and violations of convention, chronicling chronologies, and highlighting both inconsistencies and continuities across episodes and even series—I call this model of engagement *forensic fandom*, discussing such viewing practices more fully in chapter 8. While certainly audiences have always been active, most scholarly accounts of such reception processes focus on negotiations with television *content*, reconciling with the meanings and politics of Madonna videos or *The Cosby Show*. Complex programming invites audiences to engage actively at the level of *form* as well, highlighting the conventionality of traditional television and exploring the possibilities of both innovative long-term storytelling and creative intraepisode discursive strategies.

Many of these programs outright demand such a level of engagement—it is hard to imagine how someone might watch *24*, *Lost*, or *Arrested Development* without noting their formal innovations and considering how their use of real-time narration, atemporality, or reflexive storytelling respectively impacts the narrative action. You cannot simply watch these programs as an unmediated window to a realistic storyworld into which you might escape; rather, complex television demands

that you pay attention to the window frames, asking you to reflect on how it provides partial access to the diegesis and how the panes of glass distort your vision on the unfolding action. Interestingly, these programs can be quite popular with a mass audience (*Lost*, *Seinfeld*, *X-Files*) or have narrow appeals to cult viewers willing to invest the effort into the decoding process (*Arrested Development*, *Veronica Mars*, *Firefly*)—while certainly many of these cult series have demanding narratives that may seem inaccessible to a mass audience, the striking popularity of some complex programs suggests that a mass audience can engage with and enjoy quite challenging and intricate storytelling. This is not to downplay the importance of traditional pleasures of character depth, neat resolution of plots, storyworld consistency, action-oriented excitement, and humor—complex television at its best employs all of these elements while adding the operational possibilities of formal engagement. These levels of formal engagement and immersive storytelling reinforce each other, as articulated by Robert King, cocreator of *The Good Wife*: “The show wants to embrace complexity and baroqueness, because that helps hide magic tricks in terms of plot devices you don’t see coming.”⁴⁰ *Lost* similarly works with these dual levels, as it creates sincere emotional connections to characters who are immersed in an outlandish situation that, as the series progressed, toggled between genre identities of action/adventure serial, science fiction, paranormal mystery, and religious allegory, all constructed by an elaborate narrational structure far more complex than anything seen before on mainstream American television.

This account of narrative complexity suggests that a new paradigm of television storytelling has emerged over the past two decades, redefining the boundary between episodic and serial forms, with a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling mechanics, and demanding intensified viewer engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness. By exploring the formal structure of this mode of storytelling, we can appreciate connections with broader concerns of media industries and technologies, creative techniques, and practices of everyday life, all of which resonate deeply with contemporary cultural transformations tied to the emergence of digital media and more interactive forms of communication and entertainment. A common underlying trend that manifests itself both in television narratives and many digital forms such as videogames and webpages is a need for procedural

literacy, a recognition on the part of consumers that any mode of expression follows particular protocols and that to fully engage with that form, we must master its underlying procedures. This manifests itself explicitly in videogames, in which procedural mastery is a requirement for success, and web use, as we have come in a very short period of time to accept linking, searching, and bookmarking as naturalized behaviors. For television, contemporary complex narratives foreground the skills of narrative comprehension and media literacy that most viewers have developed but rarely put to use beyond rudimentary means. To understand this phenomenon, we must use poetic analysis to chart its structure and boundaries, while incorporating other methods to explore how this narrative mode intersects with dimensions of creative industries, technological innovations, participatory practices, and viewer comprehension. That is the goal of the rest of this book.

2

Beginnings

The beginning of a narrative is an essential moment, establishing much of what will follow, including whether any given consumer is motivated to keep consuming. If we want to understand contemporary serial television storytelling, we need to account for how programs begin. In this chapter, I explore a range of techniques that various complex television series use to launch their storyworlds, and I highlight how viewers might engage with these techniques, both for the specialized audience within the media industry and the broader set of viewers watching at home. Via a close analysis of one exemplary television pilot, *Veronica Mars*, we can get a better sense of the poetic importance of serial beginnings for a broad array of programming.

All series start somewhere. Such a statement should be self-evident, but it is actually a bit more complicated than it might seem. First off, to highlight a beginning is to suggest the parallel of an ending—but as I discuss in chapter 10, serial television concludes far less frequently than it commences. Second, for daytime soap operas and other long-running series such as *Doctor Who* or *The Simpsons*, textual beginnings are so far removed from present-day experience that few contemporary viewers actually experienced them (at least in sequence), making the notion of a clear origin point of an ongoing story moot for most viewers. Even with shorter-lived serial television programs, viewers frequently enter a series midstream, suggesting that watching the beginning of a story is less uniform than we presume. One of the goals of season openers for most ongoing series is to invite fresh viewers in, enabling them to follow the action midstream and thus serving often as microbeginnings to reorient old viewers and to welcome in new ones. So any discussion of the beginnings of a serial narrative must admit that viewers can and do enter into the story at places other than the designated starting line. However, given the rise of the boxed DVD model that enables viewers to consume a series chronologically, viewers are now more likely to

start at the beginning of a series, as they recognize that many complex television programs are designed to be watched from the start. And for commercial television programs, that start is the unusual entity called the pilot.

The Educational and Inspirational Poetics of Pilots

A television pilot must accomplish numerous tasks. Within the industry, it serves as the test run for a potential series, providing the blueprint for the program going forward as well as assembling the cast, crew, and production routines that will be responsible for creating the ongoing series. A pilot is also an argument for a program's viability, first for the audience of network executives fishing for a hit and then for prospective home viewers who must be persuaded to keep watching. A pilot presents an encapsulation of what a series might be like on an ongoing basis, while providing an exceptional degree of narrative exposition to orient viewers within an often complex storyworld. It must introduce a cast of characters via shorthand, such that their personalities and relationships are clear within moments, but in original enough ways that they do not seem like stereotypes or overly familiar clones of conventional characters. It must establish the program's genre as a means of mapping viewers' horizon of expectations, while making the case for why the series will not be "just another" conventional example of what they have seen before. Through all of these facets, pilots must encapsulate the strange alchemy required by commercial television: each new series must be simultaneously familiar and original. Thus pilots are at once the most atypical episodes of commercial television and the highly conventional means by which television series get sold to both networks and viewers.¹

I contend that the chief function of a television pilot is to teach us how to watch the series and, in doing so, to make us want to keep watching—thus successful pilots are simultaneously *educational* and *inspirational*. Pilots must orient viewers to the intrinsic norms that the series will employ, presenting its narrative strategies so we can attune ourselves to its storytelling style. Frequently such storytelling strategies are presented in a pilot's opening minutes, providing an immediate invitation to watch a particular way, and thus we can understand

much of a pilot's ability to educate and inspire by looking at the opening moments of a number of examples. An interesting parallel here can be found with the opening section of a videogame, which typically offers a tutorial for how to play the game and navigate the controls, as well as setting players' expectations for what type of experience they will have (if they choose to keep playing). A game tutorial level is typically the prologue to a bounded text released in a single package, although it might be updated to fix bugs or add additional content, whereas a television pilot launches a text that is still in the process of being made. The tutorial of the pilot thus applies not only to viewers but to the producers as well—the pilot locks in a number of creative choices that a series must either follow strictly or deviate from in an embrace of discontinuity. One of the challenges of any ongoing series is to find the balance between following its initial template and discovering itself through its ongoing development.

As one of the early landmarks of complex television, *Twin Peaks'* pilot provides an important template for the role of opening moments: it begins with two and a half minutes of opening credits combining languidly paced shots of a lumber mill with dreamy theme music, demanding our viewing patience and immediately setting a meditative tone.² To viewers today, these credits are a striking anomaly, both in their length and placement, as most contemporary programs either forgo opening credit sequences entirely or precede shorter sequences with a teaser sequence to immerse viewers in the narrative. *Twin Peaks'* pilot follows the credit sequence with an opening scene that both pays off and disrupts what preceded it: we open on Josie preparing for her day in a continuation of the initial languid tone. We then follow Pete to the shore, where he finds Laura Palmer's dead body, iconically "wrapped in plastic," and calls the sheriff's office with a comedically clueless reply from receptionist Lucy. Within the episode's first five minutes, we are taught to expect jarring juxtapositions in style, ironic undercutting of serious moments, and a dreamy tone leaving viewers unsure how to emotionally respond to the action—is Pete's discovery played for laughs, melodrama, or both? These ambiguous tendencies are reinforced throughout the pilot, which also establishes more than a dozen characters, key plot points and relationships, and the intrinsic norm that each episode takes place within one day of story time. The program's open-ended

mystery and intriguing tone inspires viewers to want to keep watching, while the narrative form and style teaches us how to engage with the ongoing series.

Opening moments of other pilots demonstrate their similarly dual educational and inspirational roles. Pilots for complex comedies must establish their style of humor as well as storytelling form. *Arrested Development* begins with a scene on a boat, with Ron Howard's off-screen narrator introducing the characters, graphic captions providing their names and roles, and techniques such as freeze-frames, flashbacks, and cutaways to newspaper clippings, photos, and maps to create a highly reflexive, self-aware, pseudodocumentary television style, all within the first two minutes of the series. The opening sequence also plants seeds for *Arrested Development*'s complex narrative structures, as Lindsey comments that she has the same blouse as a "gay pirate" on another boat—later in the episode, we learn that it is actually her husband, Tobias, dressed as a pirate and wearing her actual blouse, drawing a connection across narrative time both as foreshadowing and delayed gratification of a joke, techniques that become even more ornate as the series progresses. The episode establishes a comedic style with varying streams of information, where the on-screen visuals (including graphics and cutaways) may contradict or reinforce the characters' actions—as when Lucille Bluth says, "I love all my children equally," immediately followed by a flashback to her saying, "I don't care for Gob," earlier that day—or serve as a callback to previous moments, as well as music cues and voice-over undercutting or commenting on narrative action, all for a joke. The pilot makes it clear that the program's style and narrative structure will be unconventional and demand attention, setting our expectations for what is to come, even as the series becomes much more self-assured and effective in its complex playfulness in subsequent episodes. Although it was not a highly viewed pilot in its first broadcast, it is not surprising that many viewers were turned off by the need for careful attention and scrutiny in a manner atypical of most sitcoms; the episode inspired only a small niche of viewers to keep watching but created a cult-like fervor among that group.

Another complex comedy pilot establishing its serial norms and core concept is *How I Met Your Mother*. The episode opens with a graphic reading, "the year 2030," over a shot of two teenagers looking into the

camera, when the off-screen voice of "Future Ted" says, "Kids, I'm going to tell you an incredible story: the story of how I met your mother." Although stating the series title in the pilot's first line is a bit heavy-handed, this opening line establishes both the contours of the series story and the mode of its telling: we know instantly that *How I Met Your Mother* will use self-conscious techniques such as on-screen graphics and voice-over, as well as framing the narrative scope for us. It proceeds to demonstrate an attitude toward self-mockery, as the daughter asks, "Is this going to take awhile?" with Future Ted quickly saying, "Yes"—an answer that seems even more apt as the series took nine seasons to arrive at Ted's much-anticipated meeting of the titular mother. The narration then sets the stage as "25 years ago," as we are introduced to the program's key settings and five main present-day characters, encapsulating their relationships and backstories through reflexive devices such as freeze-frames, embedded flashbacks within flashbacks, split screens, and the voice of Future Ted answering questions posed in the present-day story. The pilot also references the program's transmedia strategy, as Barney mentions that he will be writing about something on his blog, an in-character paratext on CBS.com where the fictional character reflects on each episode's events. Additionally, the pilot establishes a number of running gags and references that appear throughout the series, such as a blue French horn that Ted steals for Robin, or catchphrases such as Barney's "Suit up!" Most importantly, the episode seems to be building toward a romance between Ted and Robin, narrating the tale of their meeting and first date, but ends with Future Ted telling his kids, "That's how I met your Aunt Robin," and promising that the true story of meeting their mother will take a while.

The *How I Met Your Mother* pilot establishes its retrospective frame story to create an embedded narrative enigma of the mother's identity, with key unknowns lodged in the temporal gap between 2030 and the present-day story starting in 2005. This flashback narration creates the sense that standard forward-moving narrative statements in the present-day story can function as narrative enigmas due to the additional information provided by Future Ted. As the first season progresses, with Ted pursuing a relationship with Robin, we know from the pilot's future reveal that this is not the titular relationship motivating the frame story and are thus encouraged to analyze the ongoing series for potential clues

as to the mother's identity, a task that forensic fans embraced via discussion forums and sites such as the *How I Met Your Mother* wiki. While these embedded enigmas are not the conspiratorial mysteries found more commonly on dramas such as *The X-Files* or *Lost*, they do provide a point of engagement for many fans, adding a layer of reflexive analysis for fans to discuss and point toward the operational aesthetic in focusing viewers on the program's storytelling mechanics via its self-conscious narrative devices, playful reversals, and nearly endless deferral of the title's promised plotline. This storytelling structure serves to differentiate *How I Met Your Mother* from other series about a group of white friends in their late 20s hanging out in New York, most notably *Friends*, as the program mixes that well-established formula with more complex narrative devices to engage viewers in the operational aesthetic over long-term enigmas. The pilot sets this stage effectively and efficiently, both educating viewers on the program's intrinsic norms and central characters and inspiring them to keep viewing for both its effective use of comedy and its reflexive narrative enigmas.

Dramas can similarly establish their narrative norms quickly within a pilot. *Alias* opens with a scene of Sydney Bristow, with bright red hair, being beaten and tortured by Chinese soldiers as they all argue in unsubtitled Mandarin. The scene plays out for a minute, ending with her handcuffed to a chair and staring at a door, where seemingly her interrogator will arrive. We then cut to another door, where a stereotypically crusty professor enters into a wood-paneled classroom to collect exams from students, including a brown-haired, healthy Sydney Bristow. The story proceeds forward from this point without clear temporal, spatial, or character orientation to explain this transformation, allowing viewers to piece it together as the episode continues; we realize that Sydney is both an astoundingly proficient and stylish secret agent (who ends up imprisoned in Taiwan on a mission at the episode's climax) and a down-to-earth graduate student. These opening moments teach us to expect disorientation (both temporal and linguistic), a strategy that the pilot script by J. J. Abrams makes clear is by design: the script describes the arrival of the professor with the action directions, "Is this a flashback? A flash-forward? All answers in time. But meanwhile . . ."³ This moment also instructs us to anticipate unexpected and unexplained juxtapositions between Sydney's dual careers—from the start, such purposeful

confusion is established as one of *Alias*'s intrinsic norms, as the program invites us to keep watching and to pay attention to try to sort it all out, a mode of engagement that becomes more essential as the plots twist and reverse throughout the pilot and subsequent episodes. This device of starting a pilot at a moment of climax and looping back to explain how we arrived at this point has become popular for many complex series, including *Breaking Bad*, *Damages*, *Revenge*, and *Veronica Mars*, as discussed more later.

Other dramas use their opening moments to establish their own unconventional intrinsic norms. *Pushing Daisies* opens with a shot of an exaggeratedly lush field of bright yellow daisies, with a young boy and his dog running in slow motion. A British man's voice-over says, "At this very moment in the town of Coeur d'Coeurs, Young Ned was 9 years, 27 weeks, 6 days, and 3 minutes old. His dog Digby was 3 years, 2 weeks, 6 days, 5 hours and 9 minutes old. . . . And not a minute older." At that moment, Digby is hit by a truck, marking a clear tonal blend of lush stylized beauty and stark presentation of death, as framed by a storybook-style narrative voice, juxtapositions that proved to be a hallmark for the series. The narrator is a key intrinsic norm, providing an authoritative voice from outside the storyworld to allow for swift and densely packed narrative momentum, while providing specific details (such as the precise age of characters), often prefaced with the phrase, "The facts were these." The sequence goes on to explain the precise premise for the supernatural scenario, with Ned's gift to reanimate the dead with a touch and the rule that another touch would kill the reanimated person or animal; while portraying the emotionally scarring moments from his youth when he learned about his power. *Pushing Daisies'* "Piellette" faces the challenge of needing to convey a very elaborate fantasy premise, to establish an unconventional storytelling mode and visual style, and to create a compelling emotional hook to a series that could otherwise be dismissed as a whimsical novelty. It succeeds in all of these tasks, while also creating a core model of weekly mysteries layered with larger character and plot arcs, as well as distinguishing itself as a truly unique program within a medium that rarely sees such distinctiveness in style. The most successful pilots announce what they are, providing a template for both the producers and viewers to move forward within the ongoing series.

24 is another example of an unconventional series needing to teach viewers how to watch in its opening moments. After the pilot begins with a digital-LED image of the title *24*, a voice-over reads the on-screen text, “The following takes place between midnight and 1:00 a.m., on the day of the California presidential primary. Events occur in real time.” Not only does this explanation highlight the importance of temporality as a storytelling element, but the simultaneous text and voice-over makes it clear that the series will be explicit in its narrative strategies, not allowing for ambiguity or confusion. The scene cuts to an image of a cityscape, with a caption reading, “Kuala Lumpur, Local Time 4:00:27,” with the seconds ticking forward to continue the focus on temporality and explicit narration; the shot then compresses into a split-screen window juxtaposing the city with a crowded street scene along with the credits of the actors to introduce the program’s dominant stylistic norm of split screen. The sequence continues in split screen, cutting into dual medium shots of the same character, who turns his head simultaneously in the dual images; this unusual effect teaches viewers that *24* will use split screen to present multiple perspectives on the same action, both creating redundancy and maximizing viewer knowledge. In the sequence leading up to Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU) agent Rovner transmitting intelligence about a planned assassination attempt, the nearly constant split screen provides no essential new story information or perspectives but rather serves as a stylistic tutorial of how the series will visualize stories. This opening scene then spans across the globe to Los Angeles, with a caption indicating the local time as just past midnight, teaching viewers that temporality will be constantly in “real time,” while cuts between scenes will only be spatial, avoiding typical ellipses of time in lieu of space. Although not much “happens” in this opening scene in terms of character or plot, it serves an essential function to orient viewers to the program’s unique narrative style and its repertoire of graphic devices.

Some pilots establish themselves clearly in some ways but confound expectations in others. *Terriers* is one of the most critically adored single-season series of recent vintage, with a distinct tone and style that is clearly established in the opening of the pilot—the episode starts with scruffy friends Hank and Britt chatting idly about being broke and having songs stuck in your head, as they prepare for some sort of job,

seemingly as part of a pool service business but soon revealed to be a theft of a man’s dog. One of these idle conversation topics turns out to be more consequential in the long run, as Hank recalls finding an empty carton of milk in his fridge but cannot remember drinking it—although he attributes this to early senility, this moment actually foreshadows a future storyline. Such subtle cues toward future plot developments are central to *Terriers*’ storytelling mode, where shaggy, loose banter often contains important narrative information that reveals itself in hindsight. The opening also speaks to one of the program’s challenges in finding an audience, as the title seemed to indicate that it would be about dogs, and the initial dog-stealing caper might mislead viewers to think dogs will be a more central focus of the ongoing plot. The fact that the men are low-rent private investigators who get embroiled in high-stakes real estate corruption is revealed quite slowly, as the pilot invites us to become part of their daily routine of witty banter and hustling for money, rather than to get inspired by a compelling narrative hook. For many viewers (including me), this was a more rewarding approach, as the palpable friendship drove the action that eventually became quite complex and narratively rich, but the program’s minuscule ratings suggest that this appeal was far too narrow to sustain itself on commercial television, especially when coupled with the misleading title and deceptive opening moments.

Sometimes a pilot presents its intrinsic norms in ways that viewers might not recognize as such, especially when they involve episodic routines. *Six Feet Under*’s pilot opens with family patriarch Nathaniel Fisher dying in a brutal automobile accident, with the rest of the episode portraying the consequences of his death for his family and their funeral home business. As the series goes on, it becomes clear that Nathaniel’s death was the first of a pattern: every episode begins with someone’s death, which becomes that week’s stand-alone plot for the Fisher family business. Later the pattern becomes more elaborate, as discussed in chapter 1, with misdirections and thwarted expectations, occasional deaths of characters already established in the series, and one exceptional birth, but the pattern was launched in the pilot’s opening minutes. Similarly, *Lost*’s pilot established the structure of interwoven flashbacks off the island—in the pilot, flashbacks were just to the airplane prior to it crashing, focused on three characters’ different perspectives, but that

model clearly could not be sustained for long. Going forward, most episodes centered flashbacks on one character's pre-island life, interwoven with island events in the narrative present, until the end of the third season radically altered *Lost*'s storytelling structure. Nevertheless, the pilot developed the intrinsic norm that we would leave the island to expand the time and space seen within the series and established the visual and sonic cues for how the program switches to and from flashbacks.

Awake debuted in spring 2012 with a highly acclaimed first episode that highlights the challenges and possibilities of complex drama pilots in teaching us how to watch and inspiring us to keep watching. Some programs face the burden of explaining their defining premise, and the premise of *Awake* is seriously high concept: police detective Michael Britten survives a deadly car accident with his family, and when he sleeps, he switches between one reality in which his wife was killed but his teenage son survived and another in which his son died but his wife did not. The premise is easy to describe, but it is hard to convey what it means as a series—the most common refrain from critics prior to the program's debut was praising its pilot but doubting how it could work as an ongoing serial. A close analysis of the pilot suggests that the answer is provided less in terms of the concept and more in terms of the tone, characters, and approach to storytelling.

As always with an effective pilot, the opening sequence sets parameters for what is to come. The episode opens with the car crash, presented with painful violent energy culminating in three shots: unconscious wife Hannah, unconscious son Rex, husband Michael waking up. This last shot pulls back and rotates in corkscrew fashion to show the inverted wreck of the car, visualizing Michael's world turned upside down. Over this shot, we hear a voice—soon to be revealed as Michael's therapist, Dr. Lee—say, "So tell me how this works." Michael's voice replies, "I don't know. I close my eyes, I open them. Same as you." We then cut to a shot of Hannah and Michael grieving at a funeral, clearly suggesting that Rex has died. Lee's voice then says, "Let's just start at the beginning," to which Michael says, "No." We cut to Michael sitting in his therapy session to continue his line, "let's start it right now."

This first 50 seconds is not particularly rich in narrative details—we learn that there was a car accident and that presumably Rex was killed in the accident—but it does provide some key clues on how to

watch the series. First, the camera work and editing is established as unconventionally stylized and free roaming across time frames without explicit motivation, encouraging us to pay attention to visual style in a way that few network programs do. The dialogue sets up two poles for how to approach the story that will prove to be crucial—Dr. Lee takes an analytic tactic, as befits his profession, trying to understand how things work and to grapple with the situation's origins. Michael wants to live in the now, downplaying that anything unusual is happening to him. These poles of engagement help structure the program's narrative, as his two therapists (one in each reality) want to make rational sense of what is happening to Michael as he flips between reality and a presumed dream, while Michael just wants to enjoy his split lives, in which he effectively can live without permanent loss. As he says at the end of the pilot, "When it comes to letting one of them go, I have no desire to ever make progress." Contrasting with the midstory start of *Alias* and other pilots, *Awake*'s insistence that we begin in the present tense seems to distinguish itself from other high-concept complex television series.

These dual approaches mirror how we might engage with the unusual narrative scenario as well—we can try to make rational sense of it to solve a mystery ("so tell me how this works"), or we can enjoy the now by accepting the premise as it is, not as a problem to be solved. Much of complex television fosters a mode of forensic fandom in which viewers are encouraged to solve such high-concept puzzles, to ask "why?" and presume that there is an answer to be found by drilling down and analyzing, much like with therapy or academic analysis. But *Awake*'s pilot invites viewers to side with Michael, not only as the story's protagonist but as a role model for accepting what we have been given without wanting to know the reasons why—as viewers, Michael asks that we do not focus on cracking the enigmas of what is "really" going on here or deduce which reality is real. The rest of the pilot focuses our attention on what matters most: Michael works on rebuilding his relationships with his son and wife in the wake of the massive loss that each has suffered, but he was spared from, at least in part. Michael learns how to make his condition an asset for doing his job, as his experiences in each world seem to inform the cases he solves in the other. He develops coping strategies to orient himself across realities with colored bracelets as visual reminders, a technique mirrored in the dual color schemes and

lighting tints that the series uses impressively to demarcate (and subtly blend) the two realms.

In many ways, the pilot situates *Awake* within a specific subgenre: the supernatural detective drama. Although very different in tone and style, there is a parallel here with *Medium*, which focused on Allison DuBois, a psychic who worked with the police to solve crimes. On *Medium*, there was never any issue as to whether Allison really is a psychic or how her powers worked—we simply accepted the fantastic premise that she communicated with the dead, and we enjoyed watching how her powers offered a twist on procedural cop plots and impacted her personal life. *Pushing Daisies* operates similarly, with no effort to explain why Ned possesses his supernatural gift but focusing on how that talent affects his life and relationships moving forward. Michael in *Awake* can be seen similarly as a character with a special, somewhat inexplicable gift that both enriches and complicates his life. One way to read the pilot is to conceive of the series's overarching narrative not to "start at the beginning" to understand what is happening but to "start it right now" to understand how his condition matters to him and others in his life going forward—in other words, the pilot tries to focus attention on narrative statements instead of narrative enigmas.

Other high-concept series in recent years, such as *FlashForward*, *The Event*, and *Day Break*, all fell into the trap where concerns about a compelling central mystery overrode all other storytelling imperatives, such as characterization, relationships, and a clear sense of narrative tone and place. Often, these series launch with what is termed a "premise pilot," in which the chief storytelling goal is to set the narrative gears in motion to establish the program's core narrative scenario—subsequent episodes will differ dramatically once the core situation is in place. *Awake*'s pilot starts midstream with Michael already immersed in his narrative situation, while still educating viewers about this scenario sufficiently to make sure we understand the premise—we never see Michael experience his first "cross-reality" awakening. Instead, *Awake*'s pilot suggests through its compelling writing, performances, visual style, and emotional realism that the series cares more about going forward with its character-driven storytelling than it does about solving the mystery; however, the pull of forensic fandom might make it seem like the goal of the series is to provide answers to its mysterious enigma, rather than

to explore its consequences in the lives of characters. A pilot is always a promissory note for what is to come (if ratings are high enough), more than a blueprint to be followed, and much can change as a series develops. *Awake*'s pilot asks us to accept Michael's wishes by accepting him for who he is, not trying to solve his problem, and letting viewers become immersed in both of his lives. As the series progressed over its single season, *Awake* solved some serialized mysteries involving Michael's accident but also refused to explain the core premise of his dual lives.

This survey of different pilot strategies has focused on some of the most acclaimed examples of debut episodes, hailed by fans and critics alike. Of course, many pilots start in a very different place than where they end up, as programs frequently take a while to find their footing. This is most true in comedies, in which ensembles often need time to develop a rapport and writers learn which relationship dynamics work best. The pilot to *Parks and Recreation* looks little like the series that many people hail as one of contemporary television's best sitcoms, as the characters were more extreme in their personalities and the action focused on an overarching plot arc of building a park, a plot that was dropped quickly in the second season. *Cougar Town*'s pilot reflects the program's initial concept of a middle-aged woman dating younger men, a concept that was quickly jettisoned after a few episodes, and even the pilot for the all-time classic *Seinfeld* shows little of the structural flair or intricate dialogue that later typified the series. Dramas can also start quite differently than they end up, as with *Justified* beginning with more of an episodic procedural focus until the series started to emphasize longer plot arcs. The series made Boyd Crowder into an ongoing foil for Raylan Givens, a shift motivated by the producers' choice to keep Boyd alive after his planned death in the pilot, due to the strength of Walton Goggins's performance and the actor's subsequent availability. *Dollhouse* aired a first episode that downplayed its long-term plot arcs and conspiracies instead of creator Joss Whedon's more serialized original pilot, a shift demanded by the Fox network—the original pilot was included on DVD, and fans encouraged new viewers to start with it for a more authorially sanctioned version of the series, which grew more serialized than the aired first episode had suggested. While we could certainly learn much by examining pilots that fail to reflect their subsequent series

or that fail altogether in attracting an audience or even making it to the air, to understand the way complex television programs can launch with effective momentum, it is more instructive to analyze an exemplary case of a serial beginning.

"These Questions Need Answers": *Veronica Mars*'s Pilot in Slow Motion

The pilot episode of *Veronica Mars* is a remarkable piece of television. It manages to introduce more than a dozen characters and relationships, to probe numerous backstories, to plant the seeds for three season-long story arcs, to establish a genre mixture of teen melodrama and film noir, and to convey a tone combining complex mystery, snarky humor, relationship drama, and social commentary—all within a running time of just over 40 minutes. To understand the educational and inspirational strategies employed by *Veronica Mars*, we need to zoom in closely on the pilot's formal mechanics and structure, detailing the strategies used to begin the narrative as a microcosm of the series as a whole, an example of the broader function of pilots, and a window onto the ways that a hypothetical new viewer might make sense of this serialized beginning. Such close analysis can also help us understand the complex intersection of gender and genre that *Veronica Mars* plays with so compellingly, an aspect that becomes clearer after a slow-motion walkthrough of the episode's storytelling strategies.⁴

When approaching *Veronica Mars*'s pilot, there is a complication—the episode aired on UPN originally on September 22, 2004, in a different form than the version released on the first-season DVD that came out a year later. The most important difference between the two versions concerns how each opens, which is crucial to the function of pilots. The UPN-aired pilot begins in the sunny parking lot of Neptune High, with Veronica's voice-over setting the scene, which features class conflict and teen politics in beautiful Southern California.⁵ This scene was pushed back to after the opening credits in the DVD version, which starts instead with a precredit flash-forward to Veronica staking out the seedy Camelot Motel along with a highly noir-style voice-over narration, a moment that will be returned to at the 18-minute mark of the DVD version, echoing the "in medias res" strategy from *Alias* discussed

earlier. Yet another version might be imagined from the original pilot script available on creator Rob Thomas's website—this script structurally mirrors the DVD version, although with a number of changed names such as the town of Playa de Costa instead of Neptune and Logan Hewitt instead of Logan Echolls, a few altered plot points, and saltier language and content more appropriate for Thomas's original pitch for cable distribution rather than a broadcast network.⁶ Or we might seek out the original unaired pilot that UPN bought, which circulated among television critics and in bootleg versions online, following the structure of the DVD version but with a few minor differences in casting and dialogue.

I have chosen to focus on the DVD version as my analytic object, not because of its status as Thomas's "preferred" final edit but rather because the series exists beyond the time frame of its initial airing, and any attempt to revisit the narrative is likely to turn to the published DVDs.⁷ While certainly the original aired version set the stage for the program's small but dedicated initial fan base, our long-term engagement with the series will treat the DVDs as the permanent lasting text for viewers. However, we can learn something from these changes. UPN's decision to eliminate the opening flash-forward was certainly trying to make the series easier to comprehend, avoiding the temporal leap that might confuse a naive viewer. But it also shifts its initial genre emphasis—by starting with the high school scene, the broadcast version cues viewers that this will be a series about teenagers, with a brave and active heroine guiding us through the perils of adolescence. As Thomas said in an interview, "The network handed me a note that basically said that since the show is about high school, it should start in the high school. . . . They were sure that getting young people to watch would be too tough with the original pilot."⁸ Thus even though UPN bought the series on the basis of the original pilot, the network reimagined it to fit the genre emphasis that it felt better suited its brand and target audience.

A close look at the DVD version, following the template of the script and unaired original pilot, reveals a vastly different genre tone, starting with a dire proclamation via Veronica's voice-over that locates the opening far from the confines of high school drama: "I'm never getting married. You want an absolute? Well, there it is." The televisual style helps set the tone, with the mellow bass groove of Air's instrumental "La

Femme D'Argent" (a music cue that Thomas specified in his original script) accompanying a slow crane up on the late-night scene outside the Camelot Motel, highlighting the red neon glow of the "No Vacancy" sign. The visuals cut to a shot of a draped window with a silhouetted couple having sex, while the voice-over says, "Veronica Mars, spinster. I mean, what's the point. Sure, there's the initial primal drive. Ride it out." For the first-time viewer, the impulse is to try to piece together the emerging story information from the scattered textual cues, following a cognitive process I discuss in chapter 5. We now know that we are hearing Veronica's voice but do not have much to help orient us as to where we are and who this Veronica Mars character might be. Might she be the long-haired passionate woman seen atop her lover in this shadowed shot? The language of "primal urge" and "ride it out" suggests an erotic link, while Veronica's emotionally detached vocal tone suggests a more distant observational role.

Our hypotheses shift along with the camera, as a continuous shot pans right to follow a man in an ill-fitting feminine bathrobe walking by the window and descending the stairs to fill his ice bucket. Veronica continues, "Better yet? Ignore it. Sooner or later, the people you love let you down. And here's where it ends up: sleazy men, cocktail waitresses, cheap motels on the wrong side of town. And a soon-to-be ex-spouse wanting a bigger piece of the settlement pie." This sequence directs our attention away from the shadowy lovers and toward the larger significance of the Camelot Motel, whose mythical name evokes a reference point of a glossy surface with hidden secrets of infidelity and betrayal. Veronica cues us that these people are merely stand-ins for a larger situation of adultery and distrust, thematic signifiers rather than individual characters. This moment highlights one key task of a pilot: sorting out which people are characters and which are simply people inhabiting the world, more like props or set decoration than actual characters. The continuous camera movement helps establish a broader narrative impulse toward mystery and problem solving, as we seek answers to questions that are then redirected and reframed, often away from red herrings and misleading dead ends. And the sequence helps us rank the relative reliability of the different sources of information: we trust what we see, but Veronica's voice-over appears to be more authoritative in helping us interpret and prioritize the images. Thus we view the

visuals as objectively true, but the voice-over provides the preferred subjective approach toward the action that includes us among Veronica's intimate confidants.

The next sequence solidifies this relationship. The visuals jump to a reverse angle nestled in the C of the neon Camelot sign, with the other side of the "No Vacancy" sign centered over the deserted street, save for four parked cars. The camera slowly zooms in, but after only one second, it cuts to a medium shot of one of the cars, continuing the zooming pattern in a somewhat disorienting jump edit. The voice-over ties the action to our protagonist: "That's where I come in." This clichéd bit of dialogue evokes film noir, although it might be more directly derived from the noir-influenced television crime drama *Dragnet*.⁹ Veronica's line clearly sets up her authority as an expert on adultery and betrayal, an expertise that will later be revealed as involving more than a professional knowledge, and coalesces all of the previous film noir cues: the sleazy motel, the surveillant gaze, tawdry affairs, and the cynical worldview. Just 40 seconds into the series, we already have a clear genre-demarcation and an evocative persona for our titular narrator, who thus far seems exceptional primarily for being a woman in a masculine-dominated genre.

What we do not yet know is that Veronica is in high school, the key revelation that UPN sought to foreground through its edit. The next shot alludes to this aspect of her persona, as we enter the car on a close-up of a book titled *Calculus of a Single Variable*. The book's connotative meaning will matter more later, as we learn of Veronica's attributes as a singular free agent with a talent for problem solving, and she will be a key variable within a number of puzzling calculations—in fact, "*Calculus of a Single Variable*" would be an apt title for the episode as a whole. For now, it offers a small enigmatic detail in an otherwise genre-consistent storyworld. As the shot drifts from the book toward a camera, Veronica continues, "\$40 an hour is cheap compared to the long-term financial security sordid photography can secure for you. Your offspring. Your next lover." We are still deep in the milieu of noir, as Veronica reaches for a steel thermos—a concession to the teen drama, as were it a hard-boiled adult noir, she would probably be drinking whiskey out of a flask. The first bit of Veronica we see is her right hand, which is adorned with an ornately designed thumb ring. When paired with her antimarriage

proclamation, the thumb ring instantly marks Veronica as a nonconformist with her own individual style. In contrast to the feminine norm of wedding and engagement rings marking a coupled status, Veronica's thumb ring highlights her status as both single and variable.

The shot follows the thermos as Veronica pours herself a cup of coffee. A seven-second pause in the narration accompanies our first glimpse of Veronica's face, giving us time to drink in the close-up sight. Certainly she is young, but we cannot be sure of an age yet—actress Kristen Bell was 24 at the time of the program's debut but easily passed for younger. She looks off-screen to her left, and the pause in narration gives us time to do the spatial calculations to gather that her viewpoint is the perspective from the first shots and that it is she who is surveilling the lurid action at the Camelot, an investigative activity consistent with the noir style. The earlier voice-over, point-of-view shot, and facial close-up confirm that our perspective is the same as Veronica's, making her our focalizing guide to this still-emerging narrative universe.

Bell's youthful beauty contradicts her cynical, cold narration, which continues as she pours and drinks some coffee: "But do us a favor if it's you in there: dispense with the cuddling. This motel tryst, it is what it is. Make it quick. The person sitting in the car across the street might have a calculus exam in five . . . make that four hours, and she can't leave until she gets the money shot." This sequence helps narrow down the possibilities of Veronica's narrative status and identity. Her glance to the car clock as she corrects the timetable for her exam grounds the voice-over within the present-tense thoughts of the character, ruling out a retrospective commentary on the action. The mention of the calculus exam identifies her as a student, although she could be either advanced high school or college, and strengthens the link between the textbook and the character. Most importantly, we realize that Veronica leads a double life—private eye by night, student by day—setting up the tension between the dual worlds that will define the series.

At this point in the teaser, our first question has been answered in a cursory manner—who is this voice lecturing us about marriage?—but deeper questions are raised about the character: who is this Veronica Mars, why is she so bitter, and what is the deal with her double roles as student and private investigator? Any further pondering is interrupted by the off-camera sounds of revving engines and a musical shift into a

faster driving synthesizer groove. Veronica looks up, and we get an eye-line match to a pack of motorcycles driving down the deserted road. The editing pace quickens to match the music, with 11 cuts in 15 seconds reversing between Veronica watching the bike gang and the bikers turning around to park in front of the hotel. The shots emphasize the contrast between the bright vehicle lights and the dark night streets, with the lights reflected off Veronica's car and mirrors. This shift in music and visual style changes its television cop drama allusive frame of reference from *Dragnet* to *Miami Vice*, with the latter's glossy neon style masking something dangerous beneath the surface. Veronica deadpans (in spoken dialogue rather than voice-over), "Well, this can't be good," suggesting a calm exterior but raising doubts about her future safety.

The next sequence begins with a shot tilting down the length of the vertical Camelot Motel sign, ending on street level as the lead biker rolls to a stop in the center of the frame. A series of reverse angles show Veronica staring down the biker, who removes his helmet, beckons her to roll down her window, and then menacingly says, "Car trouble, miss?" We end with a shot of Veronica inhaling as she ponders her next move before we cut to the credits, starting with upbeat music and a vastly different image of a smiling Veronica sitting in the sun. In just under a minute and 40 seconds, this teaser has set up a great deal of information and context for the episode and series as a whole. We have established the title character as a savvy and brave young woman, juggling life as a student and paid private investigator. The neon noir style serves to set a cynical and world-weary tone, with clever narration encouraging a more sophisticated take on conventional crime stories. The frank sexual content of adulterous motel trysts signals a level of maturity unexpected in a program that will later be shown to be based around a high school. And the cliffhanger ending suggests that suspense and action will be a prime ingredient of the dramatic action.

It is not hard to see both why Thomas might have preferred this opening for the pilot, highlighting maturity, unconventionality, and suspenseful noir, and why UPN forced the more typical opening at Neptune High to appeal to its core teenage target audience with a more familiar milieu, style, genre, and set of characters. These two openings highlight the central challenge of any pilot: demonstrating how the series is both freshly distinct and yet familiar enough to be recognizable and

comfortable, striking the delicate balance between similarity and difference that structures commercial television. The UPN opening starts with the familiar and slowly complicates it with intrigue and genre mixture, while the DVD version puts us in the midst of something unconventional for television, a young female-centered noir, and then links it to the more conventional facets of teen drama. Both educate viewers on the program's norms and inspire them to keep viewing, but clearly each approach speaks differently to various subsets of the potential viewing audience.

To further analyze the *Veronica Mars* pilot, we could continue such a slow-motion replay of the episode, highlighting how each shot, sound, line, and sequence adds to our understanding of the storyworld and sets the stage for the series. But the length needed for such an analysis would turn this chapter into a book, along the lines of Roland Barthes's *S/Z*.¹⁰ Instead, we can zoom out and look at some of the broader trends and strategies that play out across the entire episode and consider how they work to teach viewers how to view the series as a whole. Such an account builds on a model of narrative comprehension explored by David Bordwell for film and developed more in chapter 5, exploring how a text draws on both extrinsic (such as genre and stylistic conventions) and intrinsic norms unique to the film itself to cue viewers how to construct the story in their minds and posit answers to ongoing narrative questions.¹¹ For a television series, a pilot is the primary site for establishing intrinsic norms for the ongoing series and making clear connections to the relevant extrinsic norms of genre, narrative mode, and style.

One aspect that quickly becomes apparent is that *Veronica Mars* will tell its story using complex narrative techniques. The pilot contains a number of hallmarks of such narrative complexity—direct-address voice-over narration, frequent flashbacks and jumps in time frame, and long-term mysteries and story arcs that will traverse the entire season and beyond. All of these techniques clearly situate *Veronica Mars* within the mode of narrative complexity within minutes of the pilot's opening, establishing intrinsic norms to guide viewers throughout the series. After the opening credits, we are brought back into the storyworld not at the moment of cliffhanging suspense but at the sunny parking lot of a high school. Veronica's upbeat voice-over, in stark contrast to the world-weary cynicism of the first scene, quickly sets the scene for the

moments that opened the pilot as originally aired on UPN: "This is my school. If you go here, your parents are either millionaires, or your parents work for millionaires. Neptune, California; a town without a middle class." The DVD version adds a bit more exposition to explain the temporal shift—a caption reads, "20 Hours Earlier," as Veronica continues, "So how does a girl end up surrounded by a motorcycle gang at four in the morning on the wrong side of town? For that answer, we'll have to rewind to yesterday." Thus we are reoriented to the story going forward, with the two versions becoming mostly identical for the rest of the episode.

Starting an episode midstory and then flashing back to reveal how the characters got to that point is a common technique in narratively complex programs, as discussed earlier concerning *Alias*'s pilot or in the introduction concerning *Revenge* and *The West Wing*. However, *Veronica Mars*'s use of voice-over provides an explanation of the temporal jump that is more marked than typical on other series—while other programs using this device, such as *West Wing* and *Damages*, normally use only captions to reset their time lines, and the pilot of *Alias* avoids any such orienting devices, Veronica's narration explicitly notes that we are rewinding the story, making sure that audiences can follow the complex plotting. More interestingly, the narration frames the rewind as a question, explicitly asking how she got there and providing an answer through the narrative logic. Explicitly framing the story as a series of questions and answers, or "erotic narrative," as termed by Noël Carroll, is a vital aspect of the program's narrative structure, a thematic dimension that is repeated throughout the episode (which I return to later).¹² By framing this temporal shift so explicitly and by self-consciously posing the storytelling in question form, *Veronica Mars* teaches us that it will employ complex storytelling techniques but assures us that it will try to keep us oriented through a range of narrative devices, aiming for comprehension over confusion, clear questions and answers instead of open-ended uncertainty.

This opening rewind is not the pilot's only example of temporal complexity, as the episode contains eight flashbacks that run approximately nine minutes in total, accounting for more than 20% of its running time. While flashbacks remain an important part of the narrative toolbox for the series as a whole, the pilot uses them far more extensively than does

almost any other episode. In large part, the use of flashbacks in the pilot is expository, providing backstory on the characters and situations that precede the present-day time line. These flashbacks are quite important to set up the program's major plot arcs, as they posit the three key questions that will motivate the season's serialized plotlines: Who killed Lilly Kane? Who raped Veronica? And why did Veronica's mother leave the family? All of these major narrative events occurred long before the pilot begins, so flashbacks help build mystery about the storyworld's past events and narrative enigmas, a storytelling strategy that creates the fictional universe's depth and richness. The pilot's extensive use of flashbacks helps set up an intrinsic norm for the series as a whole but also underscores how a pilot is often atypical in its storytelling strategies in order to sufficiently educate viewers on the scenario and key backstory elements.

Just as the opening rewind is explained clearly with redundancy, the flashbacks are all highly cued and demarcated as narratively distinct. The first flashback comes at the episode's five-minute mark, with Veronica sitting outside in her high school courtyard, introducing her classmates via voice-over. In recounting her previous status as part of the "in crowd," she admits, "The only reason I was allowed beyond the velvet ropes was Duncan Kane, son of software billionaire Jake Kane. He used to be my boyfriend." The camera alternates between a shot of Veronica sitting alone staring wistfully at Duncan and her visual perspective of him mingling with his friends. The camera slowly tracks in toward Veronica at the end of her line, as the image blurs via quick dissolve into another shot with an accompanying "swoosh" sound effect. The new shot of kids in the high school hallway is tinted blue, with soft focus and streaky images to clearly distinguish it from the bright colors and sun-drenched lighting of the courtyard. The music shifts as well, to a breathy atmospheric vocal track from the previous subtle guitar rhythmic background in the courtyard scene. We soon see Duncan and a longer-haired Veronica in the center of the frame, with a jump-cut forward to a close-up of them kissing, before the image oversaturates with white light and shifts into slow motion. All of these stylistic techniques, from film stock to soundtrack, color scheme to hairstyling, serve to demarcate the flashback sequence from the norms established in the present-tense scenes. There is no ambiguity about this temporal shift, as

the sequence is clearly framed as a subjective memory presented to us by Veronica, our focalizing narrator.

The next flashback is similarly demarcated but differs in terms of perspective. Veronica is sitting at lunch with Wallace, as she asks him two related questions: "So what did you do? . . . Why are you a dead man walking?" These questions trigger the similar blur and sound effect to signal a flashback of Wallace reporting a robbery while working at a convenience store, with Wallace narrating events to Veronica. This flashback, briefly interrupted by a line from Veronica, is the only scene in which Veronica does not appear throughout the entire episode and thus the only story material portrayed without Veronica's firsthand experience—future episodes focus primarily on the titular character but feature scenes and plotlines without Veronica, another example of the pilot's exceptional status. Although Wallace's flashback uses comparable stylistic markers as Veronica's, its narrative status is different: Wallace is clearly retelling the story to Veronica within the storyworld, while Veronica's voice-overs and flashbacks are internal monologues, shared only with the nonspecified "you" of the television audience. These distinctions reinforce the important centrality of Veronica as our main character, narrative guide, and focalizing figure, a status that remains consistent throughout the series.

Veronica's second flashback, immediately following the scene with Wallace, appears more subjective, motivated by a triggered memory rather than expository narration. In the courtyard to her apartment, she hears the song "Just Another" by Pete Zorn playing on a radio as she walks by the swimming pool. She looks up at the radio, and then we hear a splash from the pool. Veronica looks down as we "swoosh" into a flashback image of Duncan emerging from the water, saying, "Hey, babe, it's our song." The scene shifts abruptly to Veronica's friends circling a large birthday cake being held out by a previously unseen woman, who says, "Happy birthday, Veronica! Are you surprised?" Veronica says, "Mom" twice—first within the flashback and then in a quick switch back to the present-day narrative, as she spins her head mistakenly thinking that another woman in the courtyard was her mother. While this flashback is stylistically cued as a memory, its narrative function is more opaque, not answering questions explicitly posed by Veronica's narration but rather raising a question still to be addressed: where is Veronica's mother? All

of Veronica's flashbacks offer a balance of narrative information and emotional depth, with this example furthest toward the emotional end of the spectrum.

The next flashback comes more than five minutes later and includes the most significant revelations for the major serialized plot arcs. While Veronica is surveilling Jake Kane for her father's private investigation firm, she narrates the details of Kane's prominent business and civic roles in Neptune. As she begins to talk about her relationship with the Kane family, we flash back to a scene between Veronica and Lilly Kane, revealing Lilly's murder and how Veronica learned of her friend's demise. Most notably, the sequence presents an important but understated uncertainty, with Lilly telling Veronica, "I've got a secret—a good one," in a conversation that Veronica identifies as "the last words Lilly and I ever shared." Lilly's secret is not highlighted as a key narrative enigma, but it returns in prominence later in the season as Veronica begins to unravel the case—looking back from the end of the season, this referenced secret is the cause of Lilly's death, and thus its subdued placement within the pilot helps provide unity to the arc of her murder and validates the eventual reveal as a well-crafted mystery. Although the events being portrayed are clearly emotionally fraught for Veronica, with her best friend's murder and the subsequent scapegoating of her father for a botched investigation, the tone of the narration is detached and factually driven, with Veronica presenting the story more as an investigator than as someone who is emotionally involved in the case.

This flashback thus helps situate the narrative status of Veronica's voice-over narration. After revealing Lilly's death, she says, "But everyone knows this story, the murder of Lilly Kane. . . . And, of course, everyone remembers reading about the bungling local sheriff, the one who went after the wrong man. That bungling sheriff was my dad." This narration suggests that Veronica is explicitly speaking to an audience within the storyworld, assuming our familiarity with the tabloid-covered events. While the narration is never overtly identified as fitting a particular frame of reference, like a diary or therapy session as found in other programs with first-person voice-over, this mode of direct address distinguishes it from a more objective narrational tone, like in *Dragnet*. Whereas in *Dragnet* there is no implied audience hearing Friday's narration that functions like an orated police report, Veronica is

clearly talking to somebody, explaining her perspectives and asking us to go along for a ride. This style of narration firmly embeds the viewer within the storyworld, making us an unspecified but important part of the diegesis that functions as a sounding board for Veronica's inner thoughts and plans, providing access to details of both her investigative procedures and her emotional life.

Subsequent flashbacks follow these established parameters, presenting crucial backstory plot, relationships, and lingering mysteries. Questions remain central to the use of flashbacks, as with the sixth flashback, introduced with the voice-over, "You want to know how I lost my virginity? So do I," before showing the scene of Veronica's drug-induced date rape. The seventh flashback is cued by another character's questions—Logan is taunting Veronica about her absent mother, asking, "Do you know where she is? Any clue?" Veronica stares him down as he drives away but then answers his question via voice-over: "It's been eight months since I've seen my mother." A flashback shows the morning after Veronica's mother left, setting up the season-long arc about her status and Veronica's relationship with her mother. Throughout the pilot, questions are articulated either to immediately answer them to orient and educate viewers or to establish enigmas inspiring viewers to continue watching in hopes of discovering the answers.

The flashbacks also cue some important parallels and repetitions that draw characters together, deepen the storyworld, and cue narrative pleasure. For instance, in Wallace's flashback, Sheriff Lamb mocks Wallace by saying, "You need to go see the wizard, ask him for some guts." Veronica interrupts in the present tense, "'Go see the wizard,' he said that?" a comment that seems unremarkable at the time; 22 minutes later, the comment becomes clearer—during a flashback to Veronica reporting her rape, Sheriff Lamb cruelly dismisses her by saying, "I'll tell you what, Veronica Mars—why don't you go see the wizard, ask for a little backbone." Besides clearly aligning Wallace and Veronica together against Lamb, this parallel sets up an episodically contained revenge plot that implicates the sheriff's department in exchanging favorable treatment of a strip club for sexual favors. Since the episode does not call attention to this parallel dialogue, viewers who have been paying attention can get a brief frisson of pleasure upon recognizing the repetition. Such moments of recognition and connection are an important facet

of watching serial television, as drawn-out links that may span across episodes or even seasons offer dedicated viewers an acknowledgment of, and reward for, their dedication and attention. Although this intra-episodic repetition requires no long-term commitment, the moment helps establish the broader norm that the series will expect viewers to pay attention, forge connections, and reward their dedication via pleasurable connections and revelations.

Another narrative pleasure is signaled by a subtle repetition. Around halfway through the episode, Veronica's father, Keith Mars, returns home from an attempt to collect a bounty on a bail jumper—Veronica greets him with an inquisitive, "And?" Keith pauses for drama and then offers a pseudocool, "Who's your daddy?" which Veronica dismisses with typical adolescent exasperation: "I hate it when you say that." This exchange creates a bit of playful tension between father and daughter, as Keith goes on to mockingly claim a degree of coolness that amuses Veronica but underscores their generational divide. Toward the end of the episode, a parallel scene occurs as Keith finds Veronica at night in the Mars Investigation office, where she has discovered that Keith has been withholding information from her about the Kane murder case. He tempts her to leave with promises of pizza and the *South Park* movie and offers a repeated "Who's your daddy?" This time Veronica sighs and smiles and warmly replies, "You are." The repeated moment reconciles the earlier tension like a musical phrase, replaying a dissonant theme with a resolved harmonious chord. This moment highlights the stability of this relationship that will anchor the entire series, as well as foreshadowing the forthcoming plot developments when Veronica starts to question and investigate this precise question of her paternity. Additionally, the repetition calls attention to the program's well-crafted storytelling, using an overt parallel to inspire confidence in viewers that the producers are in full control of their fictional form. It is a self-aware moment of narrative construction that, at least for some viewers, provides a moment of playful pleasure in admiration of the program's creative craft, a moment of the operational aesthetic in action.

As is typical of all pilots, the episode introduces and focuses our attention on a number of characters and relationships. Clearly Veronica is the central figure of the storyworld, appearing in every scene except Wallace's flashback, and virtually every character exists primarily in

relationship to her. The credit sequence introduces the list of major characters in order: Veronica, Wallace, Duncan, Logan, and Weevil, with Keith getting the final billing as "and Enrico Colantoni," a position conventionally reserved for more established actors in supporting roles, as well as parents in teen dramas. The actual screen time for characters is differently balanced—Wallace appears in around 25% of the episode and Keith in 20%, a proportion that effectively establishes those two characters as Veronica's most trusted and stable allies in the ongoing series. Duncan's third billing seems contrary to appearing only in 7% of the episode, an imbalance that persists throughout the series—the character is narratively central to many ongoing arcs, but his presence is less vibrant and active than that of the other supporting actors, culminating in the character leaving the series midway through the second season. Thomas has suggested in interviews that the character never quite worked as the writers imagined it, partly because of Teddy Dunn's performance and partly because he was too isolated from Veronica due to their often estranged relationship. While certainly the romantic link and familial history between Duncan and Veronica are core dramatic elements, the pilot shows little of their connection and effectively confines Duncan to the margins in favor of more colorful supporting players.

Logan was not initially conceived as a main character, but Jason Dohring's compelling performance prompted the producers to make Logan more central to the series and to establish an ongoing romance between him and Veronica. In the pilot, Logan and Weevil share nearly equal time, at around 13% of the episode time, helping to establish the two as rivals, culminating in their confrontation toward the end of the episode. Functionally the two characters share a volatile bond with Veronica, serving as both allies and enemies at various times. These proportions also mirror a legalistic aspect of storytelling unique to the television medium—contracts often stipulate the number of episodes per season each actor will appear in. Thus the actors playing Veronica, Wallace, and Keith were contracted to appear in every episode in season 1, while those playing Weevil, Logan, and Duncan were only available for approximately 75% of the episodes, forcing the producers to devise stories that allowed them to disappear for a week.¹³ The pilot effectively establishes this balance in character prominence that carries throughout the first season.

The pilot also establishes the program's norms for balancing multiple plotlines. Although like many pilots, much of the episode's time is spent introducing the setting, characters, and relationships rather than focusing on narrative events and storylines, the episode does introduce a remarkable number of events and plots. Typically, a *Veronica Mars* episode features a self-contained A plot concerning a case that is introduced and solved within an episode, alongside B and C plots focusing on long-term arcs of ongoing mysteries and relationships. The pilot is less typically structured, with six definable plotlines: the robbery at Wallace's store, the investigation into the Seventh Veil strip club, the Jake Kane infidelity investigation, Lilly Kane's murder, Veronica's mother leaving the family, and Veronica's rape. As is common for the series, the plotlines are not rigidly distinct, as they interweave in terms of both events and themes—the strip-club plot ends up merging with the robbery case, and the theme of sexual indiscretion and mystery permeates many of the storylines. It is therefore hard to define a clear A plot; although the Jake Kane investigation takes up the most time, at nearly a quarter of the episode, it blurs into nearly all of the other plotlines and lacks the resolution common of A plots in subsequent episodes. The robbery and strip-club cases are resolved but lack the central focus typical of other episodes' A plots.

Despite a fuzzier distinction between plotlines than the ongoing norm for the program, the pilot's atypical multiple story threads do help orient viewers on how to watch the series. The episode's self-contained plotlines (the robbery and strip-club cases) are presented with Veronica in firm control of the action, effectively rescuing Wallace and manipulating the sheriff's office with minimal stress and effort. These plots situate Veronica as more knowledgeable about events and backstory than viewers are, a norm common to each subsequent episode's case of the week. For most of the episode, we are unsure of the relevance of the strip-club plotline and are not privy to Veronica's master plan to connect it with the robbery via a videotape swap—the link is revealed at the moment of Lamb's humiliation, rather than positioning us as riding shotgun to the ongoing procedures of Veronica's investigations. For most episodes, the self-contained cases reinforce Veronica's investigational mastery, and they function more as games for viewers to try to guess the culprit, outcome, or Veronica's investigative strategy.

The long-term story arcs, involving the Kane family and Veronica's emotional traumas of rape and maternal abandonment, align us more closely with Veronica's limited knowledge, as we learn about new developments along with her and as she treats us as confidants sharing vital backstory. Veronica's investigative approach foregrounds posing and answering questions, and the program's serial storytelling follows this paradigm. In the final minutes of the episode, Veronica herself asks a number of key questions: "The Lilly Kane murder file—what's Dad been up to? . . . My surveillance photo from the Camelot—why is it in the Lilly Kane file? What was Mom doing there, and what business did she have with Jake Kane? And the million-dollar question: why did Dad lie to me?" After the scene with Keith in which Veronica reconciles his deception, she narrates, "I've got too many questions swirling around in my head to wait until he's ready to share. These questions need answers—that's what I do." The narrative logic of this sequence sets up the key season-long story arcs, establishes the program's erotic narration, and guarantees that these arcs will not dangle unanswered. As Veronica's final monologue asserts, "I promise this: I will find out what really happened, and I will bring this family back together again," a statement that serves also to assure viewers that these questions do have answers that will be revealed in due time and will deliver emotionally satisfying resolutions, at least as long as the network allows the series to continue to air.

The only question during this sequence that gets answered immediately is Keith's "Who's your Daddy?" which prompts Veronica's sentimental assurance to cement the stability of their relationship in the face of broader uncertainties—although later in the season, the question of Veronica's paternity becomes more than joking repartee and emerges as a key storyline. This answer helps divide the long-term story arcs into two categories: plot arcs that posit enigmas and mysteries, and emotional relationship or character arcs that are more clearly delimited in the moment. This division is typical of many prime time serials, in which plot mysteries use complex storytelling strategies around narrative enigmas, while character arcs are more conventional in their presentation of narrative statements. These differing modes of presentation allow for distinct modes of engagement and narrative questioning—the emotional plots about relationships encourage us to ask "what will

happen?" going forward, as with Veronica's romantic entanglements and rocky relations with her mother. Conversely, the mysteries frame the narrative as "what really happened in the past?" privileging the forensic mode of hunting for clues, connecting pieces, and positing theories alongside Veronica's own investigation. We know that the answers to emotional relationship questions, however temporary and fleeting, will likely arrive soon in the story, but the enigma-driven mysteries linger far beyond our expectations and take unanticipated twists along the way.

The dual narrative modes of mystery and relationship drama are tightly tied to codes of gender and genre, suggesting that formal analysis can help illuminate broader cultural questions, a topic addressed in more depth in chapters 7 and 10. The cast of characters establishes this balance at the series's core—the titular character is clearly the female center of the narrative universe, but she is surrounded almost exclusively by male figures, especially in the first season. However, Veronica herself is far from a simple embodiment of feminine norms—her hardened present-tense persona is defined in opposition to her prereape femininity, distinguished by shortened hair, a heightened sarcastic attitude, and an emotional detachment that alienates her from nearly all of her high school peers. As established in the opening scene, Veronica eschews romantic sentiment and embraces personal risk in the service of her rational, procedural detective work. And arguably the male characters serve more effeminate roles—Wallace as supportive counselor and confidant, Keith as nurturing parent, and Duncan as sensitive romantic who eventually becomes a single parent himself. Even Logan and Weevil, who first appear as hypermasculine, aggressive, and hostile threats to Veronica, undergo a process of becoming more sensitive, emotionally engaged, and feminized throughout the season, a process of gender transformation that Janice Radway has argued is central to the romance genre.¹⁴ Arguably the only regular character who neatly fits into typical gender norms is Dick Casablancas, whose hypermasculine doltishness is played for comic relief and restricted to the margins of the story (and does not even appear in the pilot); in contrast, each of the more central figures embodies gender contradictions and complexity.

The pilot comments on its own atypical gender norms—when Veronica gives Wallace the incriminating videotape, he thanks her and tries to get her to acknowledge that she did him a favor. He says, "Underneath

that angry-young-woman shell, there's a slightly less angry young woman, who's dying to bake me something. You're a marshmallow, Veronica Mars, a Twinkie!" Veronica's dual gender identity is echoed in the pilot's final lines—following Veronica's assertion that she will solve the mysteries and reunite her family, she says, "I'm sorry, is that mushy? Well, you know what they say: Veronica Mars, she's a marshmallow." The prominence of this repetition as the episode's final moment contrasts with the highly rational procedures that Veronica has followed in both explicating and pursuing the mysteries, reminding us that she is acting out of not just a rationalist mode of justice and detection but a sentimental and effeminate urge for family unity and lost friendship. Thus the final scene sets the stage for the broad range of gendered appeals and identities to be explored within the series and cues us to be alert to the complexities of both character and plotting rather than assuming clear-cut binaries and conventions.

In the end, the pilot of *Veronica Mars* teaches us how to watch the series, manages our expectations for what is to come, and inspires us to keep watching. Most pilots focus on establishing the setting, characters, and narrative situation and thus are quite atypical of what future episodes might bring. The *Veronica Mars* pilot employs more flashbacks, voice-over, and exposition than typical episodes do but also establishes many norms of tone, style, and theme that future episodes will typically adhere to. As such, it is one of the more effective pilots for a complex serial drama, performing an astounding amount of narrative work while also offering clear pleasures and moments consistent with the series as a whole. While the series ended with anticlimactic disappointment (at least until its resurrection as a feature film in 2014), the pilot remains a landmark in serial storytelling, posing narrative questions in a style that transcends the quality of the eventual answers. And by looking at such an exemplary pilot in slow motion, we can better understand the complex poetics involved in television storytelling, both at the beginnings and in ongoing episodes of a series.

Authorship

In 2000, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* suffered a crisis of faith. I am not referring to the titular character, although Buffy Summers certainly suffered many crises of faith over her serialized transmedia existence. Rather, I mean the series itself was the site of such a crisis, with fans freaking out over a plot development that threatened to undermine the program's integrity and vision as they had come to know it. The crisis was triggered by the introduction of a new character in the final moments of the fifth season debut, "Buffy vs. Dracula": Buffy's 14-year-old sister, Dawn. Fans who had spent four seasons, more than 50 hours of screen time, watching the series, knew Buffy as an only child; suddenly they were being told that she had a teenage sister who had never been seen before. The next episode, "The Real Me," did little to clarify matters, as Dawn became a central character in the ensemble with no explanation for her sudden existence. Despite numerous references to her teen angst that "nobody knows who I am" and hints that something supernatural was afoot, the established characters all acted as if Dawn had always been part of the storyworld.

While the program's fantasy genre certainly allowed for many potential explanations for Dawn's appearance, fans were panicking in the gaps between episodes, left to vent their anxieties on *Buffy*'s vibrant online fan discussion boards. On its face, this seemed like an example of typical television retooling on a teenage-focused series when central characters grow up: add new teenagers to the cast to maintain its youth appeal. However, by treating Dawn as an established character and not a new addition, *Buffy* was challenging viewers' beliefs in the fictional world they had come to know and love in previous seasons, posing a narrative enigma of who (or what) Dawn really was that was not answered until the season's fifth episode. We must remember that in the original airing, this process took a full month, with weeklong gaps between episodes for fans to theorize and stress out about what was going on: when

would this enigma be solved, and could the solution be satisfying? But while some fans feared that the series had gone off the rails, destroying its continuity due to a network-mandated retooling, a common refrain emerged on these online forums: "Trust Joss."

Of course, this refers to Joss Whedon, *Buffy*'s creator, executive producer, head writer, and frequent director—in other words, the text's author. It is an unusual moment in television storytelling and fan consumption, but I believe it is indicative of larger tendencies of how serial television authorship operates. This chapter explores the role of authorship within serial television via three related facets. The first is a material question of "how is serial television authored?"—explaining how contemporary American television production establishes its parameters of creativity and exploring the tension between the collaborative realities of production versus the romantic notion of singular authorship embodied in the concept of "showrunner." The second question focuses on such notions as they circulate in larger cultural discourses—"how is television authorship understood?"—via a broader rhetorical analysis of the changing role of television showrunners as public figures and stars in their own right. Finally, I consider "how do viewers use television authorship?"—looking at the pragmatic processes of consumption in which imagining an authorial presence is vital to our processes of comprehension and interpretation, as with the call to "Trust Joss." These three facets of material, rhetorical, and pragmatic analysis will hopefully suggest the central importance that authorship plays in framing our engagement with serial television.

The Author in Production

Narrative television is a highly collaborative medium, with dozens of individuals participating in the production process of each episode, thus making the ascription of authorship a difficult process, especially if we are trying to import a literary model of singular authors. For literary writers, we imagine *authorship by origination*, in which a singular creator devises every word and thus is responsible for creating everything found in the text. Such a notion is obviously an oversimplification, minimizing the important role of feedback, editing, publishing, and intertextual influence, but it is the widespread conception of what a literary author

does. Film scholars, critics, fans, and the industry itself have wrestled with authorship for decades, arriving at a commonly accepted attribution of a film's authorship to its director (with some notable exceptions), which alters our notions of the authoring process. A film's director clearly cannot have direct responsibility for creating every aspect of the final text, as legions of performers, technical crew members, designers, and executives are involved in the processes of creating and assembling the sounds and images in a film—not to mention the screenwriter whose script provides a blueprint for the film but rarely has much power in the production process. Nonetheless, the director is regarded as the final decision maker over every choice, from furniture color to the particular version of an actor's performance to the levels of the sound mix. This model of authorial attribution is less focused on what the director personally creates but rather vests responsibility for collective creativity in the singular authority of the director—a particular moment in a film may not have been planned or executed by the director, but he or she is ultimately responsible for choosing to include it in the finished work, a mode of attribution we might call *authorship by responsibility*.

Although few television episodes have the production complexity and scope of feature films, the medium's serial form changes the nature of the production process and thus the attribution of authorship. The need to create an ongoing series that runs for years is a very different process than the bounded system of film production, which typically has segmented phases of preproduction (writing, rehearsing, and planning), production (filming), and postproduction (editing, special effects, and sound mixing). On an ongoing television series, different episodes span these various stages simultaneously—one or more episodes might be being written, another in the planning stage for upcoming production, one shooting, and a few others in the process of being edited and scored and having visual effects added. This complicated system requires oversight that is typically granted to one or more individuals with the somewhat vague credit of "producer," and the authority granted to this role has led television to be frequently termed a "producer's medium."¹ Under this model, the producer rather than the director is accorded the final responsibility for the choices that shape the finished work in a model of *authorship by management*, evoking the leadership and oversight that managers take in businesses and sports teams. Highlighting producers'

managerial functions is not to deny their roles in originating ideas or taking responsibility for choices, but it emphasizes the additional role that television authors must take in helming an ongoing series rather than a stand-alone work, as well as highlighting the importance of the sustained team of creative and technical crew that often stay with a single series for years.

The role of producer has transformed significantly over the history of American television. In the 1950s, many of the most prominent producers were also the stars of their best known series: Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball produced *I Love Lucy* through their production company, Desilu; Gertrude Berg both starred in and was the head writer for *The Goldbergs*; Jack Webb starred in, produced, and directed every episode of *Dragnet* and wrote a few under the pseudonym John Randolph. For decades, television producers who were identified as being at least partly in charge of a series included on-screen actors such as Bill Cosby (*Fat Albert*, *The Cosby Show*), Jerry Seinfeld (*Seinfeld*), and Tina Fey (*30 Rock*); directors such as Sheldon Leonard (*The Andy Griffith Show*, *I Spy*), Michael Mann (*Crime Story*, *Miami Vice*), and James Burrows (*Cheers*, *Will and Grace*); and executive producers credited with no direct creative production role, such as Aaron Spelling (*Charlie's Angels*, *Beverly Hills 90210*) and Quinn Martin (*The Fugitive*, *Streets of San Francisco*). But the primary job that has emerged as the typical managerial role for executive producers within the organizational framework of an ongoing series is the head writer.

While every television series has its own particular organization and division of duties, some production roles have emerged as standards throughout the medium. Typically a series is created by a writer (or writing team) who pitches an idea to a production studio, broadcast network, and/or cable channel. If the pitch is optioned, that writer develops a pilot script and "bible" for an ongoing series, which again must be approved by the production and distribution corporations that will ultimately produce and air the program. The pilot production process assembles the collaborative team of actors, designers, director, and other creative and technical crew who will be responsible for making the series. If the produced pilot is deemed successful by the network or channel, it moves into series production, at which time the creator typically assembles a team of writers and producers to undertake the

ongoing creative process, while the creator steps into the role of executive producer to function as head writer via the unofficial title of “showrunner.” Sometimes writers with less leadership experience will partner with a seasoned showrunner to share managerial and creative duties, as with *The Shield*'s Shawn Ryan corunning *Terriers* with Ted Griffin, who had created the original idea but had little previous television experience. Showrunners perform similar roles of authorship by responsibility as a film's director does—for instance, typically the editing process for an episode starts with the editor making an initial assembly of the footage, the episode's director working to refine it into their cut, and then the producer-showrunner taking over to settle on the final cut with the editor.²

Since most programs' managerial oversight typically comes from a writer, the writing process is seen as more central to a series's creative vision than is the contribution of directors, who are often hired as rotating freelancers rather than permanent members of the production team. The writing staff is much more stable, typically with a regular team of between 6 and 12 writers (many of whom also have producer credits) whose work in a “writers' room” is regarded as a program's creative nerve center. For a contrast of such production roles, consider *Breaking Bad*: its 62 episodes credit 10 different writers, with the explicit “Written By” credit rotating among the team with little turnover between seasons; however, those same episodes featured 25 different directors, most of whom only directed one or two episodes. Notably, five of the program's writers directed episodes, including creator-showrunner Vince Gilligan's five directorial efforts; additionally, three episodes were directed by star-producer Bryan Cranston, four by the series's ongoing director of photography, Michael Slovis, and 11 by co-executive producer Michelle MacLaren. While *Breaking Bad* features a distinctive visual sensibility, performance style, and pacing—all facets typically controlled more by directors than by writers—its staffing patterns suggest that such vision comes more from the ongoing writing and production team than from the rotating crew of directors, a balance typical for most contemporary fictional television.

The creative processes found within writers' rooms is crucial to understanding the practices of American television authorship.³ Most writers' rooms function both as hierarchical collectives, with clear rank-

ings of leadership and authority, and as open collaborations in which all writers' contributions are incorporated into a creative stew. There are rare programs for which a singular writer operates on his (or, even less frequently, her) own mostly outside a writers' room, as with David E. Kelley (*Ally McBeal*), Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*), or Mike White (*Enlightened*), but most prime time scripted programs emerge out of “the room.” A standard practice is for the writers to meet for a few weeks before the season begins production to map out the season-long arcs, benchmarks, and goals and to decide on the season's narrative structures. The writers then “break episodes”—sometimes collectively in the writers' room, sometimes individually—mapping out the specific plots, story beats, and structure for each episode. This process results in a detailed outline for each episode, which then gets assigned to a specific writer to shape into a full screenplay with dialogue and descriptions of action. Usually the writer's goal is not to create a script that stands apart from the series as a personal vision but rather to mimic the showrunner's voice in an effort for stylistic consistency. A finished draft will sometimes return to the room for feedback or “punching up” (especially in comedies) or often be delivered to the showrunner (or other producer) to “take a pass” on the script, making it fit the program's voice, standards, and arcs—showrunners frequently do major rewrites on drafts, such as Matthew Weiner's claim that he rewrites more than 80% of most *Mad Men* scripts.⁴ Once a showrunner finalizes a script, it usually must climb the corporate ladder for executives at the production studio, network, or channel to approve and provide notes—different corporate cultures mandate different norms, with broadcast networks typically being more prescriptive in giving notes than are some “hands-off” cable channels that pride themselves on being “creator centered,” such as HBO or AMC. The writing credits for an episode typically are given to the writer who first drafts the script (although such policies vary by showrunner and production team), but a program's story construction and script revisions are usually a collective process organized via a discrete managerial hierarchy.

The final product of an aired episode goes through complex collaborative processes, filtering the contributions of performers, designers, editors, and network executives, but the responsibility for the end product rests with the showrunner. Although stories of credit-grabbing

producers who claim to have written more than they actually did are common, most showrunners earn their authorship by both responsibility and management for countless leadership decisions and thus are regarded as the primary authorial figures within an intensely collaborative medium. While it might seem that such authors shift their roles from an origination model of writing a pitch and pilot to a managerial approach once they must run the production process of a picked-up series, the initial creation of a program also has a managerial facet. Writers are always pitching projects in the hopes of getting produced, and thus they strive both to meet the expectations of the corporate executives in charge of picking up programs and to plan for their potential future showrunner roles of having to implement their creative ideas. There is a romantic notion that a writer's creative vision starts as "pure" and then gets compromised through the process of realizing that vision, especially in the commercially inflected world of mass media. However, the creative process in television is always inflected by the realities of both practical production and commercial concerns for what can and cannot sell, and these concerns shape television storytelling in all stages of creativity.

One of the more unusual examples of series development was *Lost*, and its unique production history helps explain why its success has been so hard to replicate. While most television series emerge from writers' pitches, sometimes network executives conceive a series and hire writers to develop it; this was the case with *Lost*, as ABC chairman Lloyd Braun came up with a concept in 2003 for a dramatic series modeled on the film *Cast Away* and the reality program *Survivor*, focused on people stranded on a deserted island. Braun hired Jeffrey Lieber to write a pilot based on the idea, working with him to develop the program, but fired Lieber after finding his program called *Nowhere* unsatisfactory. Braun was still committed to the idea, and pitched it to J. J. Abrams, the creator and showrunner for ABC's *Alias*. Abrams said he was too busy to take charge of the series but was willing to collaborate with another writer to develop it. ABC reached out to Damon Lindelof, then a writer and coproducer on *Crossing Jordan*, who had been trying to meet with Abrams and get hired on *Alias*. Neither writer was particularly invested in the concept for a program based on island survival—for Abrams, it was a favor for his boss at ABC, and it was Lindelof's potential way to

make a connection to land another job. Given the rumors that Braun was likely on the outs at ABC, Abrams and Lindelof had fun coming up with outlandish and risky plans for using flashbacks, creating a deep science-fiction mythology for the island, and planting mysteries throughout the pilot without much advanced planning—as Lindelof recalls, they often said, "They're never gonna pick this thing up anyway."⁵

Despite Abrams and Lindelof's attempts to create something unlikely to air on television, Braun greenlit the pilot, based only on their 13-page outline without a finished script, and even authorized a then-record budget of more than \$11 million to produce the pilot episode. Braun's bosses at ABC/Disney hated the project and used its bloated production as an excuse to fire Braun in spring 2004; however, enough money had been sunk into *Lost* that they picked up the series to debut in September 2004, expecting little from the unconventional program on a medium where formula and conventionality tend to rule. We now know that *Lost's* unconventionality was an asset, as it debuted to a large audience, garnered awards, and developed into one of the most cultish series ever to appeal to a mainstream audience. Notably, Lieber retained a credit as cocreator (and thus a share of residuals) for every episode of *Lost*, despite his own creative efforts having virtually nothing to do with the series as produced—such credits are determined by the Writer's Guild of America's arbitration process, suggesting a crucial legal and economic facet of television authorship. Abrams withdrew from active involvement with the series midway through the first season, and Lindelof persuaded Carlton Cuse, his old boss from *Nash Bridges*, to join the series as co-showrunner to navigate what eventually proved to be one of the most complex pieces of television (and transmedia) storytelling ever devised. Of course the actual credits make this attribution hard to parse, as *Lost's* final episode listed nine people as executive producer, including Abrams (who had no direct involvement by that point), Lindelof, and Cuse, as well as three other writers; the program's central director, Jack Bender; and two producers overseeing the logistical and business ends of the operation.

So who is *Lost's* author? Arguably Lloyd Braun was the person most responsible for bringing the series to the air, with both the originating concept and the decision to produce the risky pilot, although his name appears nowhere in *Lost's* credits—however, Braun appeared in

nearly every episode as the uncredited voice who says, “Previously on *Lost*.⁶” Lieber’s creative stake seems more legal than artistic, but clearly in the world of commercial television, such credits are both important and lucrative. Abrams and Lindelof conceived what *Lost* eventually became, and Cuse took over Abrams’s managerial role early in the production process, cowriting many episodes and storylines with Lindelof; and together they served as showrunners for the rest of the series. *Lost* demonstrates how a serialized text’s authorship can change over time as the ongoing narrative and production process unfolds. Even years after Abrams left the program, many articles about the series referred to it as “J. J. Abrams’s *Lost*,” suggesting how external discourses can be as vital in defining authorship as internal creative roles are, as discussed more later. *Lost* highlights the way that groundbreaking and popular television often emerges from an unplanned alchemy of accidents and inspiration, rather than the imitative logic of formulas and conventions that often tries to replicate a surprise success. The program’s numerous failed clones, from *Invasion* to *FlashForward* to *The Event*, all were designed to mimic *Lost*’s unconventionality, but by using the logic of convention and imitation; what might be a more replicable lesson from *Lost* would be giving creators license to devise a series that embraces the attitude that “this is never going to get picked up” and seeing what follows.⁶

Before turning to the broader cultural role of television authorship, we should return to *Buffy* and Joss Whedon’s authorial role. *Buffy* the series was created by Whedon, based on his 1992 film screenplay of the same name that was changed significantly in production by the director, producers, and actors to make the tone more comedic and to downplay its horror elements. Given the comparatively low control that screenwriters have in feature-film production, Whedon’s input was less valued in that medium, and thus he sought to revisit the character on the writer-centric medium of television in 1997 on the emerging network The WB. Whedon served as active showrunner for the first five of *Buffy*’s seven seasons, credited as writer or cowriter on 25 of 144 episodes and director on 19 episodes. Even though Whedon did not write or direct any of the season 5 episodes introducing *Buffy*’s mysterious new sister, he was understood by fans as the program’s creative mastermind, responsible for the story and thus the appropriate object of either disdain or faith. To understand how he came to personify the program’s

creative vision requires us to look beyond the production process to see authorship in broader cultural circulation.

The Discursive Production of Authorship

Although television is clearly a creative medium, many people might bristle at the ascription of authorship to commercial television, which has typically been seen as something that is *produced* rather than *authored*. The lexical differences are significant—production evokes a corporate factory following formulas to mass manufacture a product, an image that has been associated with television dating back to the medium’s early critics Theodor Adorno and Dwight Macdonald.⁷ There is certainly much truth to this image of television production, where an industry treats texts as products—which function mainly as bait for the real product to be sold, viewers’ attention—and creative personnel as labor; the recent rise of production studies within media scholarship embraces this definition without dismissive judgment, highlighting the ways that labor matters in media creation and validating the work of “below-the-line” crew who are typically ignored in the study of creative practices.⁸

Authorship bears quite different connotations, linked both to the literary notion of the creative genius working in solitude to give birth to a finished work of art and to notions of authority that assure a work’s interpretive frame and cultural validation. Given the intensely collaborative nature of the production process, such notions of authorship, even in its managerial conception, oversimplify the creative process and threaten to deny agency to the array of contributors who help make television. Celebrating Whedon as *Buffy*’s author does little to help us understand how that series was actually created, obscuring complex collaborative processes in the name of celebrating and elevating a singular authorial voice. And yet even though such images of authorship as a singular entity are clearly an inaccurate reflection of production practices, such conceptions still function in our understanding of television narrative, are active within industrial, critical, and fan discourses, and serve an important cultural role. In fact, we can look at authorship as one of the key *products* of television programming, its industrial practices, and its cultural circulation.

To understand authorship as a product of television programming, not as its originating source, we need to consider how notions of authorship have been framed and transformed by literary and film theory. Traditionally, authorship has served as an interpretive reference point, framed as the authoritative source of meaning and intentionality. Using approaches such as biographical criticism or close textual and intertextual analysis, critics strive to understand what a text means by discovering what the author's intended meaning was. Although such traditional notions of explicit intentionality are less common within criticism today, a looser form of intentionality follows from the auteur model of film criticism, in which a director's body of work is analyzed for consistencies of theme and style—while these authorial markers need not be identified as explicit "intent," such criticism assumes that directors bring particular concerns and approaches to their work and that the critic's job is to uncover those commonalities to reveal an authorial presence. Such auteur studies have been fairly rare within television scholarship, aside from some critics whose work derives more from literary studies, although as discussed later, issues of authorial intent do reemerge in the ways that viewers use authorship as an interpretive framework.

Traditional theories of authorship and intentionality were dismantled in the wake of poststructuralist criticism, most famously by Roland Barthes's proclamation of the death of the author.⁹ In the same era, Michel Foucault reframed authorship from a process of creation to a discursive practice, shifting the study of authorship into the rhetorical realm; for Foucault, authorship is not easy to dispel by proclaiming its death but rather is a function of discourse that works to attribute, classify, delimit, contextualize, hierarchize, and authenticate creative works.¹⁰ Television fiction provides an interesting case study for Foucault's model of authorial function—the medium's creative processes are far more collaborative and decentered than in most other media, and television authorship has been mostly hidden from the public eye for much of its history, buried in confusing credits far more than the prominent role of literary writers or film directors. As American television has become more aesthetically valued over the past two decades, its author function has become more prominent, helping to justify and anchor the medium's cultural worth through a range of discursive practices.¹¹

The very act of attributing television to an author is a comparatively new phenomenon. In the classic network era, it was much more common to connect a program to actors than creators, typified by naming a series after its star (*The Dick Van Dyke Show*), naming the main character after an actor's name (*I Love Lucy*), or both (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*), with only the most dedicated fans aware of the production teams behind such programs. Continuity between programs was most commonly established via spin-offs that followed characters across series, rather than promoting the shared producers or creators between unrelated series. More recently, identifying the creators of a new series can serve similar functions of creating common audiences and branding—tellingly, NBC initially wanted *Parks and Recreation* to be a spin-off of *The Office* from producers Greg Daniels and Michael Schur, but instead the series was developed as a separate storyworld and promoted as coming from the same creative team. While star-branded series are still commonplace, programs are now also promoted via the authorial stamp of established creators such as Aaron Sorkin, J. J. Abrams, Alan Ball, and Shawn Ryan. Even producers without a well-known reputation are promoted as authorial figures through their work in the writers' rooms of previous hits, as with *Mad Men*'s Matthew Weiner and *Boardwalk Empire*'s Terence Winter, who had both been writer-producers on *The Sopranos*.

Such authorial branding functions as an anchor for understanding programming, delimiting potential appeals, tone, style, and genre. This branding can certainly help a series get on the air, as a network or channel can look to a creator's reputation as an asset to help build an audience, and can often provide fans with hope that a series will grow to match a producer's previous work. Both of these were certainly true with *Dollhouse*, Joss Whedon's first series produced after *Buffy* left the air—Fox hoped to draw on *Buffy*'s cult appeal, while fans looked to Whedon's track record to sustain hopes that the series would grow to be more successful as a narrative than its shaky start suggested. Neither hope fully panned out, as ratings never grew enough for the program to last beyond two seasons, and fans generally viewed it as an erratic failure compared to Whedon's other work. Neither Fox's faith that *Dollhouse* might grow in viewership nor fans' faith that it might improve in quality

make much sense without the authorial function of Whedon's past successes and established brand name.

Authorship frequently functions as a marker of distinction, as we situate a cultural work within aesthetic hierarchies based on the aura of an author's reputation, track record, and public persona. Even in a previous era of television, a series produced by Aaron Spelling was assumed to be more conventional, frivolous, and mainstream than a program by Steven Bochco, even though each produced a wide range of styles and quality of programming that belie such generalized reputations. Such authorial identities serve as brand names for a new series, establishing an aesthetic framework for judging a program and a horizon of expectations for viewers in terms of tone, style, and approach to the given genre. A Chuck Lorre comedy such as *Two and a Half Men* or *Mike and Molly* is packaged with an assumed lowbrow, raunchy sense of humor, conventional multicamera production values, and broad appeal to a mass audience, while Greg Daniels's sitcoms such as *King of the Hill* and *The Office* feature more innovative production styles, drier wit and satire, and narrower appeals to cult viewers. While authorship often contributes to an upscaling legitimating discourse, it is not exclusively a realm of highbrow distinction, as examples such as Lorre, Spelling, reality-TV guru Mark Burnett, and crime-program producer Jerry Bruckheimer all provide their programs with a comparatively lowbrow yet highly popular aura.¹²

An author's reputation can also set the aesthetic bar too high, as the creator of a beloved series can find future projects quickly condemned for not meeting expectations established by previous programs. Shawn Ryan's *The Chicago Code* was generally seen as a solid cop show but nowhere near as edgy or ambitious as his earlier landmark series *The Shield*—the failure of the former to catch on with viewers is partly attributable to some fans of the latter being disappointed by the newer program's more conventional style and tone, as befits the formal and content limits of airing on the broadcast Fox network rather than the FX cable channel that had enabled and encouraged *The Shield* to push boundaries. Many other programs have leveraged an authorial reputation to help make it to the airwaves but have found the unrealistic expectations established by an earlier series daunting, as with *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (from *The West Wing*'s Aaron Sorkin), *Running Wilde*

(from *Arrested Development*'s Mitchell Hurwitz), *John from Cincinnati* (from *Deadwood*'s David Milch), and *The Return of Jezebel James* (from *Gilmore Girls*' Amy Sherman-Palladino). The critic Emily Nussbaum sums up this dynamic well, writing about the initial lukewarm reception of David Simon's post-*Wire* series *Treme* as "like a new student entering a school where everyone keeps talking about how much they loved his big brother."¹³

While most contemporary television authorship discourse compresses the collaborative creative efforts to a single figure of the showrunner, sometimes individual writers can develop an authorial presence that becomes notable for die-hard fans. Frequently, such branding stems from work on previous programs, as with the fan celebration of writers from *Buffy* and *Angel*—the presence of former Whedon writers David Fury and Drew Goddard on the staff of *Lost* gave the series cult credentials. Likewise, Whedon fans track the efforts of Jane Espenson across programs ranging from *Gilmore Girls* to *Battlestar Galactica* to *Game of Thrones*, even though she works mostly as part of a writing team supporting an established showrunner rather than as a primary authorial voice. It is rare for a writer's track record outside of television to translate into a notable presence in the collaborative realm of television—for instance, after an initial press burst, little of award-winning playwright and filmmaker David Mamet's prestige rubbed off onto the CBS military drama *The Unit* that he created. Such cross-media success is more common in British television, where individual episode writers are given more agency, leading to high-profile guest writers such as the novelist Neil Gaiman and the filmmaker Richard Curtis scripting episodes of *Doctor Who*. Rarely a single writer can establish his or her own voice, style, and reputation within an ongoing series, as with Darin Morgan's iconic episodes of *The X-Files* "Clyde Bruckman's Final Repose" and "Jose Chung's From Outer Space"—Morgan's highly reflexive and ironic take on the program's style became a fan favorite and inspired a cult following for the writer, whose approach did not mimic the showrunner's voice but rather, according to the show's star David Duchovny, "seemed to be trying to destroy the show."¹⁴ Morgan's innovative take on the series helped develop a television fan base that became attuned to the role of individual episode writers and what they brought to the collaborative creative process, a practice continued on some cult series for

which fans try to brand particular credited writers as having a unique style or perspective, even though the collaborative behind-the-scenes process usually blurs the boundaries of individual contributions.

Producers' nontelevision backgrounds can help frame a series in ways beyond aesthetic judgment and intertextual expectations. For *The Wire*, David Simon's background as a crime reporter in Baltimore certainly helped saturate the series with markers of authenticity, making it clear that the program was produced by people who knew the subject matter firsthand. This authorial validation was deepened by the broader writing team, with writer-producer Ed Burns's background as a Baltimore homicide detective, wiretap expert, and public school teacher all feeding directly into the program's plotlines and characters. Likewise, other writers such as Rafael Alvarez, whose experiences as both a reporter and a laborer on Baltimore ships informed its second season, and Bill Zorzi, whose newspaper coverage of Baltimore government helped shape the political storylines, were frequently cited as vital to maintaining *The Wire*'s authenticity; the numerous novelists on staff, including George Pelacanos, Richard Price, and Dennis Lehane, all helped provide both cross-medium legitimacy and decades of experience writing well-regarded, research-driven urban crime fiction. On-camera talent also functions to authorize the program's verisimilitude, with cameos and recurring roles played by actual Baltimore politicians, reporters, police, and drug dealers marking the program as grounded in the real city. *The Wire*'s authenticating authorship framed many viewers' disappointment with the final season, as discussed more in chapter 10, in which the details of Simon's own disillusionment and bitterness about his former employer, the *Baltimore Sun*, were frequently cited as marring the journalism storyline, turning the story too much into Simon's personal axe-grinding grudge for some viewers, rather than an organic part of the series. In all of these instances, the biographical knowledge of the program's crew and cast helped discursively frame our understanding of its fictional representations, encouraging many viewers to regard it as a work of journalism or sociology that uses fiction to tell deeper truths as authenticated by authorship.¹⁵

Traditionally, television creators and producers worked in relative anonymity, occasionally providing interviews to trade journalists or appearing at fan events but otherwise letting network promotional

materials construct their low-profile reputations for viewers, with few exceptions. The rise of online television fandom has enabled showrunners and other production personnel to have a more public, engaged, and interactive relationship with their fans. Often this is filtered through journalists, as online entertainment sites such as *The A. V. Club* and HitFix regularly run interviews with showrunners with far more depth and detail than anything previously seen in print.¹⁶ Some showrunners have adopted online media as a way to engage directly with fans and to construct their own public persona. An early example of such engagement was J. Michael Straczynski, creator of the mid-'90s science-fiction series *Babylon 5*, with Straczynski participating in online conversations via the preweb Usenet system; JMS (as he was known online) regularly answered fan questions, offered interpretive perspectives, and gave glimpses into production practices.¹⁷ While few showrunners since have been so actively engaged online, the recent rise of Twitter has led many producers such as Dan Harmon (*Community*), Kurt Sutter (*Sons of Anarchy*), and Shawn Ryan (*Terriers*) to interact directly with fans, as well as to foster public personalities that can create controversies with the entertainment press and television fans—Harmon even went as far as to mockingly reference someone who had been antagonistically critiquing him on Twitter within an episode of *Community* itself, creating an in-joke for his Twitter fans who could celebrate being in the know about Harmon's personal feuds.¹⁸

The industry has taken advantage of showrunners' increased public personas to create official paratexts that surround and augment a television series across media. Television specials or online videos that preview an upcoming season or episode, DVD extras, including making-of segments and commentary tracks, ongoing podcasts released between episodes, and live appearances at fan-friendly events such as Comic Con all serve both to hype the core series and to perpetuate an authorial presence used for commercial branding and fan interpretive strategies. Many of these paratexts allow viewers to get an inside glimpse into production practices, allowing them to see, in the phrase that *Battlestar Galactica*'s Ron Moore frequently used on that program's podcast, "how the sausage gets made"; however, it is important to remember that these official paratexts are always authorized and controlled, providing insider vision only as allowed by showrunners and production

companies, not an unmediated glimpse into the broader array of labor practices, creative squabbles, and behind-the-scenes drama. Such paratexts have helped create the phenomenon of star showrunners who have become media celebrities themselves among an expansive fan base of eager paratextual consumers.¹⁹ In the bulk of these paratexts, showrunners are constructed with dual, often conflicting cultural roles—in one way, they hype their accessibility, speaking directly to fans using insider lingo and addressing viewer questions with friendly, grounded personas that Suzanne Scott has called “the fanboy auteur.”²⁰ At the same time, showrunners are framed as authoritative presences, in control of their narratives and possessing secrets about coveted long-term mysteries but only willing to dole out clues or references obliquely. While authorial paratexts work to convey the illusion of accessibility, they simultaneously reassert authority, marking a clear power divide between fans and producers.

Each program and showrunner frames their personalities and models of engagement in a distinct way. As Derek Kompare discusses, *Battlestar Galactica*'s Ron Moore presents himself as a solitary authorial figure, rarely incorporating other voices into his regular podcasts aside from his wife, who is playfully called “Mrs. Ron.” He is willing to admit his own perceived missteps and to reveal frank insider knowledge, but his tone is authoritative as well as authorial, grounding the program within his own singular intentionality and vision.²¹ *Breaking Bad*'s podcast offers a very different tone and approach—hosted by editor Kelley Dixon, every episode features showrunner Vince Gilligan and a rotating stable of creative personnel from the series, including actors, writers, directors, producers, editors, special effects artists, and musicians. Combined with Gilligan's own low-key dissembling personality that usually attributes creative decisions to “the room” or his collaborators more than himself, the vision of authorship constructed by *Breaking Bad*'s paratexts is far more decentered, more collective, and less authoritative than how most other programs with star showrunners represent their creative authority.

Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse are among the most prominent showrunners in using paratexts, including podcasts, online video series, and public appearances on talk shows, *Lost*-themed television specials, and live events such as their annual Comic Con panels. In large part, Cuse and Lindelof's high public profile was necessary to shift attention

away from J. J. Abrams, who was erroneously credited as *Lost*'s author by the press and fans, as previous discussed. By making their presence known in a range of media, Cuse and Lindelof asserted control in the public eye and promoted their authorial role. They used that prominence to construct a goofy, comedic image that downplayed some of *Lost*'s more overwrought tendencies, with podcasts that often felt like comedy routines and live events featuring scripted scenes, running gags, and mock mythology—even adopting a combined fannish identity of “Darlton” to assert their collective authorship and playfully reference fan investments in developing relationships between characters through such combined so-called shipping names. Their pervasive public discourses worked both to assure fans that they were in control of the program's complex mythology and to urge viewers to lighten up and enjoy the ride by emphasizing *Lost*'s more fun and escapist side over the hyperserious mystery that occupied many fans' attention and forensic energies. As I discuss in chapter 10, this balancing act became particularly precarious at the end of the final season, as fans demanded both mythological payoffs and narrative entertainment.

It is telling that most of the examples I have referenced are male showrunners; in large part, this is due to the persistent gender bias within television writers' rooms, where women make up less than one-third of writing staffs.²² But few female showrunners have become public figures like some of their male counterparts, with their online presence more restricted to a core fan base (as with *The Vampire Diaries*' Julie Plec) and little widespread notoriety among television fans, despite running very popular programs such as *CSI* (Carol Mendelsohn) and *CSI: Miami* (Ann Donahue), as well as more cult favorites such as *Gilmore Girls* (Amy Sherman-Palladino) and *Orange Is the New Black* (Jenji Kohan). Shonda Rhimes is a notable exception, with a highly popular Twitter feed bolstered by her success in running two major hits, *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*. Arguably television's best known female showrunner, Tina Fey, is known mostly because of her on-screen presence in *30 Rock* and *Saturday Night Live*—tellingly, her *30 Rock* character, Liz Lemon, is a fictional showrunner who is portrayed as competent but hardly authoritative or garnering much respect from her nearly all-male writing staff and production crew. Another recent exception is Lena Dunham, who has gained much public notoriety and an active social media presence

as star and showrunner of *Girls*, but much of the discourse surrounding her authorship questions her talent due to her young age, familial privilege, and lack of experience, highlighting how female showrunners face scrutiny rarely seen by their male counterparts. One of the crucial aspects of the author function is conveying authority, mastery, and control of fictional universes, and such attributes are highly gendered as masculine in American culture, reinforcing the perceived authority of male writers over the more marginalized women both within writers' rooms and within the imaginations of television critics and viewers.

An exceptional but important moment that promoted the visibility of television writers as authors was the Writers Guild strike in 2007–2008; the lack of new television production during the strike called attention to the people responsible for television's serial creativity. Even for viewers who were not avid consumers of authorial paratexts, the strike highlighted the authored dimension of people's favorite programs, raising awareness in the public eye of the creative and commercial systems that produce television. Television writers and their allies in other production roles helped publicize their cause through direct appeals to viewers through YouTube videos, letters to the press, and personal blogs, and evidence suggests that they were able to recruit most viewers to their side of the debate with the production companies.²³ One of the most successful outcomes from the strike that helped reframe television authorship was Joss Whedon's independently produced web musical *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, a three-part video distributed online and later on DVD. Whedon launched *Dr. Horrible* as an experiment to see if a successful creator could work around the commercial industry to create and distribute a program outside the system—the experiment was quite successful commercially, with over a million paid downloads and even more via DVD, and was broadly hailed as a valued addition to Whedon's body of work. Interestingly in this context, the DVD came with a sung commentary track (*Commentary! The Musical*) that directly addressed the politics of the strike and the ambivalences of authorial paratexts, furthering the discursive production of authorship through reflexive paratexts. Although *Dr. Horrible* did not spark a revolution of web-based seriality competing directly with television (yet), it did exemplify the possibilities of television creators leveraging their authorial reputations to create alternative modes of creative work and distribution.²⁴

Paratextual extensions such as authorial podcasts highlight the role of serial form within the discursive circulation of television authorship. The gaps between weekly episodes allow time for speculation, conversation, and engaged fan practices, with the industry and creators happy to fill these gaps with official paratexts encouraging fans to focus more of their attention on the ongoing series. For fans of such serials, the podcasts and other official paratexts become another form of serialized textuality, with their own intrinsic norms and routines (*Battlestar*'s Moore highlighting his weekly choice of scotch and cigarettes), running gags (Darrow's satirical promise that *Lost*'s seventh season will focus on zombies), and particular content expectations (*Breaking Bad*'s emphasis on filmic technique and production processes). From personal experience, I can attest that some moments on *Breaking Bad* prompted me to get excited about how that week's podcast might discuss what I just saw, suggesting that authorial paratexts can function as serial texts themselves, creating their own ritualized engagements, anticipation, and intrinsic norms. The importance of such paratexts to some fans' serial experiences suggests that we must consider the ongoing ways that serial television relies on authorship as a facet of viewer comprehension and engagement, beyond just the industry's construction of authorial discourses.

Producing Authorship through Serial Consumption

It might seem that authorship is best seen as a facet of television production, both in the material ways that television is created and in the rhetorical production of authorial identity and practices. But authorship is also produced through the act of reception, as television viewers use authorial paratexts and textual features to construct notions about authors to guide their understanding and engagement with a series. Arguably, authorship is most vital in the reception process, as that is where the rhetoric of the author function becomes active, shaping viewer processes of interpretation, evaluation, and engagement. But to understand how authorship operates as part of the viewing process, we need to take a detour into literary theory to explore the concept of the implied author.

As originally proposed by Wayne Booth more than 50 years ago, the implied author is a hotly debated and much misunderstood concept

within literary theory, and certainly this is not the place to explore these broader debates.²⁵ For the purposes of discussing television authorship, it is best to look at the two most prominent participants in the debate of the term within film studies, Seymour Chatman and David Bordwell. Chatman argues that the implied author is distinct from the biographical “real author” who created the work (whether literature or film) but serves as the source of a narrative’s origination, “the agent intrinsic to the story whose responsibility is the overall design.” Chatman’s concept of the implied author serves as the embodiment of textual intent and thus functions as reference point for viewers trying to interpret a film—when we ask “what does that film mean?” we are seeking to understand what the implied author meant to convey, as contained within the text (not the biographical author’s statements).²⁶

While Bordwell and Chatman agree on the bulk of their narratological terms and approaches, Bordwell denies the usefulness of the implied author as a concept, suggesting that it is better to view a film’s narrational process as the source of storytelling agency itself: “As for the implied author, this construct adds nothing to our understanding of filmic narration. No trait we could assign to an implied author of a film could not more simply be ascribed to the narration itself: it sometimes suppresses information, it often restricts our knowledge, it generates curiosity, it creates a tone, and so on. To give every film a narrator or implied author is to indulge in an anthropomorphic fiction.”²⁷ Bordwell refuses to use an implied author in his model of cinematic narration because it seems to contribute little to our analytic abilities as critics, as he sees the film’s storytelling techniques themselves as sufficient for conducting narrative analysis. Chatman and Bordwell agree that the text itself is an agent of storytelling, and their debate boils down to whether such agency is best understood as an anthropomorphic author or a system of narrational properties. Personally, I find Bordwell’s approach to viewing a text as self-sufficient for containing its own agency and intent convincing, and I agree that we do not need to claim that only authors can actively narrate.

But I believe by shifting the question somewhat, we can see a vital use for the implied author within the television storytelling process—instead of asking whether an implied author may or may not be lodged in a text as a scholarly heuristic, we should ask how viewers use the

concept of authorship to guide their processes of reception and comprehension. I believe that many viewers themselves “indulge in an anthropomorphic fiction” by constructing authorial figures within their viewing practices. Such authorial construction is not lodged in the text, as authorship exists in the moments of television reception, working within the broader contextual circulation of author function discourses, as discussed earlier. It is connected to the material practices of television production, but only through the windows of text and context, and thus is not a direct link to authorial biography or intent. By looking at contextually situated reception practices of television serials, we can certainly see notions of authorship that are posited by viewers as active agents in the process of reception.²⁸

In a review of the various uses of the implied author, Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller suggest that the concept might be relevant within actual reading practices but that traditional literary studies have not addressed these issues empirically, and thus they focus more on the notion of textual intent, like Chatman.²⁹ To avoid confusion with that use of implied authorship, I call this reception-centered notion of authorship the admittedly clunky term *inferred author function*. “Inferred” highlights that authorship is not (solely) being construed through textual implication but is constituted through the act of consumption itself; Foucault’s “function” retains the centrality of context and discursive circulation. To briefly define the term, *the inferred author function is a viewer’s production of authorial agency responsible for a text’s storytelling, drawing on textual cues and contextual discourses*. In more practical terms, when we watch a program and wonder “why did they do that?” the inferred author function is our notion of “they” as the agent(s) responsible for the storytelling. While certainly some viewers might ground agency within a less human notion of “the series”—as in “why did the series jump forward in time?”—the prevalence of authorial discourses circulating within the industry, sites of criticism, and fan-created paratexts and conversations all suggest that for many television viewers, agency is lodged within an imagined construct of a personified authorial force. It is difficult to say what portion of viewers use inferred author functions as narrative consumers, but I believe the popularity of authorial discourses and evidence of how fans discuss programs in venues ranging from online forums to casual conversations suggest that

authorial agency is a significant part of the reception process for enough viewers to warrant discussion.

This model of the inferred author function could be generalizable to all narrative media; readers, theatergoers, and film buffs all might construct an authorial agent in the process of narrative comprehension, although critics based in other formats seem skeptical. As Torben Grodal suggests, most films are immersive narratives in which viewers are encouraged to engage “downstream” with the diegetic storyworld, focusing on the agency and choices of characters rather than filmmakers; he sees moments when focus is attuned “upstream” toward authorial choices as exceptional, either through special effects that shift attention away from the narrative, in uncommon modes of reflexive film practice such as art cinema, or in atypical viewers such as film critics and cinephiles whose attention may be directed at technique and narration more than immersive experiences.³⁰ However, as I discussed in chapter 1, contemporary television offers many moments of reflexive engagement that do not shatter the narrative frame but instead simultaneously encourage diegetic immersion and astonishment at the operational aesthetic of narrative mechanics. These moments invite viewers to infer authorship, drawing on clues in the text and surrounding contextual discourses to posit what the series creators were trying to accomplish and what it might mean for the narrative going forward. For savvy viewers of complex television, the author figure itself becomes a ludic site of engagement and forensic fandom, as viewers attempt to parse clues and separate truth from hype about these semipublic creators, echoing a mode of cultural consumption that Joshua Gamson claims is typical of many fans of celebrity gossip who treat their paratextual pleasures as an elaborate game.³¹ Given the prevalence of conspiratorial and mysterious storytelling within complex television programs such as *Lost*, *24*, and *Homeland*, the quest to discover who is behind the stories we are watching and to deduce the veracity of what they claim to be doing is often integrated directly into a program’s ongoing plot itself, inviting us to experience the narrative simultaneously in both upstream and downstream modes.

Not only do thrillers and mysteries create thematic parallels with issues of authorship and attribution, but comedies can also embed issues of authorship directly into their texts themselves, as with the experimental programs *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Louie*. The former focuses on

Larry David, who stars as himself, playing the role of the misanthropic television writer who cocreated *Seinfeld*, inviting us to imagine *Curb*’s fictionalized David as the authorial voice of the landmark 1990s comedy. *Curb* itself is widely known to be more collaboratively created than most series are, despite its central and pervasive author figure, as every episode is improvised by the cast following a story outline created by David. Watching the series, especially in moments when the process of creating television itself is portrayed, is a highly reflexive process of imagining multiple levels of authorship and identity, trying to separate the fictional Larry (as we might call the on-screen version of Larry David) from the actual showrunner David and merging both into an ever-evolving inferred author function. This reflexivity took center stage in *Curb*’s seventh season, with the ongoing plot of Larry producing a *Seinfeld* reunion episode and thus portraying a retrospective vision of that program’s creative process. As is typical of *Curb*’s plotting, things fall apart during the production process, leading to a scene in the season’s final episode (confusingly called “*Seinfeld*”) in which Larry takes over for Jason Alexander to play the role of George Costanza, a character that was originally based on David himself—the resulting sequence reflexively shows the real actor-writer David playing the character Larry playing the character George, as created by David based on himself. Through moments such as this, it is hard to imagine how viewers might not consider issues of authorship as an active part of making sense of the story, as discussed more in chapter 5.

Louie similarly represents the author on-screen, as Louis C.K. writes and directs every episode (and even edits most) while playing a fictionalized version of himself. Unlike Larry’s character on *Curb*, Louie (the character) is portrayed not as a television producer but as a stand-up comedian and divorced father, like C.K. himself. On both *Louie* and *Curb*, viewers are invited to playfully imagine what elements of the series are true to real events and characters, versus fictionalized versions or outright inventions from their central authors, issues highlighted in the episode “Oh Louie / Tickets.” The episode opens with Louie shooting a conventional sitcom that he quits due to its lack of realism and authenticity, a moment that both evokes C.K.’s failed CBS sitcom pilot “Saint Louie” and reminds viewers that *Louie* itself is framed as a much more unconventionally authentic sitcom, partially legitimated by C.K.’s

performed author function. The second part of the episode focuses on Louie reaching out to Dane Cook (played by Cook), the highly successful comedian who was accused of stealing jokes from C.K. years before this episode aired. The scene between the two directly addresses their real feud, with both asserting their perspectives in a dialogue that feels completely organic and even-handed—viewers and critics speculated about the scene’s creation, generally imagining that Cook had a part in authoring the conversation to make it accurately represent his perspective. However, C.K. recounts that the scene was written solely by him, refusing to take Cook’s suggestions for revisions: “[Cook] took my directions. He read it verbatim as I wrote it. And nailed it!”³² For the many fans aware of the high-profile history between the two comedians, the episode all but demands that we imagine the issues of authorship (especially given the topic of originality in writing jokes), blurring the lines between real comedians, fictional characters, and television creators in making sense of this complex episode.

Seriality itself encourages the inferred author function, making such inferences more prominent and vital. As discussed in chapter 1, serial form is defined by the gaps between installments, where viewers are forced to pause from the diegesis, thus interrupting “downstream” immersion; such gaps are even more prominent in commercial television, where individual episodes are interrupted by commercial breaks. Studies of fan practices, as explored more in other chapters, highlight how many viewers fill such story gaps with other ways of engaging with serialized narratives, often operating at both diegetic and metanarrative levels of form and storytelling mechanics. The inferred author function becomes prominent in these gaps, both through widely circulating authorial discourses and speculative discussions about what the creators might be up to. Such authorial attention is typical of many serial forms, as we can see when Dickens’s 19th-century readers, fans of comic strips and books, and soap opera viewers all fill such serial gaps by corresponding with authors, participating in speculative conversations about authorial intent, and creating paratexts designed to celebrate or critique their inferred authorial agents.³³

For an example highlighting how showrunners can directly engage with viewers within these serialized gaps to mold both their persona and our assumptions about their programs, Dan Harmon wrote a long

blog post in reaction to some fans taking offense at the use of stereotypical gay representations in the *Community* episode “Advanced Gay.” In his self-described “mea culpa” written two days after the episode aired, Harmon owned the critique, admitting that the writers had used the gay characters as a “tool” to address issues and conflicts within the program’s main characters, rather than treating them like real, human characters. He offered his post as a promise, pointing to a serialized future: “This blog entry is a sort of ‘receipt’ I’m giving you, proof that I’m conscious of the fact that some of you might have been abraded, because if I spent this long typing about this, you know it’s left a mark on my circuit board. I’m bound to offend you again but it won’t be in the same way, and it will be an accident then, too. This time, it was because I was focused on a story that had nothing to do with the ‘issue’ we’re discussing. I cut corners.”³⁴ For *Community* fans engaged in Harmon’s online presence—a significant number, with more than 200,000 followers on Twitter at the time—statements such as these work to constitute his persona as both a blogger and a television showrunner, which then inflects how viewers consume the program and imagine his authorial voice as part of an inferred author function that colors future reception practices.

Such television programs, like serialized literature and comic books before them, serialize not only their storyworlds but also their inferred author functions themselves, as the authorial figures evolve and change over time through their own public performances, our transforming inferences about them, and the interaction between showrunner-as-text and paratext-consuming viewers. As viewers consume more paratexts, including explicitly serialized ones such as podcasts, we come to develop new inferences about such authors, which impacts our narrative consumption. If we conceive of authorship as a discursive phenomenon, constructed by paratexts and other forms of rhetorical circulation, then the inferred author function is itself a serialized phenomenon, changing over time and working in dialogue with the core text itself. Additionally, fans come to feel that they have an ongoing relationship with inferred authors, just as they develop relationships with serialized television characters—Harmon addresses his viewers as “you,” engages in public Twitter conversations, and invites us into his own thought processes (as well as more intimate personal details elsewhere on his blog, signaled by its

scatological title, *Dan Harmon Poops*). Through such modes of address and engagement, an inferred author function develops and changes over the course of a series, and a viewer's relationship to a showrunner's public persona is a similarly fluid, ongoing phenomenon.

Harmon's role as *Community* showrunner created a good deal of real-life serialized drama, as he was fired at the end of the third season, leading to a barrage of publicity and speculative blaming among fans, critics, and Harmon himself. Not surprisingly, the fourth season under new showrunners was regarded by most fans and critics as inferior to the Harmon era, prompting a backlash significant enough for Harmon to be rehired for a fifth season, despite the previous year of name-calling and publicity of Harmon's managerial mistakes. Removing Harmon as *Community*'s showrunner actually strengthened his role within many viewers' minds as the program's inferred author—fans approached this season searching for what was missing because of Harmon's departure, rather than trying to look at what was there under the new regime, and similarly assumed that the fifth season would be a return to form because of the restoration of a clear authorial figure. Whether these personnel shifts are actually responsible for changes in storytelling, humor, or production quality, the inferred author function works to attribute all differences to the presence or absence of the showrunner, not the multiple other factors that were probably also at play.

We use such serialized notions of authorship to develop assumptions about how a series is created, especially concerning how much is planned out in advance, and consume the program in search of clues, using the codex of inferred authorship as a guide.³⁵ For instance, the second season of *Breaking Bad* featured an ongoing set of flash-forward scenes in the precredit teasers of four episodes, mysteriously showing the aftermath of some major violent occurrence outside Walt's house. On podcasts, Gilligan and the other producers alluded to this mystery and suggested that it would be revealed at the end of the season, thus framing expectations for the season's arc and inspiring forensic fandom to analyze both the text and paratexts for clues to reveal the events in advance. Such authorial paratexts presented the narrative ambiguities with a sense of ludic play, encouraging viewers to play along with the series while guaranteeing resolution, rather than coyly obscuring details or refusing clarification, as on other serialized programs.

Another example from *Breaking Bad* highlights how ambiguity and intent can manifest themselves differently. In the final scene of season 3, Jesse appears to shoot Gale in an act of desperation. However, the camera angle shifted in such a way that we never saw Gale being shot and that Jesse may have changed the aim of his gun, a camera move that some viewers interpreted as suggesting that Jesse did not actually shoot Gale. In the first wave of interviews after the finale, Gilligan highlights that any ambiguities were unintentional:

In my mind, no, I don't intend for there to be any ambiguity. Let me start this by saying I always am reluctant to tell the audience afterward what to think or how to feel. I really prefer it when the audience comes to their own conclusions. . . . I never really intended for there to be any ambiguity. But it's funny: in the editing room, my editor and some other people were saying that the way it counter-dollies around, it looks like he's changing his point of aim before he pulls the trigger. . . . I've been hearing from the people who've already seen it that it looks like he's changing where he's aiming. That is not intentional. I did not see it that way when I was directing. It's not wrong for you to think he shot this guy.³⁶

While Gilligan explicitly asserts his initial intent here and elsewhere, in later interviews he embraces ambiguity and notes that the unintentional openness means that he might revisit his own intent for season 4. Not surprisingly, fans posited their own speculation, drawing on different facets of Gilligan's statements to support their own theories on whether Gale would live or die. The next episode opened, after a 13-month gap in screen time filled with paratext-driven speculation and anticipation, with a scene of Gale alive and well; it is soon revealed to be a flashback, with the next scene showing Gale's dead body at the crime scene. Such a sequence invites viewers to posit an authorial presence, playing with their expectations and building on the paratextual conversation about Gale's ambiguous shooting—we can almost hear Gilligan speaking to viewers in this scene, playfully referencing speculations and debates. Although we could follow Bordwell's antianthropomorphic approach and regard it as the series itself playing with audience expectations, the prevalence of the showrunner's voice in paratexts encourages viewers to personalize such intentionality, attaching it to a hypothetical

construction of Gilligan, who embodies the entire collaborative team in the mind of fans.

Of course, savvy viewers are well aware of television's collaborative production process and frequently use paratexts and forensic fandom to analyze who might be responsible for a given choice or outcome. Such questions of collaboration can stretch beyond the writers' room—for instance, African American actors on *The Wire* were frequently asked in interviews how much of their dialogue was improvised or self-written, as many viewers found it doubtful that David Simon or his mostly white writing staff could be responsible for the program's vivid black vernacular (which they actually were). In other instances, viewers parse collaborative creative partnerships to figure out how to map authorial discourses and intertextual track records, as with *Homeland*'s dual showrunners, Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa. Although the pair had shared credits on a range of programs in the 1980s and 1990s, Gordon was best known in the 2000s as showrunner for *24*, while Gansa's solo credits were more eclectic until he reunited with Gordon for *24*'s final season. In an episode-by-episode breakdown of *Homeland*'s first season on *The A.V. Club*, Gansa highlights some of their differences in approach, linking Gordon's more mainstream and conventional choices to his time on *24*, while Gansa takes credit for more ambiguous and unconventional choices; the commenters embrace this distinction, suggesting that such creative tension might undo (or help fuel) the program's success.³⁷ Of course, viewers do not know how much this creative divide actually manifests itself in the writing process or how much Gansa is exaggerating his own role, but such paratexts help create an imagined authorial role with multiple voices in tension and provide a framework to view future episodes as a product of that inferred author function.

Another important function for inferred authors concerns fan-created paratexts, which have become more widespread and popular in the digital era. In an influential post on *obsession_inc*'s *Dreamwidth* blog, the pseudonymous fanfic writer proposed two general kinds of fandom that directly relate to authorship: affirmational versus transformational.³⁸ Affirmational fans generally work to reinforce an author's vision (as they infer it) and canonical narrative content, fleshing out details through fan productions, as discussed more in chapter 8; for such fans, authorial podcasts and blogs provide insight into the creative

process and intentions of an inferred author, extending their narrative experiences. Transformational fans treat an original text not just as a canonical work to be appreciated on its own terms but also as the raw material for productive play, creating noncanonical extensions such as fanfic, fanvids, and other paratexts that frequently go against the presumed intentions of the original's creator. Transformational fans, who are more likely to be pseudonymous female creators avoiding public acknowledgment outside their fan communities, engage in dialogue or sparring matches with their inferred authors, not treating them as powerful figures to be revered, respected, and treated as the source of creative authority, which often typifies the predominantly male affirmational fan's attitude toward the television author. This is clearly an oversimplified dichotomy that requires more analysis than can be given here, but it seems that inferred author functions can play important if differing roles among the most committed productive fans of all persuasions and practices.³⁹

Throughout this discussion of the inferred author function, I have focused on how the imagined role of the author fuels narrative comprehension rather than interpretation. It certainly could be useful in both, as viewers can project assumed political beliefs, ethical goals, or worldviews onto an imagined author that would thus shape an interpretation of a program's politics or themes. Certainly we read the politics of *The Wire* and *Treme* off each other and in the context of David Simon's copious writings and interviews, providing an interpretative frame based on an authorial identity that is more unified and consistent than are actual creative processes. But in this project, I am more interested in how the inferred authorial function operates in the moment of viewership to construct a sense of narrative coherence and to shape emotional reactions, as well as guiding our gap-filling efforts to analyze what has happened and to speculate on what is to come. Per Bordwell's account, viewers do not need to construct an authorial figure to comprehend a narrative—but per pervasive fan discourses and accounts of personal viewing practices, many often do.

This returns us to the call to "Trust Joss"—in this phrase, Joss was not the biographical creator of *Buffy* or the industrial discourses that formed his public persona but the implied author function constructed by viewers out of their textual and paratextual consumption. Viewers who were

invested in *Buffy*'s ongoing storytelling confronted their doubts about this new narrative development by turning to the authorial and authoritative figure that had served them well for the first four seasons, imbuing the program's creator with knowledge and power that they trusted would provide ultimate answers. This call to trust Joss despite lagging faith is a religious move, invoking the author by calling out to a higher power, a supreme creator who must have a greater plan that will be revealed to us mere mortals in due time. As with religion, the powerful author is a figure only experienced through discourse, via texts and paratexts, and glimpsed through oblique moments when we infer something greater at work than just the characters living their lives, as we hope that the events seen on screen are not just random occurrences but all part of a larger plan that a creator has worked out in advance. Of course the belief in a master plan does not stop religious believers from praying to their deity for particular alterations to that plan—just as television fans regularly lobby showrunners to change a series on the basis of their feedback at the same time that they assert the need for authors to have a plan beyond "making it up as you go."

We can see religious metaphors running through the language of serial television, as with a "series bible" that lays out a program's core tenets and story arcs, the idea of "canon" standing in for the authoritative version of the fictional world, fans referring to producers as "The Powers That Be" (which is also the term that Whedon used to reference the guiding deific forces on *Angel*), or transformative fans willfully committing "blasphemy" through acts of transgressive remixing. It seems clear that for ongoing serial storyworlds, many viewers want to imagine a creator with full knowledge and mastery guiding the outcomes, and in moments of doubt or confusion, they put their trust and faith in this higher power—or renounce such authority and take control in their own transformative hands. The inferred author serves this role, and our faith in the author's ability to shape a well-told story carries us through the serial gaps—or when the story goes off the rails, we might lose faith and abandon a series. This act of faith is a form of subjectification, in which we willingly give over our power to something greater in hopes for future payoffs—for all the expansions in participatory culture and fan production in recent years, there is still an active desire for many viewers to be the recipient of a well-told story, not a productive partner

in its telling. As narrative consumers, sometimes we want to give over some degree of control to authors, placing our attention in their hands to guide as they see fit. If we doubt that they know precisely what they are doing, our pleasures are weakened, losing faith in the coherence and rationale of their narrative vision. I am not suggesting that serial television is only for the religious minded or that we have to imbue the author with deistic powers—I write as an affirmed atheist but also as a television fan who has experienced awe and reverence at moments of authorial prowess and creation that borders on worship.

Of course the actual creative process is much messier, more collaborative, and more contingent than the image of an all-powerful creator with a master plan suggests. In the real world, many people find the complexity of biology much too vast to be accounted for by the bottom-up emergence of evolution, so they seek the assurance of an anthropomorphized notion of intelligent design. Similarly, complex stories can seem far too elaborate to be designed by a decentered team beset by contingencies and unplanned interference, so we look to an imagined authorial power to account for narrative complexity and to provide ongoing serial assurances that somebody is actually in control. The inferred author function offers a model for the pragmatic use of an imagined, all-powerful creator to guide our faithful narrative comprehension, while the realities of production studies highlight the messy collaborative realities out of which our serial stories evolve.

Characters

Nearly every successful television writer will point to character as the focal point of their creative process and how they measure success—if you can create compelling characters, then engaging scenarios and storylines will likely follow suit. In a statement echoing dozens of similar interviews with showrunners, *Lost* cocreator Damon Lindelof states, “It’s all about character, character, character. . . . Everything has to be in service of the people. That is the secret ingredient of the show.”¹ Even as television writers, directors, and actors focus much of their energies into creating fully realized characters and designing plots and storyworlds around them, academic analyses of storytelling have focused far less on issues of character than on other narrative elements such as plot, world building, and temporality. This oversight is especially true for moving-image media such as film and television, where character tends to be taken as a self-evident given, wrapped up into conventions of performance and stardom, rather than analyzed as a specific narrative element.² This chapter aims to add to this literature by exploring the vital role of character in serialized complex television, considering how characters are produced and how viewers engage with these figures.

While there is robust debate among narrative theorists and philosophers about the definitions and essences of characters, I am not particularly interested in considering whether a character is “real” (whatever that might mean) or exists solely within textual utterances, in the minds of viewers, or per the intentions of producers. I follow Jens Eder’s provisional definition of characters as “identifiable fictional beings with an inner life that exist as communicatively constructed artifacts”—in other words, characters are triggered by the text but come to life as we consume fiction and are best understood as constructs of real people, not simply images and sounds on a screen.³ This chapter considers television characters by looking at textual representations, contextualized

within production and reception practices, and then focuses on the rise of antiheroes on many of the most prominent examples of complex television drama.

Character Contexts, Constraints, and Concepts

As discussed throughout this book, we can only understand the poetics of television storytelling within its specific contexts, where industrial norms and viewing practices help shape the creative possibilities available to producers. These contexts clearly differentiate serial television’s characterization from other media, especially compared to the long-form possibilities of literature. Television characters derive from collaboration between the actors who portray them and the writers and producers who devise their actions and dialogue. Performance is always a collaborative creative act, as actors embody the roles sketched out on the page; within television’s writer-driven production model discussed in chapter 3, this collaboration is most typically developed through pre-production work between actors and showrunners. In film production, the director is the chief conduit between a script and an actor, helping to guide a performance and shape it to the contours of the narrative whole, but the rotating array of television directors places that role more in the hands of producers, who are typically writers, or in some cases writer-directors, as with hybrid showrunners such as Joss Whedon, J. J. Abrams, and Vince Gilligan. In some cases, an actor also serves as a series producer, as with Timothy Olyphant on *Justified* or Laura Dern on *Enlightened*, while some actors are directly involved in the writing process, as with *Men of a Certain Age*’s Ray Romano, *30 Rock*’s Tina Fey, or *Girls*’ Lena Dunham, all of whom created and ran (alone or in a team) their programs. Thus actors have varying degrees of creative authority and collaborative ownership of their ongoing characters, marking a difference from both the literary model of single authorship and typical film models of stand-alone character development rather than television’s ongoing serial performances.

This link between character and performer sets major storytelling constraints, especially when extratextual factors emerge, or what the invaluable TV Tropes website calls “Real Life Writes the Plot.”⁴ Although actors are typically contracted for many years to ensure their

ongoing availability, sometimes an actor must depart sooner than the writers planned for a character—an actor might die, as with *The Sopranos'* Nancy Marchand, or become too ill to perform, as with *Spartacus'* Andy Whitfield. In the former case, the series portrayed Marchand's character, Livia Soprano, as dying in the third season; in the latter, Whitfield's titular role was recast with another actor for the second season when he was diagnosed with cancer, with no in-story reference to the character's new appearance. Such recastings of a major regular character with a new actor are quite rare on prime time dramas, with a few notable instances such as *Cagney and Lacey* in the 1980s or more recently *Pretty Little Liars*, while they are somewhat more common on sitcoms (such as *Bewitched* and *Roseanne*) and even more so on daytime soap operas. Since most prime time dramas aim for a degree of naturalism and consistency in representing their storyworlds, recasting a character usually comes across as too artificial, as well as downplaying what the original actor's performance may have contributed to the character's identity. Certainly the most innovative and widespread case of recasting is *Doctor Who*, as William Hartnell, the original actor playing the Doctor, decided to leave the series in 1966; leveraging the program's science-fiction premise, the writers created an "escape clause" that the character's body regenerates when facing death, allowing new actors to take over the part, a process that has led to 12 different Doctors as of 2014. This recasting conceit allows the character both to remain a decade-spanning constant and to acquire new shadings of each actor's performance style and reinterpretation, providing a wide range of connections and collective memories to generations of viewers.

Despite some exceptions, recasting tends to disrupt a series, violating viewers' ongoing commitments to the paired actor-character identity. More often than recasting, producers integrate an actor's departure or other changes into the storyworld. Most typically, writers must work around actors with scheduling conflicts that limit their availability, creating episodes that omit or restrict a character's presence, and must similarly shape stories based on actors' contracts, as discussed with *Veronica Mars* in chapter 2. A similar circumstance is when an actress gets pregnant, as writers need to either integrate the pregnancy into the character's arc, as with the landmark storyline in *I Love Lucy* or more recently Jennifer Garner on *Alias* and Charisma Carpenter on *Angel*, or attempt

to hide the pregnancy through costuming, plotlines involving the actress mostly sitting down, or going on production hiatus, all of which were employed on *Parks and Recreation* during Amy Poehler's pregnancy. When an actor decides to leave a program or producers fire an actor due to off-screen issues, the ongoing narrative must be shifted to account for this absence—one high-profile instance was Charlie Sheen's highly acrimonious departure from *Two and a Half Men*, prompting the series to have his character get hit by a train and die. The Sheen case highlights that often viewers are well aware of the off-screen issues impacting a story, making real-life events function as a paratextual framework for anticipating and interpreting a series, as discussed in chapter 5.

Lost's second season provides a good example of many issues blurring character arcs and real-world events; the season introduced "the tailies," a new group of characters seated in the airplane's tail section who landed on a different part of the island. Four tailies managed to rejoin the main group of survivors, although only Bernard survived past the third season. Both Ana Lucia and Libby were killed by Michael late in the second season, a surprising twist that resonated with fans' extra-textual knowledge that both actresses, Michelle Rodriguez and Cynthia Watros, respectively, had been arrested for drunk driving during production, leading many fans to speculate that their deaths were motivated by off-screen issues. Producers have attested that Ana Lucia was always planned to be a single-season arc and that they decided to kill Libby to increase the impact of Michael's betrayal, not due to any actor behavior. The fourth surviving tailie's fate was definitely dictated by off-screen issues: Mr. Eko was intended to play a major role in the ongoing story arc, but actor Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje disliked living in Hawaii and requested to leave the series for personal reasons, resulting in the character's death at the start of season 3 and major shifts to the ongoing plan. Additionally, the young actor who played Walt, Malcolm David Kelley, had a growth spurt between seasons 1 and 2, making it implausible for him to portray Walt within the program's compressed story time frame; *Lost* restricted Walt's future appearances mostly to scenes in flash-forwards or apparitions, which Sawyer sarcastically calls "taller ghost Walt." Extratextual factors can also help expand a character's role, as Michael Emerson's guest performance as Henry Gale on *Lost* was so compelling that the character's arc was extended, turning out to actually

be the leader of the so-called Others, Ben Linus, a central character who persisted until the end of the series. In all of these instances, real-world practicalities and possibilities of actors have direct impacts on the storytelling that transcend writers' plans, complicating notions of creative agency and impacting viewer comprehension of ongoing narratives in ways that are unique to serial television.

If the off-screen lives of actors can constrain a series, they can also open up interesting resonances. As explored by many scholars of stardom, actors serve as sites of intertextuality, merging viewer memories of previous characters and knowledge about off-screen lives to color our understanding of a role. This intertextual resonance can be heightened through serial narrative, as our engagement with actors stretches out over time and we can witness a star's persona change within the gaps between episodes. For instance, George Clooney was not well-known when debuting on *ER* in 1994, but his popularity grew and he soon became a major film star, transforming how he was viewed on *ER* and framing his departure in 1999. Stars also bring resonance from previous roles, as with knowledge of Alan Alda's iconic role of antiwar doctor Hawkeye Pierce on *M*A*S*H* as well as Alda's own left-leaning activism, both of which undercut the conservative politics of his character Republican Arnold Vinick on *The West Wing*, making him a more palatable figure within the program's core liberal sensibility. Michael J. Fox's star persona as a likable leading man in the 1980s and 1990s transformed drastically following the onset of Parkinson's disease; in the 21st century, he has appeared in smaller recurring roles on series such as *Scrubs*, *Rescue Me*, and *The Good Wife*, as well as launching his own series *The Michael J. Fox Show* in 2013, always playing characters that foreground his disability in ways that clearly cater to viewers' extratextual knowledge. In such instances, viewers approach characters with a wealth of star-connected contexts from both on- and off-screen references that help shape storytelling practices, highlighting the centrality of actors in constituting characters within serial television.

Viewers bring more than star discourses to their assumptions about characters, of course, as many viewers are well versed in television conventions that guide their narrative expectations. Murray Smith identifies *recognition* as one of the chief components of character engagement in cinema, as film viewers differentiate between characters and other

figures, whether they be inhuman objects or humans who do not rise to the level of character, such as background extras in a group scene.⁵ For serial television, recognition also means viewers differentiating roles within a program's ongoing ensemble, where characters are positioned in fluid but meaningful tiers of primary lead characters, secondary supporting characters, tertiary recurring characters, nonrecurring guest characters, and background extras. These tiers have industrial meanings, as actors' contracts, placement in credits, salaries, and long-term availability all impact how a character functions in an ongoing story. Narrative surprises can be foiled by credits—the fan-favorite *Buffy* character Spike was added to the cast of *Angel* in season 5, a revelation that is not made until the final moments of the first episode, but the actor James Marsters appeared in the episode's opening credits as a member of the ongoing cast. Similarly, *Lost* episodes frequently saw characters who had been killed in the main time line appear in flashbacks or in other alternate time lines, but viewers paying attention to an episode's opening credits would know which characters would return from the dead that week. Producers are aware of this, striving to confound viewers by keeping surprise appearances out of the credits until the end of the episode, but such matters are dictated by legal matters, guild negotiations, and contractual stipulations that typically override the impulse for narrative surprises, providing another example of industrial constraints shaping creative decisions.

Such credit spotting might be a fringe phenomenon for die-hard fans, but most viewers know basic precepts of serial storytelling that set expectations for characters—most crucially, we all assume that main characters are bound to stay on their programs and highly unlikely to die or depart the story, unless motivated by off-screen factors. This is particularly true of title characters, as we cannot imagine *Seinfeld* without Jerry or *House, M.D.* without Dr. House. But viewers usually assume that the core cast of characters will be a stable foundation throughout a series run, and it is quite exceptional when main characters depart a series unless it is for their own spin-off. For stories with life-or-death stakes, this knowledge colors our narrative experiences, as we assume a degree of character safety that runs counter to threats and dangers within the storyworld. Dedicated fans are well aware of conventions such as "red shirts"—named for the costumes worn by crew members

on the original *Star Trek* who were typically fated to be the first killed on any mission—that help shape narrative expectations for how a story might progress. To counter such expectations, many complex programs have killed off major characters early in their runs to raise the dramatic stakes, as seen on *Angel*, *24*, and *Heroes*, among many others, although such deaths are almost always of second-tier supporting characters rather than the core heroes, who usually remain safe until the program's final season. Serial television can struggle to create dramatic stakes in the face of viewers' knowledge that the fictional jeopardy facing lead characters is highly unlikely to come to pass, an aspect discussed more in chapter 5.

A particularly interesting case of the relative safety of lead characters is *Game of Thrones*, in which the character who appears to be the main protagonist, Ned Stark as played by Sean Bean, is executed toward the end of the first season. Importantly, the television program is based on a series of novels, with Ned's shocking death portrayed in the first book published in 1996—by the time the television series aired in 2011, anyone who had read the novels or followed their critical coverage was anticipating Ned's demise. Nonetheless, there was a good deal of backlash from unaware television fans shocked by Stark's death, with viewers pledging to boycott the program or cancel HBO, although the high ratings for the second season suggest that these were mostly idle threats. As eloquently summed up by a fan on EW.com, "Most of you who think this was some sort of brilliant move or something don't understand the difference between a book audience and a TV audience. . . . TV audiences need to invest in characters. Most of the other characters I don't care much about. While the show will probably still appeal to the 'wow' crowd, its mass appeal just got beheaded."⁶ This comment highlights the different expectations between novels and television: novels do typically create bonds to characters—and reportedly readers of the *Game of Thrones* novels were similarly outraged when reading about Stark's death—but there is a long history of novels killing off main characters, and the *Game of Thrones* books' multiple focalized structure decentred Ned as the main character. For television, actor embodiment creates a different type of parasocial bond; when coupled with the medium's long-established norms and industrial cues such as credits (Bean got top billing in season 1's opening credits) and actor reputations, viewers expect

more safety and long-term commitment to main characters. Thus it is telling that one of the very few examples of a death of a leading character early in a television series was a literary adaptation, and it is unlikely that the program would have tried such a twist without the novel's established precedent.⁷

Lost plays with many of these conventions of character tiers and fates, initially planning to raise its stakes by ending its two-hour pilot with the death of the heroic lead Jack Shephard; ABC objected, fearing it would quickly alienate its audience. Instead, the series surprisingly killed off numerous characters throughout its run, typically second-tier characters such as Boone, Shannon, and Ana Lucia, with occasional deaths of more central characters in highly dramatic fashion, as with Charlie's heroic death at the end of the third season. While *Lost* posed greater risks for its characters than most prime time programs do, it still kept the core group of Jack, Kate, Sawyer, Locke, and Hurley on the series throughout its entire run. *Lost* played games with viewers and their knowledge of red shirts, often including dialogue referring to the arbitrary distinction between named characters central to actions on the island and the background extras who rarely did anything but murmur assent or carry out chores at the camp, with such reflexive lines typically spoken by Hurley, the embodiment of the knowing science-fiction and comic-book fan. Toward the end of the first season, Dr. Arzt emerged as a new character from the nameless crowd, becoming differentiated by being named, going on a mission with the main characters, and speaking dialogue that called attention to his shift from the background—but Arzt's emergence was a fake-out, as he was dramatically blown up just as he was becoming a distinct individual, in a winking nod to audience expectations. Other background characters were occasionally differentiated from the ensemble in playful ways, such as main characters confusing the names of castaways Scott and Steve, or Neil getting the derisive nickname "Frogurt," enabling viewer recognition while also marginalizing him as insignificant, before killing him with a flaming arrow to the chest.

No *Lost* episode plays with character expectations and norms more than "Exposeé," an almost parodic rewriting of island history to include background characters Nikki and Paulo. In the third season, the two figures had been identified as supporting characters, by receiving names,

speaking dialogue, and having the actors' names added to the credits, but they served little dramatic function within the ensemble. *Lost's* producers claim that they elevated these two characters in response to fans wanting to know more about the background characters, but they quickly realized that they could not fit them into the ensemble seamlessly.⁸ "Expose" simultaneously weaved the characters into the core ensemble's history by including them in flashback scenes to previously seen moments and dramatically killed them by burying them alive (and bringing back Arzt to highlight their doomed status). The episode is a distilled example of the operational aesthetic, as we engage at the level of storytelling discourse, considering how the revisionist history of island life resembles fans' rewriting of canonical events, scribbling in the margins of the established storyworld. For fans who disliked the divisive episode, the lack of continuity disrupted what had already been established—"Expose" presented new information about already-established events but did not seem to contribute toward the greater mythology. But for fans willing to play the episode's storytelling game, its ludic pleasures stem from the willful knowledge that the episode is marginal to the point of being almost noncanonical, playfully tweaking fans' forensic obsessions for continuity and coherence and shining a light on characters' functional roles and hierarchies.

Why do television series place such weight on the stability and safety of core characters while relegating others to the ephemeral periphery? There are industrial incentives to associate a program with actors who can be used to promote the series, serve as its public face, and be contractually committed to appear for years at a fixed salary. Creatively, most programs are so defined by their core characters and their web of relationships that replacing them becomes a challenge without losing what drew fans into the series—this is especially true of comedies, in which ensemble dynamics are usually what distinguishes a given program, with character replacements or additions often proving troubling. Serialized dramas might be based on a high concept or complex plot, but the character ensemble at its core is usually what hooks in viewers, as typified by the failure of series such as *FlashForward*, *The Event*, or *Reunion* to create sufficiently compelling characters to ground their enigma-driven storytelling. The large ensembles of daytime soap operas maintain stability through anchor characters who might live their entire

lives on decades-spanning dramas, mirroring the time line of viewers at home, even as other characters in the ensemble might come and go (or be recast).⁹ Episodic procedural dramas are the most common type of programming with a rotating cast of characters, as long-running series such as *Law and Order* and *CSI* can replace characters with some frequency. Such replacements are less disruptive since storylines depend on weekly cases with a core setting and tone, while each character plays a functional role in the organization, with drawn-out character relationships relegated to tertiary plottines. Even on such procedurals, viewers do become attached to particular characters and relationships, leading to some characters remaining for many years or to a franchise creating other iterations more committed to a stable cast of characters, as with *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*.

Television's character consistency is more than just an industrial convenience, as one of the primary ways that viewers engage with programming is to develop long-term relationships with characters. The term for such engagement dates back to early mass communications research in the 1950s: parasocial relationships.¹⁰ While parasocial relationships between media consumers and on-air personalities, be they real-life celebrities or fictional characters, have often been pathologized as an unhealthy inability to distinguish between reality and media, they can instead be viewed as an active, participatory facet of media consumption, with fans choosing to engage with a media text and extend its reach into their own lives. We should not presume that caring deeply about characters is a sign of unhealthy boundaries but embrace it as a central component of storytelling—we temporarily give part of ourselves over to a fiction to produce intense emotional affect. Murray Smith offers a detailed theory of such engagement with characters, framing it as a clearly demarcated process of imagining oneself in relation to fiction, rather than muddling the boundary between reality and fiction.¹¹ Smith's approach to engagement highlights how films cue us to recognize, align with, and forge allegiances with characters, a convincing model that needs to be expanded for the temporal dimensions of serial television.

As discussed in the introduction, watching serial television is a long-term process, stretching over time with interceding gaps. A viewer's character engagement will necessarily extend through these gaps, as

dedicated fans will think about and discuss characters, imagine what the characters might be doing outside the presented episodes, and perhaps even produce their own paratextual extensions for characters, such as fan fiction, fake Twitter accounts, or remix videos. Officially produced paratexts can also fill serial gaps, including in-character blogs, commentaries found on podcasts and interviews, and character-based merchandise. Such ongoing parasocial relationships are heightened for television, where typical domestic viewing literally invites characters into your home, often for regularly scheduled visits over the course of years. Fans will frequently develop sincere emotional attachments to characters, designating particular figures as their “TV boyfriends/girlfriends” or cultivating hateful (but often pleasurable) antipathy toward a character. Such investments are much more commonplace than the rare instances when a viewer blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, resulting in behaviors such as stalking; the norm for most viewers is a playful engagement in which the fictional frame is treated “as if” it were real, attaching honest emotions to representations that they know to be fiction.

Viewers can imagine relationships between themselves and fictional characters, but it is more common to become invested in the emotional stakes within the fictional frame itself. A common type of viewing pleasure is so-called shipping, a term derived from “relationshipping” fandom that emerged around viewers rooting for (or against) a romance between Mulder and Scully on *The X-Files*. In an ongoing series, viewers make intense investments in the romantic entanglements of characters, advocating for particular relationships in forums with other fans, often via “shipping names” combining two characters, such as “Sculder,” as discussed for *Lost* in chapter 8. Viewers care about characters beyond romance, often rooting for particular figures to succeed or fail in business, crime, or other professional endeavors, as well as experiencing key developments in their various relationships with family and friends. Viewers’ investment in characters bleeds outside the storyworld as well into the realm of storytelling mechanics; fans might hope that minor characters get more screen time or that major ones get less, as well as imagining potential spin-offs or crossovers between series. These facets of serial engagement all suggest the centrality of the nonreciprocal relationship between viewers and television characters.

Often such connections between viewers and characters are termed “identification,” but I agree with Murray Smith that this term is inadequate to convey the complexity of the viewing process—viewers do not literally think of characters as standing in for them within the storyworld or imagine themselves as being characters, as implied by “identification.” Instead, Smith proposes that engaging characters involves the three practices of recognition (as discussed earlier), alignment, and allegiance (discussed shortly).¹² Smith’s notion of *alignment* helps explain the connections viewers feel with characters, both within the storyworld and parasocially outside it, as a series manages what we know about and experience with characters. Alignment consists of two key elements: *attachment*, in which we follow the experiences of particular characters, and *access* to subjective interior states of emotions, thought processes, and morality. In a long-form serial, attachment is a crucial variable, as our relative connection to individuals can shift from episode to episode, and nearly all serials have a pattern of multiple attachments to an ensemble of characters—the most exclusive attachment on fictional television might be the highly episodic *Dragnet*, in which Joe Friday’s narration mimics the form of the police report, restricting every scene to his presence and personal experience.¹³ Individual episodes might similarly restrict attachment to a single character, as with the *Veronica Mars* pilot discussed in chapter 2, but such patterns expand over the course of a series for both practical production reasons (as it is too inefficient to require an actor to be present for every scene) and to encourage connections with a wider range of characters. A series typically creates a broad ensemble with wide-ranging attachments across scenes and episodes; these attachments often work to foster the sense that the serial is aligned more broadly with its setting and scenario than with individual characters. On *The Wire*, a scene might attach to any one of dozens of characters whom the narrative differentiates and recognizes—and the series’s opening credit sequences and season-ending montages attach to nondifferentiated people who serve in familiar roles, such as cop, dealer, and dockworker, without elevating them to recognizable characters. This vast breadth of attachment locates Baltimore itself as an immersive place functioning as the core aligned character, with its various inhabitants providing access to the city’s interior subjectivity, as discussed more in chapter 6.

Attachment is particularly important for serials, as spending time with characters encourages parasocial connections—the more time we spend with particular characters, the more we extend that time through hypothetical and paratextual engagement outside the moments of watching. Attachment strategies can become a crucial site of intrinsic norms that help define the storytelling parameters of a series. *Lost* offers a key example, with most episodes centered on a single character, including that character's flashbacks (in the first three seasons), flash-forwards (season 4), time-travel experiences (season 5), or flash-sideways (season 6); fans typically label these episodes as "centric" to a character, as in a "Kate-centric episode." *Lost* episodes do usually feature scenes in which the centric character does not appear, but these usually take place in the on-island narrative "present" (a tricky term for the temporally convoluted series). The effect of such centric episodes is to deepen viewers' knowledge of particular characters, providing access to their backstories (or futures) and thus providing viewers with a broader range of knowledge than any individual character possesses, delivered through piecemeal episodic accumulation. Some episodes violate these centric norms by attaching to multiple characters—sometimes dually focused on the couple Sun and Jin, in a group flashback, as with the season 1 finale "Exodus," or by dispensing with the flashback structure altogether, as with "The Other 48 Days," which offers a linear account of the on-island events for the tail-section survivors. *Lost*'s complex but patterned use of attachment helps deepen our experiences with a range of characters, as well as offering engaging variations on serial storytelling.

Smith suggests that alignment consists of both spending time with attached characters and accessing those characters' interior subjective state, but film and television rarely employ the literary conventions of hearing characters' interior voices or describing characters' emotional state or thoughts. Instead, moving-image media convey subjective interior states through the accumulation of exterior markers of what we see and hear about characters: appearance, actions, dialogue, and other sorts of evidence explicitly presented within the narrative discourse. Viewers necessarily infer and construct interior states of characters, filling in internal thoughts through a process of reconstruction and hypothesizing. Thus in a scene on *The Wire*, Cedric Daniels glaring at Jimmy McNulty (a frequent action) is an exterior marker, but we infer that it

is a judgmental and infuriated glare, suggesting that Daniels might be thinking, "I cannot believe what he just did." There are no adverbs in television's visual storytelling, so the program cannot simply state that Daniels is glaring *judgmentally*, but it must cue viewers to infer his interior state through exterior markers, ranging from the subtleties of Lance Reddick's facial expression and posture that convey tense, suppressed rage to the dramatic context of whatever disrespectful thing McNulty just did to motivate Daniels's glare, to our own memories of previous instances when Daniels showed that same expression toward McNulty and other characters. In the moment, we infer Daniels's interior state as a hypothesis, which is typically confirmed by subsequent exterior markers, such as Daniels tensely barking, "McNulty, my office!" other characters' awkward reactions to witnessing such anger, or McNulty's typical defensive reaction: "What the fuck did I do?" We might imagine another scenario in which Daniels breaks the tension of his glare with a playful, sarcastic insult, which would convey a different interior state of bemusement or camaraderie toward McNulty, but within the context of Daniels's larger characterization, such exterior actions and interior states would be wholly out of character (whereas they would be in keeping with other characters, such as Bunk or Kima). Such interplay between explicit exterior markers, inferred interior states, and serialized contexts is part of the cognitive viewing process that I discuss more in chapter 5.

Some programs do allow for greater access to subjectivity, such as the voice-over and fantasy sequences on *Scrubs*, in which we are privy to J.D.'s thoughts, attitudes, and imagination. Although this might seem like full access to J.D.'s interior state, even those manifested moments of interiority contain gaps for us to flesh out through the same processes we follow in less subjective narrative techniques. For instance, in the first-season episode "My Bad," J.D.'s voice-over interrupts a conversation he is having with Dr. Cox with, "I'll always remember that moment as the first 'thank you' I got from Dr. Cox." Dr. Cox follows with a sarcastic line, "Well, geez, Agnes, does the field hockey team know that you're missing?" to which J.D.'s voice-over responds, "It felt good." Viewers have to parse out the degree to which J.D.'s desperate need for affirmation ignores Cox's sarcasm, how much Cox truly is appreciative but cannot express it openly, and how much J.D. himself might be sarcastically mocking Cox. Just because we are inside J.D.'s head with a great degree

of subjective access, the process of narrative comprehension always posits hypotheses about what a character is thinking and feeling, even when the storytelling seems to portray a character's interiority.

Fleshing out a character's interiority is a core appeal of most fiction, a process that Blakey Vermeule argues is crucial to understanding how and why we engage with fictional characters.¹⁴ She suggests that fiction invites us to access characters' interior states through a process of *mind reading*, in which we probe the thoughts and emotions of others—while we never can fully know the interiority of another person, whether fictional or real, narratives offer a laboratory for using social cues to explore others' minds with more access than in reality. Mind reading is especially compelling around a character's attitudes toward other people, and thus an ongoing serial portraying a community of characters interacting and reacting to one another becomes a particularly fertile ground to explore interiority. Over the course of a serial, the characters whom we are aligned with, connected to, and invested in are typically those we spend the most time with and who provide the most interesting interior states, balancing scrutable access with complex dimensionality to engage us as active mind readers, a process I discuss more later regarding Walter White in *Breaking Bad*. As discussed throughout the book, one of the pleasures of watching complex television is engaging with a sense of ludic play and puzzle-solving analysis, and attempting to read the minds of nuanced, multifaceted characters is fertile ground for such playful viewing practices. Through a long-term investment in a series, viewers accrue knowledge and experiences about characters that allow us to posit our own version of their interiority, especially within the gaps between episodes, when we are left to think about what we have seen and consider our own relationship to characters. Our alignment with characters certainly changes throughout the course of a series—but do the characters themselves change?

Serial Characters and the Possibility of Change

Viewers of serial television engage with an ongoing, dynamic system, not a fixed text like most films. We identify characters not just within a fixed ensemble but also from episode to episode, across gaps of various

lengths in both screen time and story time. One commonplace strategy to maintain such recognition is dialogue explicitly mentioning characters' names, relationships, and identity to help orient the audience—most series offer such identifying information about characters far more than we typically do in real life, and programs that eschew such dialogue cues, such as *The Wire*, are often viewed as confusing and disorienting, requiring guides, as discussed in chapter 8. But at a more abstract level, how do we recognize a character who has changed from the first season to the last? Is he or she the same fictional person, or has he or she changed at a more intrinsic level?

While it may seem that a pleasure of serial narratives is watching characters grow and develop over time, most television characters are more stable and consistent rather than changeable entities. This is not to suggest that characters do not experience major life events, traumas, and conflicts that have an impact on who they are—surely most serial characters experience an unrealistic number of such occurrences in the high-drama realm of fiction. And as discussed in chapter 1, a core facet of seriality is that narrative events accumulate in characters' memories and experiences. But even in the face of such life-changing events, television characters are mostly stable figures, accumulating narrative experiences more than changing from them, as Roberta Pearson argues:

Over the course of a long-running series, the routine augmenting of traits and biographies for novelty purposes can lead to highly elaborated characters. But a highly elaborated character is not the same as a well-developed character. . . . For literary and dramatic critics, development has often meant that the protagonist grows, achieves a higher degree of self-awareness and makes life-transforming decisions. But the repetitive nature of the television series dictates a relative state of stability for its characters, whose failure to perform key narrative functions and to interact with other characters in pre-established fashion could seriously undermine a series' premise. . . . In television, it's more accurate to talk about character accumulation and depth than it is to talk about character development. The long-running American television drama can create highly elaborated characters of greater accumulation and depth than any contemporary medium.¹⁵

I agree with Pearson's account of most serial characters, for whom elaboration substitutes for change, but there are certainly exceptions, in which character development and transformation do occur.¹⁶ How might we define stability and change within these terms, especially given that so many narrative events and shifts in relationships occur over the course of a serialized program?

To grapple with character changes, we need to consider Smith's third factor of character engagement: *allegiance*, the moral evaluation of aligned characters such that we find ourselves sympathetic to their beliefs and ethics and thus emotionally invested in their stories. Since interiority is a restricted area of access, we must infer characters' morality and beliefs on the basis of exterior markers, including their appearance, behaviors, and interactions as well as how other characters act toward and talk about them. When Pearson connects character development with a "higher degree of self-awareness" and "life-transforming decisions," she is referring to changes within interior beliefs and moral values (which prompt shifting actions) that Smith frames as promoting allegiance. Most of such changes in a serial are either temporary, attributed to an external factor that dissipates over the course of an episode or short arc, or only midlevel shifts in behaviors and attitudes, rather than high-level transformations of core morality and ethics that would prompt a change in our allegiances. So when examining stability and change, we need to look for indications of shifting allegiances, as motivated by transformations within both exterior actions and interior thoughts and feelings. But because we can only access interiority through exterior markers, shifts in character allegiance must be manifested externally.

There are many ways to assess changed interiority on the basis of exterior markers—a character's new appearance might indicate a revised attitude or belief system, as a different haircut or wardrobe might signify a transformation. Dialogue can certainly signal change, either from characters themselves ("I've changed!") or what other people say about them ("She's changed"). Of course, dialogue, costuming, and appearance all might be indications solely of superficial changes or characters' attempts to change that viewers assume are ultimately futile. Complex multifaceted characters must have their interior states confirmed by a number of different exterior markers, and typically overt actions speak

louder than dialogue to indicate a character's true subjective state. For instance, at the end of *Homeland*'s first season, CIA agent Carrie Mathison undergoes a mental breakdown that we have anticipated, given that we learn of her bipolar mental illness in the pilot and see her medication run out midway through the season. In the midst of her breakdown, she asserts that she is fine, but Claire Danes's manic performance trumps those claims, as we are aligned with her colleague Saul in trying to discern how much she has lost touch with reality. He ultimately finds his answer, and we find ours alongside him, when he discovers a huge wall collage of color-coded papers that she has assembled in a fit of mania—more than any other marker, this artifact of her actions both conveys her unhinged state and reinforces our allegiance with her, since her madness enables her to discover a pattern pointing to the truth about a terrorist conspiracy. Thus while we want to gauge a character's interiority, we judge characters mostly by what they do, cued by how other characters regard, interact with, and talk about them; through these actions and reactions, we locate our own allegiances within a set of characters. Our sustained allegiance through her breakdown marks Carrie's shift as a midlevel behavior change, rather than a high-level moral shift—Carrie is still motivated by noble ethics and consistent beliefs, even if her actions and attitudes differ radically from where she started the season, and we believe the shift to be temporary, anticipating her renewed stability following psychiatric treatment.

Not all character changes are manifested in actions, as one significant way characters might change is through a shifted perspective on themselves and their situation that does not translate into different actions. Carmela Soprano is a good example of a character who makes many attempts to change outwardly, by forging new relationships, seeking a career, changing her appearance or material world, or even leaving her husband, but none of these changes seem to make much of an impact on her core character, as she always reverts back to the narrative status quo. Yet Carmela does seem to have learned something about herself and changed her own internal attitudes over the course of *The Sopranos*, gaining some peace and acceptance about the core hypocrisy of her lifestyle and Tony's profession in the wake of numerous traumas, accepting her guilt in living off the spoils of his violence. We gauge this shift less from differing actions than through subtle shifts in Edie Falco's

performance—the way she looks at people and things, how her emotional reactions to Tony's actions mellow—and contrasts to other characters' lack of growth and maturation. We also fill in the gaps in these silent moments of Carmela looking or reacting by filling in her interior state by referencing our own serial memories of the character, constructing an internal monologue that draws connections across the life span that we have shared with her, a process discussed more later.

Characters rarely shift significantly, but our understanding of them often does, a change of a somewhat different narrative order that we might call *character elaboration*, referring to Pearson's distinction between elaborated and developed characters. This model of change exploits the serial form to gradually reveal aspects of a character over time so that these facets of the character feel new to the audience, even if they are consistent and unchanging character attributes. *Lost's* flashback structure harnesses the power of character elaboration, as each episode reveals elements of characters' backstory that cast their on-island actions in new light.¹⁷ While most series are less predicated on such structures, many use intermittent flashbacks or moments of recounting to fill in crucial backstory contexts to elaborate a character, a strategy seen in programs ranging from *Mad Men* to *How I Met Your Mother*, *Terriers* to *Orange Is the New Black*. Since we measure character change in large part on the basis of our own allegiances toward characters, elaborating more about a character's backstory can make a static figure seem more dynamic, so that our own shifting knowledge and attitudes create the illusion of character change, much like the sun appearing to orbit our seemingly fixed position on Earth.

This perspectival illusion of change is not unique to viewers, but it is even more commonly seen within the relationships between characters themselves, as the most fluid dynamic of television characters is the way they interact with one another, via romances, friendships, alliances, conflicts, and betrayals. As discussed in chapter 7, Robert Allen argues that daytime soap operas focus on the ripple effects of events within the web of character relationships, observing how intracharacter reactions and attitudes shift and resonate within the diegetic community and thus color viewers' own perspectives on characters.¹⁸ For prime time serials with far fewer hours of story material, such character webs are usually more compact and less elaborated, but they still form a key point of

engagement for viewers, helping to create the perception that characters are fluid and dynamic through the shifts in how other characters relate to them. For instance, *Lost's* Ben Linus is a highly complex and engaging character, but he changes little throughout the series—he is driven by a stable set of motivations for personal survival, paternal protection, and quest for validation, accompanied with a moral flexibility and lack of loyalty to anyone but his daughter. He may not change much, but our attitudes toward him do, as he becomes much more elaborated through revelations about his backstory through flashbacks, as well as the shifting ways that other characters regard and act toward him, moving from fear and hostility to pity and contempt. On most series, we watch fairly stable characters interacting to form dynamic relationships, with such interactions providing the surrogate dramatic hook for change and development that might be lacking within the interior stability of characters themselves.

Although wholesale shifts in allegiance are rare, there are instances when we do see characters change; to describe such examples, we might use a number of terms interchangeably, such as "development," "growth," and "transformation," but more specific vocabulary can help distinguish between different types of character arcs. One common model of change is *character growth*, evoking the process of maturation in which a character becomes more realized and fleshed out over time. Not surprisingly, such arcs are most common with young characters; their physical and emotional maturation fulfills a coming-of-age narrative. This framework succeeds particularly well because viewers know from the start that young characters are not fully formed, and we expect the ongoing story to portray them transitioning out of youthful tumult into more stable adulthood. Thus many complex programs center on young characters, including *Buffy*, *Veronica Mars*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Friday Night Lights*; highlight them within an ensemble, as on *Six Feet Under*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Arrested Development*; or feature young secondary characters that serve as a focal point for how they grow in relation to the more static adult world, such as on *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*. Even when a character is not young, an arc can mimic a growth narrative by presenting a major transition that resembles the traumatic development of adolescence, such as Bubbles overcoming drug addition on *The Wire*, the eponymous protagonist of *Chuck* adjusting to a world of espionage,

or various figures on *Heroes* adapting to their new superpowers. In almost all of these series, the characters who follow such growth arcs are contrasted with stable adults whose personalities and actions are much more static, highlighting how character change is far from universal.

Another frequent character arc might be considered *character education*, in which a mature adult learns a key life lesson over the course of a series and ends up a changed person. This type of education is commonly seen in the smaller scale of an individual episode, as many sitcoms and dramas portray characters learning something about themselves and promising to change; however, those lessons rarely stick, as the episodic nature of conventional prime time storytelling demands a return to a narrative status quo each week. *Lost's* Jack Shephard offers an example of a long-arc character education, spending most of the series struggling with his role as a reluctant leader, his need to fix situations, and his inability to see beyond his own rationality. The series portrays his gradual acceptance of irrational phenomena and coming to terms with his lack of control, an arc that enables him to ultimately fulfill his destiny to save the island and his friends. Similarly, *The Wire's* Carver starts the series as a mediocre cop who betrays his boss and takes dangerous risks without thinking, but we see him learn from his mistakes and follow the mentorship of Daniels and Colvin to become "good po-lice." Typically such educational arcs are contrasted with other characters who do not learn those lessons, either because they lack the ability to change (as with Carver's partner, Herc) or because they already knew them (as with Jack's frequent adversary John Locke), highlighting thematic lessons as well as aligning viewers with the figures that are most able to adapt and adjust. Neither Jack nor Carver undergoes major moral shifts, as both start as basically good if flawed people who must learn how to move beyond their limits, and thus our allegiance does not waver significantly throughout the series. This type of character education is fairly common in long-form serials, as characters learn to accept their life's situations, come to terms with their pasts, or develop skills and abilities that change how their behavior—but in all of these instances, such an arc leaves the character's core morality and our allegiances unchanged.

A more abrupt form of change might be called *character overhaul*, in which someone undergoes a dramatic sudden shift, often tied to a supernatural or fantastic situation that creates body switches or clones, but we

retain our serial memories of earlier events and relationships. Such character overhauls can be seen on a range of programs, including Locke on *Lost*, Francie on *Alias*, both Starbuck and Sharon on *Battlestar Galactica*, and Olivia on *Fringe*. *Buffy* and *Angel* employ such character overhauls quite frequently, often just for a single episode in which a character is possessed by a demon, switches bodies with someone else, confronts a doppelganger from another dimension, has his or her memory erased, is turned into a puppet, or is otherwise temporarily recharacterized.¹⁹ Some of these shifts are more long term, tying into larger arcs that make overhauls part of the character's core identity. *Angel* is a key example here, as he is a reformed vampire with a soul, but occasionally on both *Buffy* and *Angel*, he becomes Angelus, a soulless killing machine. However, for both viewers and other characters, the memories of Angel's soul persist, and we imbue Angelus's actions with a level of moral complexity and sympathy that the demonic vampire himself lacks. A more lasting transformation occurs in *Angel's* fifth season, as Fred is permanently transformed into Illyria, an ancient demon who is bewildered by the modern world; we experience this transformed character through the sympathetic perspective of her boyfriend, Wesley, who tries to sustain Fred's memory by helping Illyria learn from humanity. Along with Wesley, we feel the loss of Fred and see Illyria inflected by our shared serial memories that she herself does not understand. Such fantasy conceits allow extreme examples of character transformation that contrast most normal characters' stability, whether it is a temporary overhaul that quickly returns to normal or a longer-term shift that highlights what was lost through the disappearance of the character's original stability.

Overhauls offer opportunities to play with recognition, teasing viewers and other characters about which version of a character is present. Such mistaken identities are often integrated into key plot threads, so that a character's recharacterized version deceives other characters within the story, as in *Fringe's* so-called Fauxlivia version of Olivia, who manipulates her colleagues across dimensions. In such plotlines, viewers typically know about the deception, creating suspenseful anticipation of when the truth will come out, as well as layers of dramatic irony in which we know the true meanings of dialogue. More rare are instances of overhauls in which the audience is unaware of the switch, only to learn of it at a later point in the series to create a moment of dramatic

surprise—*Lost* featured a significant instance of this, as the 2007-era on-island scenes with John Locke featured in six episodes in the fifth season turned out to be a doppelganger manifestation of the unnamed Man in Black in Locke's form; a transformation only revealed in the season finale. This twist forced viewers to retroactively reinterpret the season's events (and inspired many to rewatch within this new context), positing new interior states to explain the same external markers performed by the newly identified character, known by fans as "Flocke" (fake Locke) or "UnLocke." Playful names such as Fauxlivia and Flocke speak to fans' need to identify and recognize characters within viewer discourses, orienting themselves within complex layers of characterization and multiple identities, as discussed in chapter 8, as well as indicating the ludic fun that many fans have in playing such games of comprehension.

This need to recognize an overhauled character is a heightened instance of what viewers of all cumulative narratives must constantly do: locate a character in their experiential arc. Most programs simplify this process by mirroring the chronology of characters and viewers, so at any given time, a dedicated sequential viewer will be drawing on the same set of shared memories and experiences as the characters themselves. Programs with convoluted chronologies complicate this process, as we must locate characters within the serial time frame and calibrate our knowledge and memories of their experiences, a process that is mirrored within the series of *Doctor Who* itself. As discussed in chapter 8, the romantic arc between the dual time travelers River Song and the Doctor features a tremendously twisty narrative chronology, with the characters carrying their own orienting journals to sync up their experiences whenever they meet. The two characters take time to recognize each other and to figure out who they are at this time, as defined by their shared or divergent experiences—and River Song herself expresses the melancholic anticipation that the Doctor will eventually not recognize her at all given their opposing temporal vectors (a moment that viewers had previously witnessed), as well as insisting on "no spoilers" for events in each character's future. Of course, many television viewers are time travelers themselves within serial storyworlds, consuming episodes out of order or rewatching selected episodes, requiring viewers to similarly sync up their memories or consult paratexts to orient themselves as to which version of a character is appearing on screen.

My final category of character change is what we might traditionally think about under such an umbrella: a *character transformation* of an adult, complete with a gradual shift of morality, attitudes, and sense of self that manifests itself in altered actions and long-term repercussions. Pearson suggests that traditional norms of character change feature such "life-transforming decisions," a model that seems suited to the more stand-alone narrative forms of film and literature than to the ongoing serial model of television, but a few rare examples of television's character transformations do seem to fit this category. One of serial television's most effective character transformations is Wesley Wyndam-Pryce from *Buffy* and *Angel*, who was introduced in the former's third season as a comedically pompous, cowardly, and bumbling Watcher ineffectually trying to supervise Buffy. The following year, Wesley moved to spin-off *Angel* and began to transform into a more competent and assured "demon hunter" through his experiences and meaningful relationships with coworkers and friends, eventually rising to a leadership role within the team. Yet when he betrays his friends in a well-intentioned attempt to spare Angel additional torment, he is outcast from the group and becomes involved in a dark and manipulative sexual relationship with the antagonistic lawyer Lilah. Wesley eventually returns to Angel's side but is clearly a changed man, with a darker and more cynical edge; he confronts romantic situations and personal sacrifice quite differently in the program's final season through his relationship with Fred and the trauma of Illyria's emergence. Although he encounters numerous supernatural phenomena in his journey, his transformation is not a paranormal overhaul but a gradual human shift—at any point in his multiseason journey, Wesley feels like a robust and fully realized character, and it is only through a broader view that we can see his arc as a rare example of serialized character transformation.

By concluding this roundup of different models of character change with transformation, I do not mean to suggest that television's dominant approach to characterization is flawed by overemphasizing stability or less organic models of change except for a few notable exceptions. The desire for stable characters with consistent traits and personalities is a major draw for serial storytelling, as we want to feel connected to such characters through parasocial relationships and might be quite disappointed if they changed in ways that violate their initial connections and

appeals—certainly a common complaint among television fans is when a character's actions seem unmotivated and inconsistent, a critique that speaks to the need for character stability. Viewers invest themselves in the shifting web of relationships between fairly stable characters; focusing on character change does not belittle that dominant mode of television storytelling in either episodic or serial forms. However, character transformation remains an exceptional feature for most television, and looking closely at how a series can accomplish such dramatic changes highlights one of the more innovative possibilities of complex television. No series embraces character transformation more fully than *Breaking Bad*, so to explore its remarkable approach to television characterization, we need to examine an important dramatic staple of many complex series: the antihero.

Lengthy Interactions with Hideous Men: The Serial Poetics of Television Antiheroes

In the collection of short stories *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, David Foster Wallace creates a resonance between the two adjectives in his title—if we are going to spend time in the company of hideous men, it best be brief. Most television abides by this link; distasteful and unpleasant characters are treated briefly, whether as unsympathetic protagonists on an anthology program such as *The Twilight Zone* or as single-episode villains featured in a procedural's police investigation or medical case. But as I argue throughout this book, serial television is distinguished by the long time frames it creates, and thus any interaction with hideous men found in a series's regular cast will last quite a while. One common trait shared by many complex television series is the narrative prominence of unsympathetic, morally questionable, or villainous figures, nearly always male (as discussed more shortly), a trend typically identified as the character type of the antihero—a term that may not be applicable per traditional literary definitions but has become the common cultural moniker for this style of characterization. The rise of television's antiheroes raises a key question: why would we want to subject ourselves to lengthy interactions with such hideous men?

Using Murray Smith's vocabulary, an antihero is a character who is our primary point of ongoing narrative alignment but whose behavior

and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance. Although often lumped into a singular character type, antiheroes can come in a wide range of variants, from misanthropic, selfish, but ultimately redeemable heroes, such as Mal on *Firefly* or Tommy on *Rescue Me*, to arrogantly superior, destructively flawed, but moral figures, such as Gregory House on *House, M.D.* and Jimmy McNulty on *The Wire*, to outright amoral villains as protagonists, such as Tony Soprano and Dexter Morgan. Some antiheroes stretch a rebellious member of a typically upright organization to its moral limits, as with *The Shield*'s portrayal of rogue cops turned into corrupt murderers and thieves, while others focus on a community of villains within an unlikely locale, as with Oz's prison or the *Sons of Anarchy* bike gang. Complex comedies have also embraced antiheroic protagonists, as with Larry David's misanthropic self-portrait on *Curb Your Enthusiasm* or the ensemble of horrid losers populating *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*. Television features a longer history of comedies centered on unlikable protagonists, including Archie Bunker on *All in the Family*, *Seinfeld*'s core ensemble, and the main characters on *The Larry Sanders Show*, with even more prominence on British comedies such as *Fawlty Towers*, *Absolutely Fabulous*, *Blackadder*, and *The Office*. In nearly all of these comedic instances, we are positioned as rooting against the unsympathetic heroes, watching them fail for our amusement as well as laughing at their boundary-pushing behavioral extremes. But how do we account for the pleasures of watching a highly unpleasant protagonist at the center of a dramatic narrative that asks us to truly care about his actions and potentially encourages our allegiance?

Antihero narratives regularly invoke *relative morality*, in which an ethically questionable character is juxtaposed with more explicitly villainous and unsympathetic characters to highlight the antihero's more redeeming qualities.²⁰ On *Mad Men*, Don Draper's misbehavior is often seen as more redeemable and motivated than that of less sympathetic characters Pete and Roger; on *Dexter*, the title character's murderous ways are always contrasted with another murderer who lacks a code and targets innocents. Although *The Wire* is not directly focused on antiheroes, criminal characters such as Stringer Bell, Omar Little, and Bodie Broadus are framed as more multifaceted and morally complex than unredeemed villainous figures such as Marlo Stanfield, The Greek, and

Maury Levy. Within *The Sopranos*, it would be hard to say that Tony's actions are truly more ethical than those of his mafia associates, but through his therapy sessions and familial interactions, we come to know his personal history that shaped his amorality, his moral quandaries, and the anxiety attacks that derive from his internal conflicts. We may not be certain that Tony is a morally superior person than more villainous associates Richie Aprile and Ralphie Cifaretto are, but due to our alignment with Tony, we perceive him as relatively more worthy of our allegiance than these more distanced and opaque characters. Even more central characters Paulie and Christopher are viewed as less noble than Tony, lacking leadership abilities, parental grounding, and an ability to overcome their respective flaws of superstitious paranoia and drug addiction.²¹ With Tony Soprano and other leading antiheroes, we feel more connected to characters with relative morality within that program's ethical universe, even if all of the characters would be reprehensible in real life—in effect, these main characters are validated for being less hideous than the alternatives presented in the series.²²

As suggested by *The Sopranos*, alignment and elaboration are key components of our allegiance to an antihero—the more we know about a character through revelations of backstory, relationships, and interior thoughts, the more likely that we will come to regard them as an ally in our journey through the storyworld. This might be partly akin to a fictionalized Stockholm Syndrome, in which time spent with hideous characters engenders our sympathy as we start to see things from their perspective. However, we are not being held captive by serial television, so a series must justify why it deserves our attention week after week; and compelling characters are an essential element of any program's appeal. Charisma helps us overlook the hideousness of many antiheroes, creating a sense of charm and verve that makes the time spent with them enjoyable, despite their moral shortcomings and unpleasant behaviors. Charisma largely stems from an actor's performance and physicality but is also cued by how other characters treat the antiheroes, so that on-screen relationships guide viewers how to feel toward a character. Thus on *The Sopranos*, nearly every character respects, loves, desires, or follows Tony—and those who do not rarely survive for long—despite the fact that he consistently treats people quite poorly, whether they be family members, colleagues, or friends. Likewise, everyone tells Don

Draper how good he is at his job, with most of *Mad Men*'s male characters aspiring to be him and many of the women desiring to be with him. Both James Gandolfini and Jon Hamm are magnetic actors, with the former using his physical bulk to create a sense of menacing but approachable power, while Hamm is commonly regarded as one of the most handsome actors in Hollywood, a physicality that certainly feeds into Draper's desirability. Additionally, both Tony and Don are positioned as accomplished leaders in their respective careers, generating material wealth and power that signals desirability and success within much of American culture. Both characters exude charisma that inspires viewers to want to spend time with them, despite their moral hideousness.

The draw of antiheroes does not simply override such hideousness but partly stems from the *fascination* that it prompts—the immoral actions of these characters create viewer intrigue, or what Smith calls “the innate fascination of imagining experiences that we lack the opportunity or courage to experience in reality.”²³ The fictional bubble allows us to witness actions and traumas that we are hopefully safe from in real life, and through aligned antiheroes, we are able to read their immoral minds. Vermeule connects such fascination to a cognitive concept called “Machiavellian intelligence,” in which success in a socially complex environment depends on the ability to understand and manipulate other people, a trait that is well served by interpersonal mind reading. For Vermeule, much of our engagement with fiction stems from our interest in reading the minds of Machiavellian characters who display social intelligence, cunning, and a keen ability to manipulate others—we learn from their adventures, helping to develop our own social intelligence through the tales of fascinating characters. She posits the core Machiavellian character as a “mastermind” who manipulates others (for good or ill), excels at social problem solving, and is often found in narratives with “high narrative reflexivity” and allusions to games and puzzles, all traits common to complex television.²⁴ Although most of Vermeule's literary examples are not antiheroes, we can see such traits within many complex television series focusing on amoral figures, suggesting that Machiavellian fascination is a key component driving the antiheroic boom.

The lead character on Showtime's *Dexter* offers an interesting example whose hideousness as a serial killer may be unmatched in terms of

reprehensible actions among television antiheroes; he is responsible for murdering more than 130 people over eight seasons. However, Dexter Morgan is clearly framed as a protagonist deserving sympathy and allegiance via a number of characterization strategies. Actor Michael C. Hall brings an intertextual shine to his portrayal, as he was well-known as the sympathetic, soft-spoken, and occasionally victimized David Fisher on HBO's *Six Feet Under* for the five years immediately before *Dexter*'s 2006 debut; given the two shows' shared style as a dark premium-cable drama with comedic undertones, Hall's previous role helped make Dexter feel more familiar, charismatic, and accessible to viewers of both series. Viewers are highly aligned with Dexter, spending most of the narrative attached to him and being granted exclusive access to his interiority via voice-over narration, flashbacks, and subjective visuals. Such alignment facilitates mind reading as well as granting access to Dexter's dryly ironic sense of humor, highlighting our shared connection to the character. This attachment allows us to witness actions that no other characters know about, providing shared secrets and knowledge of Dexter's personal ethical code to promote allegiance and even positioning viewers as passive witness to, and accomplices in, his vigilantism. The series clearly embraces relative morality, as his victims are almost always more monstrous than is Dexter himself, and we repeatedly hear his thoughts about his adoptive father's code of ethics and his need to target those who deserve to be brought to justice to protect innocents. We admire his Machiavellian prowess; his cunning and dedication to rational analysis allow him to evade capture and discovery for many years. Thus even though we see Dexter doing unspeakably hideous things, we are steeped in his perspective, his rationales, and his backstory enough to understand and even sympathize with his murderous and deceitful actions.

Dexter's first season sets important groundwork for the character, establishing clear alignment and allegiance for viewers to build on for the rest of the series. The season gradually elaborates the character in tight alignment, as we discover alongside Dexter himself the gruesome childhood trauma that caused his mental illness: when three years old, he witnessed his mother's murder via chainsaw and was locked in a room in a pool of her blood for two days. The harrowing flashbacks to this event, which stand out as the most gruesome and troubling images in a series full of them, provide a plausible explanation that such trauma

might cause a mental break and turn a boy into a serial killer, creating sympathy for the character's victimization in childhood that extends to his older murderous version as trained and guided by his adoptive father. As discussed more in chapter 5, this sympathy is contrasted to his previously unknown brother, whom Dexter discovers also experienced this matricidal trauma and became a serial killer but lacks Dexter's moral code and familial grounding. The series accomplishes what would seem to be an impossible task—making a serial killer into a sympathetic hero whom we enjoy spending time with each week—but gets stuck in a narrative bind: because Dexter must continue to kill to fulfill the program's concept but cannot deviate from his moral code to sustain viewers' sympathy, the character has little room for conflict, change, and development. Nearly every season portrays Dexter fighting his instincts and working to eliminate his murderous urges, but he must always embrace who he is to exact justice, to save his family, or to preserve his own life, leading to character stagnation and repetition and stretching emotional credulity for a series that already lacks realism in much of its storytelling. Typically a program can use the fluid dynamics of relationships to offset static characters, but because *Dexter*'s concept is predicated on his character posing behind a stable facade to all of his long-term friends and family, they cannot have sincere relationships with him compared with what we know of him as aligned viewers; instead, Dexter's family situation is the most fluid variable, as he marries, has a child, and then copes with being a single parent, but none of these shifts have much palpable impact on his core characterization. Without a sense that Dexter's character changes over time, either internally through transformation or development or cued via the surrogate of externalized relationships, the program's concept wears thin after numerous seasons, only rekindling interest in the seventh season when his sister, Deb, learns his secrets and thus transforms their relationship and challenges his worldview.²⁵

Dexter's serialized challenge highlights one of the key issues with antiheroes: what are our expectations for character change? Since antiheroes are predicated on a careful chemistry of alignment, relative morality, fascination, and charisma, character change can upset that balance, but overt stagnation becomes dull and troubling for the relationships portrayed on the series. Additionally, the narrative scenarios of most antihero dramas seem pointed toward an ultimate reckoning,

when characters will have to pay the price for their crimes and immoral behaviors—but without clear character changes or development, coupled with the endless delay of television’s infinite model (which *Dexter* suffers from for much of its run), the final destination of an antihero can set up mixed expectations. In chapter 10, I discuss the conclusion of *The Sopranos* and the need for narrative closure and potential justice for Tony, but we can see similar challenges raised for the arcs of Don Draper and Dexter Morgan. *Seinfeld’s* ending delivered a reckoning for the lead characters, imprisoned for their insensitivity, but most viewers felt like the punishment did not fit the crime, especially in the program’s comedic context. Probably the most celebrated final fate for an antihero is *The Shield’s*, with Vic Mackey working the system to get immunity for his crimes, but he ends up condemned to a desk job that feels like prison given his action-oriented personality. Antihero conclusions are extraordinarily difficult, as they must provide a motivated end to a complex character arc, pay off serialized arcs that reward viewers’ dedication, and offer (or actively refuse) a moral position toward the characters’ behaviors. And for many ongoing serials, the anticipated ending looms over a series run, with viewers waiting to judge a character’s arc and morality in lieu of where the story takes him.

As I have argued throughout this book, complex television acknowledges its own role as fiction through reflexive storytelling strategies, even when programs are highly dedicated to realism, as with *The Wire*. This is an important element for antiheroes, as we must remember that their hideous acts are fictional to allow us to suspend moral judgments and rationalize their behaviors, which Margrethe Bruun Vaage argues is essential to enable allegiance with characters doing horrible actions.²⁶ However, the serial model of television complicates the solid line between fiction and reality, as parasocial engagement with television characters allows serialized characters to persist beyond their time on the screen. If you immerse yourself within the fictional lives of Dexter Morgan or Tony Soprano, you are likely to think about their behaviors even while you are not watching television, perhaps positing how they would handle a situation in your own life or imagining what they might be doing in between episodes. While we do maintain a clear sense that these are fictional characters, parasocial engagement allows hideous characters to occupy our thoughts and attention outside the

clear frame of televised entertainment, creating uncomfortable blurs in which we might find ourselves imagining the actions and thoughts of a psychopath within our daily lives. Although antiheroes do spark a different set of allegiances than typical serialized characters do—though I am loathe to acknowledge that there are certainly viewers who imagine Dexter as their “TV boyfriend”—there is no doubt that watching an ongoing serial tightly focused on an antihero does entail entering into a relationship with the character and allowing him into our daily routines and thoughts, for better or worse. While this does not mean that viewers cannot distinguish between fiction and reality, it does highlight how watching serial television blurs character boundaries and suggests that any notion of a clear fictional frame might be a bit more muddy than we might expect for other, more bounded media.

In my discussion of antiheroes, it should be clear that crafting characters who effectively balance alignment, allegiance, and stability is quite difficult to pull off successfully throughout a serial, which leads to a key question: why bother? Decades of dramatic television have avoided such antiheroes at their centers, settling for charismatic villains we love to hate to explore darker characters, such as *Dallas*’s J.R., *Melrose Place*’s Amanda, or numerous figures on every daytime soap opera. Certainly part of antiheroes’ appeal stems from the imitative logic of commercial television—when *The Sopranos* became a surprise hit, it invited the industry to ride on its success by mimicking its focus on a criminal protagonist, a trend that proved lucrative through commercial and critical successes such as *The Shield* and *Dexter* but also certainly yielded less successful imitators such as *Kingpin* and *Brotherhood*. This innovation also signaled to television creators new possibilities for darker heroes, storylines, and themes, capitalizing on the freer content standards available on cable to tell a broader range of stories than had been permissible in television’s classic network era. Not surprisingly, such dark stories tend to get more critical accolades and awards for their innovative approaches and subject matter, so there are incentives for creators to rise to the challenge of creating compelling antiheroes that encourage viewers to stick around for such lengthy interactions.

As mentioned earlier, all of these antiheroes are hideous men, with a distinct lack of female characters who invite us in to embrace their troubling morality. Female characters who approach antiheroic status

tend to be either sympathetic but prickly, as with Veronica Mars, Starbuck on *Battlestar Galactica*, and Sarah on *The Killing*, or more comedic approaches to morally questionable women, as with *Sex and the City*, *Weeds*, *Nurse Jackie*, and *Enlightened*. The few examples of a full-blown female antihero I can name who might be dramatically equivalent to Tony Soprano, Don Draper, Dexter Morgan, or Vic Mackey fall short of those programs' characterization. Patty Hewes on *Damages* seems similarly ruthless and unsympathetic, but her protagonist function is more doubtful, as she is contrasted with the more noble and sympathetic character of Ellen, making Patty more into a villain we love to hate, at least in early seasons before her backstory is more fully explored. *Revenge* teased with transforming its main protagonist from a vengeance-seeking hero into a morally questionable antihero, but the series maintains Emily Thorne's moral superiority to her victims, backing away from murder and other explicitly immoral acts. *The Americans* focuses on a married couple of undercover Soviet spies, with Elizabeth presented as more capable of violence and betrayal than is her husband, Phillip, but the dual focus makes the antiheroic woman less central than on most male-centered series.

Part of why antiheroes seem limited by gender stems from the cultural norms of particular genres, with crime dramas that lend themselves to antiheroes tending toward masculine appeals, as discussed in chapter 7. More centrally, there are broader cultural norms at play; men are more likely to be respected and admired for ruthlessness, self-promotion, and the pursuit of success at any cost, while women are still constructed more as nurturing, selfless, and objects of action rather than empowered agents themselves—or when women do embrace powerful agency, they are often recast as the comedic “unruly woman.” This cultural stereotype can yield a backlash against an aggressive, morally questionable female character, who is often viewed as more of an unsympathetic “ball-busting bitch” than the charismatic rogue that typifies most male antiheroes. But clearly there is room within television’s narrative palette to expand the range of female antiheroes that might serve as the focus of serial narratives.²⁷

Throughout this discussion of antiheroes and character change, I have avoided one example that might be the most salient and interesting from contemporary television: *Breaking Bad*’s Walter White. Thus

I conclude this chapter with a detailed look at Walt as a case study of television character analysis, with the clear caveat that it is an exceptional and atypical example. Creator Vince Gilligan conceived the series to be predicated on character change to a degree that he had rarely seen on television, with the title indicating this transformative arc—“breaking bad” is an American southern idiom for someone losing his or her moral compass. Gilligan regularly mentions that his goal was to take Walter White on a journey “from Mr. Chips to Scarface,” referring to cinematic character tropes of the model schoolteacher and gangster kingpin, respectively, a transformation he elaborates in more depth in comparison with *The Sopranos*:

Where you meet Tony Soprano, he was a guy born into a world of crime. . . . I like the idea of approaching a crime show from *my* point of view. . . . I’m just a big weeny; there’s no way that I’d break the law—not because I’m particularly moral but because I’d be scared of the consequences. And I like the idea of approaching a bad-guy character from a starting point of zero, from never having jaywalked or littered to doing some of the crazy shit Walter White does. . . . What would I do if I suddenly decided to become a criminal? How would I approach it? The process . . . was a big part of what appealed to me, delineating the process of transformation, of going from a normal schlub to a bad guy and ultimately to a kingpin.²⁸

As Gilligan makes clear, the program starts with Walt as an everyman “schlub,” a high school chemistry teacher who is clearly aligned with the audience and encouraging our allegiance; by the final season, Walt is a monstrous villain, murdering rivals, poisoning an innocent child for a risky, selfish scheme, and deceitfully manipulating those whom he claims to love. How did this epic moral transformation work?

To understand Walter White, we must start at *Breaking Bad*’s pilot—or even earlier, as *Breaking Bad*’s debut in January 2008 was linked to three key intertexts. As the cable channel AMC’s second foray into original dramatic programming, *Mad Men* loomed large, having debuted six months before *Breaking Bad* and establishing AMC as a legitimate venue for ambitious, antiheroic serialized drama and thus encouraging viewers and critics to take the new series seriously. At the level of plot, *Breaking*

Bad was initially framed as a male version of *Weeds*, with shared focus on a “respectable” middle-class parent entering into the illegal drug business in a moment of crisis; this comparison helped highlight *Breaking Bad*’s dramatic darkness and heavy serialization in contrast to the more playful comic (and female-centered) tone of *Weeds*. The third and most important intertext in terms of characterization was *Malcolm in the Middle*, the landmark single-camera sitcom that pioneered many techniques of complex comedic television in the early 2000s, featuring Bryan Cranston as the befuddled man-child father Hal for seven seasons. *Breaking Bad* was initially known as “that show where Malcolm’s dad gets cancer and becomes a drug dealer,” an important framework for how Walter White was perceived: Cranston’s star persona as an affable comedic actor (on both *Malcolm* and a recurring role on *Seinfeld*) inflected his portrayal of Walt, whose character was vastly different from Hal but drew on Cranston’s reservoir of goodwill and likability. Thus *Breaking Bad* emerged into a context where viewers were poised to embrace Walt as a sympathetic lead character, fulfilling Gilligan’s conception of an everyday schlub.

Indeed the pilot’s opening moments evoke the *Malcolm* intertext, as we first see Walt recklessly driving an RV through the desert, wearing nothing but “tighty whitey” underpants and a gas mask. It is not hard to imagine Hal in such a manic situation, albeit without the dead body in the back of the van, as Cranston was hailed on *Malcolm* for his outlandish physicality and no-shame style of physical comedy—*Malcolm*’s writers used to play a game called “what won’t Bryan do?” as they created outlandish and humiliating stunts for which the actor always was game.²⁹ The underwear is an unintended intertextual connection that Cranston initially resisted, pushing back against Gilligan’s scripted call for Walt to wear the same style of underwear as Hal. After further consideration, the actor embraced how the wardrobe choice says something different about each character: for Hal, it indicates his boyish immaturity, as “he always wore them and it never occurred to him to wear anything else,” while Walt wears them as a sign of “stunted growth” and a depressive lack of caring about himself.³⁰ For viewers who knew Cranston from *Malcolm*, this opening moment taps into positive sentiments toward Hal and extends them to this still-unknown figure of Walter White. Beyond this shared taste in undergarments, the two

characters are both motivated largely by fear, which Cranston suggests manifests itself differently: an outlandish cartoonish cowardice in Hal and a closed-down emotional and physical absence for Walt.³¹

We get our first indication that Walt is not Hal when we first see Cranston’s face upon removing the gas mask, as Walt has what the actor calls “an impotent mustache” that Hal never featured. Physical appearance is crucial to creating characters, and Cranston, as a producer as well as a star (as well as an occasional director starting in the second season), had an active hand in creating Walt’s look: “I told Vince, he should be overweight, he should wear glasses, he should have a mustache that makes people go, ‘Why bother?’ His hair should be undefined; he always needs a trim. He doesn’t care. His clothes should blend in with the wall, no color in his skin. As he changes, color palettes will change, his attitude, everything.”³² These exterior traits clearly reflect on Walt’s internal psyche, and Cranston has noted that physicality is crucial to his performance, both in how Walt feels and in how that interiority is conveyed to the audience. As the series progresses, Walt’s changes are externalized through his appearance, as the impotent mustache and undefined haircut shift to a shaved head with a goatee, a look that Cranston calls “badass, . . . the most intimidating look there can be,” both signaling his changing psychology and allowing Walt to help rationalize his behavior because he “doesn’t recognize the man in the mirror.”³³ Similarly, Walt adopts a black porkpie hat to wear in his persona of “Heisenberg” within the drug business, an iconic marker that transforms both our perception of the character and his interior sense of self. By the second season, it is hard to imagine a viewer looking at Cranston and thinking about *Malcolm*’s Hal, but at the start of Walt’s journey, that association was crucial to forge allegiance and a positive emotional connection with the character.

Walter White does not start as a villainous antihero, as his initial characterization seems driven less by questionable morality than by a desperate situation—he makes a series of bad choices that lead to his eventual moral dissolution, but he starts by evoking pathetic pity rather than the charismatic confidence of most other antiheroes. As we learn about his cancer, his unfulfilling career, and his dire financial situation, we are fully attached to the character, sharing knowledge that he keeps secret from other characters, thus increasing our alignment. The first

lines of dialogue we hear from Walt are his confessional thoughts, even though the series never uses voice-over narration, as he videotapes a message he presumes to be his dying words to his wife and son. In a now-conventional format discussed in the introduction and chapter 2 regarding *Alias*, *Revenge*, and *Veronica Mars*, this pilot opens with an *in medias res* scene that invites us to wonder how he came to this desperate moment—on *Breaking Bad*, this curiosity is cued by Walt telling the video camera as the surrogate for his son, “There are going to be some things that you’re going to learn about me in the coming days.” Importantly, the video message clearly establishes Walt’s character constellation, as he assures his family that all of his mysterious and seemingly suspicious actions were done for them. This opening scene, in which Walt is the only character present (aside from an unconscious Jesse), establishes that the series will be a highly aligned character study and that it will pivot on the enigma of how this man, so clearly uncomfortable holding a gun, ended up in such a dire situation—and, given the show’s serial nature, what complications will follow from these events.

As suggested earlier, the relative morality of characters is important in establishing allegiance, and even though Walt does not begin as an amoral antihero, he is still partially redeemed in comparison to others, especially his bombastic, blowhard brother-in-law, Hank (who is later revealed to be far more conflicted and less confident than he seems), his seemingly shallow and materialistic sister-in-law, Marie (who we will learn is both a kleptomaniac and stronger than she lets on), and the brash young drug dealer Jesse who introduces him to his life of crime (whose moral journey will be almost as complex as Walt’s). Compared to these strong personalities, Walt shrinks into the background and seems too inconsequential to be anything but morally sound. His wife, Skyler, and son, Walt Jr., are both more sympathetic, though neither character has the degree of depth and nuance that Walt does, at least for the initial two seasons. Walt garners our sympathies if not our admiration, as he is clearly pitiable in a hopeless situation that begs the question, “what would you do?” While his desperation-driven decision to cook crystal meth to secure a nest egg for his family is not posited as admirable, it is reasonable given the dire circumstances—in fact, “reasonability” is a crucial facet of Walt’s decision-making process, as *Breaking Bad* presents Walt as a master rationalizer for his increasingly

hideous actions. Throughout the series, we watch Walt convince himself that various immoral decisions are the right thing to do, given a lack of alternatives, leading to a descent into monstrous behavior that is always presented as reasonable within Walt’s own self-justification and immediate context.

By the time Walter White becomes a full-fledged antihero, a hideous man whose actions bring suffering on his family and colleagues, whom he claims to be protecting, it is clear that he is of a different ilk than other television antiheroes. Unlike Tony Soprano or Vic Mackey, he is not a charismatic leader with loyal followers or devoted family members—for most of the series, the only characters who seem to like or respect him are family members who know nothing of his secret criminal life, and thus such feelings do not extend to viewers, who know the full depths of his moral decline. He lacks “friends” in any conventional sense, with his closest confidant being Jesse, who grows to regard him with contempt, working with him only when “Mr. White” (as Jesse calls him) manipulates him into an alliance or when Jesse’s own insecurities drive him to seek for the security of a father figure. Walt’s sometimes estranged wife, Skyler, only accepts him back into a tenuous reconciliation to maximize her own safety, but only before she knows of the extent of his crimes or when he bullies her into submission. And unlike nearly every other antihero, there are no romantic plotlines that frame Walt as an object of sexual desire—his sex life with Skyler perks up when he discovers his dark side in the first season, culminating in an aggressive nonconsensual encounter in their kitchen that Skyler must defensively cease once she gets over her shock at his behavior. But otherwise Walt is sexually neutered for most of the series and even attempts a ludicrously inappropriate advance toward his high school supervisor, Carmen, resulting in his being fired. He creates the artifice of a powerful and respected villain under the Heisenberg moniker emblematically tied to the black hat, with a feared street reputation, his demand that adversaries say his name, and even a *narcocorrido* ballad celebrating his mythic exploits, but long-term viewers recognize Heisenberg as a shallow put-on rather than an authentically awe-inspiring figure. While other antiheroes gain our allegiance through the attitudes of other characters, Walt might be the least respected or admired ongoing character on the series, despite our clear alignment toward him.

Instead of relationships cuing our allegiance to Walt or numerous flashbacks to his originating backstory, we instead have our own memories of who Walt used to be, as long-term viewers can recall him as being decent and ethical, if boring and depressed. Our serial memories help sustain lingering allegiance, despite his irredeemable acts along the way. Such memories help us understand the characters in micromoments as well, given that *Breaking Bad* features many scenes with minimal dialogue that invite us to think along with the characters. Through a long-term investment in a series, viewers accrue knowledge and experiences about characters that allows us to mind read our own version of their internal monologues. For instance, in the opening two-minute scene from the fourth-season episode “Open House,” nothing really happens: Walter White comes to work in the meth lab, drinks coffee, notices the newly installed surveillance camera, and gives it an obscene gesture, with the only dialogue a muttering “Son of a . . .” And yet for serial viewers sharing Walt’s memories from more than 30 previous episodes, we can read Cranston’s subtle cues and infer Walt’s raging interior drama that contradicts the lack of exterior action—we infer his contempt toward the workaday life he tried to escape via the drug game, evoking his feelings toward his old car-wash job from the pilot. His one moment of pleasure comes while drinking coffee made in an elaborate contraption, as he fondly remembers its quirky architect, former coworker Gale. This joy turns to grief as he thinks about Gale’s recent death, then to guilt when he remembers that he is directly responsible for ordering Gale’s murder. In typical Walt fashion, guilt turns to indignant anger, as he rationalizes his own acts and convinces himself that he is actually the victim—an anger confirmed and further stoked by discovering the camera. The scene concludes with Walt channeling his anger and sense of outraged victimization into an impotent attempt to fight back, represented by the obscene yet ineffectual gesture and reminiscent of many other times he has raged against people purporting to be his superiors. While different viewers might construct their own particular accounts of Walt’s interior emotional state, through the power of serial memory we can overcome television’s limited access to character interiority and provide a subjective account of tightly aligned characters.

As Walt shifts from his pitiable but sympathetic initial status through his moral journey, we are gradually confronted with increasingly

escalating actions that challenge our character allegiance, a process that can be benchmarked by those who die or are injured at his hands. In the pilot, he concocts a gas explosion in the RV to escape a direct threat, killing Emilio and incapacitating Krazy-8, an action of unthinking self-defense that seems completely justified in the moment. Walt and Jesse take Krazy-8 hostage and rationalize that they must murder him to protect themselves from his vengeance or being caught, but Walt is unable to commit murder until Krazy-8 poses an immediate physical threat, again justifying the act as self-defense. Later in the first season, Walt shaves his head and adopts the pseudonym Heisenberg to take on a more intimidating facade of a drug criminal, confronting the kingpin Tuco and his henchman by triggering a seemingly nonfatal explosion in his office—this is Walt’s first act of planned violent aggression, but since it is aimed at characters who are clearly more dangerous and immoral than he is, we are still clearly allied with Walt. Indeed, the Heisenberg persona and visual style is clearly framed as an enjoyable “badass” facet of Walt’s character, inviting us to enjoy his violent acts against more hideous criminals in a fashion common to other morally ambiguous crime series such as *The Shield* and *Justified*. Although some of Walt’s actions are violent and his contributions to the drug epidemic are a negative social force, for the most part *Breaking Bad*’s first two seasons situate us on Walt’s side against less moral characters.

The end of the second season takes a major step toward Walt’s broader moral dissolution. Walt is investing more of his emotions and energies into his secret drug career and personal relationship with his protégé Jesse than into his own family, including missing his daughter’s birth to make a drug delivery, but he reaches an impasse with Jesse, who has sunk deeper into his drug habit along with his girlfriend, Jane. When finding Jane choking on her own vomit in a heroin-induced stupor, Walt chooses to let her suffocate in order to reclaim Jesse and avoid Jane’s blackmail—we watch him wordlessly rationalize this passive act of murder. As discussed more in chapter 6, this moment plunges us into Walt’s interiority by triggering serialized memory: we reconstruct Walt’s interior thought processes via our shared experiences of his life that we have witnessed over the previous two seasons. We know his talent for rationalization and his need to prioritize his own well-being over that of others, as well as his paternal connection to Jesse, and thus can imagine

his internal monologue as he stops himself from saving Jane's life and watches her die to protect himself and his surrogate son. Although at this moment it is unlikely that most viewers feel that Jane deserves to die the same way that they may have felt toward Krazy-8, Walt's rationalization makes sense as an act of passive cruelty toward a character we have less allegiance toward and as an attempt to rescue Jesse, whom we have become more allied with through the series. However, this moment indicates some vital character change, as the Walt whom we met in the pilot certainly would have saved Jane had he found himself in the same situation.

Walt and Jesse's relationship is crucial to *Breaking Bad*'s shift in character morality. Throughout the first season, Walt is clearly more admirable, driven to crime out of desperation and a sense of familial obligation and displaying an impressive mastery of chemistry that allows him to thrive in this new criminal world, while Jesse is an avid if not addicted drug user, bright but uneducated, and seemingly only motivated out of selfishness, greed, and hedonism. We are more aligned and allied with Walt, although learning more about Jesse's family background and undernourished artistic talent makes him more sympathetic and understandable in his actions. Season 2's "Peekaboo" is a key episode for increasing our connection to Jesse, as we follow him into a dangerous situation in which he both acts to save a young boy and refuses to murder the boy's junky parents, revealing a moral center that grows stronger and more admirable as Walt's dissolves. The end of season 2 troubles our allegiances, with Jesse being less aligned but more admirable despite his addiction, while Walt's selfishness and deceit becomes less justifiable in contrast.

By season 3, the duo shifts roles in terms of allegiance: armed with the secret of Jane's preventable death, most viewers root for Jesse's eventual salvation and hope he can escape from Walt's dark influence. Jesse comes away from Jane's death blaming himself and, as he says in the episode "No Mas," accepting who he is as "the bad guy," an identity that viewers regard as undeserved and avoidable. Meanwhile, Walt runs from his own moral culpability, as he renounces his criminal career to salvage his crumbled marriage and restore his normal life. But *Breaking Bad* puts viewers in an uncomfortable situation—the moral version of Walter White is an unpleasant, boring, and pitiable character whom we

feel little desire to spend time with over the course of a series, while the amoral, "bad" version is much more vibrant, Machiavellian, and engaging as an antihero. The series pushes Walt further and further across the moral line, making us root for him to do hideous things for our entertainment, while calling attention to his hideousness in a way that refuses to glorify violence or celebrate depravity. The series poses and reasserts the questions of how far is too far for this man and, given his actions, what price should be paid and how should we regard him. Thus we root for him to get back to cooking meth, even though we know there will be unforgivable consequences from that decision and must reconcile our own culpability in watching his moral decline. At the end of the third season, he is even deeper in the drug game, easily killing two henchmen who threaten Jesse and plotting to kill Gale to protect himself—his most brutal act is enlisting Jesse to shoot Gale, as discussed more in chapter 3, corrupting Jesse further by pushing him into being a murderer and thus generating more viewer antipathy for Walt through the moral rebalancing of the two characters. Walt's turn toward the monstrous reaches far beyond the point of no return by the end of season 4, when he sends his innocent neighbor into his house to root out an ambush from murderous thugs and poisons a child to manipulate Jesse back to his side, not to mention directly causing the deaths of five drug criminals and setting off a bomb in a nursing home.

For the first half of season 5, Walt tries to become a full-time Heisenberg supervillain in the "empire business," alienating all of his family and Jesse in the process. He finally triumphs over all adversaries but finds the lack of recognition and hard work empty despite the nearly infinite monetary rewards; thus he retires from the meth business and attempts to rededicate himself to his family. Yet the monsters he has unleashed, from his alliance with the dual evils of a global corporation and a band of neo-Nazi enforcers, will not remain dormant, nor will his brother-in-law Hank, who discovers Walt's secret life. The final string of episodes presents an elongated moral reckoning that stems from Walt's hubris in thinking that he could transcend the drug game that provided his wealth, with a string of deaths, exiles, bankruptcies, and betrayals. Walt's most brutal penance is in the series finale, as he finally admits—to Skyler, to us, and to himself—that his rationalizations were ultimately hollow: "I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was alive." He

finally owns up to his own villainy and antiheroic status, but only as he stands as a dying shell of the kingpin he had become, knowing that his pride and selfishness has led him to his death and condemned his family to pay for his sins.

The complexity of Walter White's characterization stems in large part from the disjunctions between how we see his actions and how he sees himself. The points where those two perspectives merge is in the episodes whose plots follow a pattern of "trap and escape"—Walt and Jesse find themselves in a seemingly inescapable situation, and we watch how they manage to work free in slow-burning detail.³⁴ As Vermeule suggests, "Machiavellian narratives drop their characters into the middle of the march and watch them try to wriggle out."³⁵ From the beginning of the series, Walt's genius is decidedly not in the realm of the social, as his scientific knowledge allows him to escape traps often set by his own inability to play the human side of the drug game, but his Machiavellian intelligence gradually grows as he becomes more immersed in criminality. Thus in season 2's "Four Days Out," Walt wriggles out of being trapped in the desert using his scientific expertise to create a battery, but by season 3's "Sunset," he uses his social intelligence to escape the RV by ruthlessly tricking Hank into believing that Marie has been in a car accident. In these moments when Walt asserts his abilities, we enjoy marveling at his antiheroic exploits, even when it means morally questionable behavior such as cruelly manipulating Hank, which also results in a devastating assault on Jesse in retribution.

More often, *Breaking Bad* presents a gap between how Walt sees himself and how we regard him and his actions, as the character is a master rationalizer of his own decisions, able to convince himself that his immoral choices are either for the greater good of his family or not decisions at all given the circumstances. Even though he frequently attempts to withdraw from the drug world, he is repeatedly pulled back in because of the thrill and ego boost that it provides—between his increased sex drive in the first season to moments when he confronts other drug manufacturers with competitive vigor, it is clear that Walt's criminal acts have awakened a vibrancy within him that contrasts with our initial image of him with his impotent mustache, and this ego rush drives him more than his rationalized justifications do. Walt's vigor and antiheroic sense of self is tied to his professional achievements, as

his initial depression and passivity stems from his neutered career as a chemist despite his talents, while his renewed vigor stems from becoming known as the region's preeminent meth manufacturer, a professional accomplishment that he painfully must keep hidden from his loved ones and former colleagues until the series ends.

However, Walt also sees himself as more of an aggressive leader than he really is, as typified by his conversation with Skyler in season 4's "Cornered." When Skyler expresses concern for his safety after hearing about Gale's murder, saying, "You are not some hardened criminal, Walt. You are in over your head," Walt responds with prideful indignation that shows her Heisenberg for the first time: "You clearly don't know who you're talking to, so let me clue you in. I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger! A guy opens his door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No. I am the one who knocks!" While there is little doubt that Walt wants to believe in his own power, his assertions are contradicted by our serial memories of Walt being previously thwarted in his repeated attempts to kill Gus and manipulate Mike and Jesse, while he felt the need to sow doubts in Hank's mind to avoid Gale getting credit for Walt's meth-making prowess. Additionally, he was not the "one who knocked" on Gale's door, but rather he forced Jesse to do it on his behalf. Walt's assertions of Machiavellian prowess are often hollow attempts to puff himself up rather than insights into his own antiheroic capabilities, but these contradictions create layers of interpretive engagement for viewers to exert our own social intelligence, rooting out dimensions of deception and self-revelation as we construct these complex characters through our narrative engagements.

After Walt's defiant proclamation to Skyler, he walks away, with his lips moving as if he has more to say, but turns into the bathroom, a strikingly ambiguous moment. The richness of Cranston's performance opens up a wide range of different thoughts that we imagine he might be suppressing: he might want to apologize to Skyler for berating her, or he yearns to boast more of the dangerous havoc he has caused but stops to protect her, or he might be trying to convince himself that he is indeed the one who knocks, not the target of his adversaries' danger. All of these are potential outcomes of reading Walt's mind, but the program never tells us precisely what he is thinking, allowing for ludic hypothesizing across serialized gaps in the narrative. Such interplay between

tight alignment and limited interior access into a highly layered and self-deluded character is one of the key pleasures of Walt as a transforming antihero, with his fascinating psychology keeping us attuned and interested in him, even as he grows more hideous.

The power of *Breaking Bad*'s antiheroic characterization is that it is predicated on charting changes, rather than inviting us to wonder what makes an already hideous man such as Tony Soprano tick. By the end of *Breaking Bad*'s fourth season, we have witnessed the remarkable transition of Walt from everyman schlub to amoral criminal kingpin, a gradual enough shift that we have still maintained a degree of allegiance to him—in part because we have invested so much time in following his exploits, an instance of “sunken costs” of attention and engagement. The series was premised on Walt's need to break the law to provide for his family, but as it progressed, his deeper goals have been revealed: to be seen, known, and appreciated for his talents and unwilling to accept outside help or to accept the monetary spoils of crime without the recognition of his chemical mastery. The character is liberated as he grows less fearful and timid, willing to stand up for himself in moments of danger and then creating moments of danger to assert his own power and importance. The series makes this transformation work through its gradual progression, as each step along the way feels organic and consistent to the character, to our accrued experiences with him, and to the interiority we infer about his character. As discussed more in chapter 7, Walter White's characterization presents a critical vision of ineffectual masculinity striving to find redemption in a changing world yet choosing the path that leads to the dismantling of the very things he claims to be trying to protect: his family and sense of self.³⁶ *Breaking Bad* is a highly moral tale, in which actions have consequences, and thus we expect it is unlikely that Walt emerges from this story as a victorious hero—even though he proclaims “I won” when he finally kills Gus, we recognize that the cost of that victory is another part of his dwindling morality.

Breaking Bad's character transformation invites a “what if?” experiment for viewers: would you start watching a new series focused on Walter White that begins with him at his antiheroic peak at the end of the fourth season? Personally, I doubt I would get invested in the story of a pathetic and uncharismatic man who poisons a child to manipulate

other criminals without any other clear protagonists with whom to align myself. Yet having watched from the beginning, I find myself connected to Walt to the point of having used the iconic Heisenberg line drawing as my Twitter avatar, an emblem of self-identification as a fan of this transformed monster. The pleasures of *Breaking Bad* are in the character's journey; we find ourselves uncomfortably in a situation that we would rather not be in, aligned to an immoral criminal whom we remember as having once been decent and sympathetic. And thus I find myself loving Walter White, not as a person (even though I do personify him and grant him a more robust interiority than nearly any other fictional character I can think of) but as a character—I am endlessly fascinated by his behavior, his arc, and his enactment by Cranston and the program's production team. Just as complex television plots encourage the operational aesthetic in observing the storytelling machinery in action, Walt's complex characterization invites me to examine what makes him tick, how he is put together, and where he might be going, while at the same time emotionally sweeping me up into his life and string of questionable decisions. We might think of this engagement as *operational allegiance*—as viewers, we are engaged with the character's construction, attuned to how the performance is presented, fascinated by reading the mind of the inferred author, and rooting for Walt's triumph in storytelling, if not his actual triumph within the story. Although his moral transformation is unique within serial television, understanding the unusual case of Walter White helps explain the contradictory appeal of serial antiheroes and our willingness to spend lengthy times with such hideous men.

Comprehension

Viewers engage with a television series through a wide range of practices, as detailed throughout this book. But at the most basic level, nearly all viewing starts with the core act of comprehension, making sense of what is happening within a episode. This might seem obvious, and certainly much of television storytelling aims to make comprehension easy, invisible, and automatic. However, complex television has increased the medium's tolerance for viewers to be confused, encouraging them to pay attention and put the pieces together themselves to comprehend the narrative. While television rarely features an avant-garde level of abstraction or ambiguity, contemporary programming has embraced a degree of planned confusion. *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner credits *The Sopranos* for demonstrating that a serial can leave plot points, characters, and relationships unstated, suggesting, "Now it's the viewers' problem if they don't know what's going on. And all of a sudden, a world has opened up to us as writers."¹ This chapter explores how viewers make sense of complex serial television.

My approach to comprehension is based on the cognitive poetic model developed primarily through David Bordwell's work on film narration.² This approach assumes that viewers actively construct story-worlds in their minds, a process best understood through the tools of cognitive psychology. Since I claim no psychological expertise, I primarily build on how Bordwell and other humanists have adapted psychological principles to poetic analysis, rather than engage directly with the psychological literature.³ I avoid too many technical terms about cognition or mental processes, choosing instead to explore viewing practices on their own terms as inspired by cognitive poetic theory. The application of cognitive science to television studies is still quite rare outside the paradigm of media effects research; this chapter is a brief foray into what may hopefully evolve into a subfield exploring how cognitive poetics might help us understand the cultural facets of television more fully.⁴

If this cognitive approach to comprehension seeks to understand how viewers make sense of television, we need to be careful about what we mean by "viewer" here. Bordwell makes it clear that the viewer or spectator he discusses is neither an empirical person nor an ideal reader best situated to understand a text but rather a "hypothetical entity executing the operations relevant to constructing a story out of the film's representation"—in other words, the generalized receiver of a film who processes its formal systems and cues to create a narrative within his or her mind.⁵ When Bordwell charts out this viewer's activity, he strives to understand the underlying universals that any competent viewer would likely carry out, rather than considering the contextually shaped variances that real viewers bring to their experiences. Contexts can matter greatly for the process of cinematic comprehension, but we can assume that most viewers watch a typical nonserial feature film within some narrow conventional parameters, including focused attention and seamless chronology in one sitting. While certainly there are many different ways one can watch a film—even more so today than in the 1980s, when Bordwell developed his theories—his approach outlines an assumed norm for how films are viewed and arguably one that most filmmakers have in mind when crafting the work, thus making it a useful project to establish an underlying baseline of viewing cognition.

But serial television lacks such an assumed viewing norm, especially in today's media environment. As discussed in chapter 1, industry lore has long asserted that fans only watch one-third of new episodes, suggesting that creators must write for a spectrum of potential viewers, ranging from novices approaching any episode as the first of the series that they have seen to erratic viewers who may have seen any combination of the episodes up to that point, to comprehensive viewers who have seen every previous entry, potentially multiple times. Additionally, the rise of DVDs, DVRs, streaming, and downloading has shifted television from the schedule-dominated model of broadcasting to alternative consumption patterns in which viewers binge on series, catch up from earlier seasons after starting midway through, and frequently rewatch episodes; such varying screen-time patterns may or may not include breaks for advertising or between episodes—as I argue throughout this book, seriality is constituted by the gaps between installments, and such gaps can be experienced or overridden in various ways. As the Internet

has emerged as an active place for discourse about television, paratextual frames have become more important, meaning that a viewer might be frequenting discussion sites, fan wikis, or Twitter conversations or searching for spoilers in moments before, during, and after viewing, all of which substantially change the experiences of narrative comprehension. So which of these models of television viewing should we assume to be the baseline norm? I contend there is no single norm of viewing, but instead of ignoring these varieties of viewer practice, I incorporate the role of such contexts in the viewing process, using a contextual cognitive poetics to explore how programs cue our understanding and how varying viewing practices help shape serial television comprehension in a manner applicable to novice, erratic, and comprehensive viewers.

A cognitive poetics of serial television could cover a wide array of issues. Serial television prompts viewers to create cognitive maps of storyworlds, suggesting the importance of spatial orientation and visual construction in the viewing process. The question of emotional response is an important topic within cognitive studies of fictional forms, and certainly the ongoing immersion within serialized stories prompts distinct types of affect and engagement. Viewer attention is a vital variable in moving-image media, so we might explore how programs help cue our attention through visual, aural, and temporal strategies for storytelling impact. All of these issues and others are worth considering, and I hope future cognitive poetic studies of television might take up these questions. But this chapter concentrates on viewers' knowledge in the process of narrative comprehension—stories are systems of information management, with revelations, enigmas, and ambiguities mobilized for emotional impact. Focusing on how serial television handles narrative information and manages viewers' knowledge can help us better understand some of the chief appeals of complex television.

Serial Systems of Knowledge

There are many types of narrative information and knowledge that might be conveyed by a television series. As discussed in chapter 4, we learn about characters' backstories, relationships, interior motivations, and beliefs throughout a series. We gather information about the storyworld's geography, history, temporality, and particular norms and rules,

especially in genres with somewhat unreal universes, such as science fiction and fantasy. We also gain operational knowledge, as we learn the intrinsic storytelling norms of a series and extrinsic information about the genre, creative team, network, or codes of the television medium itself—the conventions catalogued by fans at the TV Tropes wiki speak to the huge amount of information about how stories are told that might be activated within the process of narrative comprehension. And at the most basic level, we learn about narrative events, answering the essential question of “what happened?”

Consuming a narrative requires constant information management, as we must keep track of what we know and what knowledge gaps might be filled throughout the series, a process that can be quite engaging and pleasurable for viewers. Most of this information management is preconscious and automatic, driven by underlying assumptions and conventions—we recognize a face and connect it to what we know about a character, we identify the sounds coming from a character as language and comprehend its meaning, we see an edit and process it as a shift in perspective within the same continuous fictional time and space, we hear music and situate it as either nondiegetic score or diegetic sound from within the scene. Such automatic processes of assumptions and inferences rely on cognitive schemata that viewers develop through accumulated experiences of consuming media, as well as norms of everyday perception and cognition.⁶ One strategy that a complex television series can use to create greater narrative intrigue and engagement is to play with the boundaries of such preconscious schemata, pushing back against our normal viewing competencies to create interesting variations on expectations by relocating automatic inferences into the realm of conscious comprehension. For instance, *Battlestar Galactica*'s robotic Cylon race is composed of only 12 humanoid prototypes, meaning that multiple characters are played by the same actor—viewers experience dissonance in our automatic facial recognition schemata, as we are forced to consciously think about precisely which iteration of a Cylon character is being embodied in any given scene by actors Tricia Helfer and Grace Park.

Many narrative schemata are based not on everyday universals such as language or facial recognition but rather through the norms of the television medium. In Bordwell's terms, these are *extrinsic norms* that

pervade a medium to guide our comprehension process, including genre conventions, stylistic modes, and standard expectations for what a television series is supposed to do. Within American television, screen time is a powerful site of extrinsic norms, as we watch a program knowing full well that it will last for a prescribed amount of time (typically 30 or 60 minutes) and will be interrupted by commercial breaks (unless it is on PBS, a premium cable channel, or DVD). Our moment-to-moment comprehension is framed by our perception of screen time, as the approaching end of an episode will frequently trigger expectations that particular plotlines will be resolved—or in the case of genres such as soap operas and serialized thrillers, we anticipate a cliffhanger to motivate our desire to watch the next episode. While sometimes we feel like we “lose track of time” in a particularly compelling episode, at a preconscious level our comprehension processes maintain a sense of how far into an episode we are and approximately how much time remains. We use our sense of screen time to manage our 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), as with the moment when an episode ends with an unexpected “To Be Continued” graphic.

As discussed in chapter 1, series establish their own *intrinsic norms* as well, teaching viewers how to watch and what to expect from future episodes. We learn to parse *Battlestar Galactica*’s multiplying Cylon characters, to recognize *The Office*’s direct-address interviews as part of a fictional documentary film, and to anticipate the weekly death that starts every *Six Feet Under* episode. As with extrinsic norms, an individual program’s intrinsic norms guide viewers’ assumptions, as well as providing an opportunity to create pleasurable moments of confusion, surprise, and twisty trickery by violating these norms via a narrative special effect. *Lost* was particularly adept at both creating and subverting such intrinsic norms—three seasons of character-centered flashbacks created a strong set of intrinsic norms that were used to fool viewers into a stunning surprise at the end of the third season, portraying a flash-forward to Jack’s postisland future masked as a preisland flashback. The program then adopted flash-forwards as a new intrinsic norm for the fourth season, teaching viewers to watch episodes in a new way, as well

as setting up new possibilities for narrative special effects. Season 4’s “Ji Yeon” offers a particularly interesting play with *Lost*’s intrinsic norms of temporality and character attachment. The “present-time” island plot focuses on Sun’s pregnancy and her relationship with her husband, Jin, intercut with off-island flashes to Sun going into labor and Jin rushing through Seoul looking to purchase a baby gift and get to the hospital. The season’s intrinsic norms suggest we are attached to the couple in a flash-forward as they have their child after they escape the island, but the end reveals that Jin’s scenes were a flashback to preisland life, getting the baby gift for a business associate—and the flash-forward to Sun’s delivery ends with the revelation that Jin is dead (or so she believes). As the only episode of the series that mixes types of off-island “flashes,” it plays on our established expectations for *Lost*’s intrinsic norms, ending with a twist that both elicits the operational aesthetic and delivers an emotional punch about a character’s future death.

These examples of subverting norms point to an important strategy that serial television uses to engage viewers’ attention and interest: shattering expectations by shifting comprehension processes from preconscious assumptions and inferences to conscious hypotheses. An established norm can provide the answer to a question that we may not even be aware that we are asking: When are we in this character’s history? Why are we hearing this character’s thoughts? Using these norms allows for smooth comprehension that guides viewers’ understanding and expectations, but over the course of a long-running series, they can become overly predictable, stale, and repetitive. Serial narratives must strike a balance between familiarity and difference to keep viewers engaged, and shifting an assumed norm into the realm of consciousness can provide important variations. Such variations can play out on the level of an individual episode, as with episodes of *Buffy* that shift genre norms or storytelling perspective, or provide a “reboot” to a program’s ongoing premise and storytelling mode, as on *Alias*, *Angel*, and *Chuck*. On *Lost*, altering the norms of episodic structure and temporality starting with the shift to flash-forwards served to engage viewers by forcing us to make more active hypotheses within the operational realm—how do these narrative time frames relate? As I argue throughout this book, viewers engage with complex television through the operational aesthetic, which we can understand as the conscious accumulation,

analysis, and hypothesizing of information concerning how the story is told. As discussed later in this chapter, such operational engagement intersects with a range of other realms of narrative information.

One of the chief drives for narrative consumption is to increase our knowledge of a compelling story, as we learn more about characters, relationships, the world, events both past and future, and the operational storytelling itself through active hypothesizing and analysis of an ongoing serial. Bordwell, following Meir Sternberg, calls the process of learning more about a narrative's past *curiosity hypotheses*, as we are presented with gaps in the backstory that motivate further discovery, whether in the form of a mysterious illness, a character's unstated motivations, or the causal events that led to the particular storyworld conditions, such as a political election, a romance, or an apocalypse.⁷ Curiosity questions can be posed explicitly, as with a murder mystery, or inferred implicitly, as with a character's behavioral shift. As discussed in chapter 1, narrative enigmas emerge from such curiosity; we hypothesize to fill in the story gaps and speculate on what revelations might be revealed. Contemporary complex television can draw out curiosity over a longer span of screen time than in previous modes of prime time programming, as producers are much more willing to rely on viewers' sustained interest and memory, as discussed later in this chapter.

New bits of narrative information often help us answer lingering curiosity questions that viewers have been thinking about, filling in characters' backstories, vague gaps, or enigmatic mysteries by offering new or revised hypotheses. *Lost* certainly excelled at such long-term curiosity, often drawing out such gaps over years, as with the question of how John Locke became paralyzed before arriving on the island, posed in the program's fourth episode, "Walkabout," and answered in its 62nd, "The Man from Tallahassee." In rarer cases, new narrative information will create questions and resonant meanings retroactively, as we look back at what we thought we understood with a new layer of comprehension that prompts curiosity. Early in *Revenge*'s first-season finale, "Reckoning," we are reminded of the already established backstory information that Emily's mother had died when Emily was a child; later in the episode, Emily's fights with a mysterious unnamed "white haired man," who says, "You're a hell of a fighter—you must have gotten that from your mother." This line might raise the question "How does he know Emily's

mother?" but the scene's context provides a more obvious understanding of the line—before the fight, Emily says, "I'm not here because of how my father was framed. I'm here because of how he died," activating our established knowledge that this is the man who murdered her father. Within that context, we infer that the man's comment is an insult aimed at Emily's father's inability to fight, not prompting us to even consider that he might know her mother—we assume "mother" signifies "not father" more than anything about her actual mother. But at the end of the episode, Emily learns that her mother is still alive and might be involved with this larger conspiracy—this new knowledge reframes this earlier inference, which we probably did not even consider could be taken two ways (I certainly did not), suggesting that this man might know of Emily's mother's fighting abilities firsthand. The line's meaning transforms even more in the second season, as it is revealed that the white-haired man is actually married to Emily's mother, retroactively changing our comprehension processes through new connections and contexts. Such moments of revelation and revision, transforming an invisible inference first into a conscious curiosity question and then into a deeper moment of narrative interconnectedness, contributes to the rewatchability of many complex serials, using our increased base of knowledge to increase our appreciation of foreshadowing or buried information or perhaps encouraging a critical analysis of inconsistencies or discontinuity.

Backward-looking narrative enigmas are less common than are narrative statements that propel the storytelling forward, prompting *anticipation hypotheses* about what might happen next. Sternberg uses *suspense* to refer to any such anticipated narrative outcome, but I prefer to reserve that term for its more specific usage: a subset of anticipation hypotheses in which the events that viewers hope to happen to characters in risky situations seemingly has a low probability of occurring within the storyworld: Can Walt and Jesse escape from Tuco in *Breaking Bad*'s episode "Grilled"? Will Jack Bauer rescue his kidnapped wife and daughter in *24*'s first season? While at the operational level we are assured that our protagonists cannot die or profoundly fail, given the extrinsic norms of both television and most forms of popular storytelling, the storyworld's scenario makes us anticipate the more likely, undesirable outcome to create suspense in our imagined hypotheses of how things might turn

out.⁸ But suspense is a special subset of a broader mode of narrative anticipation, in which we react to a narrative statement by hypothesizing about what will happen next at both macro plot levels (will Kate choose romance with Jack or Sawyer on *Lost*?) and micro scene levels (how will D'Angelo react to learning of Wallace's murder on *The Wire*?). Serial narratives thrive by creating narrative statements that demand the next bit of information, inspiring our anticipatory hypothesizing about what might happen next to sustain us through the structured gaps between episodes.

Both curiosity and anticipation are emotional responses prompted by the desire for more narrative information and the drive toward discovery—when we talk about whether we “care” about a series, we are typically referring to whether we are curious about filling in gaps about what has already happened or eagerly anticipate what is yet to come. (Of course, when dealing with a series with complex temporality, such as *Doctor Who* or *Lost*, parsing the differences between curiosity toward the narrative past and anticipating the narrative future can be quite muddled, as one character's past might be another's future.) One of the challenges of such hypothesizing is that producers must balance between the need for plausibility, so that the new information feels consistent and motivated within the storyworld, and unpredictability, so that the revelations are not obvious to anyone who had bothered to hypothesize. Often programs strive for shocking twists and surprises through thwarted expectations, but those often feel inconsistent with what we have come to expect from the storyworld and the program's operational norms—the ideal surprise is followed by a viewer thinking, “I should have seen that coming,” suggesting unexpected but effective internal motivation. The American version of *The Killing* fell prey to these pitfalls in its first season, with numerous “red herring” suspects in the murder mystery who viewers could clearly see were not guilty, as well as surprising revelations that seemed unmotivated except as a tactic to surprise viewers; such weak surprises helped lead to a major backlash among fans and critics for what was perceived as an unmotivated and inconsistent season-ending twist. Serialized enigma-driven mysteries have a difficult time sustaining curiosity over long-term questions and thus often resort to surprises that lose their impact if overused or unmotivated. As I discuss shortly, even though surprises can seem like

primary motivations for viewers, they can be thwarted without losing much narrative power.

As I discuss throughout this book, many viewers do not consume television in individual isolation but watch as part of viewing communities, often facilitated by fan cultures and online paratexts. Hypothesizing is a cognitive process enacted by individuals in the act of viewing, but such ideas and potential answers to narrative questions are frequently articulated within fan communities, turning internal hypothesizing into the cultural practice of *theorizing*. Such theorizing takes place in numerous cultural realms, from interpersonal conversations on the couch during commercial breaks to popular websites, as discussed in chapter 8. The internalized process of hypothesizing and the externalized cultural realm of theorizing are interwoven, as viewers will integrate the shared theories that they have read or heard from others into their own hypothesizing while watching (or rewatching) episodes. This interaction between individual cognitive activity and broader cultural circulation is a crucial facet of any attempt to understand the process of narrative comprehension, especially for a serialized narrative whose gaps invite viewers to speculate, theorize, and converse about a program—while there may be broadly shared commonalities of cognitive engagement, the actual experience of consuming a serial narrative is a highly contextualized practice, and thus we must consider how such interpersonal discourses can help shape the comprehension process.

Some series can inspire anticipation and curiosity as part of a larger intertextual franchise, as with prequels such as *Smallville*, which builds on viewers' knowledge that the young Clark Kent will grow up to become Superman, or the dual contemporary adaptations of Sherlock Holmes, *Elementary* and *Sherlock*, both of which knowingly play with the original's iconography and characterizations. A particularly interesting case is the series *Hannibal*, which dramatizes the iconic serial killer Hannibal Lecter's life as a practicing psychiatrist before he was imprisoned. For viewers familiar with the Thomas Harris novels and film adaptations, the series both acknowledges and modifies the character's previous representations, changing the mythology to make it more appropriate for an ongoing television series, while providing little hidden references and “Easter eggs” for dedicated fans to catch allusions to the books and films. The series assumes basic awareness of Lecter

as a cannibalistic serial killer, as the character is sufficiently iconic to be known to most adult viewers even if they have not read or seen the source materials—the first few episodes portray him cooking elaborate meals, serving meat that we assume to be human to guests, but it is never overtly acknowledged within the narrative. The program's tone creates dark, ironic humor through this knowledge differential, placing viewers in a more knowledgeable state than any character except Lecter, despite the television series not actually providing such key information. The effect is to highlight the operational aesthetic, calling attention to the storytelling's playful practices of both withholding information and relying on intertextual cues.

One mode of sharing narrative information that has become more prevalent in recent years is *spoilers*, which short-circuit the narrative information system by providing viewers advance knowledge of what is to come in a given series. The line between “normal” and “spoiled” consumption is defined differently by various viewers, as some fans treat any advance information found in episode previews or summaries as forbidden knowledge, while others regularly read brief summaries published in television listings and watch promo videos to fuel their anticipation. Inadvertent spoilers proliferate in the online television-viewing community, as people tweet about a program from American East Coast hours before West Coasters have a chance to see an episode; likewise, viewers who watch programs online, recorded on DVRs, or on long delays outside the United States must step lightly through the Internet to avoid stumbling on unwanted plot revelations. However, there is a class of viewers who actively seek such revelations ahead of time, as so-called spoiler fans frequent online sites that traffic in the black market of advance narrative information, with many embracing watching a program in a spoiled state as their normal mode of viewing. Jonathan Gray and I conducted audience research on this phenomenon, examining *Lost* spoiler fans via an online survey to try to root out why viewers might actively seek to consume such a serialized narrative in what seemed to be an aberrant manner.⁹ While we found no uniform answers that apply for all spoiler fans, many respondents highlighted that knowing where the plot is going heightens their attention to other modes of engagement, as they focus on the “how” and “why” of the storytelling as well as the operational aesthetic of how the story is being told, mirroring

the experience of rewatching a program.¹⁰ Spoiler fans effectively dictate the terms of their own narrative experience, transforming anticipation about uncertain narrative futures as designed by producers into anticipatory curiosity as to how the series will connect the dots to the spoiled event, with the spoiled information almost serving as flash-forwarded story information. Additionally, some of the spoiler fans we surveyed sought out narrative information as a way to control their emotional responses, avoiding surprises or preparing for disappointments about the fate of beloved characters, as well as filling the anticipatory gap between episodes by revealing story information in advance.

One interesting question about spoiled viewings is to what degree suspense might still be available, especially given that the majority of *Lost* viewers we surveyed claimed to enjoy the program's suspenseful storytelling. Bordwell suggests that even though suspense involves anticipating narrative events, we still experience suspense for a narrative outcome that we know is coming, whether in historical fiction portraying a well-known real-life event or in rewatching a film, because emotional responses to suspense are partly involuntary, “bottom-up” phenomena as well as being based on the information-processing model of anticipating undesirable outcomes.¹¹ Such innate emotional responses to suspenseful stories can withstand the advanced knowledge provided by spoilers, as tension derives more from how events will arrive at their known outcome than from the unpredictability of the outcome itself. Seymour Chatman argues this point by quoting Alfred Hitchcock, who suggests that suspense generates from the audience's inability to reveal crucial information to sympathetic characters and offers what might be a mantra for spoiler fans: “For that reason I believe in giving the audience all the facts as early as possible.”¹² Thus spoilers can ratchet up the anticipation that fuels suspense by pointing toward an inevitable outcome, but we must remember that narrative outcomes are often well-known regardless of whether they are spoiled or not—viewers draw on their operational expertise and awareness of storytelling norms to be assured that protagonists are safe from mortal harm, mysteries will be solved, and other conventions will be upheld.

We can compare how viewers with different narrative knowledge might watch the same sequence using the climax of *Veronica Mars*'s first-season finale, “Leave It to Beaver.” Veronica has solved the season-long

mystery of who killed her best friend, Lilly (which I will leave unrevealed to avoid inadvertent spoilers), but has been trapped in an outdoor chest freezer by the murderer who is threatening to let her die in a spreading fire if she does not hand over evidence. Will her father, Keith, come to her rescue before she is burned alive? Will the killer be captured or escape? A “fresh viewer” who comes to the episode unspoiled, with no insider knowledge of what happens next, experiences the story that proceeds down an unknown path as designed by the program’s producers, but how uncertain is the outcome? Genres have established storytelling norms that are rarely broken, including the assumption that the detective will capture the criminal, not the reverse. As discussed in chapter 4, television series have industrial norms concerning actors that structure storytelling, making it highly unlikely that the lead character will be killed or seriously hurt, especially when the series is named after her. Thus within the storyworld, the odds are stacked against Veronica’s survival, which leads to suspense, but viewers know that they are watching televised fiction, not experiencing the storyworld directly. Viewers who are savvy, which I would argue a complex series such as *Veronica Mars* all but requires, realize that the storytelling odds are actually reversed: Veronica’s escape from peril is all but assured, making the dreaded outcome of Veronica’s death highly unlikely. The typical fresh viewer, especially for an ongoing serial demanding dedicated viewing, does not approach a new episode naively nor treat the fictional world as if it were real but watches with a set of operational expectations that point toward likely outcomes as they typically play out on television. This viewer watches the scene with minimal uncertainty as to the outcome, quite confident that Veronica will ultimately survive and that justice will be served, with the unknowns clustered around *how* exactly the inevitable resolution will play out.

A spoiler fan would come to this episode knowing that Veronica survives and that the killer is captured, analogous to Bordwell’s example of watching historical fiction such as *United 93*, in which we know the climactic end before we begin. The spoiled viewer approaches the episode with far less uncertainty than the fresh viewer does, as any surprises from unexpected twists (such as the specific identity of the killer) are gone. But in Veronica’s moment of peril, spoiled viewers’ expectations are not drastically different: they know Veronica that will survive, but

precisely how her escape will unfold is uncertain. According to Hitchcock, suspense comes from being unable to intervene in the storyworld, a position that all viewers share regardless of their spoiled status. But there is another level as well here, as Hitchcock’s expertise was in how he revealed his story points, not the narrative information itself, with the elements that trigger suspense found less in narrative events than in their telling through expressive cues eliciting emotional reactions via music, camera angles, and facial expressions. This is why a potentially suspenseful series of events can be narrated in a way that undermines suspense (as in most chase cartoons) and a seemingly nonsuspenseful set of events can be told to create suspense (the red-herring moments of many horror films)—such emotional reactions stem from how a story is told, rather than what actually happens in the story. Both fresh and spoiled viewers experience the narrative discourse for the first time, even if the spoiled viewer has more confidence in what events will occur; however, both viewers share the same uncertainty in precisely how the events will be narrated and what cues will be presented, experiencing suspense from these cues in mostly similar ways.

The third type of viewer is the rewatcher, somebody reliving the narrative experience through repeated viewings, a practice that is certainly quite common in the TV-on-DVD era, just as it was in the era of ubiquitous reruns for many series. The rewatcher shares the spoiled viewer’s knowledge of the narrative events to come but also knows how those narrative events will operationally unfold through the specific telling; yet according to Bordwell, a rewatcher still experiences suspense through the familiar but powerful emotional cues of the storytelling. On multiple viewings, a rewatcher will still be enthralled by the suspense of Veronica’s jeopardy but will also be more attentive to how that tension is being generated via crosscutting between scenes and musical cues, as well as thinking about how the entire season led to this climactic showdown with foreshadowing and anticipatory character seeds. A rewatcher’s anticipation is inflected with imperfect memory, as our memories are rarely sufficiently exact to precisely match our anticipation. Thus rewatchers actively compare the unfolding series with their memories, resulting in minor surprises and moments of recognition alongside larger feelings of anticipation; this creates a playful engagement with past experiences, adding another layer of viewing pleasure

to rewatching. Both spoiled viewers and rewatchers can use their story knowledge to focus their attention on the narrative discourse, absorbing and enjoying how the story is operationally told and the subsequent emotions that the telling stimulates. Some of *Lost's* spoiler fans indicated that they used their foreknowledge of narrative events to focus on textual details, subtleties of performance, stylistic flourishes, and foreshadowed clues. Thus by knowing the story ahead of time, spoiler fans and rewatchers both approach an episode more like a critic, simultaneously experiencing and analyzing a text, foregrounding the operational aesthetic.

Another important variable concerns how viewers reconcile their own narrative knowledge with the information that characters seem to possess. We can consider a series as exhibiting varying degrees of openness with its narrative information, offering more or less range, depth, and communicativeness of knowledge.¹³ These variables often connect with specific characters, charting how many characters we share information with, how much access we have to characters' interiority and backstory, and how much characters seem to be withholding from viewers, all issues discussed more in chapter 4. We can see these variables played out over the course of a long arc, using *Dexter's* first season as a brief case study. We are tightly aligned with Dexter Morgan, seeing what he sees, hearing his thoughts in voice-over, sharing his secrets and discoveries, and rarely learning more than what he knows. In the pilot episode, we witness (and are informed via voice-over) his secret life as a serial killer, learn of his adoptive father Harry's code that he follows, and meet every other character from his perspective, via storytelling that appears to offer limited range but high depth and communicativeness of knowledge. The pilot also sets up the season-long arc, with the "Ice Truck Killer" making his presence known in Miami by sending messages to Dexter directly, suggesting that Dexter's secret is not safe—the enigma of the killer's identity and his connection to Dexter align us with the main character, as we share identical gaps in knowledge and the resulting curiosity. While the narrative range expands somewhat in subsequent episodes to include scenes of the secondary characters without Dexter, especially his sister, Debra, for the most part all of our significant new information, curiosity, and anticipation directly parallels Dexter's.

This tight alignment shifts in episode 8, "Shrink Wrap," when we learn something Dexter does not: that Rudy, Debra's new boyfriend, is the Ice Truck Killer. In the subsequent episodes, Rudy seems creepily obsessed with Dexter for reasons that only we understand (at least partially). This knowledge shift alters the narrative intrigue away from the curiosity question of the killer's identity and toward anticipation of what will happen down the road—by allowing us to know more about Rudy than Dexter or Debra do, we start to anticipate their potential jeopardy and notice hidden motivations in Rudy's behavior. This dynamic is especially effective in episode 9, "Father Knows Best," when Dexter discovers that he inherited a house from his biological father and travels there to uncover pieces of his past. Rudy convinces Deb to join Dexter, and we watch Rudy insert himself into Dexter's emotional life, building on the established game that the two killers have been playing. We watch these episodes with the assumption that we have the essential knowledge about Rudy and his twisted motivation and that our position as more knowledgeable than Dexter provides anticipatory pleasures, expecting the emotional and violent payoff when Dexter discovers that the killer has been lurking around his sister. The season finale, "Born Free," does pay off this anticipation but raises the stakes even more when we learn that Rudy and Dexter are long-separated brothers, a revelation that pulls all of the Ice Truck Killer's actions into focus, providing clear motivation as to why he was tweaking Dexter's past and repressed memories and how he knew more about Dexter's history than Dexter himself did. *Dexter* uses these differentials in narrative knowledge to drive the serial narrative forward via suspense, anticipation, and curiosity.

However, the revelation of Rudy and Dexter's shared parentage is more complex than just a surprise twist, as it turns our attention backward toward the mechanics of storytelling that drive the narrative, shifting focus on the characters and their relationships to offer more depth and complexity in light of this new knowledge. The last half of the final episode plays out the inner conflict that Dexter feels between his monstrous nature, represented by his fellow traumatized brother, and his socialized code, fostered by his adoptive family of Harry and Debra and their shared profession as police. Anchored by a compelling lead performance from Michael C. Hall, the episode pays off the big twist by focusing inward into Dexter's damaged psyche, with subsequent events

resolving this conflict, at least temporarily. But with this revelation in mind, previous narrative events take on a new light that would only be visible to spoiled viewers, rewatchers, or viewers familiar with the novel that the series is based on. In “Father Knows Best,” when Dexter goes to sort through his biological father’s house, Rudy is also visiting his own familial past. On first viewing, we know that Rudy is manipulating Dexter, placing us in a more knowledgeable position than the lead character, but only with full narrative knowledge can we see ramifications of the crucial bit of narrative information that only Rudy knows at that moment. *Dexter* does not call attention to this revelation, offering no introspective moment of Dexter putting together the pieces of his and Rudy’s shared past; instead, the series rewards viewers for continued contemplation into the gap between seasons or for rewatching, creating an opportunity for making pleasurable narrative connections on our own that feel more earned than if had we watched Dexter come to the same conclusions himself. But to make such connections, serial television must rely on and trigger viewers’ memory, a complex topic on its own.

The Mechanics of Serial Memory

Complex television requires viewers’ effort and attention for ongoing comprehension, strategically triggering, confounding, and playing with viewers’ memories via medium-specific poetic techniques. For instance, cinematic narratives typically engage a viewer’s short-term memory, cuing and obscuring moments from within the controlled unfolding of a two-hour feature film, while literature designs its stories to be consumed at the reader’s own pace and control, allowing for an on-demand return to previous pages as needed.¹⁴ The typical model of television consumption, divided into weekly episodes and annual seasons, constrains producers interested in telling stories that transcend individual installments, as any viewer’s memory of previous episodes is quite variable, with a significant number of viewers having missed numerous episodes altogether. In a series told over a period of months and years, managing the mechanics of memory becomes a challenge for storytellers. As discussed in chapter 1, shifts in technologies and viewing practices have made concentrated binge viewing more common,

providing a competing pressure for serials to avoid redundancies and repetitions that become annoying and excessively obvious when viewed without long serial gaps between episodes. Viewers also vary as to what paratextual expansions they explore, as some read reviews, participate in fan forums, and visit other participatory cultural sites that keep memories fresh in their minds, while others may not think at all about a program until the next episode airs. Thus the long arcs of complex television must balance the memory demands of a wide range of viewers and reception contexts.

Similarly, individual episodes need to manage our short-term memory of events that roll out over the course of the episode along with the longer-term serialized recall from weeks, months, or even years beforehand. While the paradigm of the distracted television glance is less relevant today, especially concerning demanding and slow-paced narratives such as *The Wire* or *Mad Men* that might take years to pay off long-dormant story threads, producers still need to create programs for a domestic environment that is prone to split attention and multi-tasking viewers more than for many other media.¹⁵ Over the course of an episode, television narratives embed minor redundancies that remind viewers of key story information, ranging from establishing shots locating a scene’s setting to dialogue repeating characters’ names and relationships. Soap operas rely on a common device for redundant narration that both facilitates viewers’ recall and offers the pleasure of watching characters’ reactions to past events: *diegetic retelling*, in which dialogue reminds viewers of what has already happened on the series. Prime time serials are far less dependent on the dialogue-based practice of diegetic retelling as a core narrative pleasure than daytime soaps are, but characters still call each other by name and reference their relationships more frequently than people do in everyday life, using dialogue as a way to keep crucial character information active in our minds. Often past events are retold to new characters both to update them on the status of a situation and to remind us of what we have already seen. For a typical instance, early in *Lost*’s fourth-season episode “Cabin Fever,” a scene shows the mercenary leader Keamy arriving via helicopter on a freighter with an injured man. The ship’s doctor asks, “What did this to him?” Keamy replies, “A black pillar of smoke threw him 50 feet in the air, . . . ripped his guts out,” retelling a spectacular event portrayed two

episodes earlier in “The Shape of Things to Come.” While anyone who saw the previous episode was unlikely to have forgotten the source of the injury, this diegetic retelling reminds us of the events via naturalistic dialogue and reinforces what we have already previously seen.

This example points to an important concept for understanding how viewers make sense of ongoing serials. At this point in *Lost*'s original broadcast run, a dedicated viewer would have watched 79 episodes over the course of four years, creating a vast array of narrative information to retain and recall. Even the most attentive viewers could not possibly have all of that narrative information active in their operative working memory, which is able to hold around seven discrete thoughts at a time—most of the story information they have retained would be archived in long-term memory.¹⁶ When a character's dialogue uses diegetic retelling, viewers activate that bit of story information into working memory, making it part of their immediate narrative comprehension. While certainly some viewers might have been actively thinking about the smoke monster's attack from two weeks earlier when starting “Cabin Fever,” this diegetic retelling ensures that everyone has this context active in working memory while watching the rest of the episode, as subsequent events build on this past event to motivate Keamy's actions to find his betrayer and return to the island.

Diegetic retelling typically uses dialogue as a means to activate past events into working memory, but more subtle *visual cues* such as objects, setting, or shot composition can serve a similar function to activate long-term memories. For instance, in the third-season *Battlestar Galactica* episode “Maelstrom,” Kara Thrace gives Admiral William Adama a figurine of a goddess to use as a masthead for his model ship; at the end of that episode, Adama destroys the model out of grief when Thrace's spaceship appears to be destroyed in a fatal crash. In the next season's episode “Six of One,” Adama is shown rebuilding the model after Thrace has seemingly returned from the grave. Lingering shots of the figurine and boat activate memories of the earlier episode, adding resonance to these characters' relationship and the mysterious circumstances of Thrace's survival, but without the explicit expository function of dialogue. Typically, visual cues are more subtle than dialogue, functioning less to catch up viewers who might have missed an episode than to

integrate past events into a naturalistic style of moving-image storytelling that still activates viewers' memories.

While diegetic strategies of dialogue and visual cues are a primary means for activating viewers' memories, many programs use nonnaturalistic techniques to trigger recall. The use of voice-over is a common way to convey story information via a more self-conscious mode of narration. While many screenwriters condemn voice-over as overly literary and a lazy tool for film and television, it can be used effectively in certain genres such as detective programs or sitcoms, serving both to guide viewers within the narrative world and to offer a distinctive personality to the storytelling. As discussed in chapter 2, the film-noir-infused teen drama *Veronica Mars* uses often sarcastic first-person voice-over narration by the titular character both to keep viewers on track with the complex story and to convey the character's perspective on narrative events. In the first-season episode “Silence of the Lamb,” Veronica is helping her friend Mac grapple with the discovery that she was switched at birth with another baby. Veronica's voice-over narration intones, “I could tell Mac I know how she feels, but the truth is, I don't. When I had the opportunity to learn my paternity, I chose blissful ignorance with a side of gnawing doubt.” This reference to Veronica's paternity refers to an event from two episodes earlier, as Veronica discovered that her mother had been unfaithful and ordered a kit to test her father's DNA but decided not to go through with the test. While Veronica's mysterious parentage does not become a significant plot point until later in the season, recalling this previous event helps viewers draw parallels between Mac and Veronica and colors how Veronica and her father interact later in the episode.

Voice-over narration can also resemble the more literary model of third-person omniscient storytellers. Such narrators typically act only to frame a story, as in Rod Serling's opening and closing narration on the 1960s science-fiction anthology series *The Twilight Zone*, but some recent series have played with third-person voice-over narration as a self-conscious device. *Pushing Daisies*, a whimsical cross between supernatural romance and detective fiction, uses the voice of Jim Dale, recognizable as the reader of the *Harry Potter* audiobooks, as an omniscient narrator both to present new story information and to remind us of past

events. In episode 7, "Smell of Success," the narrator comments, "Chuck continued to keep the secret ingredient of her pies secret. Not even Olive Snook knew the baked secret she delivered contained homeopathic mood enhancers meant to pry Chuck's aunts out of their funk." This typically baroque voice-over reminds us of a plot development introduced four episodes earlier, while also orienting us as to who knows what about the secret pie ingredient. Given *Pushing Daisies*' highly elaborate narrative mechanics and fanciful storyworld, the omniscient narrator's storybook style, as reinforced by the intertextual link to *Harry Potter*, functions both to manage memories and to promote a self-conscious playful tone.

The third-person voice-over found in the farcical sitcom *Arrested Development* is differently playful, with producer Ron Howard narrating the action about a dysfunctional wealthy family as if he is providing deadpan commentary within a nature documentary.¹⁷ Howard's narration fills in gaps and moves the story forward, allowing the fast-paced series to cover an astounding amount of story in less than 30 minutes. The narrator frequently provides clarifying references to a previous episode—in the second-season episode "The One Where They Build a House," the aspiring actor Tobias appears with blue paint on his ear, leading Howard to clarify, "Tobias had recently auditioned as an understudy for the silent performance-art trio the Blue Man Group," an event that occurred in the previous episode. Howard's deadpan narration often serves to humorously undercut or comment on the character's action, providing narrative momentum, clarifying recall, and comedic density. *Arrested Development*'s narration highlights how moving-image media rely on more than just language to manage memory—often the narrator's comments are accompanied by images and scenes to further trigger memories and to move the narrative forward. Following the comment about the Blue Man Group, the scene shifts to a flashback of Tobias auditioning for the part. While this scene references an event that happened over the course of the previous episode, it was never shown in the earlier episode, making it a flashback within the storyworld but adding new narrative information beyond just triggering recall. *Arrested Development* uses more than flashback scenes to retell past events, relying on a number of pseudodocumentary techniques for comedic effect. Later in the same episode, Michael and his son are talking about how Michael is

no longer in charge of the family company. Howard's narration reminds us of another event from the previous episode: "In fact, since Michael's father escaped from prison, his brother G.O.B. had been made president." The visuals cut to a shot of a newspaper reporting both the prison escape (complete with still photo taken from the previous episode) and the leadership succession. The scene then shifts to a conversation between Michael and G.O.B., in which they recount the events that led to G.O.B.'s presidency and the accompanying criminal investigation, all framed with the running gag of Michael disingenuously saying, "I have no problem with that," which is even quoted in the newspaper. Such an array of storytelling strategies prompt viewer recall while providing a comedic toolbox to create running gags and self-conscious style.

Nonverbal techniques can retell information as well. Flashbacks are a common technique to incorporate previous events into an episode, and like voice-over, they can follow first- or third-person focalization. A first-person *subjective flashback* is more common, presenting a character's memories as cued by suggestive close-ups, subjective visuals, and special effects. For instance, in the season 4 *Battlestar Galactica* episode "Guess What's Coming to Dinner," the Cylon leader Natalie tells a group of humans that being rescued by Kara Thrace was their destiny. Kara watches the speech as the image begins to blur and break up, leading into a subjective flashback of Kara being told that she is the "harbinger of death" in the previous episode. While this was an important prophecy that viewers are likely to recall, the explicit flashback both activates the memory and highlights its importance to Kara in imagining her own role in the battle between humans and Cylons. Reinforcing this dialogue by replaying the scene via flashback makes it more prominent in the long-term mythology, which proves to be a central narrative concern in the program's final season. Such glimpses of characters' memories via flashbacks are a common cue to trigger viewers' own memories, to promote empathy and alignment with a character, and to frame our comprehension of upcoming events. Flashbacks can be paired with voice-over narration to visualize a narrator's memories. *Veronica Mars* frequently uses this device, as we often see flashbacks from Veronica's memories and clues about a lengthy mystery cued by her voice-over. Comedies can use a similar technique, such as on *My Name Is Earl*, in which Earl will reference a minor character we have met previously

and narrate a flashback composed of earlier appearances and footage. In these instances, the voice-over typically serves as a determining thread of knowledge, framing previous scenes and cuing the relevant memories of earlier events and relationships as needed to advance the ongoing story.

Flashbacks presented from a more objective third-person perspective, or what we might call *replays*, are more commonly used as a way to fill in backstory than to trigger memories—series such as *Lost*, *Jack and Bobby*, and *Boomtown* use atemporal storytelling to craft their complex narratives, but their flashbacks are rarely used to present memories rather than new narrative material. Flashbacks of previously seen events that are not framed as characters' memories are quite uncommon. Crime dramas such as *CSI* often use replays in the context of retelling the previously seen crime scene, but they present new narrative information in the retelling, making the flashback less about memory than filling story gaps. The legal thriller *Damages* and the hostage drama *The Nine* both use complex atemporal structures to narrate their core crime stories, portraying previous events repeatedly throughout the season and adding more information each time to string together a new story thread—again, this model of repetition is more about filling in gaps in multiple time lines than about reminding us what we might have forgotten. Matt Hills discusses such objective flashbacks in the British science-fiction series *Doctor Who* but suggests that they function more to invite new viewers into the complex narrative than to refresh the memories of long-term fans.¹⁸ An exceptional example of a memory-driven replay came at the end of *Lost*'s final-season episode "Across the Sea." The episode takes place entirely in ancient times to tell the origin story for The Man in Black and Jacob, concluding with Jacob placing his mother's and brother's bodies in a cave; this final scene is intercut with a replayed scene from the first-season episode "House of the Rising Sun," portraying Jack, Kate, and Locke finding the decayed bodies in 2004. The producers have said that the replay was not included to remind viewers about the bodies, known for years as "Adam and Eve," but instead to connect the ancient plotline to the lives of the main characters; however, the backlash from fans suggests that the atypical device felt too obvious and redundant to warrant this violation of the program's intrinsic storytelling norms.

A more common use of such replays is on reality television, where we often are shown earlier scenes and moments to refresh our memories of previous events and to heighten the dramatic stakes. Within fictional television, the most common examples of objective replays triggering memories might be within comedies that use cutaway gags as a comedic technique, commonly found in animated series such as *Family Guy* or single-camera sitcoms such as *Scrubs*. Such asides frequently cut away from the main action to comment on, illustrate, or refute whatever just happened in the story, often cutting to a random vignette featuring fantasy sequences, unknown moments from a character's past, or replays from past episodes. An example of the latter comes from "Kidney Now," a third-season episode of *30 Rock*: Tracy tells Kenneth that he never cries, which triggers a cutaway to a montage of six moments from previous episodes showing Tracy crying. The sequence certainly functions as a comedic aside, but it also builds on our memories of Tracy's frequent crying jags that counter his own statement. However, the paucity of relevant examples suggests that such replays are a comparatively less utilized strategy to promote memory recall within fictional television.

The memory-triggering strategies I have discussed thus far all occur within diegetic narration, but television has also adopted a number of strategies outside the core storytelling text to help manage memories. Most contemporary series air a brief *recap* before each episode to summarize key events "previously on" the series. These recaps are generally crafted by series producers, who choose key moments that they believe relevant for refreshing viewers' memories for upcoming storylines and enabling new viewers to join the series midstream. While recaps are designed for the weekly original airings, they often do get included on DVDs, with some series offering the option of viewing each episode with or without recaps, while others leave them integrated into the core episode. The presence or absence of recaps can drastically change the way episodes are consumed and comprehended. Most recaps highlight the upcoming episode's most pertinent narrative information. For instance, the *Veronica Mars* episode "Silence of the Lamb" replays three brief scenes in the recap, drawing from three different episodes, ranging back over nine weeks. The scenes capture highly expository moments—first is a two-line exchange between Veronica's father and the former sheriff Keith Mars and his successor Lamb, discussing the season-long

murder mystery of Lilly Kane. Next is the scene in which Veronica and Mac meet, setting up Mac's role in this episode's primary plot. Finally, shots of Veronica investigating her mother's past are overlaid with a voice-over explaining the contested paternity, which sets up the secondary plot of this episode. In just 30 seconds, the episode activates the relevant long-term arcs into working memory to comprehend this episode's developments. However, these clips would mean almost nothing to someone who had not seen most of the previous episodes, as the snippets are far too minimal to actually provide adequate exposition for new viewers. Just as notable is what the recap omits, with no reference to the major characters Logan and Duncan—these characters do not appear in this episode and thus can stay archived in long-term memory.

Recaps can serve more expository roles, especially early in a series run. *Dexter*'s second episode features a two-minute recap, culled exclusively from the 52-minute pilot. This recap functions as a summary of the pilot, providing glimpses of each main character, highlighting the core narrative scenario of a serial killer working for the Miami Police Department, and establishing the ongoing arc of Dexter pursuing the Ice Truck Killer. While it might be a bit confusing, it would certainly be possible to watch the series without viewing the pilot, filling in narrative gaps solely from this recap and other internal redundancies. For viewers who had seen the pilot (especially in the short order of a DVD viewing), the recap seems quite redundant, offering little to cue memories aside from characters' names—the core narrative situation of a serial killer working as a forensic investigator is sufficiently memorable not to need refreshing, as simply thinking about the name of the series would likely activate that basic narrative memory. The recap from *Dexter*'s first-season finale is much more in keeping with the memory-refreshing role typically found later in a season. The finale's almost two-minute recap contains clips from many of the previous 11 episodes and presents them in such quick succession that they would be incomprehensible to a new viewer. For ongoing viewers, however, the flashes of clues remind us of how far Dexter had gotten in his pursuit of the Ice Truck Killer, and the final shots of his sister in peril refresh the cliffhanger from the previous episode. The recap also highlights Angel's stabbing from episode 10, which becomes a major plot point in the finale. Such memory-refreshing recaps help filter the hours of story information that an ongoing viewer accrues,

activating the most crucial bits of narrative into working memory while allowing other moments that will not become relevant in the upcoming episode to remain in the archives of long-term memory.

Recaps can trigger long-dormant memories that might work to foreshadow upcoming narrative events. Often in complex narratives, a recap will remind viewers of a key mystery or enigma that has receded to the background in recent serialized episodes. In the seventh episode of *Lost*, "The Moth," Sayid is attacked and knocked unconscious while trying to use radio equipment to send a message off the island. Sayid recovers in the following episode, but it is left uncertain as to who attacked him, going unmentioned for numerous episodes. In *Lost*'s 21st episode, "The Greater Good," the recap replays the knockout scene that had first been seen five months earlier, suggesting (correctly) that this dormant question as to who attacked Sayid would finally be addressed. While different viewers might have varying investments in that particular mystery, *Lost* had introduced so many burning questions and enigmas over the months between these two episodes that without this recap, the mystery over Sayid's attack would be fairly unlikely to be active within most viewers' working memories, even if they were binge viewing in rapid succession. The recap includes the scene to encourage viewers to remember this lingering question, to rekindle the anticipation of an answer, and to trigger the narrative satisfaction of its forthcoming resolution.

Sometimes a recap can trigger memories beyond dormant questions, highlighting important character backstories or relationships instead. For instance, the recap before the fourth-season *Battlestar Galactica* episode "Escape Velocity" includes a scene from the third-season episode "Exodus (Part II)" featuring the death of Ellen Tigh, the wife of Colonel Sol Tigh. The gap between the original airdates of these episodes was over 18 months, marking this scene's presence in the recap as unusual—when I first saw it, I hypothesized that including Ellen's death in the recap signaled that she would reappear in some fashion in the episode. That prediction proved correct, as Sol Tigh begins to hallucinate visions of Ellen, a connection that proves to be even more significant in the series mythology later in the season. The recap effectively reminded me about Ellen, who had receded from my working memory, but also made her reappearance more predictable than it would have been within the diegetic narrative without the recap. Viewers watching the series on

DVD or DVR might choose to skip over the recaps, which might make Ellen's reappearance prompt confusion or surprise, two reactions mitigated by her presence in the recap. For those who saw the recap, Ellen's reappearance was presaged in a manner analogous to spoilers, making us anticipate her reappearance even without knowledge of how or why she would be back from the dead. Clearly recaps must balance between the dual demands of activating memories for comprehension and avoiding foreshadowing to allow for surprises to register for viewers without being confusing; creators have devised a number of strategies for avoiding such recap spoilers.

One option is using diegetic flashbacks to serve as embedded recaps for viewers in the moment of the surprise itself. "Daybreak," the series finale of *Battlestar Galactica*, offers a good (if convoluted) example. Five characters (including Tory and Galen) agree to share in a technological process that will share their memories with each other to facilitate a peace agreement between the warring Cylons and humans. Prior to the procedure, Tory mentions that they may discover shameful things in their pasts, a protest that is quickly brushed aside. During the procedure, we glimpse memories in the form of flashbacks of some key moments from each character. Among these events, we see Tory confronting Galen's late wife, Cally; Galen starts to focus on these memories, and we witness a replay of Tory's murder of Cally from "The Ties That Bind," which had originally aired 11 months before "Daybreak"; this revelation triggers Galen to break from the procedure and strangle Tory. Series producer Ron Moore stated in his commentary track that the writers intentionally "buried" the storyline of Cally's murder, waiting for this climactic moment to pay off Galen's revenge with high narrative stakes in the finale. Notably, the recap for "Daybreak" contains no reference to Cally or her murder, allowing the viewer to experience the rekindled memory along with Galen's realization. While a dedicated viewer certainly could have recalled that Tory had murdered Cally, it was far from active memory after 11 months and many subsequent plot machinations—viewers watching the series on DVD would have a more compressed experience and thus would be more likely to have the lingering plot point fresh within their minds. But for viewers watching the original airings whom I spoke with, the revelation prompted a gradual surprising realization that Galen would witness his wife's murder. Had

the recap reminded us about the murder, we would have likely anticipated the result of the memory meld earlier, defusing a moment of high drama. The effect of such revelations might be called *surprise memory*, or the moment of being surprised by story information that you already know but do not have within working memory.

Surprise memory need not be triggered by a flashback. In the fourth-season episode of *Lost* "Cabin Fever," which notably aired without a "previously on *Lost*" recap, Claire awakens in the jungle to discover that her infant son is not with her. She looks around for him, and we see Christian Shephard holding him. Claire looks at him with confusion and says, "Dad?" right before we cut to commercial. It had been previously revealed via off-island flashback in the third-season episode "Par Avion" that Jack's father, Christian, was also Claire's father, but that relationship had not been actively referenced for over 10 months of broadcast time. While it is surprising enough to see Christian in the woods (especially given that the character is dead and previously had only appeared on the island as a mysterious apparition for Jack), the average viewer would not likely have his identity as Claire's father in working memory until she calls him Dad, prompting this satisfying moment of surprise memory. When a long-term viewer has accrued a large amount of story information, a storyteller can guide emotional reactions based on what is in working memory—an episode might highlight particular relationships and connections within working memory or prompt surprise or suspense via elements buried in long-term memory. The feeling of being surprised through the act of remembering is quite pleasurable, rewarding a viewer's knowledge base while provoking the flood of recognition stemming from the activation of such memories. Such pleasures are hard to imagine working in nonserialized formats, as the shorter-term forms of cinema or novels do not typically allow sufficient time over the course of narrative consumption to enable the process of archiving, forgetting, and reactivation needed to be surprised by your own memory.

One additional memory trigger found within television episodes is the credit sequence. Such sequences vary greatly in form and scope, from brief title cards on *Lost* or *Breaking Bad* to two-minute montage sequences on *Six Feet Under* or *Homeland*. Some title sequences use footage outside the main narrative, as with Tony's drive from New York City to his suburban house on the gangster drama *The Sopranos*, with

the sequence working to emphasize the program's setting and milieu, or *Dexter*'s visually stylized images of the title character preparing to go to work, evoking the theme of finding the gruesome within the mundane. Many longer title sequences include images from the series itself, which for both episodic and serialized programs can evoke fond character moments, as with *Friends* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Each season of *The Wire* offers a new montage of images of Baltimore and from narrative moments of the series, most of which have little explicit resonance within the story, but some images do trigger particular memories. For instance, season 4's credits include a brief close-up of an unidentified man putting a lollipop into his pocket. For the first four episodes, this image bears no real meaning and seems out of place next to images of criminals, cops, and kids on the street. In the fourth episode of the season, "Refugees," we see the image in context: the crime boss Marlo pickpockets the lollipop in an act of petty crime aimed to openly mock a security guard, who is later killed for daring to confront Marlo about shoplifting. For the rest of the season, this repeated image in the credits serves as a reminder of Marlo's arrogance and cold-blooded lust for power, highlighting how he might do anything to climb the ranks of Baltimore's drug game and build his reputation. Through this repetition and constant reminder, we keep this minor action in working memory, shading Marlo's character.

As I have argued throughout, the process of consuming television narratives plays out in a broader context than the singular television text itself, and thus the television industry has devised a number of extra-textual means of helping manage viewers' memory. One long-standing tradition is the rerun—for decades, networks typically played each episode of a season twice throughout the year, filling in off times with earlier episodes. These network reruns have become less common in the 21st century, especially with DVDs, DVRs, and online video as methods for viewers to rewatch or catch up on missed episodes. *Lost* aired with reruns over the summer and during breaks from new episodes in its first two seasons, but ABC ceased this practice in later seasons. Instead, *Lost* and other network series took a page from cable channels, showing the same episode multiple times throughout the week of its first run, a scheduling practice that allows viewers to refresh their memories, to take a closer look at an episode during the week's gap, or to catch

up on missed material without falling behind. *Lost* used these secondary airings to offer so-called enhanced versions of episodes after their initial broadcast—these versions added caption annotations to clarify references and previous events. For instance, in "Something Nice Back Home," when Claire encounters Christian, the captions read, "Christian Shepard is also Claire's father, making Jack and Claire half-brother and sister, though neither one of them know it." Such comments can certainly help refresh memories for casual viewers, but most die-hard fans found the "enhanced" experience too obvious, literal, or trivial in its annotations.

More commonly, serialized programs use paratexts to refresh memories and orient new viewers. ABC aired 14 hour-long compilation episodes over the course of *Lost*'s six seasons, with each episode replaying key moments along with voice-over narration and interviews retelling the narrative. *Battlestar Galactica* and *The Wire*, among others, aired similar recap compilation episodes before the start of new seasons to refresh viewers' memories and to invite new viewers. Compilation episodes, like recaps, are quite strategic in their summaries, selecting plot threads with continued relevancy while ignoring storylines that have been resolved and made dormant within the ongoing narrative. The rise of online-video has enabled a number of other strategies for recapping. Some networks, channels, and programs have created "minisodes" that briefly sum up previous episodes, such as NBC's online-only "2 Minute Replays" or *Rescue Me*'s "3 Minute Replays" that could be seen both online and on the cable channel FX. Such replays function more to allow viewers who missed episodes to fill gaps, but they could also serve as memory refreshers like preepisode recaps; however, such replays are designed more to retell the entire episode than to strategically present key story information for the upcoming episode.

An interesting trend emerged in 2007 with the popular YouTube video "The Seven Minute *Sopranos*." A high-speed recap of the previous five and a half seasons in advance of the final episodes airing, the humorous but affectionate fan-created video garnered over a million views and successfully promoted the final season.¹⁹ The television industry took note of the success and created similarly glib online recaps, such as "*Lost* in 8:15" and "What the frak is going on?" for *Battlestar Galactica*. These humorous recaps are designed for long-term fans as affectionate

parodies, but they also function to effectively remind viewers of key events and to highlight patterns and repetitions across the series, such as the numerous times that Carmela Soprano “gets pissed” at her husband, Tony, captured by the repeated visual of her throwing his luggage at him down the stairs. In addition to recap videos, viewers’ memory can be refreshed via many of the orienting paratexts discussed in chapter 8, yielding an array of media extensions that allows nearly any question a fan might have about a serialized television series to be answered by a quick Google search or by perusing the program’s most active fan sites, making these complex long-form storyworlds effectively searchable and highly documented.

Clearly, a complex series can use a range of narrative strategies to trigger and play with viewers’ memories. This catalogue of memory-aiding techniques highlights the importance of underlying processes of memory in the seemingly simple act of narrative comprehension. Managing a multiyear narrative universe is difficult enough for television writers, but they also face significant challenges to ensure that viewers can follow the action without falling into either confusion or boredom from redundancy. Even though new modes of viewing have made it more common for viewers to watch a serial in sequential order without missing episodes, it is still common enough for viewers to watch erratically, requiring internal redundancy and paratextual extensions to ensure narrative comprehension. To understand the process of making sense from a series without full background knowledge and memories, we can take a closer look at the comprehension of a single episode.

The Serial Viewer’s Activity

Comprehending a television narrative is both so straightforward as to fall beneath the threshold of analysis and potentially rich in complexity. To understand how we make sense of complex television, we need to take a slow-motion look at comprehension in practice, following Bordwell’s model pioneered by his account of viewing *Rear Window*.²⁰ But as suggested earlier, the television viewer’s activity is too multifaceted to bracket off the viewing context, as serial texts can be comprehended in drastically different ways depending on what viewers bring to their viewing. To highlight this process, I examine viewing a *Curb Your*

Enthusiasm episode with some self-reflexivity, considering how the particular context I first brought to the episode shapes the comprehension experience, frames knowledge differentials, and structures viewing memory. I am not suggesting that the viewing I trace here is identical to my own comprehension process, as much of this activity operates at the level of preconscious automatic processing that I cannot claim to access for myself or others; rather, by highlighting the contexts that I brought to the episode, I hope to show the microlinks between contexts and cognition. Thus the comprehension activity charted here is abstracted and hypothetical, but the crucial shaping contexts are not. This slow-motion account of the episode’s storytelling and the process of viewer comprehension allows us to see complex narrative form operating at the level of an entire episode, exemplifying many of the poetic aspects explored throughout the rest of the book.

I have chosen to focus on “Vehicular Fellatio,” the second episode of the seventh season, in part because it is a particularly elegant episode of television (despite its crude name) and in part because of my own idiosyncratic context. I first saw this episode upon its initial airing in September 2009, as a longtime fan of *Curb* but one with an erratic viewing history. I had watched the program’s first four seasons in full when they aired from 2000 to 2004 but gave up after a disappointing fourth season made me less interested in the series, as well as the complication that I lacked HBO during the next two seasons. I returned for the seventh season because it was to feature a *Seinfeld* reunion as a serialized plotline—as a longtime *Seinfeld* fan, I was compelled to watch. So my experience watching this episode was framed by the context of knowing the program’s first four seasons well (although in distant memory) but not knowing the next two at all. Prior to watching the seventh season, I read brief online summaries of the fifth and sixth seasons to see what I had missed, but many of the characters and relationships portrayed in the seventh season were new to me. This experience of watching a serialized program with breaks in viewing history and using extratextual information to fill in gaps is certainly not the ideal as designed by television producers, but it is common among viewers, highlighting how serial television’s viewing contexts are far more variable and unpredictable than those for film. While not ideal, my background made me a “competent viewer,” drawing on both previous viewing and extratextual

information to put me in a position to adequately comprehend the season. I foreground my own experiences to demonstrate how comprehension is shaped by the intersection of a television text and a viewer's contextual background within the cognitive process of watching a program.

As discussed in chapter 3, *Curb*'s main character, Larry David, is a television writer who made a fortune after creating *Seinfeld*, a series modeled in part after his own life. Of course, *Curb* itself is created, produced, written by, and stars Larry David, a television writer who made a fortune after creating *Seinfeld*, a series modeled in part after his own life via his on-screen surrogate of George Costanza. On top of this layer of metareferentiality are numerous celebrity guest stars playing themselves, always reminding us that the people who play (fictional) Larry's friends are often (real) David's friends. These blurring boundaries between reality and fiction become particularly fraught in the seventh season, as the story follows from Larry's divorce of his longtime (fictional) wife, Cheryl, in the sixth season, paralleling David's well-publicized divorce from his longtime (real) wife, Laurie. Additionally, the season's main arc follows Larry's attempts to create and produce a *Seinfeld* reunion special, culminating in a reunion of the *Seinfeld* cast that stages part of this reunion special within *Curb* itself, offering scenes from an embedded (fictional) episode of *Seinfeld* in lieu of any actual reunion special. Thus anyone watching *Curb* with a degree of cultural literacy about *Seinfeld* and David (which the series certainly encourages viewers to seek out) must keep these multiple frames of reference in mind, inviting us to chart out what on-screen events are based on real events and how those representations mirror, rework, or comment on reality.

Another important level of extratextual knowledge involves *Curb*'s highly unusual production model—David writes a detailed story outline for every episode, but the actual lines of dialogue are improvised by the actors in multiple filmed run-throughs. Thus as we watch, we are invited to imagine how scenes were put together, wondering what was improvised by actors and what was scripted. Although with most programs such meta-analysis is something that only a small subset of viewers do—including those trained in media studies, aspiring to become television creators themselves, or just fascinated with “how the sausage gets made”—*Curb* invites such operational attention to the

creative process because the fictional world itself frequently portrays the characters creating television, theater, or other storytelling media, a trend that is magnified in the seventh season. Additionally, Larry and his friends are always obsessing over what people mean by what they say and why on earth somebody might have said *that*—extending such nitpicking analytic detail to how the spoken lines came to be seems consistent and encouraged by the program's analytic attention to minutiae and motivations.

Season 7 picks up on two main plotlines from the sixth season: Larry's divorce from Cheryl and his romantic relationship with Loretta Black, a member of the African American New Orleans family that the Davids welcomed into their house in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The season premiere, “Funkhouser's Crazy Sister,” links these together by making it clear that Larry would like to end his relationship with Loretta to reunite with Cheryl, but the episode's final moments reveal that Loretta has cancer, a diagnosis that the ever-selfish Larry regards as an obstacle to both extracting himself from the relationship and playing golf. Thus “Vehicular Fellatio” begins at this key moment in the story arc, with Larry facing his role as Loretta's caretaker, a position for which he is wholly unsuited. After watching the season debut, I investigated some questions that arose as an erratic viewer: how long have Larry and Loretta been a couple? How long has she been ill? And who exactly is Leon, who seems to be of a different ilk than the rest of the Black family? Consulting resources such as fan sites, other viewers, or even Wikipedia has become commonplace for television viewers, as discussed in chapter 8—while *Curb* does not feature a convoluted mythology like *Lost* or a vast world of characters like *Game of Thrones*, it does invite us to explore extratextual sources, largely cued by the program's own references to extratextual concerns.

Differences in viewing contexts can shape emotional investments in characters—on the basis of my partial viewing, I was wholly unsympathetic to Loretta and her relationship with Larry, as I lacked any context for her character beyond her appearance in this season's first episode, and thus I shared Larry's disdain for her and interest in reuniting with Cheryl, whom I knew much better from the first four seasons. Thus I first watched “Vehicular Fellatio” armed with this partial knowledge and framed anticipation. As is typical in the era of electronic program

guides and DVRs, the episode title precedes the episode; in this case, the title certainly calls attention to itself, setting up anticipatory questions about who might be giving and receiving such fellatio and in whose vehicle. *Curb* episodes lack “previously on” recaps, so depending on how long it may have been since a viewer had watched “Funkhouser’s Crazy Sister,” the episode must diegetically remind us of the lingering questions surrounding Loretta. However, the opening sequence forgoes plot concerns for a moment of pure physical comedy—Larry opens a gift bag containing a GPS device but struggles to open the plastic clamshell packaging for nearly two minutes of escalating frustration, a wordless sequence featuring only Larry’s rage-induced shouts. This opening aims our anticipation away from plot questions and more toward the emotional realm of pure comedy. The sequence ends with Loretta’s voice calling for Larry to come upstairs, leading him to stomp on the package in anger, connecting this microfrustration to the broader reminder of his sense of being trapped in an unhappy relationship with ill Loretta. Her illness is activated into working memory when he converses with her upstairs, as Loretta mentions her cancer to make Larry feel guilty about his petty complaints and desire to play golf. Over the course of the conversation, Larry mentions a few other characters that activate our memories, including series regulars Jeff and Susie, Richard Lewis, who has played himself as a recurring role throughout the series but had not yet appeared in the seventh season, and Lewis’s unnamed new girlfriend, suggesting a new character. Iterating such characters helps prime viewers for who might appear in subsequent scenes and establish the relationships for viewers who might have missed episodes. The scene also displays Loretta being petty and demanding, using her cancer as a rationale to have Larry wait on her, which reinforces our allegiance with Larry in rooting for him to dump Loretta despite her illness, rather than making us pity her and condemn his selfishness.

The next scene seems to be a throwaway, as Leon asks Larry to call his friend Alton, revealing that Alton is a huge *Seinfeld* fan, he is depressed, it is his birthday, and he has “a hot-ass wife.” The brief scene offers little comedy, aside from Leon’s curse-filled dialect, but sets in motion another plotline, with Leon leaving Alton’s number on Larry’s dresser. Thus five minutes into the episode, we have five potential dangling story threads: Larry and Loretta’s dysfunctional relationship, the

upcoming dinner with Richard and friends, Alton’s birthday call, the GPS gift, and the mysterious episode title. Additionally, we know of the lingering possibility of Larry and Cheryl reconciling and the extratextually hyped *Seinfeld* reunion that has yet to be mentioned in the season. Having learned how to watch *Curb* and recognize intrinsic norms of plotting, we expect some of these plotlines to come together in surprising ways, as we imagine such possibilities through hypotheses of operational speculation. The next scene moves one of these plots forward, as Larry glances at the television to see Dr. Karen Trundle urging cancer patients to ditch their “toxic relationships,” which she defines as “someone who is impatient, someone who is obnoxious, someone who is petty and argumentative, obsesses over meaningless details at the expense of a harmonious relationship.” Larry’s face moves from interest to pleasure to jubilation as he hears his own faults itemized, and we engage in an easy bit of mind reading (as discussed in chapter 4) to imagine him rationalizing the breakup as better for Loretta’s illness. The next scene moves this plot forward, with Larry telling Loretta that he has made an appointment for them to see Dr. Trundle—although this being *Curb*, we anticipate that this plan will backfire in unpredictable ways.

The Alton plotline advances next, as Larry calls him with birthday wishes. All goes well in the phone call, until Larry succumbs to his tendency to overshare information, as he tells Alton that Leon thinks his wife is beautiful, triggering a jealous rage in Alton that Larry hangs up on. We predict that this conflict will come back before the episode’s end, as Larry often makes minor social miscues that lead to overreaction and conflict, and thus experienced viewers remember other *Curb* moments of comparable awkwardness and their repercussions in predicting the potential confrontational outcome. The next scene is the anticipated dinner, which begins with Jeff and Larry talking at the bar. Jeff makes Larry swear to secrecy, to which Larry says, “I’m a vault,” a reference to a phrase commonly used on *Seinfeld*, which both strengthens the link between Larry and George Costanza and evokes the anticipated outcome that, as on *Seinfeld*, this vault will soon be opened. Jeff tells Larry that on the way to the restaurant, Richard’s girlfriend “blew him in the car,” providing a reference for the episode’s titular sex act and thus seemingly answering that lingering question. The conversation drifts into comedic riffing, as Jeff and Larry discuss the dangers of blow jobs, hand

jobs, or “any kind of job” while driving and then speculate as to why they are called “jobs.” This type of comedic dialogue evokes the operational dimension of comprehension—knowing the program’s improvisatory production model, viewers can imagine the actors coming up with these digressions and watch for frequent signs of the actors breaking character to laugh at each other.

When Jeff and Larry reach the table, Richard’s girlfriend introduces herself as Beverly, which furthers the process of character recognition discussed more in chapter 4—and assures erratic viewers that she is indeed a new character, rather than a reoccurring figure we might be expected to remember. Beverly encourages Larry to try a sip of her drink, which repulses him because of his memory of her recent sexual activity—as viewers, we share Larry’s knowledge and thus can fill in the unstated rationale for why he refuses the sip, even as the other characters are confused by his rude behavior. At the end of the dinner, Jeff asks Larry if he is going to Michael York’s party, which raises a memory question: do we know this character? Some older viewers might know York as the British actor best known from 1970s films such as *Cabaret* and *Logan’s Run*, while dedicated *Curb* viewers would remember York’s appearances in four episodes in the third season. Regardless of how we know him, his name sets up our anticipation that he will reappear in this episode, cuing narrative expectations for another setting and character to emerge. York’s mention becomes an excuse to bring up the GPS system, which Larry thanks Jeff and Susie for. He then recounts how he failed to open the package; 10 minutes into the episode, this reference functions as a short-term memory cue, reminding us of this opening moment and suggesting that the GPS package will return to relevance beyond just the opening bit of physical comedy. Beverly tries to kiss Larry upon her departure, and he recoils from her, prompting her outrage and Richard demanding that Larry explain himself. As we wonder whether Larry will open the vault, Jeff gestures to keep it secret, so Larry lies that he was ashamed that he had a cold sore—given our knowledge of *Curb*’s obsession with such health-related minutiae and deceptions, we can assume this fake cold sore will reappear in some form.

The next day, Larry goes to a hardware store to buy a knife to open the GPS package; at the store, Leon confronts Larry for disclosing what

he thought about Alton’s wife, which it turns out was more than just a compliment. As Larry and Leon argue about the latter’s habit of “tapping the ass” of married women, it raises curiosity questions about Leon’s backstory. Given the context of my serial gaps, I was not sure how much about Leon’s past, personality, and relationship with Larry had been established in the sixth season versus what was intentionally unstated. For me at the time, he seemed like a particularly inscrutable character, notable mostly for his profane speech and comic banter with Larry but lacking any clear role in the ensemble; such instances are telling for the varieties in serialized experiences, as many fans who had watched the sixth season celebrated Leon as one of their favorite characters. Thus watching without the full backstory prompts viewers to create unintentional curiosity questions and hypotheses, leading to a wide range of possible narrative responses due to varying backgrounds and contexts.

Larry and Loretta visit Dr. Trundle in the next scene, which plays on our knowledge differences. We know that Larry is trying to appear “toxic” by selfishly ignoring Loretta and belittling her cancer, and thus we laugh at his petty, horrible behavior as an exaggerated performance of his typical insensitivity—mirroring how the fictional Larry functions as an exaggeration of the real-life David as well. These layers of performance foreshadow a theme that will grow in prominence throughout the season, as Larry views Jason Alexander’s performance of George as a fictionalized reflection of his own worst tendencies. Within this episode, we root for Larry to extract himself from Loretta and enjoy his over-the-top attempts to be insensitive and obnoxious. When Larry leaves the room, we follow him to maintain full alignment throughout the episode; in the waiting room, he encounters Mr. Trundle, the doctor’s husband whose picture he saw in her office, but this interaction only lasts a single line—given *Curb*’s norms that new characters and interactions usually amount to something significant, we anticipate his eventual return. Dean Weinstock, Larry’s former neighbor, arrives and reminds Larry (and us) who he is, which we have likely forgotten, having appeared only in one first-season episode that originally aired nearly nine years earlier. They get into a highly petty, minutiae-focused argument about who broke Dean’s glasses, which escalates in typical *Curb* fashion until Dean mentions that he has cancer; this mortifies Larry, who disengages and

agrees to pay for the glasses. Larry's shift in demeanor highlights that he is not wholly a horrible person but also contrasts with the insensitive way he is willing to treat Loretta for personal gain.

On the drive home, Larry tells Loretta, "I got a pretty good vibe from that doctor. Pretty, pretty, pretty good." His drawn-out delivery of the repeated "pretty" is one of *Curb*'s catchphrases, evoking memories of past episodes and our affinities toward Larry. This positive sense is furthered by the impression that Dr. Trundle told Loretta to dump Larry, as Loretta alludes vaguely to things she needs to do for her health, which Larry encourages. After arriving home, Richard stops by to blame Larry for destroying his relationship with Beverly, which Richard claims was "maybe the most special one" he ever had; Larry questions this claim by highlighting how Richard had said the last one was special. Without knowledge of the previous seasons, this reference is unclear, although given the program's sense of history, we can assume that Larry was somehow involved in wrecking Richard's last relationship as well. Richard insists that Larry apologize to Beverly for his actions, and we anticipate a reiteration of the cold-sore lie. However, Larry tells the truth for once, mistaking Richard's gesture as the "blow-job sign," and opens the vault, talking about the vehicular fellatio and thus reactivating the episode title. The dialogue between Larry and Richard again enters the realm of operational pleasure, as they riff about sex and manners, with both actors on the verge of cracking up.

Larry drives Loretta to Dr. Trundle's lecture, and they see Mr. Trundle in the car ahead of them, mentioning him by name, relationship, and previous encounter, all of which seem to be setting him up for playing a major role in the anticipated narrative collision course that *Curb* episodes frequently feature; and thus his presence triggers an operational anticipatory question: why do we keep seeing him? We soon get our answer, with the first crossover between plotlines: as both cars are driving, we see Dr. Trundle's head rise up from her husband's lap, wiping her mouth after some implied vehicular fellatio. Loretta is so offended that she discredits the doctor, insisting that Larry turn the car around, thus foiling his plan to inspire Loretta to leave him. At the operational level, it feels like the title has now fully been paid off, crossing between plots and serving as a major narrative stimulus to undercut Larry's grand scheme. Yet it returns in the next scene, as Larry goes to Dr. Trundle's office to

leave payment for Dean's glasses, but Dr. Trundle expresses her disappointment that Larry and Loretta missed the lecture and accuses Larry of interfering because she was going to urge Loretta to leave him. Larry "rejects the hypothesis," and when she presses him to tell the truth, he describes what they witnessed in the car. The doctor denies it, becoming so incensed with Larry's implications that she beats him with her book. We are left uncertain whether she was lying about her explanation that she was searching for her cell phone, but clearly we can support her accusation that Larry has a "tiny little, insecure, infantile mind of about a twelve-year-old" (to which he replies, "I think you blew him")—and yet we are fully aligned and allied with Larry throughout his pettiness and misanthropy. Like the antiheroes discussed in chapter 4, we see Larry as an undesirable person but enjoy him as a character, saying things that are socially unacceptable and living without shame or fear of consequences from his petty griping.

The fellatio-related complications are not yet over, however, as Larry arrives home to find Leon attempting to hide Alton's wife from Alton, who has arrived hoping to catch them in an uncompromising position. Alton's unnamed wife hides by ducking in Larry's car until Leon convinces Alton that nothing is going on, but just as the coast is clear, Loretta drives up to see Alton's wife sit up in the car. With vehicular fellatio active in her working memory, Loretta assumes the worst and promptly leaves Larry, moving out with her family. Despite being called a "cheating, no-good, bald-head motherfucker," Larry is elated to be free from Loretta, and our sympathies are certainly with him. Our sense of a happy ending is intensified with the operational aesthetic of having the multiple plot threads come together in such an elegant manner, united around the unusual act of vehicular fellatio that randomly allowed Larry to accomplish the goal that his scheming could not. This effect is typical of the series, as Larry's successes are rare but are most frequently attributable to random fortune rather than careful planning, social skills, or decent behavior. As I discussed in chapter 4, we enjoy mind reading characters with particularly adept social skills or Machiavellian intelligence; in Larry, we have a character whose social intelligence is stunted within an infantile mind but who manages to succeed through coincidence and fortunate failure, conveying the message that no matter how culturally awkward we might be, we can still survive via dumb luck.²¹

However, the episode is not yet over, as there are a few more threads to weave into the web of vehicular fellatio. The final scene shows Larry driving to Michael York's party, calling back to that reference from the dinner scene, when he sees a car accident on the side of the road. He discovers Jeff and Susie in the car, having swerved off the road in a moment of vehicular fellatio, a danger that Larry had cautioned Jeff against earlier in the episode. To help them escape their compromising situation, Larry says he will get the knife he bought earlier to cut Jeff's seatbelt—only to discover that the knife itself is wrapped in an impenetrable plastic package, leaving Larry screaming in an incoherent rage, just as the episode began. This is a dually satisfying moment, offering both the visceral laughs of a panic-stricken Larry grappling with an improbably packaged knife and the operational pleasures of a circular comedic structure. Such circularity and contrivances make for highly unrealistic storytelling, as *Curb* clearly sets its norms far from expectations of plausibility. Instead, the series values the elegance of a well-crafted set of contrivances, in which the situations pile up and top one another in highly implausible but resonant ways. Per the program's intrinsic norms, we do not expect that these closing events will have serial implications—while we can assume that Loretta leaving (and Leon staying) will persist beyond this episode, we also expect that Jeff and Susie's car accident and Larry's attempted rescue will go unresolved, treated as a thrown-away gag rather than a lingering plot point. This assumption is proven correct in the next episode, "The Reunion," which launches the *Seinfeld* arc now that the lingering situations from season 6's story with the Blacks are wrapped up.

As an exemplar of complex comedy, *Curb* highlights how innovative plotting, reflexive story mechanics, and awareness of its own norms and expectations can work to offer new possibilities for narrative comprehension. While not as elaborately serialized as many dramas or as infused with backstory enigmas and suspense-driven mysteries, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* offers a good glimpse into how we engage with an episode of complex television to make sense of an ongoing narrative. Although comedy is typically less naturalistic than drama is, *Curb* is on the extreme side of the spectrum along with *Arrested Development* in rejecting realism for more operational pleasures, coupled with a pseudo-documentary shooting style and improvised dialogue that invite us to

imagine how the program was made. With at least five plot threads all connected to a central character, the episode must keep each plate spinning independently, actively reminding us about each storyline and playing with our anticipation as to how they might all crash together. All of this cognitive stimulation does not forestall emotional engagement, as we laugh at the episode, root for Larry to move forward with his personal life, and cringe at his inappropriate behavior. This slow-motion description of the viewer's activity in making sense of an episode can highlight how complex television storytelling works to interweave the pleasures of a story and its telling that typify the operational aesthetic.

Taking a cognitive poetic approach to television storytelling does not close down other theoretical models or methods—it is an approach that is best suited to answering particular, limited questions about viewers' mental activity and engagement. Although cognitive approaches to film and media studies have been criticized for making overly universalized assumptions about viewers and ignoring cultural contexts, my analysis shows how using cognitive models for viewer comprehension can fit within contextualized accounts of active audiences and participatory culture more common to television studies. We can combine what we know about cultural contexts with the mechanics of mental comprehension and engagement to develop a more pluralistic and complementary set of theoretical tools. Looking closely at how we comprehend complex television narratives through both contextual and cognitive models helps explain how this narrative mode engages various types of viewers and fosters creative innovation within television storytelling.

Evaluation

In the introduction, I discussed how my experience watching *Alias* and *24* in 2001 helped shape this book, as seeking ways to explain both programs' narrative complexity inspired me to study television's storytelling poetics to help fill a gap in the field. However, these dual programs point toward another blind spot in television studies: my own sense that *Alias* was much better than *24*. There was no shortage of discussion over the relative worth of these or other series in the backstage arenas of media scholars, whether on barstools at conferences or in departmental mailrooms—sites that today extend to online networks on blogs, Twitter, and Facebook. But there was then, and still is, little space for a media scholar to make such an evaluative argument within the realm of official scholarly discourse. Perhaps such evaluation might appear in disguise, masked in the garb of political analysis arguing the superiority of *Alias*'s representations of gender, race, and global politics in comparison to *24*. While I would not argue with such an assessment (although those are certainly complicated issues), my own evaluation was more due to an aesthetic judgment than a political preference: I believe that *Alias* is a far more effective serialized narrative than *24*.

So what might I do with this evaluative judgment? The most common tactic among media scholars is to pack it away, bracketing it off from our professional writing in the name of analytic objectivity, or at least neutrality. But I see two main flaws with this quick dismissal. First, it is dishonest—my aesthetic judgments do structure and shape this book. Since analyzing serial television requires an investment of many hours into watching, rewatching, and researching any given series, I have chosen to focus on programs that I actually enjoy as my primary case studies. Does this emphasis on my favorite programs such as *The Wire*, *Lost*, *Veronica Mars*, and *Breaking Bad* over complex television series I do not particularly enjoy, such as *Mad Men*, *24*, and *Heroes*, mean that my analysis is skewed? Certainly, as this would be a different book if my

analysis had focused on other objects of study. But I make no claims toward objectivity or neutrality, as I fully acknowledge that my own taste biases shape what programs I analyze and how I approach them. I do not know how someone could manage to write a book like this without being selective in what programs to cover, and it is far better to be up-front about why I have focused on these particular programs than to bury the hidden rationale in pseudo-objectivity. And while I do not personally like some of the programs that I overlook, I would never claim that they are irrelevant to our understanding of television storytelling—I encourage critics with more sympathy for *Mad Men* or *24* to offer their own poetic analyses of such important series.

The more vital problem with bracketing off questions of taste and evaluation is that it ignores key questions concerning television storytelling: Can we analyze why some programs work better than others for particular viewers? Can we analyze taste as anything more than a reflection of either textually inherent aesthetic value or contextually determined markers of the critic's social strata? In analyzing the poetics of television narrative, can we ask both how something works and how it works *well*? I believe the answers to all of these questions are yes—we can use evaluative criticism to strengthen our understanding of how a television program works, how viewers and fans invest themselves in a text, and what inspires them (and us) to make television a meaningful part of everyday life.¹ At its best, evaluative criticism helps us to see a series differently, providing a glimpse into one viewer's aesthetic experience and inviting readers to try on such vicarious reading positions for themselves.

Before proceeding to such evaluations, it is important to contextualize what it is we do when we evaluate. An evaluative critique does not aspire to the status of fact or proof. By claiming that a given program is good or that one series is better than another, I am making an argument that I believe to be true, but it is not a truth claim—in Stanley Fish's terms, evaluation is an act of persuasion rather than demonstration.² Even more than other types of analysis, evaluation is an invitation to a dialogue, as debating the merits of cultural works is one of the most enjoyable ways we engage with texts, establish relationships with other consumers, and gain respect for other people's opinions and insights. Of course, I do hope to convince readers that my evaluation is correct, and

I certainly believe it to be true. But we do not make evaluations to make a definitive statement about the value of any given text; instead, they are contingent claims lodged in their contextual moment that will almost undoubtedly be revised after future viewing and conversation. While my persuasive evaluation emerges from a context of authority, with an imprint of academic expertise that might give it more weight than a random pseudonym in an online comment thread, any evaluation's effectiveness stems more from successful analysis and argumentation than from the backing of institutional power or authority.

So why do I claim (however contingently) that *Alias* is a better case of complex television than *24* is? For me (as such evaluations are always draped in the cloak of personal caveat), both series are ludicrous, but *Alias* revels in its own ludicrousness in a way that *24* fails to. Both programs tell ridiculous tales of action-oriented espionage, double and triple agents uncovering moles and deep-seated deceptions, and far-fetched scenarios of global peril that strain credulity. However, *Alias* never pretends to be serious in its vision of espionage and global intrigue—it wears its preposterous vision of globe-trotting secret agents as part of its high-fashion, stylistic sheen. It invites us to care about the characters and their relationships but winkingly acknowledges that its plot and scenarios are absurd in their fantastic glossy style, undercut by the comic relief of SD-6's technology guru Marshall Flinkman's nerdy fanboy reflexivity, by the superhuman talents of Sydney Bristow and her fellow agents, and the scenery-chewing villainy of Arvin Sloan and Irina Derevko. *Alias* presents itself as a rollicking good time of a series, a thrill ride with a campy level of self-awareness and an overt embrace of endless attempts to top its own cliffhanging twists and reversals—in short, it's a hoot.

In contrast, *24* takes its own ludicrousness way too seriously. From its production style of gritty realism to the real-time storytelling gimmick to its naturalistic high-stakes acting tone, *24* invites viewers to believe that this all might be real.³ At least judging from the first season (which is the only year I watched in full, along with selected episodes from subsequent years), the program does little to puncture its own self-serious tone, with minimal comic undercutting, reflexive acknowledgment, or moments of stylistic artifice. This is not to say that a program must mock itself or undercut its own seriousness to be good but that there

seems to be an inherent incompatibility between *24*'s serious, naturalistic style employing techniques that connote realism (on-screen anchoring text, split screens signaling simultaneity, handheld camerawork) and its ridiculous first-season storylines about faked deaths, body doubles, a double-crossing double-agent mistress, and a plane-exploding, hypersexual lesbian assassin—not to mention Kim randomly getting attacked by a cougar in season 2. As a viewer, I found myself perpetually unsure how seriously I was supposed to be taking the series and its dramatic arcs, an uncertainty that becomes even more troubling with the program's political celebration of torture and demonization of Muslims. Additionally, the plotting was frequently sloppy, with loose ends and shortcuts that belied the program's real-time illusion of tightness and planning. Although *Alias* had its own fair share of narrative missteps and shortcuts, it never presented itself as anything more than a stylish fantasy, while *24* always maintained a pretense of being a coherent and well-constructed suspense thriller.

The takeaway from this brief evaluative comparison of *Alias* and *24* is that a series must effectively provide a framework for understanding its own storytelling and style to be successful—the text must speak to its viewers in a voice that guides us how to watch it. To me, *Alias* is a far more effective series (especially for its first three seasons) because it established my expectations to offer escapist, fantastic propulsive fun, with character relationships providing emotional weight to stories that were far from grounded. Of course, *24* was far more commercially successful in the long run, with higher ratings, a larger fan base, and broader cultural influence. However, as an outsider to the program's viewership, I do not understand how viewers made sense of the program's contradictions in tone and storytelling—is it supposed to be a serious thriller, a campy hypermasculine melodrama, or somewhere in between? Viewers who fail to appreciate a series often have such a sense of not speaking the program's language, creating a layer of miscommunication between what the text is saying and what we might be hearing. Many of the best complex television series work on numerous levels, providing both surface pleasures and deeper resonances for different groups of viewers, so I am sure that many *24* fans find that it does succeed at these goals, as they can understand the program's language. But *24* fails for me at multiple levels, succeeding only at developing cliffhangers that make me want

to keep watching, even though I do not enjoy the program, making it the televisual equivalent of a can of Pringles. I do find it an interesting failure, marrying ambitious formal innovations to more conventional content in ways that run counter to other innovative contemporary television series that are frequently labeled “quality television,” a label that deserves more discussion.

The Qualities of Complexity

In writing about complex television series, many of which I find highly compelling and successful works of popular art, I have consciously avoided the label “quality television.” This term is most usefully understood as a discursive category used to distinguish certain programs from others, with such programs less united by formal or thematic elements than used as a mark of prestige to elevate the sophistication of viewers who embrace such “quality” programming. The field of television studies has a mixed relationship to the term—“quality television” is a more commonly used phrase in Europe, referencing upscale fictional programs in the press and academic discourse, while it is used far less frequently in the United States, even though much of what is labeled “quality” is American television. Most American media scholars regard the emphasis on quality with skepticism and even have outright hostility toward regarding television as an aesthetic object. In charting out some of these different perspectives, I hope to move away from the discursive trap of quality and model an approach to evaluating television programming that can hopefully open up a space for scholars to engage more productively with aesthetic analysis.

The first approach to evaluation might be considered unselconscious quality television discourse, but this is actually quite rare among media scholars. “Quality television” as a term is rarely used without layers of caveats and disclaimers within academic writing, noting that “quality” (frequently compartmentalized by quotation marks) is subjective or that it is more interesting as a discourse circulating within the industry or fans, rather than an evaluative label itself.⁴ Yet for all of these caveats, there still seems to be a general consensus as to what programs are included and excluded among scholars who use the term, suggesting that it has some salience as a critical category. Looking at books that

use the term “quality television,” as well as the Reading Contemporary Television series from publisher I. B. Tauris that typically embraces the category if not the term explicitly, we can see common series including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *ER*, *The X-Files*, *The Sopranos*, *The West Wing*, *Lost*, and *Six Feet Under*. While we might see a shared corpus identified under the label, there is rarely any analytic clarity as to what precisely counts as quality television, making it hard to justify why *CSI*, *Deadwood*, *Scrubs*, and *The Daily Show* are all covered within the book *Quality TV*, aside from all being part of a shared taste culture that appeals to academics and critics.⁵

Attempts to define quality television typically depend on implied resemblances, contrasting quality with its presumed opposite and used to elevate certain series over others. Such programs are united less by a clear set of formal or thematic elements than by cultural markers of prestige linked to “serious” content, cinematic style, and convention-breaking innovations that reflect well on viewers who embrace such programming as a distinctive (and oft-repeated) exception to their standard antitelevision tastes—“that’s the only program that I watch.” For the commercial television industry, quality refers most directly to the “quality audience,” the educated, upscale, urbane demographic that mainstream television frequently struggles to attract but that advertisers most want to capture—it was this niche audience that helped make unlikely commercial successes out of programs such as *All in the Family*, *Hill Street Blues*, and *The West Wing*, the latter of which was renowned as the most popular program with viewers who otherwise did not watch television. Historically, American quality television was rhetorically crystallized in opposition to the “vast wasteland” of lowbrow, interchangeable formulaic programming, with the term reaching its highest profile in the 1980s to celebrate, and lobby for the continuation of, low-rated programs such as *St. Elsewhere* and *Cagney and Lacey*.

The American scholar who has touted quality television most directly is Robert Thompson, who fully admits that the label is ultimately relational: “Quality TV is best defined by what it is not. It is not ‘regular’ TV.”⁶ Under this formulation, “quality television” refers to series that stand in opposition to the majority of programming, with an oxymoronic implication to the term—television must be redeemed by its opposite. For some critics, quality is a marker of value, suggesting that these

programs are better than others, while for others, it serves as a construction of either a class of targeted viewers ("the quality audience") or a set of textual attributes of high production values, serious themes, and connection to other more culturally legitimated, prestigious media such as literature and cinema. However, the slippage between notions of value, prestige, and audience and the need for quality to assert its equally vague opposite of assumed "low quality" or worthless television make the concept aesthetically incoherent and not particularly useful either as a textual category with analytic or evaluative precision or as a label for how television circulates culturally.

Many uses of "quality television" accept an implicit notion of textual value, in which evaluative criteria are left unspoken or undeveloped and a program's critical worth is viewed as inherent to the text itself rather than tied to contingent contexts or active viewer engagement. In an unusually self-aware and reflective piece about quality television, Sarah Cardwell outlines a number of features that distinguish quality television more as a genre and less as an evaluative category, noting that "to notice a programme's signifiers of quality is not to assert anything about its value." But her next sentence reinforces the assumption that a text's value is inherently tied to such markers of quality: "Yet I believe these qualities also make them good."⁷ She stops short of carrying forward her detailed account of the quality genre to explore the experiential dimension of television evaluation that she briefly points to, allowing the illuminated category of quality television to stand in for more in-depth evaluative criticism. I agree fully with Cardwell that we should be up-front and open about discussing programs that we like and engage in evaluative discourse, but I find that the category of quality television does little to help explain this facet of media engagement, frequently complicating an already muddy terrain through a slippage between the established category and the type of aesthetic possibilities that such texts offer. Instead, we need to find a way to engage in evaluation without resorting to the loaded and misleading category of quality television.

A different, explicitly antievaluative approach dominates American television scholarship, arguing that questions of value should not be on the disciplinary agenda.⁸ Often this position is constructed by omission, as most scholarship avoids overt evaluation so pervasively that there is no need to even mark the gap as notable—evaluation is framed as

what journalistic critics and fans do and is only studied by media scholars at a discursive remove when analyzing those cultural practices of criticism and reception. When American scholars do raise questions of evaluation, they typically follow a tradition of cultural studies that frames issues of taste and aesthetics as social constructions that reinforce power dynamics and hierarchies, inspired primarily by the work of Pierre Bourdieu.⁹ Under this formulation, evaluation creates distinctions that elevate one social sphere by belittling others, typically mirroring established class and gender norms. Bourdieu and his followers certainly offer a vital rejoinder to the universalizing discourses of aesthetics by highlighting how such practices are always embedded in social relations and cultural contexts, rather than inherent in texts themselves; however, this critique can be taken too far by reductively dismissing all issues of aesthetics and value in the name of political egalitarianism. Additionally, there is an unintentional consequence of how Bourdieu's sociology of taste has been embraced within media studies—in an attempt to empower people with delegitimated tastes via denaturalized aesthetics, the resulting social determination of taste becomes too rigid and disempowering to account for the actions of people who help constitute their own aesthetic realms and taste cultures, such as fans and active audiences.¹⁰

A recent book that exemplifies both this antiaesthetic approach and its shortcomings is Michael Newman and Elana Levine's *Legitimating Television*, which provides a compelling account of how television has become more culturally valued throughout this century by reinforcing cultural hierarchies. As they write in the book's thesis statement,

The work of analyzing patterns of taste judgment and classification is thus to unmask misrecognition of authentic and autonomous value, bringing to light their political and social functions. Such is the project of this book. We argue that it is a mistake to accept naively that television has grown better over the years, even while such a discourse is intensifying within popular, industrial, and scholarly sites. In contrast, we argue that it is primarily cultural elites . . . who have intensified the legitimization of television by investing the medium with aesthetic and other prized values, nudging it closer to more established arts and cultural forms and preserving their own privileged status in return.¹¹

In surveying an array of critical, industrial, and scholarly practices as part of a larger discourse of cultural distinction, they map this discursive terrain and highlight the ways that it can reinforce class and gender norms. They also shine an important light on how evaluative approaches to television often strive for legitimacy by highlighting connections to more legitimated media such as cinema and literature, instead of focusing on specific attributes unique to television. But they fall prey to a core danger of such discursive analysis: glossing over the varieties of micro-practices that fall under a discursive umbrella in the name of mapping a more totalizing and cohesive macropicture of unreflective “golden age” celebration. Thus while they claim to be arguing for more self-awareness and reflection in our analyses, they quickly label everything fitting into these broader trends of legitimization as “naïve” and thus reinforce pre-existing class and gender hierarchies, while they themselves often ignore cases exhibiting the very self-awareness and reflection that they call for. And thus we are left with a situation in which we cannot escape legitimating discourse, rendering all evaluative judgments suspect or invalid and regarding the pragmatics of taste solely as reflections of social strata rather than as cultural practices on their own contextualized but non-determined terms.¹²

A danger in treating Bourdieu’s critique as gospel is that it paralyzes scholars who want to say anything about issues of evaluation, as accusing an academic of “perpetuating class and gender hierarchies” is among the harshest critiques imaginable within contemporary scholarly discourse. But just as “quality television” is too vague of a brush to paint an effective picture of media practices, “legitimizing discourse” is a similarly slippery concept, used both to focus on specific technological or genre shifts and more broadly to caricature criticism as politically complicit or naïve. This is not to say that Bourdieu is wrong in highlighting how aesthetic evaluation is a socially situated practice that can perpetuate power relations or that the legitimizing discourse mapped by Newman and Levine is not an important facet of media today. But taken as gospel, these are deterministic dead ends, providing little room to account for the multifaceted pragmatics of taste distinctions and evaluations that cultural consumers regularly engage with pleasurable, as these are the very practices that arguably constitute television’s cultural hierarchies more than any top-down institutional power that Bourdieu charted via

the French educational system. As Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz aptly push back against this antiaesthetic model, “surely we cannot reduce all declarations of a show’s artistry to the politics and performance of superiority.”¹³ Thus we need to take the antiuniversalist lessons of Bourdieu and his followers seriously but use them to reimagine how we can talk about issues of aesthetics and evaluation more contingently and without the broad brushes of universalized quality television claims.

Thus I want to offer a middle-ground approach to the critical evaluation of television, one that avoids the categorical sweep of either quality television or antilegitimation discourses. This approach follows that of a number of mostly British and Australian media scholars whose writings have had unfortunately little influence in American television studies, in which treatment of evaluation mostly either celebrates quality television or critiques legitimization and distinctions. Before Stuart Hall effectively defined the scope of the cultural strain of television studies with his seminal “Encoding/Decoding” essay, he cowrote *The Popular Arts* with Paddy Whannel, offering a defense of popular culture via aesthetic analysis and evaluation.¹⁴ For Hall and Whannel, the category of popular art is forged by the type of distinctions made unfashionable by Bourdieu but still remains analytically useful even after the recognition that aesthetic judgments are embedded more in power relations than in transcendent essences of beauty. Hall and Whannel, as in other early cultural studies work by Raymond Williams and Dick Hebdidge, explore the aesthetics of everyday life, attempting to understand popular culture on its own terrain, not measured against incompatible paradigms of high art. A number of recent works of cultural studies, and a few in television studies, return to questions of aesthetics and value to open up the possibilities of evaluative criticism of popular arts.¹⁵ This approach to evaluative criticism allows scholars to be honest and reflexive about our own taste cultures and commitments and to provide insight into our assessments of television texts without assuming universal or essential criteria of value. I distinguish typical notions of *valuation*, in which a text’s worth is seen as intrinsic and needing to be discovered by the critic like an appraiser setting a price on an antique, from *evaluation*, the active process of engaging with aesthetic criteria, textual features, and cultural circulation—valuation follows a norm of close reading that presumes that meaning and value exist in texts, awaiting a critic to reveal

their truth, while evaluation highlights the contextualized cultural processes of consumption in which meaning and value are produced. Valuation follows traditions of the literary school of New Criticism, in which close reading aimed to prove a work's intrinsic worth, a trend continued by quality television advocates; instead, evaluation foregrounds the process of critical analysis and ongoing conversations about texts, contexts, and aesthetic criteria.

In discussing television's complexity, it is important to emphasize that "complex television" is not a synonym for "quality television." Complexity and value are far from mutually guaranteed—personally, I much prefer watching excellent conventional programs such as *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and *Everybody Loves Raymond* to narratively complex but conceptually muddled series such as *Heroes* and *FlashForward*. Nonetheless, we can see complexity as one criterion of value, a distinct goal for many contemporary programs. Harking back to New Criticism in literary studies, to call something complex is to highlight its sophistication and nuance, suggesting that it presents a vision of the world that avoids being reductive or artificially simplistic but that grows richer through sustained engagement and consideration. It suggests that the consumer of complexity should engage fully and attentively, and such engagement will yield an experience distinct from more casual or partial attention. We teach students to strive for complexity in their analyses, as we believe the world to be multifaceted and intricate enough to require a complex account to accurately gain insight, whether the field is biology or media studies. Contrast "complex" with "complicated," and the latter seems to suggest both less coherence and more artifice, an attempt to make something appear more nuanced than it really is, rather than offering a more intrinsically motivated elaboration or unconventionality that might be found within complex programming. Thus while complexity need not be seen solely as an evaluative criterion, it can certainly serve as one that helps shine a light on how serial television can reach aesthetic achievements.

One frequent objection to evaluation is that it inherently creates cultural hierarchies by valorizing one cultural practice over another, a mode of distinction that Bourdieu has convincingly shown can work to reinforce social power relations. However, we must think beyond a reductive binary logic that insists that value is a zero-sum game in

which lauding any single criterion inherently derides its opposite. Thus while complexity can be a virtue, that does not mean that simplicity is a sin—there are many contexts in which simple would trump complex, whether in constructing an effective rhetorical motto or designing a user interface. There is certainly pleasure and value in some forms of simple television, where a straightforward elegance of purpose and execution is a laudable achievement—there are few televisual pleasures as purely satisfying as the single-scene transformation of Lucy Ricardo into the drunken Vitameatavegemin spokesman on *I Love Lucy*. Likewise, achieving complexity is no inherent marker of value, as a complex narrative that sacrifices coherence or emotional engagement is likely to fall short in any evaluative analysis. In analyzing any specific series, we can use the multifaceted qualities of complexity as an evaluative category, while avoiding the assumption that only complex series are worthwhile or that there is only one formula for successful televisual art. Likewise, in charting an era of complex television, I am not claiming that this represents a singular golden age of television—rather, we can see a number of programs clustered around this innovative narrative mode, many of which succeed in notable aesthetic innovations whose prominence does not belittle or marginalize other forms or pleasures.

Complexity is a guiding feature of the two television series that I currently place atop my (regularly shifting) personal list of best all-time television: *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. I am certainly not alone in celebrating these two serial dramas, as both are roundly celebrated by critics and frequently appear in discussions of the best television series of all time—for instance, *New York* magazine ran a series of articles in 2012 to determine the best television drama of the past 25 years, with *The Wire* winning the critic's prize and *Breaking Bad* capturing the fan vote.¹⁶ The parallels and differences between the two series shine a light on complexity as an aesthetic tendency, highlighting how it functions in divergent ways toward similar positive results. In contrasting the two, I am not interested in attempting to argue that one series is superior to the other or even in validating why I see them as more successful than many other excellent programs, but instead I want to use the pair to tease out qualities of complexity and how each series manages to succeed in accomplishing its own ambitious aesthetic approach. Like all evaluative claims, my analysis is an argument offered not as fact but as

supported belief—I make my case in the hopes of helping others see these series in a new light, not to convince the world that these two programs are the pinnacle of television. Additionally, I aim to evaluate them both on their own medium terms: they are television programs, not novels or films adapted to the small screen, and thus we can look to their successes as aspects of a distinctive televisual aesthetic. Hopefully this evaluative analysis demonstrates the usefulness of academic critics engaging in such discussions and not abdicating questions of judgment solely to journalistic critics and fans.

In many ways, *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* are strikingly similar. Both were produced for emerging cable channels in the shadow of a critical darling that had immediately established the channel's brand identity (HBO's *The Sopranos* and AMC's *Mad Men*, respectively). Both pushed the channel toward new aesthetic directions and slowly grew to match or surpass the earlier series in critical reputation. Both came from writers who had established themselves on landmark 1990s network innovators (David Simon on *Homicide: Life on the Street*, Vince Gilligan on *The X-Files*), but neither producer seemed poised to create programs as innovative and acclaimed as these follow-ups. Both programs feature five-season runs, ending on their own terms after approximately 60 episodes. Both series have a somewhat similar focus on drug dealers, crime syndicates, and ongoing battles among police and competing criminal groups in an unheralded midsize American city. And both mix intense violent drama with a vibrant vein of dark comedy to explore contemporary struggles of men attempting to find meaning in their relationship to work and labor, along with a commitment to portraying procedure through a detailed vision of how characters do what they do, whether wire-tapping pay phones or cooking crystal methamphetamine.

Yet in other ways, the two series are diametrically opposed, starkly contrasting the range of options available to serialized prime time dramas. *The Wire* is generally restrained in its visual and sonic style, following naturalistic cinematic norms by eschewing the use of nondiegetic music except for its opening credits and notable season-ending montages and adhering to typical editing conventions that we read as "realistic" storytelling.¹⁷ *Breaking Bad* embraces a much wider visual palette, ranging from stylized landscape shots evoking Sergio Leone Westerns to exaggerated camera tricks and gimmicks situating our vantage

point within a chemical vat or on the end of a shovel, as well as editing devices such as time-lapse and sped-up montages. The program's sound design is also widely varying, with unusual choices of licensed pop songs, ambient electronic score, and even an original composition of a *narcocorrido* ballad, a Mexican genre of songs celebrating drug dealers. While *Breaking Bad* embraces atemporal storytelling jumps and subjective sequences like other examples of complex television, *The Wire* is fully linear and conventional in presenting chronology and objective narrative perspective throughout. In short, *The Wire* embraces a "zero-degree style" that strives to render its televisual storytelling techniques invisible, whereas *Breaking Bad* foregrounds a "maximum-degree style" through kinetic visuals, bold sounds, and unpredictable storytelling form—it is hard to imagine two programs within the general norms of crime drama that take such different approaches to narrative, visual, and sonic style.¹⁸

The two series also approach their thematic and storytelling scope in similarly contrasting manners. *The Wire* is nominally about the drug war, especially in its first season, but eventually reveals itself to treat crime as a window to peer into the larger urban condition of 21st-century America. As seasons progress, its scope expands to include the shipping docks, City Hall, public schools, and the newsroom, tracing the interplay between these new dramatic sites and the established police precincts and drug corners. The series begins with an already large scope, as the pilot episode introduces more than two dozen characters who will serve recurring roles, with more to come in subsequent episodes to reach a mass of 60 significant characters in the first season alone. This narrative scope broadens over five years to create the sense that viewers have experienced a full range of people and places constituting the program's fictionalized Baltimore. Moreover, the series not only creates a vast world but presents a guided tour of the city's political and economic machinery by portraying how each person, place, and institution fits into a broader system of function and dysfunction. No other television series comes close to achieving such a sense of vast breadth as *The Wire's* storyworld, and arguably only a few examples from other narrative media do either.

The Wire's emphasis on the vastness of Baltimore's interlocking institutions and inhabitants necessitates that it sacrifice character depth to

achieve such breadth. Characters on *The Wire* are certainly multidimensional and quite nuanced human beings, but they are defined primarily by their relationships to larger institutions, whether the police force, the school system, or the drug enterprise—the characters who accomplish their goals are usually those who play the rules of their particular games best, while individualistic rebels fail to escape, change themselves, or transform unjust systems. The series rarely focuses on characters' interior lives or nuanced relationships with each other, as *The Wire* creates a world where people are defined more by what they do than by what they think or feel, except as those thoughts and emotions become manifest in their actions—our sense of characters comes from nuanced subtleties in performance and glimpses into how these people do their jobs and live their lives. Depth accrues from the accumulation of numerous characters and their institutional affiliations, as Baltimore itself is constructed as a living entity with its own complex interiority. If one of the pleasures of serial narratives is the desire to read the minds of fictional figures, as discussed in chapter 4, then *The Wire* poses Baltimore as the most engaging site of interiority and depth, rather than the individuals who inhabit the city.¹⁹

Despite a shared focus on drug criminals, *Breaking Bad* has quite different thematic concerns, rejecting a vast sociological breadth for an inward-looking psychological depth. The series has little interest in constructing a working model of Albuquerque, forgoing urban verisimilitude in exchange for a tight focus on a central character and his immediate associates. It has a comparatively small cast for a serialized program, with an initial core ensemble of six main characters with little expansion over its five seasons. Every character is defined primarily through his or her relationship to Walter White, and the narrative traces how his choices and actions impact each of their relationships. Instead of subsequent seasons spinning outward from the core characters and setting, the series layers itself inward, creating deeper layers of Walt's psychological makeup. If *The Wire* presents a world where characters and institutions are immutably locked into a larger system, *Breaking Bad* is a profile of psychological change as the core character becomes darker and more amoral, pulling everyone around him down on his moral descent, a unique model of change discussed more in chapter 4. The program's spatial universe seems fairly small and nondistinct, but

the psychological depth and web of interpersonal history is arguably as complex as the political machinery of *The Wire's* Baltimore.

These different approaches to style and storytelling highlight distinct modes of realism pursued by each series. Televisual realism is not a marker of accurate representation of the real world but rather is an attempt to render a fictional world that creates the representational illusion of accuracy—a program is seen as realist when it *feels* authentic, even though no media text comes close to a truly accurate representation of the complex world.²⁰ *The Wire* embraces a fairly traditional mode of social realism, with minimal stylization and strict adherence to norms of accuracy that befit Simon's background as a journalist; we are asked to judge the storyworld, its characters, and their actions on a metric of plausibility, with success measured by how much the fiction represents society as we know it (or might discover it, if we had the multisite access offered by the series).²¹ The number of sociologists, geographers, and other scholars of urban America who have used the program as a teaching tool and research reference point to illustrate social conditions, often ignoring its fictional frame, is a testament to *The Wire's* realist successes.²² The program's techniques for achieving its social representations are innovative in their scope and vastness, resulting in a vision of the world with great explanatory and rhetorical power. It is telling that for many fans and critics, *The Wire's* final season fell short of its earlier heights primarily because it forsook its full commitment to such realist storytelling in exchange for a more reflexive and satirical tone, as discussed more in chapter 10.

Breaking Bad strives for a different mode of realism, privileging the psychological over the social. In its portrayal of a long-term character transformation, the series aims for a nearly unprecedented effect in television: chronicling how a character's core identity and beliefs can drastically change over time. The program's flashy visual style signals that the world seen on-screen is less naturalistic than the thoughts and emotions playing out inside characters' heads, so even something as implausible and even antirealist as two planes crashing, as triggered by Walt's selfish actions, is grounded as psychologically plausible and consistent with the program's thematic and tonal approach. *Breaking Bad* is ultimately less invested in creating a realistic representation of its storyworld than in portraying people who feel true, and through this sense of honest

representation, the series engages with questions of morality, identity, and responsibility.

So *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* are both similar and different—a banal observation probably true for any random pair of series. But their storytelling differences point to two distinct modes of narrative complexity, and the fact that two such different programs can be so successful with the same critics (including me) is instructive for how we evaluate television. The two series approach serialization with distinctly different vectors, paralleling terminology discussed more in chapter 9. *The Wire* embraces what we might call *centrifugal complexity*, in which the ongoing narrative pushes outward, spreading characters across an expanding storyworld. On a centrifugal program, there is no single narrative center, as the action traces what happens between characters and institutions as they spread outward. It is not just that the series expands in quantity of characters and settings but that its richness is found in the complex web of interconnectivity forged across the social system rather than in the depth of any one individual's role in the narrative or psychological layers. For instance, the fourth season's resolution is predicated on how the fate of kids like Randy and Namond is not determined by their own mettle or talents but by the coincidental actions undertaken by agents of the interconnected institutions of the school system, the police, drug gangs, and city government. On the basis of conventional narrative logics, Randy's entrepreneurial spirit and warmth would allow him to rise above his circumstances, while Namond's bitterness and sense of entitlement should doom him to replicating his father's role on the corners—but on *The Wire*, character traits and choices are frequently determined by complex institutional networks portrayed through the program's vast serial expanses. On *The Wire*, characters' agency is rarely able to make a difference in broader institution systems, and individuals can only hope to escape their fates by happy accident combined with a willingness to make personal sacrifice. Systemic logic trumps characters' actions or motivations, as when Snoop (quoting Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven*) answers the question of what a potential victim did to deserve his fate—she justifies an unjustifiable murder by saying, “Deserve's got nothing to do with it.”

But on *Breaking Bad*, deserve's got everything to do with it. If *The Wire* is all about broad systemic vastness, *Breaking Bad* exemplifies a

model of dense television, embracing *centripetal complexity* in which narrative movement pulls actions and characters inward toward a gravitational center, establishing a thickness of backstory and character depth that drives the action. The effect is to create a storyworld with unmatched depth of characterization, layers of backstory, and psychological complexity building on viewers' experiences and memories over the program's numerous seasons. All narrative expansions connect back to Walter White or his associate Jesse Pinkman, typically becoming part of their ongoing interrelated transformations; nearly every plot event is triggered by Walt's choices and behaviors, rather than by social systems or conditions. Walt's choices may be circumscribed by his contexts, but they usually present multiple options with divergent outcomes—he could have accepted the generosity of Elliot and Gretchen, walked away from Gus's financial offers, rescued Jane, or taken numerous other opportunities to avoid getting deeper into his criminal lifestyle, yet each time he opts to break bad, triggering spirals of pain and suffering on his community. Additionally, the series frequently revisits moments from the narrative past to fill in gaps in characters' histories or relationships, whether through flashbacks to Walt's hyperconfident persona before becoming a teacher or returning to the narrative consequences of Combo's murder, an event that at the time felt secondary but reemerged months later to directly trigger a crucial narrative turn at the end of the third season. On *Breaking Bad*, there is always the sense that a marginal past event might get pulled back into the narrative center and impact Walt's fate in unpredictable but justifiable ways; this centripetal force creates a complex storyworld that holds its main characters accountable for past misdeeds and refuses to let them (or us) escape these transgressions at the level of story consequences or internal psychology.

A comparison between two similar climactic moments, each coming from the penultimate episodes of their respective seasons, highlights these dual approaches to complexity. *Breaking Bad's* “Phoenix” sees Walt estranged from his partner, Jesse, who is immersed in a heroin habit with his girlfriend, Jane; Walt goes to Jesse's house to try to win him back but finds him passed out in bed with Jane. When Jane starts vomiting and choking, Walt reaches out to turn her body to save her life but hesitates—for the next minute, we watch Walt wordlessly realize that Jane's death provides him an opportunity, and thus he rationalizes letting her

die. Bryan Cranston's stunning performance portrays Walt's interior thought processes, as discussed more in chapter 4, as we watch his character's morality erode through rationalized selfishness—the dramatic action here is within Walt's unspoken psychology, conveyed to viewers through the shared layers of his experience and memories.

At the end of *The Wire*'s first season, we also witness the death of character at others' hands, as Bodie and Poot shoot Wallace per Stringer Bell's orders. While there are certainly character resonances between the three friends, and we recognize that this is a point of no return for Bodie's and Poot's commitment to "the game," it is clear that they have no real choices: their only source of livelihood is as part of a drug crew, and the game demands that they demonstrate their loyalty or end up like Wallace. Ultimately what underlies the emotional impact of the scene is the social conditions and institutional logics that led inevitably to this moment, not complex moral calculations or psychological developments for the characters—Poot and Bodie undertake an all-too-common action dictated by their institutional marginalization, while Walt's act is fully unique and individualistic, not standing in for larger social forces. Both deaths are powerful, memorable scenes that resonate emotionally. But *Breaking Bad*'s impact is felt more through Walt's complex psychological characterization and the lingering shadow it casts on his relationship with Jesse, while *The Wire* uses Wallace's death to put a memorable human face on the social costs of urban poverty and the drug war.

These two different modes of complexity point to the need to evaluate a series on its own aesthetic terms. Even under the same umbrella of complexity, we can see that their approaches are so different that each would fall short of the other's aesthetic criteria: *The Wire* fails to provide psychological depth to its characters to suggest how their actions are forged by personal histories and individual tragic choices, while *Breaking Bad* falls short of painting a picture of how people are impacted and constrained by interlocking institutions. But their specific modes of complexity function as criteria for their own evaluation, as each demonstrates a relentless commitment to its own storytelling norms and approaches—the failure of each series to achieve the other's model of complexity is to be viewed not as an aesthetic shortcoming but as a facet of each program's own particular model of complex storytelling. And

it is through these serialized storytelling strategies that each program speaks to its viewers, and our ongoing attachments to each series run through such aesthetic facets. Thus I would argue that such models of complexity are not simply embedded in the series, to be rooted out by critics, but emerge through viewers' contextualized engagements with texts—we are the ones who flesh out the models of centripetal and centrifugal complexity by filling in gaps, making connections, and investing our emotional energies into these storyworlds and then discussing those engagements in public forums, both online and in person. By critics and fans publicly reiterating the qualities that they value in their favorite series, the broader cultural understanding of the program's evaluative terms becomes more established and shared. There is no universal essence of complexity that all television must aspire toward, but rather complexity can be crafted by each text as a specific set of values and aesthetic goals.

My goal here is not to prove that these are great programs (although I believe that they are) but to argue that how they each achieve aesthetic success helps explain how they work as texts and what they say about the world, as well as pointing toward avenues for further research on how they engage viewers, contrast with other series, and fit into trends across media. We could probably analyze such dual models of complexity without considering evaluation, but it would be untrue to cast me as a detached, objective observer of these programs. I find them both tremendously powerful and compelling works of fiction, and I am moved to write about them because I find them aesthetically exceptional and exceptionally interesting—two facets that are certainly related. By acknowledging my own personal investments, it allows me to go beyond asking "how do these programs work?" to consider "how do they work *so well?*" When scholars bracket off our aesthetic engagement with media, we are not only being dishonest but also missing the chance to participate in larger conversations with critics, fans, and producers about the very cultural hierarchies that some scholars seem fearful of replicating. What is most important about this analysis is not whether you agree with my take on the evaluative worth of *The Wire* or *Breaking Bad* but what these programs teach us about contemporary television storytelling and the particular qualities of complexity. Through the dual vectors of vast centrifugal and dense centripetal complexity, we can have

a better sense of how various series create their storyworlds and characters and help establish expectations for narrative payoffs.

I began this chapter by highlighting evaluative criticism as an invitation to dialogue rather than an attempt to impose a critical judgment onto others, and an important part of this dialogic approach is to be up-front about our own contexts. I write this book, and watch these series, as who I am: an American, white, educated, heterosexual, middle-aged professional man, one with an investment and expertise in long-form television narrative that is far from universal. I fully acknowledge that my identity is similar to the class *habitus* that has long policed traditional aesthetic judgments, as well as that of the creators of these two specific programs—in other words, these programs are speaking my language in my own accent, and I have a vocabulary and voice to respond. Yet that does not change the fact that the texts are speaking, creating their own aesthetic fields and urging viewers and critics to respond. But I am not responding with a universalized appeal to transcendent aesthetics outside of who I am. I am not asking you to join me in celebrating the complexity of *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* (although I am happy if you do), but rather I am inviting you to see the series how I see them, to hear how they are speaking to me. I have faith that you would see something interesting if you do, but I also think there is much more in each program to be explored and discussed—and I welcome the opportunity to read different perspectives that highlight other aspects and evaluations of these and other programs. What I have done here, and what I think evaluation can do more broadly, is to present an argument to open a conversation. Making an evaluative claim is designed not to construct a canon to exclude other possibilities but rather to posit a contingent perspective on why something matters, both to me and presumably to other viewers who similarly embrace it. It is neither a statement of fact nor a proof but an invitation to dialogue and debate.

The Challenges of Devaluation

This dialogic approach to evaluation works well to argue for the worth of something, as we can explore specific criteria offered and implemented by a series and contextualize our judgments within larger social and intertextual systems. But what of the arguments against a program?

What does it mean to devalue a cultural work? I began with such a claim, highlighting *24*'s shortcomings in establishing its own internal conventions and viewing logics. I am sure some readers felt put off by my critiques, as the devaluation of something that you enjoy can feel like a personal attack on your own tastes and pleasures. But *24* is a frequently critiqued series that even its biggest supporters admit is erratic in quality, so I doubt my criticisms would be viewed as too controversial. But what happens when you devalue a series that garners nearly universal critical praise and is particularly embraced by the social strata of media scholars who might be reading such a critique?

I had that particular experience in 2010, when I was invited to contribute to an anthology about *Mad Men*. I informed the editors that I did not really like the series, and we decided that an essay exploring that dislike would be an interesting addition to the volume. I posted the resulting essay to my blog under the title “On Disliking *Mad Men*,” and it has become the site’s most read and commented-on entry.²³ The piece explored both my critiques of the series and the challenges of thinking about devaluation in a scholarly context, highlighting the difficulties in writing about a negative aesthetic reaction without appearing either to condemn other people’s tastes or to persuade viewers that their pleasure is somehow false or unwarranted. I am sure I convinced nobody that *Mad Men* was bad television (which was neither my goal nor my argument), and at best I offered a snapshot of how a series that clearly works well for many viewers with similar tastes can fail to speak to a would-be sympathetic viewer. It is telling that the piece was cut from the anthology, as it did not fit the typical paradigms of academic analysis and the tonal norms of a collection of media criticism. I will not attempt to fully repurpose my critique here (as it lives on online for anyone to read and rebut), but I do think it is interesting to revisit my negative take on the series to highlight some of the perils of aesthetic devaluation and hopefully to model the benefit of going beyond simple declarations like “it’s boring,” which might be where another conversation about *Mad Men* both starts and ends.

I approached *Mad Men* inspired by the best account of critical dislike that I have read, Carl Wilson’s “Journey to the End of Taste” with Céline Dion—Wilson offers a vision of a different mode of aesthetic discussion beyond argumentation: “What would criticism be like if it were

not foremost trying to persuade people to find the same things great? If it weren't about making cases for or against things? It wouldn't need to adopt the kind of 'objective' (or self-consciously hip) tone that conceals the identity and social location of the author, the better to win you over. It might be more frank about the two-sidedness of aesthetic encounter, and offer something more like a tour of an aesthetic experience, a travelogue, a memoir."²⁴

Following Wilson, my aesthetic travelogue of *Mad Men* starts in my *habitus*, as the program's narrative complexity, slow-burn seriality, and immersion in American media and cultural history make it required viewing for people within my taste culture. I fully acknowledge that it is a "good" series: well crafted, impeccably styled, smartly written, expertly produced, and effectively acted. But despite such traditional markers of "quality," I would rather watch many programs that are less well made, less intelligent, and less ambitious, as I find them more satisfying and pleasurable. My failure to enjoy and value *Mad Men* highlights the limits of Bourdieu-inspired aesthetic determinism and the dangers of trying to reduce evaluative response to a reflection of social structures. Although Bourdieu's analysis focuses on the aggregate societal level and acknowledges that individual experiences certainly vary, the model has taken on a predictive and structuring power for many media scholars, ignoring such individual differences as outliers, instead of exploring such variations to uncover the complexities of taste and cultural engagement. According to such models, I am supposed to love *Mad Men*, since it resides squarely within my middlebrow cultural sphere and nearly everyone of a similar *habitus* seems to adore it.

But I do not love it; in fact, I dislike it. To clarify what I mean by "it," I watched *Mad Men*'s first season in full, along with assorted episodes of subsequent seasons. While numerous commenters on my blog criticized me for basing my claims on a first season that they acknowledged was weaker than subsequent years, the program's critical praise and copious awards began in season 1, and my sampling of later seasons did not change my opinions. So my analysis of what I dislike about the series is based on the first season; whether we can fairly judge a serial text on a limited sample is a larger topic for another time, but certainly many viewers do just that all the time—in fact, most viewers judge programs on the basis of single episodes (or even partial episodes), so the idea

that we must consume something in full before evaluating it seems both impractical and misguided.

I find *Mad Men*'s sumptuous production design to be a cold artifice, echoing the program's thematic exploration of advertising as the dominant site of constructed imagery defining postwar America's visual culture but creating a hypocrisy in the incongruity inherent in fans embracing and emulating the stylistic sense of a series that regularly highlights the manipulations of marketing and the creation of consumerist consciousness. Embracing its design as a primary pleasure, as many fans and critics do, seems to me intellectually incompatible with the program's own critical edge, suggesting either internal inconsistencies within the text or a widespread misreading of the program's use of style. I find it hard to understand how *Mad Men*'s champions navigate this terrain and reconcile this seeming contradiction—in reading criticism, I recognize that many people do find this tension productive and compelling, rather than off-putting, but it makes no sense to me, either intellectually or emotionally. If one of the goals of any serial is to teach its viewers how to watch, relate to, and enjoy it, *Mad Men*'s efforts to establish its intrinsic norms simply fail to convince me; the dialogue between this viewer and this text is a case of miscommunication, in which I fail to understand the guiding norms that clearly many others find clear and compelling.

This disconnection is not limited to the program's treatment of visual style and production design but extends to its larger treatment of period culture and values. The series strives to create a world that is simultaneously an idealized nostalgic place and an object of cultural critique, an opposition that I find impossible to either intellectually reconcile or aesthetically experience. *Mad Men* employs a sophisticated form of social engagement that is unique to the form of a serial period drama—we watch the characters move forward in small installments but with foreknowledge of much of what is to come in their world. Thus, when we witness the characters' casual sexism and racism, we regard them as dinosaurs unaware of the coming ice age; from our privileged perch in the 21st century, we know that they will be forced to adapt or become extinct. At times, such commentary seems to be little more than condescension toward the 1960s characters, as we are meant to feel superior to them at a fairly obvious level—as the critic Mark Grief dismissively characterizes the program's message, "Now We Know Better."²⁵

Often the series embraces a more subtle take on 1960s norms, but not without its own discomforts. While we are obviously supposed to condemn the sexist attitudes of the ad men, the fact that we spend so much time with these characters and grow to like them (at least to a degree) makes it awkward when they casually belittle and mistreat people. For example, when in a seemingly heartfelt moment in the episode "Indian Summer," Roger Sterling compliments Joan Holloway by calling her "the finest piece of ass I've ever had," we certainly are dismayed by what strikes us as cruel insensitivity—but Roger's character makes such offensive behavior charming and charismatic, and thus we can simultaneously dismiss and embrace his attitudes, especially as Joan seems content to take it as a compliment. Coupled with the fact that Christina Hendricks emerged as a sex symbol through her hypersexualized portrayal of Joan, regarding her as a "fine piece of ass" is not too dissimilar from how many contemporary fans seem to regard her.

This discomfort is more problematic in the numerous scenes of the ad men engaging in one-upmanship by belittling their secretaries and wives. We simultaneously recoil at their attitudes and appreciate being invited into their gang. In many ways, *Mad Men*'s social critique functions similarly to the ambivalent politics common in many contemporary advertisements, especially for beer. In this beer-commercial logic, male protagonists are presented as unrealistically stupid, offensive, and clueless, and we are invited to mock them—but simultaneously, we are encouraged to be like them, hanging out, enjoying their camaraderie, and sharing their beer. In *Mad Men*'s upscale, scotch-drinking version of this mode of address, the more time we spend with the ad men, the more charming they become, making their outmoded sensibilities less offensive and more appealing. By situating us as insiders in a shared culture stretched out over serialized time, the series promotes character and group sympathies and engagement, resulting in a kind of Stockholm Syndrome in sympathy for values that we might otherwise find abhorrent. Spending hours of time with characters whom we dislike either makes that time unpleasant or invites us to see their behavior as more sympathetic and acceptable—I am not sure which option is worse.

As I discuss in chapter 4, serial television is dependent on creating connections between viewers and fictional characters over the course of hours and years. That does not mean that such characters must be

sympathetic or morally upright to promote identification, as we can see with problematic figures such as Walter White, Tony Soprano, and Dexter Morgan, but they must be compelling, creating an emotional attachment and investment in their lives, relationships, and actions. As I watch *Mad Men*, I find myself simply unmoved by these people and what they are doing, seeing them more as both inscrutable and inhuman—I lack empathy with these characters, watching from an emotional remove that makes them appear as pieces in a mannered dance, not people I enjoy spending time with. Don Draper is posited as analogous to other television antiheroes, but I find his character and Jon Hamm's performance to be more of a blank slate of callowness than a complex rendering of a psychologically damaged man. The series plays with the enigma of Don Draper's identity, but as a viewer I find little beneath the surface to care about who he really is or what he will become; nor does Draper elicit the operational allegiance I have toward other antiheroes, as discussed in chapter 4. Hamm's performance nails Don's slick exterior, but I have little sense of any humanity or motives underneath his callous charms beyond a backdrop of blank brooding. The program constructs Don as a charming bad boy whose sex appeal regularly allows people to overlook his misdeeds, but I find his charisma to lack depth and thus am only invested in seeing his failure. As the critic Todd VanDerWerff notes in a review of the *Man Men* episode "Nixon vs. Kennedy," "the show doesn't work if you can't buy that Don is a cold bastard but capable, somehow, of being both better than his contemporaries and himself."²⁶ I simply can't buy how Don is, or could be, better than everyone else, except in his abilities to pitch products and charm women, and thus the series doesn't work for me.

In the end, watching *Mad Men* leaves me feeling unclean and unpleasant, having spent time in an unenjoyable place with people I do not care about and coming out smelling of stale cigarettes. The gloss and sheen is seemingly meant to be charming, but instead it masks something hollow, dark, and cancerous. For people who like the program, this resonance is affecting and provocative, but for me, it feels like one of Don Draper's callow ad pitches. None of the characters' emotional arcs feel real or earned; instead, I am being sold the illusion of drama rather than honest drama itself, much like the packaging of nostalgia and memory in a Kodak slide projector. But I would not try to convince you of that

assessment, as condemning something that a fan loves can feel like a personal insult—and I fully expect that most people reading a book on complex television would likely be current or future *Mad Men* admirers. My negative reaction is ultimately analytically inexplicable, only pointing to my own personal preferences and tendencies toward a form of textual complexity exemplified by *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* and against the subtextual interpretative complexity invited by *Mad Men's* symbolism and thematic sensibility. This is ultimately not an argument about the program's value but rather the transcript of my own aesthetic dialogue, as suggested by Wilson's approach. Since we watch television as a dialogue between text and viewer, hopefully there is critical value to sharing such intimate conversations with others, especially when the dialogue becomes awkward and noncommunicative, leading to a public breakup.

My devaluation of *Mad Men*, along with more positive evaluative takes on other programs, aims to shine a light on how we engage in aesthetic dialogues with serial television. My approach is nonnormative, as I am not trying to measure these programs up to any universal or preestablished norms of aesthetic quality or uniform set of criteria, and I make no claims that my accounts are inherently more valid than any others. But what I have tried to do is to put my own nonuniversal engagement under the microscope to try to discover what we can about how serial television works as an aesthetic experience. By more scholars sharing such accounts, we can gain perspectives from multiple critics that together can help us understand the range of voices, appeals, and pleasures offered by serialized texts. We cannot simply lump all of these programs together into an undifferentiated category of "quality television," nor can we bracket off aesthetic engagement as a byproduct of social power. Instead, we need to listen to our ongoing aesthetic exchanges, sharing such dialogues to understand the voices of serial television texts, and we need to look closely to unpack the enigmatic long arc of why we find such programming either so frustrating or rewarding. That is the shared goal of evaluation.

7

Serial Melodrama

Complex television is not a genre. As I argue throughout this book, complex television is a storytelling mode and set of associated production and reception practices that span a wide range of programs across an array of genres. Television genres are cultural categories that discursively bundle texts together within particular contexts, not simply sets of textual conventions.¹ This is not to suggest that questions of genre are irrelevant to understanding complex television—to the contrary, looking at genre as part of its growth and circulation highlights how the mode has grown to pervade and influence a wide range of types of television fiction, including both comedic and dramatic genres. Complex television is a site of tremendous genre mixing, where conventions and assumptions from a range of programming categories come together and are interwoven, merged, and reformed.

Likewise, melodrama is more of a mode than a genre, an approach to emotion, storytelling, and morality that cuts across numerous genres and media forms.² However, when it comes to American television, melodrama is often assumed to belong solely to the important genre of the soap opera, and thus moments of melodrama appearing outside the daytime schedule are often linked to the soap opera genre, as with the derogatory label "soapy." This chapter teases out the formal and cultural linkages between the complex narrative mode discussed throughout this book and the genre of daytime soap operas and its associated affective style of serial melodrama. Most complex television dramas that proliferate in prime time today are serial melodramas and thus share some traits with the daytime soap opera; however, in terms of formal elements, industrial histories, and critical discourses, prime time serials and daytime soaps have crucial distinctions that need to be underscored. Thus by highlighting complex television's distinctive take on serial melodrama, I consider how it functions as a "narrative technology of gender,"

per Robyn Warhol's model, and argue against the claim that prime time serials "masculinize" the traditionally feminine realm of soap operas.³

Soap Operas and Questions of Genre

To understand how prime time complex television works as serial melodrama, we need to first consider how both television seriality and melodrama have been historically linked to the soap opera genre. Prior to the 1990s, the primary site of television seriality in America was the daytime soap opera, a genre that precedes the medium with long roots back into network radio, including some individual programs such as *The Guiding Light* that ran for decades spanning the two media. Unlike most genres, the name "soap opera" refers neither to elements from the television text (like the setting of Westerns or the central topic of cooking shows) nor to the intended audience response (as with horror and comedy); instead, soap operas are a derogatory moniker coined by commentators in the 1930s to mock the juxtaposition of high melodrama with low commerce, condescending to the presumed audience of allegedly unsophisticated housewives. Prior to the term's popularization, soaps were known more commonly as "daytime dramatic serials," highlighting their industrial placement on the radio schedule, their narrative form, and their intended emotional affect. All three of these features became culturally linked to the term "soap opera," as the programs migrated to television in the 1950s, with the genre becoming the primary manifestation of television seriality for decades.⁴ The stigma of soap operas has remained active for decades, as certainly many contemporary prime time serials benefit from distinguishing themselves from the daytime tradition, and calling a series "soapy" is regarded by most people as a damning insult.

However, it is important to note that daytime soap operas were not the sole or even primary form of American radio serials in the 1930s and 1940s—many emerging forms of radio fiction were commonly referred to as serials, including the most popular and influential early radio fiction program, *Amos 'n' Andy*.⁵ Such early radio serials most resembled daily newspaper comic strips as a model of seriality, with sustained settings and casts of characters dealing with ongoing scenarios but generally avoiding plotlines with open-ended narrative situations

demanding resolution. Notably, many of these early prime time series were broadcast daily via the scheduling format now referred to as "stripping" (after daily comic strips), rather than the weekly installments now nearly universal on prime time television. While the plotting and storytelling found on 1930s prime time radio programs such as *Amos 'n' Andy* more closely resemble contemporary episodic television sitcoms that we rarely label as "serialized" than today's complex narrative forms, seriality encompassed a much larger umbrella of narrative forms in the radio era, including daytime soap operas and their ongoing melodramatic plotlines, prime time texts within numerous genres that emphasized consistent and enduring characters and settings, and even ongoing public affairs programming, as Frank Kelleter argues that President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "fireside chats" functioned as serial culture.⁶

As television took over radio's role as the primary site of fictional programming in American homes in the 1950s, serialized plotting became less common within prime time schedules—while a few prime time radio serials (both dramatic and comedic) made the shift to television, by the mid-1950s they had shifted to daytime or disappeared from the television schedule.⁷ Of course, sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* and dramas such as *Gunsmoke* were serialized in important ways mentioned in chapter 1, with consistent settings and ongoing casts of characters much like *Amos 'n' Andy* and the comic-strip convention. But just as genre labels function as clusters of cultural assumptions, formal labels such as "series" and "serial" carry their own shifting connotations—by the mid-1950s, "serial" came to imply cumulative ongoing, open-ended plotlines, while "series" suggested continuous storyworlds and characters typical of comic strips and radio comedies but not necessarily cumulative plots. Both of these serial and series modes contrasted to the era's important traditions of "variety" and "anthology" programming, which typically introduced a new set of characters, setting, and plotlines each episode.⁸ Along with seriality's shifting signification came an important cultural linkage between the genre that most prominently featured this plot-based serial model, the daytime soap opera, and the serial form itself; thus from the late 1950s onward, television seriality was viewed by many critics, viewers, and producers as synonymous with, and exclusive to, daytime soaps, forging a connection between serial form and the derogatory disdain for the genre.

This discursive link between the soap opera genre and serial form has taken on additional associated meanings, with seriality tied to other aspects of the genre through some slippery chains of signification. I believe that these slippages have led to a frequent assumption: that contemporary prime time complex television has “borrowed” or “evolved” from the daytime soap opera.⁹ While this claim of generic influence has rarely been made via in-depth scholarly argument, it is frequently mentioned in passing within industrial, popular, and academic realms—I have seen it referenced in journalistic pieces and conference papers alike, with little elaboration or evidence.¹⁰ But what is the basis for this seemingly commonsense claim of generic evolution? While contemporary prime time television embraces seriality in a range of ways, I contend that the specific modes of serial storytelling it employs derive less from American soap operas than from other serial modes such as comics, classic film serials, and 19th-century serial literature, all of which have their own connections to melodrama. But since the history of television seriality is so linked to the soap opera genre, the common assumption is that all prime time serials must be reacting to or building on soaps, an assumption that I hope to break apart here. By itemizing some of the specific formal conventions and cultural assumptions tied to the soap opera genre, including the episodic structures, daily scheduling, melodramatic focus, and ties to female viewers, we can have a better sense of how contemporary prime time serials operate differently than soaps and can also foster a better appreciation for the distinctive aspects of soap opera storytelling.

At a formal level, soap opera seriality employs very particular structures and practices, with a distinctive mode of production, scheduling, acting style, pacing, and episodic narrative structure. The redundant narration of soap operas depends on the device of diegetic retelling, as discussed in chapter 5, a device that both facilitates viewer recall and provides the pleasures of watching characters react to past events. A contemporary hour-long soap opera episode follows four to six story threads, intercut throughout the hour, selecting between a program’s dozens of potential ongoing stories active at any one time. At the beginning of an episode, each storyline features one scene to set up that day’s conversation, typically with the characters talking about some recent event and revealing some new information about how that event

impacts their relationship or situation. These initial scenes are highly focused on retelling, reminding and catching up viewers about every element in the scene—previous events, relationships, settings, and even characters’ names. As the episode progresses, this process of retelling continues to remind viewers as each scene cycles back from a commercial break but gradually advances the plot by highlighting the new story elements rippling out from past events. The final scene from each storyline typically concludes with a moment of uncertainty, often in the form of a suspense-inducing cliffhanger, that will prompt future retellings when the next episode featuring that storyline airs. Typically, each of an episode’s plot threads progresses with minimal temporal shifts or ellipses (aside from occasional flashbacks that are highly marked as atemporal anomalies), with each of the crosscut scenes typically playing out within a narrow frame of an hour or so of story time. Thus a given daytime soap episode rarely has either self-contained closed plot-lines or thematic linkages seen in the majority of prime time serials, as discussed in chapter 1; unlike prime time programs, soap episodes lack titles and are rarely rebroadcast as discrete storytelling units. A soap opera episode functions as an ephemeral daily “check-in” on the storyworld as well as a part of the week’s larger plot and character arcs, rather than a self-contained unit of a larger narrative structure, a distinction highlighted by some fans fast-forwarding through stories that disinterest them.

Soap operas embrace a poetics of slow-paced redundancy—but instead of treating repetition as a necessary evil, soaps raise it to an art form. Robert Allen influentially argues that soap operas, which were designed for both dedicated fans and distracted and erratic viewers, derive their narrative pleasures less from the forward-moving plot of new events and developments and more from the ripple effects of an event across the community of characters and their relationships within the drama, a model he calls “paradigmatic storytelling.”¹¹ A soap opera might portray a key event, but the event itself becomes less narratively important in its initial portrayal than in the chain of subsequent conversations about the event. Thus any single event can be retold numerous times through the dialogue-heavy conventions of the genre, as each character reacts to hearing about the event and we witness each retelling’s impact on the characters’ web of relationships. Through this

convention of narrative recall, we are both repeatedly reminded of what happened and guided to focus our attention on the characters' emotional lives, making redundancy an active pleasure of the genre. Yet this mode of repetitious seriality is by no means the only option for television seriality, as it is quite rare to see such embedded redundancy as part of prime time serials; instead, it is a facet nearly unique to the daytime soap opera.

In large part, this model of daytime soap redundancy and its comparative absence on prime time serials stems from the different material demands of each mode's production and scheduling. Most network prime time fictions air no more than 24 episodes per year in weekly installments, and cable programs often reduce that order to 13 or fewer episodes, with lengthy gaps between seasons. Daytime soap operas are in constant production, airing five days per week throughout the entire year, meaning that the longest gap between episodes will be over a weekend, aside from rare preempting for special events. The significance of these scheduling differences is enormous, for both producers and viewers. On the industrial side, soaps' constant demand for the next episode leads to a highly regimented, factory-style production model that depends on conventions, repetitions, and formulas, given that daytime soaps air 10 times more narrative material each year than an average prime time network series. Just as daily newspapers and comic strips differ drastically in form from weekly magazines or monthly comic books, respectively, we must distinguish between the production models and resulting programming of endless daily soaps and seasonal, weekly prime time programs as vastly different textual formats.

These scheduling differences forge vital contrasts in how viewers engage with daytime versus prime time serials. For viewers of prime time serials, an episode can be a regular appointment in a weekly schedule, emerging as a must-see occasion or a routinized time shift through a DVR; in contemporary television, many viewers prefer to bank episodes to watch in quicker succession or even wait for DVD or download release to embrace the boxed viewing aesthetic discussed in chapter 1. Whether episodes are watched in scheduled installments or boxed binges, most prime time viewing practices center on the episode as a discrete unit; this viewing practice matches the narrative form that maintains episodic unity with some self-contained storylines and defined episodic

structures and themes. Daily soap opera viewing is more part of the ongoing texture of everyday life than a special event to be scheduled—even the many viewers who time shift their daily soaps, a common practice dating back to VCRs in the 1980s and done via DVRs and online streaming today, find ways to integrate the playback into their everyday routines and schedules, such as watching over dinner or while working out. The sheer volume of episodes prevents a binge aesthetic from taking hold, compounded by the rarity of soap opera reruns or boxed releases; this broadcast model requires soap viewers to be responsible for their daily rituals to keep up with their favorite ongoing narratives. For most soap fans, such a daily ritual is a key pleasure of the genre and even a defining component of the genre.¹²

While these daytime viewing practices have some parallels in prime time, the contrasting schedule and distribution models make the experience of watching daytime soap operas and prime time serials more distinct than similar, raising doubts about claims that prime time serials are merely legitimated, high-class, or masculinized soap operas, at least in terms of viewing practice. In chapter 1, I argue that the installment-driven structuring of screen time with significant temporal gaps between episodes is essential to the definition of seriality and the specific ways that serial television tells stories. Daytime soaps and prime time serials have vastly different structures of screen time, and the daily schedule of soaps deemphasizes the gaps between episodes by locating them within part of a daily routine. For prime time programs, the weekly gaps, and even longer breaks between seasons, make each episode seem more eventful and encourage fans to bridge those gaps with paratextual engagement and speculation, as discussed more in other chapters—while some soap fans fill daily gaps with paratextual participation via online forums and communities, the different time frame for daily versus weekly installments changes the scope and prevalence of such practices. This is not to privilege one mode of engagement as more valued or effective than the other but to highlight the experiential differences between the two scheduling models and the resulting storytelling strategies that they enable and encourage.

If we look at genre as defined by viewing practices, industrial systems, textual norms, or discursive valuation, soap operas seem clearly distinct from most prime time serials, and thus an analysis of the melodramatic

mode of complex television need not be lodged within the soap genre. But the question remains about the role of influence, as some observers claim that today's prime time programs are retreading ground already broken by soaps. To understand the potential relationship of influence between daytime and prime time serial forms, it is useful to look at three programs that stand as some of the earliest successful attempts to incorporate serialized plotting into American prime time programming, all of which had explicit relationships to the soap opera genre. The first is *Peyton Place*, the mid-1960s hit that signaled the arrival of serial melodrama on prime time. Although the series adapted a well-known novel and movie, the storytelling format drew explicitly from soap opera precedents. ABC scheduled the series to air two or three nights per week, running in continuous production rather than the "seasons with reruns" model typical for prime time drama, and enlisted the soap opera pioneer Irna Phillips to consult with series creator Paul Monash in making the drama succeed as serial television. Caryn Murphy discusses how Monash was adamant in denying the program's ties to soap opera, preferring labels of "television novel" and "continuing drama" to highlight more respectable formats than the lowbrow associations with daytime serials, even though the prime time series diverged significantly from the original novel and followed many of Phillips's suggestions over Monash's objections.¹³ There is no question that at the levels of both production and cultural circulation, *Peyton Place* was deeply influenced by and linked to the daytime soap opera, and the brief wave of failed prime time serials in the late 1960s followed its precedent with the continuous, multiepisode weekly schedule evoking the ritual experience of soap opera viewership. However, no imitator came close to *Peyton Place*'s success, leading networks to eliminate such serialized dramas from prime time schedules by 1970.¹⁴

Serialization and explicit connections to soap operas returned to television outside the daytime schedule through the unusual vehicle of comedy in the late 1970s, with the dual innovators *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* and *Soap*. The former was a highly idiosyncratic hit that emerged from Norman Lear's successful production team in 1976, explicitly embracing the form, production values, and pacing of daytime soap operas via daily airings. Rejected by all of the national networks, *Mary Hartman* was distributed to local stations through the system of

first-run syndication, airing in various time slots outside prime time but most frequently in the daily stripped late-night spot of 11 p.m. to avoid controversy over its risqué content. The program married over-the-top storylines involving a small-town mass murderer and an elderly flasher with quotidian details of domestic drudgery, most notably Mary's obsession with the "waxy yellow buildup" on her kitchen floor, creating a unique blend of the outrageous and the mundane. Although the series embraced a dry, absurdist wit and was certainly best understood as a comedy, it featured none of the era's sitcom conventions of laugh tracks, studio audiences, or even actual jokes; instead, the humor came through its conventional soap opera style of unpolished videotaped staging and melodramatic music cues played straight, but with a quirky small-town setting and an ambiguous tone that most resembles future television innovator *Twin Peaks*. This allegiance to soap opera was affirmed behind the scenes, as Lear hired a team of soap opera veterans to write the series, led by Ann Marcus, who had previously written for both daytime soaps and prime time *Peyton Place* but never before (or again) for comedies. Thus *Mary Hartman* retains much of the feel of daytime soaps in its emphasis on relationships, deliberate pacing, redundant dialogue, and lack of overt sitcom style.¹⁵

Through the program's daily schedule, *Mary Hartman* developed a strong following from viewers who tapped into the ritualized rhythms of daily serialized storytelling. Although the series certainly did mock many soap opera conventions through heightened absurdity, it also embraced melodramatic takes on relationships and characters' struggles. While many viewers laughed at its exaggerated characters and subtle jabs at consumer culture, moments such as Mary's televised nervous breakdown at the end of the first season also delivered intense emotional moments of character melodrama. Reports on the trendy fascination with *Mary Hartman* focus on viewers' speculation on potential storylines and the fate of relationships—these are not the pleasures of ironic parody but sincere serial engagement. The parodic frame gave license to audiences who would normally dismiss soap operas to enjoy the pleasures of serial melodrama without guilt, with rave reviews in upscale periodicals such as the *Village Voice* and *The Nation* celebrating its ironic sensibility; the program's writerly intelligence and formal inventiveness was seen as rising above soap opera convention, even if its

reported pleasures were comparable to those of daytime fans. Viewers wrote to the program's producers praising *Mary Hartman* while being sure to mention that they did not like soap operas—and that they could not wait for the next episode. For its brief two-year yet more-than-300-episode run, *Mary Hartman* delivered the compelling story engine of serial melodrama, alongside soap opera production style and daily viewing rituals, but viewed through an absurdist, askew lens that tempered the genre's emotional sincerity and allowed viewers who were skeptical of the daytime genre to shamelessly enjoy some of its pleasures.

The third early prime time serial had the most overtly stated connection to soap operas but the least in common in terms of textual norms, production pedigree, or viewing practices. *Soap* debuted on ABC in 1977 following the conventional scheduling and production model for sitcoms: weekly prime time airings in a lineup filled with other comedies, shot with a live studio audience whose laughter cues viewers at home, created by veteran sitcom writers and producers, and featuring the broad humor and joke-filled dialogue typically found on the era's sitcoms. In fact, creator and head writer Susan Harris asserted that the program's writers had no desire to either mimic or mock soap operas but rather viewed the series title as simply a "shorthand reference" to serialized television storytelling—Harris denied even having viewed soap operas, and none of the program's key production staff had a background in the daytime format. The program's cultural reception similarly saw it primarily as a sitcom, albeit one that drew on soapy serial style and mocked the genre's storytelling excesses. The series featured much-faster-moving plotting than either daytime soaps or *Mary Hartman*, and the weekly scheduling disallowed the daily viewing rituals common to soap opera viewers. Additionally, internal redundancy and diegetic retelling was far less common, but instead repetition was outsourced to tongue-in-cheek "previously on" segments that both recapped earlier events and mocked *Soap*'s serial complications. Episodes featured numerous narrative events that grew more and more outlandish, as well as character-driven conversational humor (usually between women) more akin to *Mary Tyler Moore* than *General Hospital*.¹⁶

I highlight these three early innovators to show what explicit soap opera influence on prime time programming might look like and thus to argue that most contemporary serial programs lack such clear

connections to the daytime tradition. In the 1960s, *Peyton Place* inspired a number of failed imitations that curtailed prime time serial experimentation for many years. In the 1970s, the comparative influence of these dual serial comedies suggests a road not traveled for prime time serial storytelling. Although *Mary Hartman* received great buzz and cultural validation, it did not spawn imitators in incorporating its soap opera scheduling, production style, and creative pedigree into prime time, marking it as the last time a daily scripted serial attempted to move outside the daytime block and the soap opera genre delineation. Likewise, Ann Marcus proved to be one of only a handful of writers who worked on both daytime and prime time series, while it has been much more common in recent years for prime time series to be staffed with writers and producers from other media such as comics, film, theater, literature, and journalism, as discussed more in chapter 3. Created by prime time comedy veterans, *Soap* offered a more popular and influential model by grafting serial plotting onto standard prime time genres, a technique seen in subsequent 1980s innovators that became major television landmarks: the sitcom *Cheers*, the cop show *Hill Street Blues*, and the medical drama *St. Elsewhere*.

Even the rise of what are often called "prime time soaps" such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* bear little formal resemblance to daytime soaps in terms of production style, plot structures, and most importantly episodic frequency and use of screen time. Instead, they incorporate serial plotting into tales of family melodrama that are structurally and formally more similar to other prime time programs than to established daytime soaps. The label "prime time soap" persists as a category of weekly serial melodramas that indulge in excessive emotional displays and relationship-focused complications, used to describe a succession of series from *Dallas* to *Melrose Place* to *The O.C.* to *Revenge*, but they are formally still distinct from the key features of daytime soaps in both episodic structure and viewing practice. It is in the prevalence of melodrama in nearly all modes of serial storytelling that we can find the most commonality between daytime soap operas and prime time serials, but we should not assume that the latter is somehow mimicking or transforming the former; instead, we need to understand melodrama as a much more widespread facet of television narrative that is not unique to daytime soaps or any single genre category.

Serial Melodramas and Mixed Gendered Affect

It is far more important to understand what complex serials are than what they are not. While I question their ties to soap operas, nearly every dramatic program I discuss in this book can be considered a form of serial melodrama, whether the “soapy” excess of *Revenge*, the adult family drama of *Six Feet Under*, the weighty political debates of *The West Wing*, or the realist social critique of *The Wire*. While few critics would resist framing the first two programs as melodrama, many would bristle with giving the latter two that label, as their intellectual seriousness, measured production style, and claims to authenticity and realism are often viewed as the opposite of melodramatic excess. I was one of those skeptical critics myself, regarding melodrama as the core element that prime time soaps such as *Revenge* shared with their daytime counterparts, and I differentiated them from the nonmelodramatic, more realist approach of other, more unconventional series such as *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*. But I was persuaded by Linda Williams’s call to redefine melodrama away from the terrain of excess: “melodrama has become so basic to all forms of popular moving-picture entertainment that it is futile to continue to define it as ‘excess,’ since these apparent excesses are not necessary for melodrama to do its work nor are they of the essence of the form.”¹⁷ Instead of a specific genre tied to women’s films or daytime soap operas, melodrama, she argues, should be construed as a narrative mode that uses suspense to portray “moral legibility,” offering an engaging emotional response to *feel* the difference between competing moral sides as manifested through forward-moving storytelling.¹⁸

This more expansive definition of melodrama as mode rather than genre unites various forms of serial television via a shared commitment to linking morality, emotional response, and narrative drive. As I argue throughout the book, the sustained storytelling time that viewers spend with a long-form serial, as well as the productive gaps between episodes, fosters deeply felt emotional engagement with television characters and their dramatic scenarios, often tied to moral allegiances outlined in chapter 4. Television fiction only succeeds if we care about the drama, and Williams highlights how that caring is mobilized to create a shared moral map: “strong affect combined with moral legibility to create a *felt good* is what these popular moving pictures do.”¹⁹ Williams suggests

that prime time television’s melodrama stems from its “shared DNA” evolving from daytime soap operas, but we do not need to follow her evolutionary implication (as I argued earlier) to see the melodramatic mode running throughout the television schedule—in fact, her argument about the ubiquity of melodrama across film genres is more compelling as a shared cultural vocabulary than as an evolutionary tree of influence. But whether or not we want to chart influences or highlight shared modes, recognizing the ubiquity of melodrama throughout complex television is crucial to understanding the medium’s cultural work.

Extending the melodramatic mode to encompass realist narratives that reject many norms of emotional and stylistic excess challenges well-established critical categories. Thankfully, Williams has already done the critical heavy lifting by highlighting how television’s most acclaimed realist drama, *The Wire*, embraces her new conception of melodrama. The series charts a shared “*felt good*” in the nostalgic ideal of a functioning, fair city of Baltimore and provides emotional hooks to make us care about what has been lost (even as an ideal, if not an actual lived experience) through a range of injustices such as the drug war, global capitalism, and political corruption. Its melodrama is presented in an understated, often dry tone, but the cumulative emotional responses to the tales of personal redemption (Bubbles climbing the stairs) and institutional failure (bulldozing Hamsterdam) are as affectively powerful as any recognizably melodramatic narrative trope like consummated romance or familial tragedy.²⁰ And once *The Wire*’s melodramatic core is made visible, then it is difficult to view any other complex serial without seeing its own map of moral legibility, narrative drive, and emotionally resonant characterization all working to create a shared “*felt good*.”

Expanding our understanding of melodrama into a more pervasive mode instead of a narrower genre has at least two major impacts on our understanding of contemporary television seriality. First, it disrupts a dichotomy that has been posited for decades, pitting the “prime time soap,” marked by stylistic excess and trashy sensibility, against the “quality drama,” heralded as serious, socially engaged, and more aesthetically mature than its lowbrow competition.²¹ If we separate excess from melodrama, we can see 1980s programs such as *Hill Street Blues* and *Dynasty* as coexisting in a spectrum of affective morality and serial storytelling, rather than as polar opposites. We can better understand the multiple

facets of stylistic play and emotional engagement offered by hybrid programs such as *Twin Peaks* and *Mad Men*. And, of course, we can avoid defensive caveats of why a series is not being “soapy” when it embraces moments of emotional pathos or moral judgment, recognizing the ubiquity of the melodramatic impulse across various modes and genres of serial storytelling, regardless of their stylistic excesses or connections to soap opera traditions.

Embracing complex television’s melodramatic elements also has an important impact on how we see the narrative mode’s gender politics. A frequent critique of many of the programs I discuss in this book is that they are overwhelmingly masculine in focus and appeal and that through that emphasis they deny the traditional links between serial melodrama and more conventionally feminine subject matter, viewing practices, and pleasures. Michael Newman and Elana Levine extend this critique to suggest that “the legitimated serials of the convergence era masculinize a denigrated form, negating and denying the feminized other upon which their status depends,” suggesting not only that prime time serials derive from daytime soaps but also that they actively try to deny those origins as a strategy of gendered differentiation.²² While certainly many prime time serial creators, viewers, and critics do deny links between complex television and soap operas (I contend with good justification) and melodrama (with far less justification), I do not want to focus on this question of differentiation and legitimization, as doing so reinforces what I regard as overly simplified dichotomies between serial and episodic forms, melodrama and realism, and feminine and masculine texts and viewing practices. Instead, I hope to more productively suggest how we can reframe the conversation to see how integrating serial melodrama into other genres has led to more fluid possibilities of gender identification and to the challenging of rigid stereotypes of gendered appeals. But first we need a better understanding of what it means to call a narrative form “masculine” or “feminine.”

I doubt any contemporary critic would claim that melodrama or seriality are inherently “feminine” in expressing a viewer’s biological essence or even a static cultural norm, but rather most would say that such narrative modes have been discursively linked to female practices as to signify a nonessential yet significantly gendered cultural realm. Robyn Warhol productively explores the gendering of serial narrative

consumption, suggesting that emotional responses to sentimental fiction, such as “having a good cry,” function as “gendered technologies of affect,” an analysis she develops through case studies of Victorian serials, soap operas, and marriage-plot movies.²³ Warhol labels such affective responses as “effeminate,” both linked to and constitutive of behaviors culturally coded as female but by no means determined by or limited to female bodies—by using the term “effeminate,” which more commonly describes gay men’s behaviors than women’s, she highlights the performative aspect of gender practice rather than its connection to sexed bodies. She identifies how such sentimentality is marginalized within both academic criticism and broader mass media, which dismiss melodramatic genres and forms as unserious, manipulative, excessive, and aesthetically barren, especially when compared to more legitimated and masculine forms, arguments that Newman and Levine echo. But Warhol’s emphasis on affect and form allow for a more fluid understanding of the cultural politics of taste and engagement, as effeminate pleasures are not exclusively tied to formats such as daytime soaps; instead, she provides a formal vocabulary of sentimentality that helps demonstrate how it might be evoked within both conventionally effeminate and non-effeminate genres and modes.

While Warhol focuses her account on effeminate responses and textual modes, she also suggests that there are masculinist pleasures and engagements with texts such as Patrick O’Brian’s serial maritime novels, focusing on adventure plots and homosocial friendships.²⁴ Other key facets of serial narrative are conventionally coded as masculine as well, such as the analytic puzzle solving common to mysteries and procedural explorations of systems such as science-fiction technologies and mapping fictional worlds—all responses frequently elicited by complex television and forensic fandom, as discussed more in chapter 8. Again, labeling such modes of engagement as masculinist is not to suggest they belong exclusively (or even primarily) to male viewers, as many women embrace genres such as mystery and science fiction in which such affective engagement thrives, and certainly many forensic fans are female.²⁵ Rather, such practices are culturally coded as masculine no matter who is performing them, just as sentimental crying is regarded as effeminate even (or perhaps especially) when done by a man. These distinctions, at their most reductive, echo the long-standing stereotypical mapping of

rationality as male and emotion as female or the gendered dichotomy between thinking and feeling, a set of dualities that map onto the modes of affirmational versus transformative fandom discussed in chapter 4. Warhol's performative model highlights how such assumptions are reiterated through cultural practice rather than illuminating innate gendered differences, and despite the status of such distinctions as reductive stereotypes, exploring the gendered dimensions of such affective engagements is crucial to understanding the cultural dynamics of narrative consumption.

As explored throughout this book, a good deal of complex television foregrounds narrative elements that invite such typically masculinist analytic, forensic responses, but Williams convincingly argues that melodrama and its "felt good" are importantly prominent in such programs as well. By merging Williams's and Warhol's arguments, we can see that the melodramatic pathos that suffuses most television serials can work to evoke effeminate feelings, even outside the traditionally feminine genre of soap operas. Williams's account highlights how, despite an overwhelmingly male cast and crew, a focus on the world of men at work, and a rational procedural focus, *The Wire* generates deeply felt emotional responses of pathos and sadness, and I would extend her analysis to suggest that it occasionally elicits a "good cry," per Warhol—I certainly get choked up at the untimely deaths of a few characters, the suffering heaped on victimized children such as Randy and Dukie, or the understated triumph of Bubbles getting (and coming) clean.²⁶ Such sentimental responses exist alongside the program's more conventionally masculinist pleasures of procedurality, systems analysis, political critique, and homosocial bonding in the workplace, producing a vibrant mixture of gendered responses that can appeal both to a wide range of viewers and to a spectrum of affective engagements within a single viewer of any gender identity. Thus I reject Newman and Levine's claim that contemporary serials "masculinize" the soap opera form but rather invert their claim to suggest that the pervasive spread of serial melodrama has added an effeminate layer to traditionally masculinist genres such as crime dramas, espionage thrillers, and science fiction.²⁷

Lost provides a good example of the type of genre and gender mixing prevalent in complex television serials. Few programs are more exemplary of the importance of forensic fandom, the operational aesthetic,

and the ludic engagement with transmedia storytelling that I discuss throughout the book, and these facets, along with its central focus on male heroes coming to terms with their "daddy issues" and conflicts over leadership, would suggest that *Lost* is a resolutely masculinist program in its appeals. Yet Michael Kackman convincingly highlights how it intertwines melodramatic plotlines that evoke both effeminate and masculinist narrative conventions and appeals, mixing the formal narrative complexities triggering forensic fandom with the affective pulls of melodrama to foreground a cultural complexity of morality and emotional engagement.²⁸ We can extend this analysis using Warhol's seven-part "narratology of good-cry techniques" as a yardstick to measure sentimentality, highlighting the prevalence of melodrama and effeminate pleasures within *Lost*.²⁹ Warhol suggests that sentimental films use highly emotive acting and cinematic styles, "rendering emotion as something overtly visible" as well as manifested in the emotionally excessive musical cues, all tendencies common to *Lost*'s dramatic moments.³⁰ In Warhol's account, sentimental fictions are focalized around the perspective of characters who are most emotionally vulnerable, with *Lost*'s rotating focalizations via flashbacks highlighting the inner emotional life and struggles of many members of the large ensemble, usually flashing back to moments of peak vulnerability and pathos. Warhol notes that sentimental literature often directly addresses its readers to actively engage in narrative comprehension, although film rarely embraces this device; while *Lost*'s use of direct address is more implied in moments of reflexivity that call attention to narrative enigmas or plot devices, rather than sweeping emotion or romance, it does "blend its metafictional self-consciousness with sentimental techniques" in a way that is consistent with her account.³¹

Warhol suggests that "the sentimental plot emphasizes close calls and last-minute reversals, either for better or for worse," a description that perfectly captures *Lost*'s penchant for twisty plotting that services both rational and emotional engagement.³² She argues that characters in sentimental texts frequently act against established type at critical moments of emotional payoff, a tendency we can see repeatedly in climactic moments for many of *Lost*'s characters, including Jack, Ben, Jin, and Sawyer. Finally, she suggests that sentimental fictions balance moments of tragedy and joy, suffering and triumph; given *Lost*'s multithreaded

plot structure, especially with the sixth season's parallel "sideways" narrative, virtually every character in the ensemble experiences important moments of both suffering and triumph, death and redemption—often within the same episode—with no singular fate overriding the other. *Lost* hits every element of Warhol's inventory of sentimental storytelling techniques, highlighting the centrality of melodrama to its appeal and its mixed-genre format that refuses any simple classification that the series "just" belongs to a masculinist genre of science fiction or action-adventure.

Newman and Levine acknowledge that series such as *Lost* do incorporate "soapy" elements such as these into their storytelling stew, but they argue that these elements are always marginalized and secondary, functioning as an internal "other" to highlight a program's cultural legitimization in more masculinist terms.³³ But as I argue in chapter 10, *Lost* frequently foregrounds affective over forensic fandom, and the series concludes by privileging the emotional over the rational, much to the chagrin of many of its more masculinist fans. It is telling that the nearly universal choice among critics and fans for *Lost*'s best episode is "The Constant," which balances a science-fiction time-travel tale centered around arcane physics experiments with a sweepingly romantic tale of doomed lovers reuniting across time and space. As critic Ryan McGee writes, "'The Constant' represents the humanist side of *Lost* better than any other [episode], using its narrative trickery not to create riddles about smoke monsters and glowing caves, but rather a simple, powerful story about human connection."³⁴ The episode's climactic romantic moment is among the most affecting of many in *Lost* when the sentimental wells up to produce tears as an emotional payoff to hours of serial engagement, and it belies any claims that such a program's melodramatic tendencies are an afterthought meant to "legitimize" it in comparison to soap operas. If anything, I would contend that the series is more of an emotionally focused melodrama, in both the adventure and sentimental incarnations of the form, that uses puzzles and science-fiction trappings to draw in masculinist viewers.

With Warhol's and Williams's perspectives on sentimentality and melodrama in mind, we can see the importance of effeminate viewing practices in nearly all prime time serials, and it becomes clear that most complex television offers a blend of gendered appeals. These gender

mixtures are a comparatively recent phenomenon within mainstream fictional television, made visible when looking back to a seminal work of 1980s media studies, John Fiske's *Television Culture*.³⁵ Fiske frames masculine and feminine television forms as stark oppositions, using examples such as *The A-Team* and *Dynasty*, respectively, while acknowledging that (then) newer innovations such as *Hill Street Blues* and *Cagney and Lacey* were starting to blur such distinctions. In his dichotomy, Fiske contrasts the feminine facets of open narrative deferment, emotional expressiveness, domestic settings, and character complexity against masculine norms of exclusively male professional spheres, rational actions, and narrative closure. What is striking is how difficult it is to find a contemporary prime time drama that fits neatly into his feminine or masculine paradigms, as the blends of episodic closure and serial deferment, character actions and emotions, and blurred work and domestic spheres are nearly universal. As I discuss more later in this chapter, incorporating sentimental melodrama and female characters into traditionally masculinist genres has worked to validate effeminate emotional experiences for male viewers and helped destabilize television's long-standing gender hierarchies.

The various ways that new forms of television storytelling and genre mixing have reframed the medium's techniques of gender representation are far too multifaceted to deal with fully here, but it is worth exploring a few techniques that have emerged as part of this mode of narrative complexity.³⁶ One common strategy places a female protagonist at the center of a highly serialized version of a traditionally masculinist genre story, such as the espionage programs *Alias* and *Homeland*, the legal thriller *Damages*, and the police procedural *The Killing*. One key innovator of such gender reversals mixed the traditionally masculinist horror genre with female-centric teen dramas to forge the influential (and highly studied) series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Less written about, but arguably just as interesting, is *Veronica Mars*, which mixes the effeminate teen drama, highlighting romantic and familial relationships, with the neo-noir crime procedural, typically framed as masculinist. As discussed in chapter 2, the series opens by positing teenage Veronica as a hard-boiled cynic, solving crimes and condemning romance, while surrounded by a cast of male characters who often surpass her in sensitivity and sentimentality. In terms of narrative pleasures, many of *Veronica Mars*'s

core storylines fit more neatly into the masculinist norm of action and detective drama than into the effeminate realm of romantic melodrama. While *Hill Street Blues* and other early prime time serials focused their ongoing stories on traditionally effeminate relationship and character arcs, keeping the masculinist crime and professional plots more episodically contained, *Veronica Mars* typifies the new breed of complex narratives that weave serialization into all realms of their plotting, featuring heavily serialized mysteries alongside character melodrama, blurring gendered appeals into a fictional world that actively questions the presumed gender norms of its characters and, by extension, its viewers, especially when framed within the female-skewing network branding of UPN and The CW.

Gender norms also are blurred within *Veronica Mars*'s plotting. The self-contained detective stories seem consistent with more masculinist crime narratives, but the low-stakes high school setting and Veronica's status as a savvy investigator willing to use both traditionally masculine and feminine traits to solve mysteries complicate this simple gender identity. The ongoing serial storylines embrace both the effeminate and masculinist traditions that Warhol discusses—the relationship arcs generally follow serial melodrama patterns typical of teen dramas but often interwoven with detective mysteries, such as the connections between Logan's budding romance with Veronica and his potential involvement with both mystery arcs of Lilly's murder and Veronica's rape. Veronica often applies her hyperrational detective skills to explore her emotional realm, whether by investigating her own paternity, solving mysteries for friends, or implicating her boyfriends in criminal cases. The program's serialized mysteries offer narrative thrills in a more masculinist vein but tied to the emotional and female-centered realms of rape, motherhood, and soured romance motivating murder. While *Veronica Mars* clearly embodies both gendered modes of narrative pleasure, it does more than offer parallel pleasures for distinct types of viewers; instead, the program's storytelling structures intermingle and complicate such neat gendered binaries, inviting all viewers to experience both effeminate and masculinist emotional responses.

If centering a masculinist genre on a female figure can disrupt traditional gender norms, the infusion of serial melodrama into male-centered narrative worlds often calls the dominant definitions of

masculinity into question. Certainly the majority of complex dramas (like most prime time television) are quite male centered, focused on men in professional realms of crime, crime fighting, or other professional endeavors, including important programs such as *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Mad Men*. The cable channel FX has made a profitable brand identity out of complex masculinist dramas such as *The Shield*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Rescue Me*, and *Justified*, all of which portray mostly hypermasculine worlds using serial storytelling—and notably, FX struggled to find an audience with its female-centered drama *Damages*. Yet such masculine series are not simply a contemporary version of *The A-Team*, celebrating male bonding, action sequences, and professional success, but instead use the emotionally foregrounded storytelling style of serial melodrama to cover new narrative ground—such programs are not just male-centric but are ultimately about masculinity itself in crisis and conflict. As Amanda Lotz argues, the multifaceted narrative strategies of “male-centered serials enable these shows to interrogate submerged sentiments about gender scripts that lurk beneath the surface of largely reconstructed masculinities.”³⁷ While few of these male-centered melodramas are overtly feminist in questioning patriarchy, the narrative act of making male privilege an object of dramatic conflict, as well as encouraging male viewers to experience effeminate melodramatic affect, can be regarded as progressive steps within the traditionally hegemonic realm of dramatic television.

As discussed in chapter 4, many complex serials focus on male antiheroes as protagonists, often highlighting the emotional suffering that they both cause and feel as a result of their actions. *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White is certainly a unique case, as his character undergoes drastic transformations toward villainy rather than starting out as an amoral figure like most antiheroes. Throughout his journey toward criminality, he rationalizes his actions to provide for his family, following what his fellow criminal Gus tells him: “What does a man do, Walter? A man provides for his family. . . . And he does it even when he’s not appreciated or respected or even loved. He simply bears up, and he does it. Because he’s a man.”³⁸ Such overtly patriarchal rhetoric, contrasted with the hideous actions Walt takes toward others and eventually toward his family itself, articulates the hollow, rotten core of traditional masculinity as portrayed on the series. While we are aligned with Walt and can

sometimes empathize with his struggles, he eventually steps over the line to pure villainy and becomes an object of narrative contempt (with the specific point by which he loses sympathy differing among viewers).

Of course, Walt is not alone in his journey, and the role played by his wife, Skyler, is particularly interesting in light of serial melodrama and effeminate responses. We perceive Skyler mostly from Walt's point of view, which starts as loving affection tempered with growing frustration as she serves as an obstacle to his self-realization as a "real man" via his criminal alter ego Heisenberg. If we regard the series as a gangster drama in which Walt's success in the drug enterprise is the purported goal, then Skyler may be an obstacle. But complex serials feature multiple story threads that invite us to follow and shift character connections; thus if we retell the series focusing primarily on Skyler's character's arc, *Breaking Bad* becomes a very different type of gendered tale, offering a melodramatic account of deception, adultery, and ultimately an abusive, dangerous marriage.

Skyler starts the series in a content and comfortable place, although not living the life she had dreamed of when she married the older Walter White, an ambitious and successful scientist. But Walt's professional failings, born of stubborn pride and the challenges of having a disabled son, shifted their life into a more compromised but stable existence: she gave up trying to be a fiction writer to work as a part-time bookkeeper, he became a high school chemistry teacher who had to moonlight at a car wash. A surprise pregnancy changes things, but more abruptly Walt starts acting erratically around his 50th birthday, which is soon explained when he reveals that he has terminal lung cancer and is resigned to die rather than get treatment. In an effort to keep the family together, Skyler convinces Walt to undergo treatment and extend his life. But Walt's behavior remains bizarre, including a fugue state causing him to appear naked in a grocery store, an odd connection with a drug-dealing former student, numerous unexplained disappearances, strange parenting decisions (such as getting their 16-year-old son drunk on tequila), and hints of a second cell phone that points toward some deception. Despite being eight months pregnant, Skyler goes back to work to help pay for their medical bills, even though her boss's affections creep her out. And on top of everything, Walt misses their daughter being born, with a shoddy excuse. When Walt undergoes cancer surgery, he accidentally confirms

his second cell phone, leading Skyler to investigate his cover stories to find a web of deception worse than she had imagined, and thus she leaves him as soon as he has recovered from surgery.

Soon after their separation, Walt tells Skyler his secret: that he has been cooking crystal meth. He assures her that it is a safe job, with no violence or threat of danger, but she is outraged at how his actions and deceptions risk everything for their family and demands a divorce. Walt refuses, calling her bluff and moving back in despite her threats to go to the police. So she lashes out in the only way that she can think of: having an affair with her boss, Ted, who has his own corrupt business practices that she becomes embroiled in. Eventually Walt does agree to a divorce, but Skyler decides to remain married for spousal legal protection. When her brother-in-law, Hank, is shot and left paralyzed due to circumstances seemingly related to Walt's crimes, Skyler agrees to pay for Hank's medical costs, devising a cover story for Walt's riches involving compulsive gambling and card counting, drawing her deeper into Walt's criminal interests to help her family. As Skyler learns more about Walt's business, she uses her bookkeeping skills to launder money and purchases a car wash as a front, rationalizing her decision that helping Walt is better for the family than breaking the law for Ted. Although their relationship is still strained, Skyler and Walt reach a balanced arrangement of mutual benefit, until she learns that one of his drug associates was killed in cold blood. After expressing concern for their safety, Walt lashes out with an anger she has never seen before, as he claims to be "the danger" in a threatening moment. She comes close to taking the newborn Holly and fleeing but decides she must remain to "protect this family from the man who protects the family"—how much she honestly fears Walt versus regarding him as a blowhard out of his depths is uncertain, but clearly she feels like she can still manage him. Trouble with Ted returns in the form of an IRS investigation, which she helps skirt by paying him off and hiring thugs to pressure him. And then a threat to Hank's life prompts the family to go into protection, which ends when the drug kingpin Gus Fring is killed in a nursing-home explosion.

When Skyler realizes that Walt was responsible for the bomb, this is the first indication she has that he is capable of murder—while viewers have witnessed his procession of increasingly amoral killings for years of screen time, to Skyler this revelation means that Walt has suddenly

gone from a meek criminal chemist who seems in over his head to a scheming murderer willing to blow up a nursing home to take out an enemy. We imagine what might be going through her mind, positing what else he might have done that she has yet to discover. Suddenly she is not only aiding a drug criminal; she is an accessory to murder—and she soon learns that her efforts with Ted have led to his near demise and a resulting terrorized paralysis. Skyler is simultaneously repulsed by her murderous husband, who moves back in and assures her “life is good,” and horrified that she too has made moral compromises in the name of protecting her family, taking her down the road that Walt has already traveled. But unlike Walt, she experiences remorse and horror at her own actions, placing her in a state of passive paralysis as a battered spouse, desperate to protect her children from “the danger.” Skyler finally convinces Walt that they have too much money to be able to ever spend, and he quits the business and tries to return to a mild-mannered suburban life.

But just as they adjust to a cash-infused state of seminormalcy, Hank discovers Walt’s secret, tearing apart Skyler and her sister, Marie, and forcing Skyler to help Walt threaten and humiliate Hank and Marie. She gets so wrapped up in protecting herself and her family that she begins to mimic Walt’s rationalizations, even suggesting that Walt murder Jesse to eliminate a threat. When Marie tells her that Walt has been arrested, Skyler aims to reconcile with her sister by cooperating and coming clean to Walt Jr., but she faces a crisis when Walt returns home, apparently having killed Hank—their marriage explodes when she cuts him with a kitchen knife, and Walt runs off into exile with Holly. The relationship culminates with one of the most complex and harrowing telephone calls ever put onto film, in which Walt bullies Skyler in an over-the-top rant that is both a performance designed to absolve her of culpability to the police and an expression of his deep-seated masculinist rage and resentments. The series ends with Skyler broke and broken, paying for Walt’s crimes and having lost everything financially and familial, the tale of a wronged wife destroyed by her husband’s criminal ambitions and emotional abuse.

Of course, it is not Skyler’s story. Walt is *Breaking Bad*’s protagonist, so we are invited to see his perspective on his marriage and share his singular knowledge of his actions and motivations. AMC’s branding

certainly reinforces Walt’s centrality, as the series was promoted primarily as a crime drama, hyping Walt’s dangerous exploits as an emerging drug kingpin far more than his familial drama or Skyler’s emotional abuse. Yet Skyler’s story is there, creeping toward the narrative center as the series progresses, while Walt’s performative iterations of his patriarchal role and masculine prowess begin to crumble and erode, in our eyes if not his. As discussed in chapter 10, Skyler’s presence serves as an irritant for some viewers, but for others willing to consider her perspective, Skyler’s experiences offer a vital critique of Walt’s damaged masculinity. By considering Skyler’s perspective, *Breaking Bad* functions in part as a “women’s film” in reverse, told through the rationalizing perspective of the abusive spouse whom we only slowly grow to recognize as the villain.

Many examples of complex television use serialized melodrama to tell stories of damaged masculinity or recenter a traditionally masculine genre around a female protagonist, but some mix genres to portray the intersection of traditionally masculine and feminine spheres with a focus on a larger ensemble of characters. *Friday Night Lights* overlays the hypermasculine realm of high school football with family melodrama focused both on teens coming of age and on life in the small Texas city of Dillon. While much of the drama involves men trying to use football as a lifeboat to escape their dead-end lives or as an anchor to their past glory days, storylines focused on the gender politics of Eric and Tami Taylor’s dual-career marriage and Tyra’s attempt to succeed academically to escape both her poverty and her sexual reputation decenter masculinity within the drama. Notably, the moments that contain the greatest degree of melodramatic excess focus on football, especially the game sequences suggesting that every game is decided in the final seconds with a desperation scoring drive, portrayed with hyperdramatic slow motion and emotionally wrought musical scoring. Additionally, one of the program’s most harrowing and acclaimed episodes, “The Son,” focuses its sentimental core on Matt Saracen grappling with his father’s death, creating a portrait of a masculine emotional journey so intense that I cannot help but get a bit weepy just writing about it. The much-derided second season embraced more conventionally excessive melodramatic plotting with a contrived murder story, a hackneyed cross-racial adoption, and manufactured romantic complications, while still using performance and production styles coded as realist, creating

tonal disconnects that repelled most fans and critics. While *Friday Night Lights* is erratic in its serial consistency and use of complex poetics, it melds gendered genre norms through ongoing arcs to complicate any clear categorization of masculinist or effeminate identification or narrative pleasures.

Another series complicating its gendered appeals through innovative genre mixing and storytelling strategies is *The Good Wife*. Explicitly gendered by its title, the premise suggests a melodramatic, effeminate focus: a political wife is humiliated by a shameful sex scandal and forced to both establish her own career and publicly redefine her relationship with her estranged husband. Yet as Alicia Florrick builds a legal career in her old friend's firm, the series spins an elaborate, highly serialized set of interlocking professional and personal storylines, notably with a huge stable of memorable supporting characters of judges, attorneys, family members, clients, and political operatives. Although *The Good Wife* retains a case-of-the-week episodic structure, it features as complex a cumulative, multi-institutional serialized storyworld that has ever been seen on network prime time, leading one critic to compare it favorably to cable's standard-bearer for realist world building, *The Wire*.³⁹ But unlike *The Wire*, *The Good Wife* imbues its complex institutionally grounded serialization with explicit cross-gender appeals, merging the familial, professional, romantic, and political, often within a single story thread, and exploring how these threads connect with the emotional and rational choices of its female protagonist.

A good example of *The Good Wife* at its most complex is the fourth-season episode "Death of a Client." Primarily set at a St. Patrick's Day fund-raising event hosted by Chicago's Catholic diocese, the episode focuses on the main ongoing political plotline, the gubernatorial campaign of Alicia's husband, Peter. But as always, politics merge with the personal, as Alicia must present herself as both a doting political spouse and a new partner of her law firm, as well as defending her son against false accusations from Peter's opponent and juggling a potential family crisis concerning her mother's inappropriate disclosures to her teenage children. Additionally, her former lover (and still boss) Will's presence at the party creates tension with Peter, despite the firm's political support of his campaign—as well as Peter's offer of a potential Supreme Court appointment to Will's partner Diane, returning to a long-dormant

storyline from the first season. The episodic case of the week emerges in the form of a previously unseen client of Alicia's being murdered, as the police bring her in for questioning about the litigious client's numerous enemies; we come to know the client and his connection with Alicia through her recollections, presented via flashback in short nonchronological bursts. But mixed into this professional episodic plot are personal arcs, as the assistant district attorney working the case is romantically interested in Will and asks for Alicia's advice, prompting Alicia to recall moments of her affair with Will intermixed with flashbacks of her murdered client. The episode is narrated via a temporally complex form encouraging the operational aesthetic and forcing viewers to piece together a more linear account to ensure comprehension; similarly to *The West Wing* episode "Nöel," as discussed in chapter 1, "Death of a Client" embeds a diegetic Bach piece that connects to the program's neobaroque storytelling form. Every storyline in this complex episode (and there are a few others left unmentioned) builds on threads from longer arcs, provokes an array of emotional responses, and intermixes various personal and professional plots, suggesting a highly interwoven cloth of genre and gender mixing via its complex poetics.

Examples such as *The Good Wife* highlight how complex television has challenged the gendered norms of serial storytelling. The series is far removed from Fiske's polar examples of feminine and masculine television from the 1980s, and it is distinct from the mixed but separated style of serial romances and episodic cases that typified earlier mixtures such as *Hill Street Blues* and *L.A. Law*. Instead, the personal and professional, effeminate and masculinist, melodramatic and rational are fully interwoven and inseparable in terms of both storytelling structure and affective viewer experience. While some critics suggest that such mixtures "masculinize" feminine forms and thus marginalize the female basis of much of television storytelling, I contend that these recombinations complicate gender dichotomies in ultimately more progressive ways by inviting viewers to cross-identify and embrace affective pleasures that are typically nonnormative for their gender identity. Male viewers weep at the sentimental melodrama of *Friday Night Lights* or *Lost*, female fans celebrate female power and analytic intelligence featured on *Alias* or *Veronica Mars*, and all viewers feel the affective interconnections of *The Good Wife*'s personal and professional realms—such

viewing experiences problematize strict gender dichotomies, offering sites of fluidity and empathy, however imperfect and partial, that seem consistent with feminist critiques of gender norms. Warhol argues that narrative consumption is a constitutive practice of gender identity, with serial forms promoting particularly powerful reiterations of affect; I contend that the prevalence of serial melodrama within complex television across a range of genres enables a particularly provocative set of practices to challenge and revise established gender norms.

8

Orienting Paratexts

Throughout the history of American commercial television, we might consider “accessibility” to be one of its defining features. Per the medium’s commercial strategies for advertiser-supported programming, success was judged by the ability to attract, retain, and grow a viewership, which could then be converted into the currency of Nielsen ratings and sold to advertisers. The programming strategies that supported this system of popular appeal have been termed “least objectionable content” or, more dismissively, “lowest common denominator.” In short, a television storyteller’s first job is to avoid alienating potential viewers. At the base level of narrative comprehension, the industry demands that television be easy enough to follow in order to make sense to casual viewers. However, complex television series often challenge the ease with which casual viewers might make sense of a program, inviting temporary disorientation and confusion, allowing viewers to build up their comprehension skills through long-term viewing and active engagement, as I discuss in more depth in chapter 5.

This chapter considers how viewers make sense of complex serial forms through practices of orientation and mapping, primarily through the creation of *orienting paratexts*. Arguably, most orientation practices involve paratexts, whether in the tangible form of maps and lists or in more ephemeral conversations, as orienting ourselves in relation to a narrative world places us outside the core text itself. These paratexts are distinct from transmedia paratexts that explicitly continue storyworlds across platforms, discussed in more depth in chapter 9. Instead, orienting practices reside outside the diegetic storyworld, providing a perspective for viewers to help make sense of a narrative world by looking at it from a distance—although as with all such categorical distinctions, actual practices often muddy such neat dichotomies.¹ Orientation is not necessary to discover the canonical truth of a storyworld but rather is used to create a layer atop the program to help figure out how the pieces

fit together or to propose alternative ways of seeing the story that might not be suggested by or contained within the original narrative design. The act of linking a text to a paratext, whether officially sanctioned or viewer created, changes how we see the original, and thus this chapter maps out many ways that a serial is transformed through the act of paratextual extension, often with the explicit goal of making “sense” of the original.

In the Internet era, we are surrounded by an array of paratextual information, much of which is not designed specifically in support of a series. In a telling quote, David Simon, the creator of *The Wire* and *Treme*, explains to Emily Nussbaum how he creates television in the contemporary media environment: “Fuck the exposition . . . Just be. The exposition can come later.” [Simon] describes a theory of television narrative. ‘If I can make you curious enough, there’s this thing called Google. If you’re curious about the New Orleans Indians, or “second-line” musicians—you can look it up.’ The Internet, he suggests, can provide its own creative freedom, releasing writers from having to over-explain, allowing history to light the characters from within.² While few observers would point to Simon’s work as demanding or encouraging robust online paratextual activity, especially as compared to cult series such as *Lost* or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, his description of the Internet’s expositional usefulness highlights how creators can outsource backstory and cultural references to a preexisting and highly accessible paratextual realm. Additionally, the Internet can host and share vast paratextual resources designed specifically to help orient viewers of ongoing serials. Television series are thus not treated as stand-alone, self-contained works by either their creators or their fans but rather exist in a media landscape where online paratexts are always part of a viewer’s potential intertextual flow.

The paratexts explored in this chapter are more specifically tied to their source texts than Simon’s evocation of Googling New Orleans traditions, traversing the boundary between unofficial fan-created and official industrial extensions—while there are obvious differences between such variants of paratexts, both official and unofficial paratexts are regarded as part of the same spectrum of viewing practice. After outlining various orientation practices used by contemporary television viewers, I focus on a specific form of orienting paratext, the encyclopedic

wiki, before concluding with a consideration of what these paratexts tell us about television viewing. Throughout this chapter, I use *Lost* as a primary case study, in large part because the series stands as a rare example of a mass hit that features a highly complex story that requires and enables multiple realms of orientation practice. Due to the size and passion of *Lost*’s audience, it offers a huge array of paratexts to explore, arguably only matched on television by franchises that have spanned decades, such as *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who*.

A Catalogue of Serial Orientation Practices

In thinking about the range of orientation practices that television viewers embrace today, we encounter a mass of strategies and paratextual modes that can be rather disorienting. So to understand the scope of orientation practices, we can organize them by the aspects of narrative that might invite or require orienting, attempting to guide viewers’ comprehension, interpretation, analysis, and intertextual expansion. Returning to the simple definition of narrative offered in the introduction—*a television serial creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time*—presents four basic storytelling facets that might require orientation: *time, events, characters, and space*. These four elements provide a top-level set of categories for how viewers make sense of television narratives—to comprehend an ongoing story, we need to be able to follow each of these aspects, and paratexts offer useful resources for viewers to orient themselves along these four dimensions.

The first category of time is arguably the most central aspect of serial narrative, as seriality is defined by manipulating time as a storytelling variable—we consume the story in installments defined by the producers and process the narrative within mandatory gaps between episodes and seasons. The three layers of story time, discourse time, and screen time, as discussed in chapter 1, each potentially require orientation practices. The last of these seems most obvious, but it points to a central issue in viewer orientation: we need to know when episodes are on and in what order we are supposed to watch them. Traditionally in American television, the order in which episodes aired was a minor concern for prime time programs, as networks might choose to air episodes in

unusual time slots or sequence depending on their competition or other mitigating factors—in some cases, such as *Firefly*, a network might change episodic sequence in a way that damages viewers' comprehension and enjoyment. Syndicated reruns often aired a series out of its original sequence, meaning that viewers were likely to encounter a program in haphazard order, and thus many storytellers adapted to the lack of guaranteed sequence by avoiding major story arcs that surpass the length of a given episode, a practice that still lives on for most episodic police procedurals and many sitcoms.

With the profusion of cable channels and other viewing technologies in the past two decades, the industry developed ways to orient viewers' sense of screen time, notably through the on-screen electronic program guide. Viewers adapt their own ways of navigating screen time by cataloguing episodes and airdates online, using general resources such as Wikipedia, television-centric websites such as epguides.com, or series-specific fan sites, and employ technologies such as the digital video recorder to structure their viewing. Boxed sets, streaming resources, or downloadable purchases provide technologies to orient viewers to screen time, as the structure of seasons and episode order are foregrounded, often to assert an original intended sequence rather than network reordering. Together, the practice of *scheduling as orientation* helps viewers master a base chronology of screen time that, while obvious, is still essential to being able to comprehend an ongoing complex serial.

While screen time follows a fairly rigid set of boundaries and structures, discourse time is much more variable and free-flowing, especially in programs with complex chronology. Understanding the nested flashbacks, replays, flash-forwards, and other atemporal shifts on series such as *How I Met Your Mother* or *FlashForward* requires dedicated attention to details and chronicling of markers of temporal continuity, often through elaborate plot summaries on official network or fan websites. *Lost's* complex chronology inspired numerous graphic and textual representations, including both fan-created images and officially sanctioned paratexts on ABC's website or in DVD releases. Series do not need to embrace time travel to warrant such use of *chronology as orientation*, as fans of *Battlestar Galactica* chart its narrative through time lines that help guide viewers to understand both the sequence of events and the temporal relationship between various on-screen representations.

Discourse time refers to the sequence and selection of the narrative material presented to the audience, while story time comprises the actual events taking place in the narrative universe. For series with tight chronology, reconciling between story and screen time can be a challenge, requiring strategies to orient the program's time frame. For instance, *Breaking Bad* lacks the science-fiction temporal play of *Lost*, but remembering its compressed time frame, with the events of the first four seasons only constituting one year of story time, helps viewers grasp the consequences, pacing, and stakes of dramatic events that remain fresh in characters' minds. To highlight the historical realism of *Mad Men's* 1960s, fans use time lines to parallel the fictional events with historical moments that are mentioned in the series or left unsaid in the subtext. Such use of *calendaring as orientation* helps us follow an unfolding narrative in a way that foregrounds a realist sense of a persistent storyworld with consequences and history, a fairly new development in television narrative.

Even when the storyworld is not realistic in the least, mapping chronology and calendars can be a crucial orientation strategy. Probably the most complicated time line on television is the "timey-wimey" playfulness of *Doctor Who*, especially in the title character's ongoing relationship to fellow time traveler River Song, as discussed in chapter 4. Fans have created numerous visual representations of the bidirectional relationship experienced by River and the Doctor, attempting to match up their experiences and chart the key moments in their story, a strategy that the characters themselves perform on the program by syncing up their journals and memories whenever they meet. Of course, this is not the exclusive domain of fans, as the BBC produced its own orientation material with a video chronicling River Song's story, narrated from her own temporal perspective.³ This paratextual video highlights how orientation is an element of both official and unofficial production and can be presented in a range of media, not just graphic time lines or textual lists.

One of the most interesting ways that fans create orientation paratexts is via video remixes that recast a text's temporality, with two *Lost* projects exemplifying the varied approaches to fan remixed chronology. In the online video *Lost: The Synchronizing*, a fan took footage depicting moments of the plane crash from across three seasons and multiple perspectives, editing them together via split screen in the style of 24

to sync the story chronology and highlight how these moments converge into the program's most important narrative event.⁴ On a larger scale, another fan created ChronologicallyLost.com to distribute his reedited version of the series in chronological order in 45-minute episodic installments, starting with the origin of Jacob and The Man in Black from the final season's "Across the Sea," moving forward through the island's time jumps, character flashbacks, plane crash, escape, and return, and finally ending with the final season's flash-sideways as an epilogue. While I doubt that such extensive remix projects actually orient confused viewers as a time line or map might, they do serve as analytic forms of orientation, providing insights via rethinking the program's narrative time frame.⁵

As with any complex taxonomy, we need more than one axis to categorize practices of viewer orientation—it is not just “what” is being oriented (time versus space) but also “how” the orientation proceeds. One type of orientation practice aims for *recapitulation*, summarizing narrative material in a straightforward manner, such as the calendar or the chronological list of events. Another practice embraces a mode of *analysis*, exploring narrative material via a representational mode, typically a visual map or video, that offers an analytic dimension to the representation that goes beyond recapitulation. While analytic orientations aim to better understand what is happening within the text, *expansion* orientations look outward to connect the series with other extratextual realms beyond the core program, whether it is another fictional series or aspects of the real world. These three modes, which certainly blur and blend together, can be applied to the various aspects of narrative temporality, creating a matrix of orientation practices, such as analytic calendars or expansionist chronologies.

These three modes of orientation can be applied to other narrative dimensions beyond time as well. Narrative events are closely linked to time, as they are typically thought about in terms of “what happens when,” and attempting to orient oneself to story events often involves chronology and temporal causation. *Plot recapitulations* are commonplace orientation tools, whether the “previously on” segments preceding most episodes, as discussed in chapter 5, or write-ups on official network websites or fan sites aiming to provide a clear summation of an episode's narrative events. Such textual recaps are abstractions as well,

as the conversion of televisual material into prose descriptions is just as much of a transformation as visual or video remixes are, and the rise of humorously tinged recaps on sites such as Television Without Pity suggests how orientation can also be a creative act.⁶ However, some *event analyses* detach narrative events from their chronology to create a different perspective on the story, such as lists of character deaths found on various series wikis to more visual depictions, such as an infographic poster documenting *Dexter*'s dozens of murders, charting weapons, motives, and interrelations between victims.⁷ Such analytic reinterpretations take a series of narrative events and explore them for greater understanding of causality, significance, or even basic comprehension and can be pursued via various media forms. For instance, *Breaking Bad*'s next-to-last episode of season four, “End Times,” raised the enigma of who was responsible for poisoning a child; a fan took to YouTube to offer an interpretation of the narrative events to (correctly) argue that Walter White was responsible, piecing together scenes from the episode that provide clues and evidence that proved what would only be revealed in the next episode.⁸ Such analytic abstractions and reinterpretations function as sites of forensic fandom discussed more later, enabling viewers to make greater sense of or propose new explanations for the narrative events beyond chronology and recapitulation, a tendency we can see even more acutely in analyses of *The Sopranos*' finale, as discussed in chapter 10.

Plot expansions aim to contextualize the events of a series into a larger intertextual web, most typically by connecting what happens in a fictional series to the real world. For instance, *Treme* depicts life in post-Katrina New Orleans, with many fictionalized versions of real people and events; bloggers and journalists, most notably Dave Walker from the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, catalogue and analyze the program's cultural references, working to orient viewers to the factual basis of the fictional events.⁹ More rare are paratextual examples trying to connect the narrative events from one series to another fictional world beyond the moments when a program itself cues its own intertextuality, as with *Happy Days* references on *Arrested Development*—but in the paratextual realm, no orientation practice is as disorienting as the Tommy Westphall Universe theory. In the legendary conclusion to the 1980s series *St. Elsewhere*, it was revealed that the entirety of the medical drama existed in

the imagination of Tommy, an autistic child staring into a snow globe. Because the series had a number of crossover episodes and intertextual references with other programs including *Cheers*, *Homicide: Life on the Street*, and *The Bob Newhart Show*, fans have posited that all of these other fictions are figments of Tommy's imagination as well. Fans catalogue these crossover events and create elaborate maps of an intertextual multiverse—as of 2014, the grid lists 375 programs ranging from *I Love Lucy* to *The Wire*.¹⁰ While such orientation practices are certainly not designed to actually help viewers truly make sense of fictional worlds, as this theory is clearly meant to be taken as playfully ludicrous, I would argue that fans do take it seriously—they get immersed in the intertextual web and passionately argue about interpretations concerning the validity of various connections. They know it is not “real,” even within the fictional worlds of television, but many seriously embrace the practice of creating expansive paratexts as if it were “real,” playfully undertaking hypothetical analysis and conjecture similar to recent forms such as alternate reality games (ARGs).¹¹

The third type of narrative orientation tracks a program's cast of characters. For vast, sprawling series such as *The Wire*, it is hard work remembering who is who among the dozens of characters, many only known by nicknames or left unseen for long stretches of episodes. *Character guides*, whether those found on official websites and tie-in books or fan-created wikis and guides, offer convenient overviews of dramatis personae in a manner common to theatergoers; the baseline goal of such guides is to orient us to the cast, connecting faces with names and dramatic functions. *Character analyses* typically visualize narrative aspects via alternative means as a way of mapping relationships, developments, and personalities. For instance, *Lost* DVDs contained an interactive character guide to chart out the often coincidental connections between characters, and fans made similar maps to highlight intercharacter links and relationships. Analytic commentary can be mixed with a character guide, as in one interactive online *Lost* guide that features caricatures of each character, scalable by season, with pop-up boxes offering snarky summaries of the character's actions and death—for instance, Jin's recap reads, “Total jerk to his wife when they got to the island, but later came around to become an all right dude. . . . Dead: Opted to stay

with his trapped wife on a downed sub instead of raising their child. Very romantic.”¹²

While certainly many fan paratexts aim for character reinterpretation, as fan fiction and remix vids do, I would not call most of those “orientation practices” *per se*, as they are less focused on making sense of the existing narrative world than expanding them into other possibilities—or at least such paratexts aim more for emotional and affective orientation and analysis, a topic worth further examination in the future. A common mode of such fan creativity is intertextual expansion, bringing characters from multiple storyworlds together into a shared universe, a genre known as “crossover fic.” It is fairly rare to see such *character expansion* functioning as an orientation practice, although one example is a fun case of intertextuality: fans have adopted the alignment system from the classic role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons, which charts a character's morality on dual axes of good to evil and lawful to chaotic, and mapped it onto the cast of various television series. Examples range from *Arrested Development*'s dysfunctional Bluth family to the array of 1960s businessmen from *Mad Men*, but probably no series is more apt for such intertextual orientation than *The Wire*, given its thematic emphasis on morality and codes of conduct. Mapping out the characters on a game-based alignment chart invited discussion over the meaning of lawfulness and chaos in the context of *The Wire* and whether characters such as Avon and Omar can be seen as anything but evil because of their murderous ways.¹³ Such intertextual expansion is an invitation to rethink our impressions of the original series, orienting ourselves to a new way of categorizing and grouping characters, as well as creating intertextual resonances by connecting contemporary characters to mythic figures from the game's fantasy setting.

The final subject of orientation paratexts is the most common to the practice of mapping: a spatial storyworld. While maps are well suited to spatial orientation, it would seem that space is the dimension of television narrative that needs the least outside help for viewer comprehension. While temporality, plotting, and characterization have all become more complex in contemporary television, spatial storytelling is still fairly conventional and straightforward. Most programs follow well-established filmic conventions for orienting viewers spatially in

any scene, with little sense of purposeful ambiguity and playfulness. If anything, space is the storytelling dimension that television is most willing to cheat on to maximize complexity in other realms; for instance, *24*'s dedication to maintaining strict chronology and pseudo-real-time narration frequently led the series to create spatial implausibilities, with characters traversing Los Angeles or Washington, DC, traffic and geography at unrealistic speeds. While many fans will try to parse out and nitpick muddled chronology or plot continuity, such geographical incoherence in navigating a story space is typically only recognized by natives of a given city searching for spatial realism, suggesting that in the process of consuming serialized television, temporal consistency trumps spatial coherence. Of course, in the networked environment of comment threads and Twitter, one local fan's dismay over spatial incoherence can spread to others, leading to greater scrutiny from a broader array of viewers.

Nevertheless, both viewers and the industry do invest energy in creating spatially orienting paratexts for television series. For series that feature a fantasy space, orientation maps are helpful paratexts to ground viewers in the program's mythology, a common practice found in previous media such as J. R. R. Tolkien's novels, which included maps of Middle Earth. We can see a televisual parallel to this in the opening credits of *Game of Thrones*, which present an animated map of the series's fantasy world, Westeros, as inspired by the Tolkien books, with multiple versions to orient viewers where that specific episode's action will take place.¹⁴ Additionally HBO's website provides an interactive map charting out each episode's events and linking the map to characters and their genealogies to integrate various dimensions of character, event, and spatial orientation. Maps are more typically presented outside a program's core text, as with *Battlestar Galactica* publishing a poster-size map of its cosmos, outlining the Twelve Colonies of Kobol with detailed mythological information and graphic depiction not covered by the series; the poster was even signed by the *Battlestar* writer Jane Espenson as a marker of canonical authenticity. For fantasy and science-fiction series that do not publish their maps, fans typically fill the gaps, as typified by the vast array of *Star Trek* cartography that spans the franchise's multiple series. Such fan mapping is part of a larger facet of affirmative fan productivity that Bob Rehak has labeled "blueprint culture," as fans work to

document the canonical facts established by a fantastic fictional franchise.¹⁵ Many series that expand into videogames use them as platforms to create navigable virtual versions of their fiction spatial worlds, a vital pleasure of tie-in game properties discussed more in chapter 9.

For programs based here on Earth, no tool has been more important to spatial orientation practices than Google Maps, as both fans and production teams create custom maps for dozens of series to show both shooting locations and addresses for fictional story sites, ranging from *The Wire*'s realistic Baltimore to *Veronica Mars*'s fictional Southern California town of Neptune overlaid with its real San Diego shooting locales. An interesting example is *Seinfeld*: even though it was filmed primarily in Los Angeles, its New York City locale is a powerful part of the program's narrative experience. Thus both Sony, the program's production studio, and fans have created their own *Seinfeld*-themed Google Maps—while the map on Sony's site features glossier visuals with embedded videos, not surprisingly the fan version is more comprehensive, including more than twice as many locations.¹⁶ Such maps then can translate into embodied practice, as fans explore the locales of their favorite series as part of the growing realm of media-themed tourism, with popular tours such as *The Sopranos*' New Jersey or the *Mad Men* "Time Machine" tour of New York. The *Seinfeld* case is particularly interesting in blurring fact and fiction, as Kenny Kramer, Larry David's old neighbor who was the inspiration for the Cosmo Kramer character, entrepreneurially created Kramer's Reality Tour, which brings fans around New York to see the real places that inspired *Seinfeld*'s fictional version of the city, as filmed in Los Angeles. Unlike other media tourism such as the New Zealand tours of "Middle Earth" via the *Lord of the Rings* filming locations, when television tourism focuses on an ongoing serial, it adds another experiential dimension, as fans explore a space where they might anticipate future narrative developments or even hope to see filming on location. In these cases, maps and tours function less to orient fans to the fictional worlds than to extend those fictions into their real lives and allow them to momentarily inhabit their favorite storyworlds.¹⁷

An interesting case study of mapping within an ongoing series is *Lost*, which created a fantasy setting of a fictitious island whose geography is central to the narrative and which is also grounded within the interesting real-world island of its Hawaii shooting locale. Given the program's

huge participatory fan base, it is not surprising that fans created a detailed Google Map of Hawaii, with shooting locations catalogued by season, character, and fictional locale—and it is equally unsurprising that Hawaiian travel companies offer *Lost* tours as well. Google Maps also hosts a collaborative map of every real-world locale referenced on *Lost* and its copious transmedia extensions, highlighting the program's global reach despite nearly everything being shot in Hawaii. Google Maps is less helpful in orienting us to the program's fantastical central location, although fans have used it to chart potential sites for the mysterious island, including charting *Lost*'s mythological numbers of 4, 8, 15, 16, 23, and 42 as geographic coordinates. But *Lost*'s forensic fandom is most active in its attempts to map the internal geography of its fantastic island, requiring platforms beyond Google Maps.

Unlike *Battlestar Galactica*, the producers of *Lost* did not give us a clear rendering of the program's fictional geography—although the virtual island created for the videogame *Lost: Via Domus*, discussed more in chapter 9, attempted to create such a virtual map—but maps are a central obsession of various characters and do appear on-screen quite frequently. Such brief appearances were copiously catalogued by the forensic fans at Lostpedia and numerous other fan sites dedicated to decoding the world of *Lost*, but no map is as indicative of how such practices straddle the line between orientation and disorientation as the cultural life of what fans have termed the “blast door map.” In the season 2 episode “Lockdown,” John Locke found himself trapped in an underground bunker with his leg pinned under a blast door. For a few moments, a black light turns on, revealing a hand-painted map on the back of the door that we see on-screen for no more than six seconds. The information contained within the map, as decoded collectively by fans only hours after the episode aired, pointed to deep mythological clues that resonated both in the series and across the transmedia extensions. Locke himself attempts to reconstruct the map's geographical revelations but falls far short of what fans accomplished, aided by freeze-frame screen grabs, image-manipulation software, and collective discussion forums. The map reappeared in transmedia versions four times with slight alterations and additional information, outlasting its role in the series itself, as discussed more in chapter 9. Through forensic

fandom, viewers got a preview of future hatches still to be revealed, references to the backstory of the Hanso family and the Black Rock ship, and other minor clues to forthcoming puzzles.

However, I would contend that the blast door map's least successful function concerned spatial orientation, as the map provides little sense of scale or relationship between the outlined stations and the places we had seen on the island. Instead, the map functions more like a roster of places, names, and clues scrawled onto a wall, a to-do list for fans anticipating what might be revealed in future episodes. It also provides a window into a number of character subjectivities, visualizing the mental states of the map's two authors-to-be-named-later, Radinsky and Inman, who chronicle their limited mythological knowledge and island explorations under duress, as well as orienting us to Locke's obsessive quest to make sense of the briefly seen images. The map also charts narrative time and events, as we try to situate the drawing's creation into the island's backstory and our own limited knowledge of the history of the DHARMA Initiative. Thus as fans worked to decode the multiple versions of the map, they arguably were less engaged with questions of spatial orientation than attempting to understand the embedded representations of a fictional storyworld, refracted by still-to-be-discovered characters and events.

Lost fans also did create maps to spatially orient the island. A wide range of fan-created island maps emerged throughout the series, including illustrated schematics, topographic charts, and even 3D simulations. Like the schematics of *Star Trek's Enterprise*, these are clearly attempts to render an unreal fantastic space via the tools and assumptions of scientific realism. While we never saw *Lost*'s island explicitly change its shape or topography, we did see it move through time and space in a manner that suggests that realistic geography was low among the program's priorities. Additionally, the producers added new locations to the island, such as the final season's lighthouse, without much concern for the island's geographical consistency, which some fans had invested a great deal of energy in exploring. The program's commitments were more to the flexible realm of the fantasy genre than any notion of realism, yet some fans strived to map a consistent geography onto the island; such conflicts between the rational realms of science fiction and more

spiritual and irrational concerns of fantasy were an echo of one of *Lost's* main thematic debates between science and faith and became a key point of contention, which I discuss in chapter 10.

Lost points toward one final dimension of orientation that transcends time and space: the concept of dimensions themselves. As complex television has opened up playful variations of time and space in serialized storytelling, it has occasionally explored notions of parallel worlds or multiple dimensions, issues that have emerged more often in complex films such as *Run Lola Run*, *Sliding Doors*, and *Inception*. Multiple dimensions emerge in specific episodes of series such as *Community* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or as serialized plot arcs, as on *Fringe*, *Life on Mars*, and *Once Upon a Time*; as discussed in chapter 10, the final season of *Lost* was one of the highest profile television examples of multidimensional storytelling. Abandoning the flashback structure typical of the program's first three seasons, the fourth season's flash-forwards, and the fifth season's time traveling, the sixth season introduced what producers and fans called "flash-sideways." In almost every episode, action toggles between the endgame playing out on the island and a seemingly parallel dimension where Flight 815 never crashed, most of the characters had drastically different lives, and the island was sunk at the bottom of the ocean. Not surprisingly, forensic fans were both frustrated with and excited by the challenges of orienting themselves to this dimension, especially since the actual explanation for what the world was and how it related to the main storyworld was not revealed until the final minutes of the series finale. Scanning the edit history and discussions on *Lostpedia* on the entry for the "Flash Sideways Timeline" documents dozens of fans working for months, debating issues of chronology, character, and even ontology for this aspect of the story—and finally when all was revealed, arguing over whether to delete the whole article due to the temporal ambiguities that remain in the sideways dimension.¹⁸

The case of *Lost's* sixth season points to one of the particular challenges that emerges at the intersection of narrative complexity and seriality: as storyworlds grow more complicated and challenging, they require greater attention to ensure comprehension. But orientation practices for an ongoing serial means mapping a moving terrain, charting out a storyworld that is still evolving as it is being created and consumed. Viewers watched hours of flash-sideways stories without knowing how to orient

themselves to this fictional dimension relative to the core storyworld that many fans had invested a great deal of time and energy mapping and documenting. Especially for fans who watched the season in its original airing, the weekly gaps between episodes provided ample time for speculation and attempted orientations, aiming to map a coherent explanation onto the unspecified time and space of the flash-sideways. While few examples are as acute as *Lost*, a danger of all complex serials is that we will not realize what is vital for maintaining our orientation until all of a program's mysteries and outcomes are revealed, and by that time it might be too late for fans to care.

What do these categories of orientation practices teach us about how we consume complex television? First, it is significant that they are happening at all, standing as proof not only that viewers do actively engage in television viewing (which we have known for decades) but that today's television outright demands that viewers stretch beyond the time and space of their initial viewing to try to make sense of what they have seen. It is not just that audiences are active but that texts are explicitly activating them—they are designed to stimulate viewers, strategically confuse them, and force them to orient. As discussed in chapter 1, the rise of online fan culture has been essential to the success of complex television, as the tools of collective participation and orientation have enabled such programs to thrive and engage viewers. These orientation practices also help us understand how television has embraced narrative complexity and predict the areas where it might still look to develop. Clearly there has been much experimentation with complex plots and time schemes, and character relationships have always been a fertile ground for serial complexity. However, there is comparatively little experimentation in terms of innovative spatial storytelling, so if we were to predict where another wave of narrative innovation might come, we might look to how serial storytelling plays with space.

While some of these orientation practices fill in textual gaps designed by creators, most go far beyond that, taking them into the realm of fan creativity and transformational fandom—such practices highlight the ways that making maps and diagrams is fun, whether charting a fictional geography onto a real space or positing that the entirety of television is happening inside a boy's imagination. For a serial television program, orienting paratexts are often serialized as well, growing and

shifting in dialogue with the original series. In some cases, a program's producers might look to fan-created paratexts as markers of viewers' investment and theorizing that they might respond to, and sometimes fans might become more invested in expanding and maintaining the paratext than in consuming the original series itself. We can see the playfulness and passion that goes into fan engagement with orientation by looking closely at one site of *Lost* viewer practice: the encyclopedic wiki Lostpedia.

Sites of Participation: Fan Wikis as Orienting Paratexts

One important technology that emerged alongside the rise of complex television is the wiki, a system of "read/write" websites allowing multiple editors to make changes from within their browser directly without any direct HTML coding. The wiki software, which emerged in the web's early days in the 1990s but became popularized by Wikipedia's unexpected success in the 2000s, displays content to users like most webpages but allows fast editing and access to revision history at the click of a button. The ease and growing ubiquity of wiki software made it a popular option for fan groups to adopt as a collaborative tool to collect and present information about their favored cultural objects, whether that be a sports team, a musical genre, or a television series.¹⁹

Fan wikis can potentially take many different forms, functioning as sites of collaborative fan fiction or experimental storytelling media or even having the vast analytic scope of TV Tropes, which seeks to catalogue storytelling conventions of nearly every medium and genre imaginable. However, most fan wikis fall under the long shadow of Wikipedia, mirroring that site's encyclopedic approach by striving to document the storyworld and production information of an original text, explicitly serving an orienting function. There are dozens of developed fan television wikis, but I focus primarily on Lostpedia for two reasons. First, it is one of the higher-profile and larger examples of a wiki developed for a contemporary series, with most of the other larger fan television wikis documenting longer-running franchises such as *Doctor Who*, *The Simpsons*, and *Star Trek*. Second, my knowledge of Lostpedia runs deeper than that of most users of the site, as I was a frequent editor

of the site throughout the program's run and, for a period of around six months in 2006, served as one of a dozen rotating site administrators. Thus I approach my analysis as a participant-observer, looking at the cultural practices of editing a fan wiki from the inside.²⁰

Lostpedia was launched in 2005 at the start of *Lost*'s second season by Kevin Croy, a computer programmer who created the site as a technical test for how to administer the MediaWiki software, figuring *Lost* was a good topic to experiment with. The site's growth surprised him; it was supported by dedicated editors adding and supervising content while Croy and others successfully maintained the invisible but vital back end. Lostpedia has since grown into a full-fledged *Lost* portal, with an associated forum, blog, IRC chat room, and more than 10 foreign-language mirrors, although my analysis focuses on the original English-language wiki. In 2008, Lostpedia migrated from its own independent server to the wikia.com domain, which is run by the Wikimedia Foundation; despite the migration, the same community of Lostpedians made the site one of the most popular fan wikis in the world, generating over 7,000 unique content pages, more than 3 million registered users, over a million edits, and over 150 million page views.

My analysis of Lostpedia considers how the site aggregates fans' creativity and consumption practices, the limits and boundaries placed on that fan-generated content, and the rationales for those policies and preferences. These uses of Lostpedia are definitely influenced by the ways *Lost* differs significantly from other television programs, with a larger global viewership and a broad array of *Lost* transmedia content, including multiple games, novels, toys, and extensive web tie-ins, as discussed in chapter 9. Perhaps even more central to the growth of Lostpedia, the program's central narrative framework presents *Lost* as a puzzle to be solved, a set of interlocking enigmas that require research materials and a searchable archive to enable comprehension. Such ludic narrative logic and transmedia storytelling promote forensic fandom by encouraging research, collaboration, analysis, and interpretation. As Henry Jenkins discusses in his early study of online forensic fandom of *Twin Peaks*, fans saw the technologies of the VCR and Usenet boards as essential tools to crack the narrative codes of the early complex series.²¹ Just as *Lost*'s narrative architecture pushed the complexities of television storytelling far

beyond the innovations of *Twin Peaks*, the decoder rings of today have similarly evolved to facilitate a more inclusive, faster paced, participatory, and multimedia forensic fandom.

Thus Lostpedia's core function is as a shared archive of narrative knowledge, combing the series, its brand extensions, and its cultural references to make sense of the program's mysteries and storytelling web for viewers seeking orientation. But Lostpedia goes beyond the realm of collecting information, with elaborated policies on how to treat borderline material such as speculation, hypotheses, parody, and fan-generated paratexts. Such forms blur the boundaries between fan creativity and fan documentation, as the three orienting functions of recapitulation, analysis, and expansion all coexist throughout Lostpedia, often in tension. How do the users who generate the site's content make these distinctions and decide on such policies?

As suggested earlier in this chapter and discussed more in chapter 4, charting characters and their relationships is a key orientation practice for complex series with large casts. Productive fans frequently go beyond recapping existing relationships to speculate about and call for relationships beyond what appears in the text, especially queer readings of characters via fan fiction and remix videos, but a wiki that is primarily used to document a storyworld seems like an unlikely space for such speculative production. When I first did this research in spring 2008, Lostpedia had a space for queer readings and shipping fandom (viewers' desire to see a romantic couple within the series or paratexts) on the page called "Pairings." The page was defined as follows: "Pairings are relationships, either real or suggested, that fans enjoy and would love to see consummated. The desire for love to blossom on the Island between several pairs of characters, to varying degrees of commitment and affection is explored further in fan fiction."²² Beneath this brief disclaimer, the page listed a wide array of romantic relationships included in the series and their playful fan shorthand terms, such as Sawyer and Kate ("Skate") and Charlie and Claire, whose multiple monikers include "PB&J," for "Pregnant Babe and Junkie." This page also included relationships more imagined than enacted, such as Sayid and Kate ("Kayid") and Claire and Ethan ("Eclairé"). Same-sex pairings were also included equally in this list, such as Kate and Juliet ("Juliate") and Locke and Sawyer ("Lawyer"), with links to related fan-created projects that explore these relationships,

such as the satirical fanvid *Brokeback Island* portraying a Jack-Sawyer romance. On this page, all romantic relationships, from canonical to slash (slang for homoerotic fan fiction) to extratextual, such as the mashup of producers Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse into "Darlon," were given equal billing, seeming to exist without hierarchy within the Lostpedia universe.

One of the hazards of researching wikis is that the object of analysis is potentially always in flux. On January 2, 2009, the "Pairings" page transformed without discussion, when a Lostpedia administrator removed all noncanonical relationships from the page, offering only the explanation, "removing fan wished relationships. non-encyclopedic cruft." A link to a page about fan-made names remained, but the shipping content there was far less prominent and extensive. This edit suggests how oftentimes wiki content can appear or go missing by a single user's preferences, rather than by consensus or debate, even when a clear policy remains in place—and often such changes are left in place simply because nobody within the community notices the edit or because people assume that the administrator speaks for the entire community when it may just be his or her own preferences. While any wiki does reflect a version of consensus among the editing community at a given time, it is important to note that oftentimes it is a passively accepted status quo rather than an actively negotiated agreement, with active and vocal editors trumping broader-based opinions of less forceful or frequent users.

While wikis can be frustrating to study for their instability, the fluidity also allows direct engagement by researchers when appropriate. Although as an academic I would not want to impose a single vision of proper fan practice, the wiki platform allows interventions to be transparent and impermanent. Because I disagreed with the decision to eliminate imagined relationships from the site, I created a page titled "Pairings (fanon)" on March 27, 2009, to restore the "cruft" (excessive, detailed material) that had been edited out, albeit within its own fanonical space as dictated by Lostpedia policy. No users have protested this change, and there have been more than a dozen additions to the page since. I made this direct intervention into the site as a fan and dedicated user, informed by my analysis of the site's practices—the lack of response suggests that wikis are often transformed not by a unified community but by individual decisions passively accepted by the user base.

The “Pairing” page’s discussion tab reveals an older history with more drama and conflict, less around slash content and more questioning the basic point of shipping fandom, often with an aggressive and belittling tone toward shipper fans. Such discussions highlight how Lostpedia can function as a space of debate over what is appropriate use of the site, as well as how best to watch the series itself. In my own experiences, any bullying behavior coming from some editors is not tolerated for long, with well-respected prominent editors regularly weighing in to defend a broad array of fandoms and ways of using the site, not asserting a singular norm of how best to watch *Lost* or to use Lostpedia. However, Lostpedians do maintain some important but debatable boundaries about how best to organize and categorize the various types of content contained on the site, inspiring conversation that echoes how many viewers parse out various reactions to and engagements with a series—just as fans debate whether they want *Lost* to be rational science fiction, magical fantasy, or melodramatic adventure, they weigh in as to what type of knowledge and creativity Lostpedia should include and exclude.

Lostpedia categorizes pages into a number of broad types of content, including canon, theory, fanon (fan-produced content), and parody. These categories are central to the organization of Lostpedia but are far from self-evident for a transmedia narrative such as *Lost*. The canon page in Lostpedia has undergone a series of significant revisions—initially, it offered two categories of canon and noncanon, marked by the presence or absence of official endorsement from the program’s creators. After the ARG *The Lost Experience* and tie-in novel *Bad Twin* complicated the boundaries of the storyworld, as discussed in chapter 9, Lostpedians began to debate various levels of canonicity. One dedicated editor proposed a complex and highly Catholic set of canonical levels—Canon, Deuterocanon, Ex cathedra, and Apocrypha. While the community ultimately rejected these gradients, due to both their lack of simplicity for casual users and their religious connotations that put off some editors, the ensuing discussion forced Lostpedians to engage with fairly complex notions of narrative medium, transmedia authority, and intentionality—for instance, if a deleted scene appears on a DVD, does it count as a canonical event in the storyworld? As one active editor philosophically posited, “If Claire had coffee with the pilot and someone

deleted that scene, did they have coffee?” The canon policy that stands today is more straightforward, with three levels of canon, semicanon, and noncanon, resting ultimate authority with the series authors, both creative and industrial—if it comes out via ABC or from the mouths of producers, it is canonical. Usually.

One of the central ways this policy impacts Lostpedia’s users is that canonical content is presented as the site’s unspoken standard or norm, which fits with Lostpedia’s typical encyclopedic form of writing—a page containing canon is unmarked, simply existing as one of hundreds of entries in Lostpedia’s archive of the program’s narrative universe. By contrast, most other modes of information contained on the site are clearly labeled as noncanonical, creating a clear hierarchy between creator-endorsed truth and fan-created paratruth, or perhaps “truthiness,” in Stephen Colbert’s wiki-friendly term. The most integrated of these noncanonical modes are theories—since the site’s inception, Lostpedia has served as a venue for mulling possible explanations for the island’s enigmas, with a variety of different ways of separating the canonical known from theoretical speculation and musings. Unlike other encyclopedias and even Wikipedia, Lostpedia has always allowed for original research and analysis, incorporating fan-created knowledge alongside the more encyclopedic acts of collecting, organizing, and distilling canonical information.

Lostpedians do try to mark differences between various forms of theory. Some broad-based theories as to the nature of the island garner their own individual articles, such as the Garden of Eden Theory or the Black Hole Theory—these macrotheories are expected to offer compelling evidence and links to external sources for underlying ideas and to present a persuasive case for their potential accuracy. Discussion pages for such theories tend to be robust debates over the merits and inconsistencies of such ideas, a model of collective engagement that many scholars highlight as one of the most participatory and exciting aspects of fan culture.²³

For some Lostpedians who view the wiki as an authoritative document of the canonical storyworld, theories and speculations belong on the site’s discussion forums, not within the wiki itself. To enforce this distinction between verified storyworld “fact” and conjecture, a wiki architecture was developed for including theories in Lostpedia’s archive:

the “theory tab,” a separate subpage on each article that allows for non-canonical possibilities. Lostpedians work to ensure that such theory tabs are not simply discussion forums and speculative musings but more elaborated attempts to posit and prove interpretations. The theory tab emerged in late 2006 out of a frustration that individual article pages were being overwhelmed with speculation and theories and thus detracting from canonical information. The discussion about the theory tab recognized that theorizing was unusual for most other wikis modeled after Wikipedia but also that such analysis is crucial for the nature of *Lost*'s narrative mode and forensic fan base.

In many ways, the creation of the theory tab served to further canonize the site's authorial-endorsed factual content. As one anonymous editor wrote to endorse the theory tab, “Not only do I feel it will keep things organized, and give more room for elaborated canon-based justifications of each theory, but also think the explicit separation of Theories from the facts articles, will be of a great effect on debunking any claims of Lostpedia being a fiction-based project.” Placing aside the definitional contortions evoked by attempting to deny the fictional roots of a *Lost* encyclopedia, such comments highlight how the site's architecture is designed to allow spaces for noncanonical fan production as a means of prioritizing canonical authorized content, a marked separate sphere of unofficial knowledge that helps make canon seem more official by comparison. The site's theory policy also stipulates that canon trumps theory—when a theory is disproved, either via producer denials or conclusive storyworld evidence, such theories are deleted from the theory tab. While the policy allows discredited theories to be archived on a page's discussion tab, it is clear that the goal of theories is to arrive at fact, not to serve as an ongoing realm of fan creativity or speculation or an archive of noncanonical imagination of different narrative possibilities.

The discussion over the place of theories cuts to the very heart of the definition of Lostpedia and wikis in general. One active editor, who offered the initial proposal for theory tabs, highlights that theories potentially muddy the waters of the site's goals: “Wiki editors, IMHO [in my humble opinion], should seek to be recorders, rather than editorialists, otherwise we risk biasing others with our opinions. I've noticed many newer editors don't edit anything *but* theories nowadays.” Other

users take a more pluralist approach to including theorizing within the purview of Lostpedia, highlighting how much postepisode traffic is editing theories more than filling out canonical information and that not every user references the site as an encyclopedia. Even *Lost*'s cocreator Damon Lindelof highlights this coexistence of theory and canon in a 2009 interview conducted on Lostpedia; after explaining the official series bible maintained by the story editor Gregg Nations, Lindelof suggests,

What differentiates Gregg from what Lostpedia does, is that Lostpedia is speculative. That is to say, it has to assume something, because it's not run by us. So, you know, I think there is sometimes a perception out there that Lostpedia is kind of branded by the show, as opposed to a separate fan community, and we find ourselves having to differentiate those two things. That being said, when we've visited the site we are incredibly impressed with sort of the level of detail. There are occasions where we basically say “What was Juliet's husband's first name?,” and if Gregg is not sitting in his office we will log into Lostpedia to get that answer.²⁴

Thus for *Lost*'s production staff as for many of its fans, Lostpedia's primary function is as a repository of canonical fact, supplemented—and made questionably valid—by the associated noncanonical speculation and theories.

In many ways, the tensions between Lostpedia's canonical and non-canonical information stem from the slippage between the software platform of wikis and its most well-known iteration in Wikipedia—there is no platform-determinate reason that wikis are suited more for documenting than editorializing, and many wikis have been used as sites of collaborative creativity, collective brainstorming, and other potentials beyond gathering and organizing facts.²⁵ But for most people, the word *wiki* evokes Wikipedia and its assumed objective model of writing—for instance, a commenter on Sarah Toton's article about Battlestar Wiki offers the following dubious claim as fact: “A wiki, by definition, is an encyclopedia.”²⁶ This connection between wikis and encyclopedias is further emphasized by Lostpedia's name, evoking the objective *-pedia* rather than collaborative *wiki-* aspect of Wikipedia's portmanteau name; although its name and platform do evoke an encyclopedic factualism,

Lostpedia's orienting practices include a broader array of creative and analytical production than do most Wikipedia-style wikis.

Fan production goes far beyond the realm of collecting and recording narrative orienting information, and Lostpedia does have ample space for fanonical modes of contribution. Initially, the site allowed for original parody pages, allowing editors to create pages that tweaked many of the conventions of both *Lost* and Lostpedia. One of my personal favorites of such pages was "Box," a parodic theory positing that a cardboard box made by the company owned by Hurley and employing Locke was the essential powerful force that caused all of the island's enigmas—the page documented every image of a box appearing in the program and included such enigmatic clues as "Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse have described a new lead character in Season 3 as 'cubical, hollow, brown, and corrugated.'" This fanonical page faced a bit of a crisis of faith in season 3, when Ben Linus referred to a "magic box" that allowed him to transport Locke's father to the island—editors had to clarify the links to "Box" to separate the canonical (although probably metaphoric) magic box from the parodic Lostpedia box, while some editors felt that Ben's reference to the box was a shout-out to Lostpedia from the producers, a theory that remains unsubstantiated.

In the summer of 2007, Lostpedia had a collective change of heart about parodies. As numerous parodic pages emerged to less-than-enthusiastic reactions, the community debated how to deal with bad parodies and whether embracing parodies creates a slippery slope. As one Lostpedian wrote, "If we accept parodic articles, how do we feel about slash [fiction]? I could argue, and possibly successfully, that the only difference between slash and parody is the intended audience. Opening the door to one would therefore open the door to the other, and... I don't think slash belongs in Lostpedia. I'm questioning whether fanon does, either, and now I wonder about parody. Thoughts?" The consensus was that neither parody nor slash belongs in Lostpedia, at least as the site of origin. Parody and fanon became markers used to point to fan-produced content that resides outside Lostpedia, such as fanvids, fanfic, parodies, and fan sites, but Lostpedia removed all pages composed of original fan content, including "Box." This is consistent with Lostpedia's role as orienting paratext, serving to point to other non-orienting works but not hosting them directly.

But we should not take this decision to ban original content creation as a disavowal of the wiki architecture as a site to enable collaborative creativity. One fanonical page that remains is "Jackface," a gallery of images of Matthew Fox, the actor who portrays Jack Shephard, making hyperemotional facial expressions. "Jackface" works as a site of wikified creativity because the community shares the basic parameters of what constitutes a Jackface and a common appreciation for the form—the collective intelligence of Jackfacers makes the page a definitive resource for sharing a parodic wink about one of the program's lead actors, while feeling like we are contributing to something a bit more creative than cataloguing canon.

Lostpedia also allows for a mode of writing that we might think of as creative nonfiction, with the caveat that this "nonfictional" gaze is aimed at the fictional storyworld of *Lost*. Pages categorized as literary devices, such as "Archetype," "Plot Twist," and "Symbolism," all offer original analysis and research, synthesizing elements of the series to demonstrate its use of particular storytelling devices and representational strategies—such original research is strictly forbidden on Wikipedia, marking a key difference for how Lostpedia can work counter to its encyclopedic label.

One interesting example of this mode of collaborative research is the page "Economics." Originally drafted in June 2006 by a doctoral student in economics, the page initially read like a term paper exploring how the allocation of resources on the island mirrored various economic models. Dozens of editors dived in, expanding, deepening, and rethinking the original article, leading to its being awarded Featured Article of the Week status in late 2006, the first time such an analytical, non-encyclopedic page was highlighted on the site's front page. While academics are prone to thinking of analysis as a solitary extension of single mind, the original creator embraced the collaborative output of the community: "Wow. When I started working on this entry around 8 months ago, I never dreamed the community of viewers would transform it into this. This entry is really spectacular as a result of what everyone has contributed. The weakest parts of it, I now see, are the original sections I wrote! Seriously, this is phenomenal." The "Economics" page, like other such analytical pages on Lostpedia, are not tagged as fanon or otherwise marked as noncanonical. This distinction was noted in July 2007 by a user who had just joined Lostpedia: "In what sense is

analysis, in the sense you're using it, not fanon? 'Analysis' like Economics is non-canonical (I don't think the word 'socialism' has ever even been used in the show), fan-created, and is based on, but not a part of, actual canon. Something doesn't need to be far-fetched or outlandish to be fanon, after all." Years have passed with no reply, suggesting that distinguishing analysis from canon is a far less pressing concern among Lostpedians than demarcating or eliminating more explicitly creative modes such as parody and fanfic. While the wiki architecture allows for multiple modes of collaborative creativity, the Lostpedia community seems to have embraced a hierarchy of perceived value differently than Wikipedia, by allowing original research, analysis, and theories but still embracing core distinctions in fan culture that privilege canonical content and extensions from more explicitly noncanonical modes of creativity, a distinction that certainly connects with the gendered differences noted by Toton and many fan scholars.

Lostpedia's dual function as a catalogue of canon and a site of original creativity found an interesting point of synergy surrounding *The Lost Experience* in the summer of 2006, as discussed in more depth in chapter 9. This alternate reality game extended the program's narrative universe beyond the confines of the television screen and into the real lives of viewers. Fans could attend events to receive complimentary Apollo Bars (a candy featured in season 2), watch a fictional representative of the mysterious organization the Hanso Foundation appear on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* to denounce the misinformation spread by *Lost*, and witness a live event at Comic Con in which the ARG's main character, Rachel Blake, accused *Lost* producers of having "blood on [their] hands." Clearly the blur between real life and fictional universes was part of the game's appeal, a disorienting blur that extended into Lostpedia.

A key part of *The Lost Experience* was a hunt for 70 pieces of a larger code that could be entered into a website to reveal a hidden video offering key mythology about both the ARG and the in-series DHARMA Initiative. These codes were primarily linked to graphic glyphs that were embedded in a variety of websites or posted in real-life locations. In August, the "puppet masters" of the ARG contacted a number of fan sites to embed glyphs, including Lostpedia. The site administrator Kevin Croy received a request to embed a glyph in Lostpedia, and Croy

subsequently contacted me as the designated *Lost Experience* system operator. The two of us devised a puzzle using wiki protocols that was designed to pay back dedicated Lostpedians through their knowledge of the site by giving them their own glyph. While it took a few days for users to discover the trail of links, the puzzle began when they found the new user account of Rachel Blake posting on Lostpedia. Once the glyph was found, one Lostpedian commented on Blake's page, "Awww. This is so exciting! I feel like Lostpedia is getting a little reward! :)." However, the way we placed the material on Lostpedia probably violated the community's policies on posting original content and properly labeling noncanonical contributions, policies that both players and administrators happily overlooked. Not only did this event create an interesting loop with my own participation as researcher, ARG player, community member, and momentary puppet master, but it also highlights how the encyclopedic thrust of Lostpedia can be punctured to create spaces of ludic engagement and fictional role-play, even as it still functions as an authoritative and reliable source of *Lost* information.

I want to conclude this analysis by highlighting the potential of the wiki architecture to overcome and blur boundaries and hierarchies between fiction and truth, canon and fanon. Even though Lostpedia's structure privileges canon and the authority of *Lost*'s creators, it also offers many spaces for unauthorized content, creative experimentation, and blurring boundaries between categories. Except for an occasional rant by an aggressive user, the site is impressive for its collegial discourse across different realms of fandom: shippers and cataloguers, theorists and vidders. The open platform of the wiki allows for constant remaking of the site's parameters and policies, and Lostpedians use other platforms to include content not appropriate to the main wiki—in the program's hiatus after season 3, the site sponsored a fan fiction contest to map out the arc of the following season, hosted on the Lostpedia discussion forum. While the site's hierarchies and attitudes matter, they are fluid and ever changing (even in the dormancy following *Lost*'s end in 2010), reshaping as the community develops. Although hierarchies between different modes of practice, engagement, and identity persist within various spheres of fandom, the structural possibilities of wikis such as Lostpedia provide a paratextual site where differences within a fandom can be ironed out, one edit at a time.

Orienting and Drilling: Forensic Fandom as Mode of Engagement

Throughout this chapter, I have focused on ways that viewers engage with television by digging into its content, exploring its form, and orienting themselves to their favorite storyworlds. This approach to digging into a fictional text runs counter to one of the dominant trends found in contemporary media culture: the “viral video” or, more accurately, “spreadable media” that suffuses social networks.²⁷ While the ephemeral “video of attractions” model that is common to YouTube, sharing links and offering brief comments during downtime at work, is certainly an important and prevalent mode of contemporary media consumption and dissemination, complex serials offer a countering approach to online engagement. They spread less through exponential linking and sharing for quick hits than via proselytizing by die-hard fans eager to hook friends into their shared narrative obsessions. Even when they are enabled by the spreadable technologies of online distribution, both licit and illicit, the consumption patterns of complex serials are typically more focused on the core narrative text than are the proliferating paratexts and fan creativity that typify spreadable media.

We need a different metaphor to describe viewers’ engagement with complex television and its paratextual extensions, thinking of such texts as *drillable* rather than *spreadable*. Complex television encourages forensic fans to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling. Such programs create magnets for engagement, drawing viewers into the storyworlds and urging them to drill down to discover more. As this chapter documents, complex series encourage viewers both to consult and create maps and guides, generating orienting paratexts to help comprehend and engage with select programs, and to fill the gaps between episodes with deeper and more wide-ranging engagement. Drillability as a metaphor suggests that viewers are mining to discover something that is already there, buried beneath the surface, but many examples of forensic fandom are invested in using analytic techniques to posit a way of looking at a series regardless of the perceived intent or design of the creators, as with the Tommy Westphall Theory or the Dungeons & Dragons alignment charts—such expansive paratexts drill to create new playful realms of

narrative experience, even if the end result does not increase viewers’ canonical orientation.

Drillable engagement and forensic fandom are not entirely new phenomena but rather have accelerated by degree in the digital era. Highly serialized genres such as soap operas have always fostered fan archivists and textual experts, while sports fans have a long history of drilling down statistically and collecting artifacts to engage with a team or player. Fan cultures in ongoing fictional series have long invested energy in chronicling, analyzing, and documenting franchises ranging from Sherlock Holmes to *Star Wars*.²⁸ However, contemporary examples are notable for both the digital tools that have enabled fans to collectively apply and share their forensic efforts and the demands that mainstream network programs make on their viewers to pay attention and connect the narrative dots. Additionally, as discussed in chapter 9, many contemporary series are dispersing their narrative content across media forms, providing opportunities or even actively requiring viewers to drill down into various sites to fully comprehend their storyworlds.

A single text can inspire fans to both drill and spread. For instance, *Battlestar Galactica* features a highly complex narrative that encourages fans to drill into the mythology on Battlestar Wiki and countless blogs and online forums. As the level of depth increases, fewer fans are actively engaging, but their intensity rises in positing theories and interpretations about the storyworld and its potential outcomes or debating the program’s representational politics or social commentary. This type of engaged drilling requires concentration and motivation by fans, making it a realm for the most dedicated and die-hard viewers—Battlestar Wiki boasts almost 8,000 registered users, although only a fraction of them actively contribute to the site, suggesting a small niche of the millions of television viewers who consume the series.²⁹

However, even a complex serial in which every aspect of the narrative is potentially interconnected can inspire spreadable offshoots more akin to the bulk of shared video on YouTube. One such example comes from season 4 of *Battlestar*, in which a character unexpectedly and brutally kills herself. Forensic-minded drilling fans took this moment as an opportunity to explore motivations, rationale, and repercussions, but one fan saw a spreadable opportunity. Posting a video on YouTube called “Worst Commercial Placement Ever,” the clip shows the moment

of the suicide, ending with the body lying in a pool of blood, and then continues into the advertisement that followed the scene on Canadian television: a cracker commercial with slow-motion shots of splashing tomato soup (resembling blood via this juxtaposition) and set to an upbeat song with the lyric, “I just want to celebrate another day of living!” This clip fits YouTube’s attraction model, with a clear moment of spectacular humor requiring no depth of storyworld knowledge—it is not surprising that the clip has been seen more than 250,000 times and linked to on numerous blogs and social networks. Even after the clip was blocked for copyright infringement, fans posted numerous copies to continue the spreadable moment.³⁰ (Alas, I have no information as to how successful this ad was in promoting the cracker brand, but clearly many more people have seen the commercial via this spread.)

The opposition between spreadable and drillable should be thought of not as a hierarchy but rather as different but complementary vectors of cultural engagement. Spreadable media encourages horizontal ripples, accumulating eyeballs without necessarily encouraging more long-term engagement. Drillable media typically engage far fewer people but occupy more of their time and energies in a vertical descent into a text’s complexities. As discussed more in chapter 6, privileging depth over breadth is a knee-jerk response bred in the humanities, where complexity is a marker of quality over surface pleasures of sensation and surprise that are more typical in spreadable media. However, we need to dismiss our normative stance of valuing one mode over another, allowing that both spreadable attractions and drillable complexity are legitimate forms of cultural engagement, differently appropriate depending on a viewer’s context and goals—and being open to other vectors and modes of engagement beyond this binary as well.

And certainly for many television viewers, a text that demands drilling into transmedia, creation of maps or reference materials, or otherwise requires orienting paratexts to ensure comprehension sets too high of a bar to entry to attract audiences sufficiently large enough to sustain itself within the commercial television marketplace, with rare exceptions such as *Lost*. Given that television has traditionally been regarded (if not actually functioned) as a medium suited for low engagement and passive attention, the rise of complex programming that encourages paratextual play and expansiveness does not meet many people’s

expectations for how they watch television and what they hope to take away from it. There are certainly viewers who avoid complex series for fear of the implied time commitments and need for external “homework” that counter their goals of television offering relaxing and low-impact pleasures, especially when compared to other media that are regarded as more serious (literature, some music) and/or participatory (games, other music). But as discussed in chapter 6, we need to recognize the particular viewing possibilities offered by complex series, not to hierarchize complexity over conventionality but to highlight how contemporary television broadens the possible textual pleasures and corresponding modes of engagement available to viewers, fostering a mode of forensic fandom that appears to be an essential type of 21st-century media consumption.

Transmedia Storytelling

Few storytelling forms can match serial television for narrative breadth and vastness. A single narrative universe can continue onward for years or even decades in the case of daytime serials, with cumulative plotlines and character backstories accruing far beyond what any dedicated fan could reasonably remember. Even a series that fails to find an audience typically airs for a comparatively long time—for instance, the single-season *Terriers* is viewed as a commercial failure, but it still offered 13 episodes of serial storytelling, with a combined running time of over nine hours that eclipses the scope of most novels and nearly every feature film. In short, of all the challenges that face the creators of television fiction, the lack of screen time to tell their stories is hardly an issue.

Given serial television's temporal vastness, it would seem unlikely that producers would want to expand a story into other venues, as managing the single-medium realm of a television series is more than enough work for a creative team. However, the 21st century has seen the rise of innovative narrative extensions grouped under the term *transmedia storytelling*, significantly expanding the scope of a television series into an array of other media, from books to blogs, videogames to jigsaw puzzles. To understand the phenomenon of transmedia television, we need to examine the strategies used by various series, the motivations behind such narrative extensions, and the tactics employed by viewers to make sense of such expanded serialized vastness.¹

Any thoughtful study of contemporary transmedia must acknowledge that transmedia is not a new phenomenon but predates the digital age. Even if the term is new, the strategy of adapting and expanding a narrative into other media is as old as media themselves—think of paintings dramatizing biblical scenes or iconic 19th-century characters such as Frankenstein or Sherlock Holmes whose narrative scope transcends any single medium. Early television employed transmedia strategies as well, as one of the medium's first hits, *Dragnet*, spanned multiple

media: starting as a radio program, the more popular television series spawned a number of novels; a feature film; a hit record for its theme song; tie-in toys such as a board game, a police badge, and a whistle; and even a television reboot of the 1950s original in the late 1960s.

Highlighting the history of transmedia is not to suggest that nothing new is happening in recent years, as the proliferation of digital forms has certainly led to transmedia techniques that are both greater in degree and different in kind. Technological transformations have helped enable such proliferations, as digital platforms such as online video, blogs, computer games, DVD supplements, and new forms such as alternate reality games (ARGs) are widely accessible avenues for expanding a narrative universe. Television producers use social networks and platforms to enable engagement across screens, creating opportunities for narrative expansions through viewer-driven conversations and sharing within so-called second-screen experiences. Additionally, industrial shifts that have shrunk the relative size of any one program's television audience and expanded competition across numerous cable and broadcast outlets have encouraged producers to experiment with transmedia as a way to get noticed and to build viewers' loyalty in an increasingly cluttered television schedule. We might characterize this as a shift in norms: in previous decades, it was exceptional for a program to employ a significant transmedia strategy, while today it is more exceptional for a high-profile series not to.

Despite the growing ubiquity of transmedia, we need to avoid confusing general transmedia extensions with the more particular mode of transmedia storytelling. Nearly every media property today offers some transmedia extensions, such as promotional websites, merchandise, or behind-the-scenes materials—these forms can be usefully categorized as paratexts in relation to the core text, whether a feature film, a videogame, or a television series. As Jonathan Gray has argued in his defining work on the topic, we cannot view any text in our media-saturated age in isolation from its paratexts—for instance, films come preframed by trailers, DVD covers, and posters, and once any text enters into cultural circulation, it becomes part of a complex intertextual web.² However, we can follow Gray's lead by distinguishing between paratexts that function primarily to hype, promote, introduce, and discuss a text and those that function as ongoing sites of narrative expansion, which I explore here;

I would add a third category of *orienting paratexts* that serve to help viewers make sense of a narrative, as discussed in chapter 8. This chapter focuses on paratexts whose prime goal is to expand the storyworld and to extend narrative engagement with the series and that are not designed primarily to chronicle, reflect on, or promote a program.

Transmedia storytelling thrives in ongoing narrative paratexts, through a strategy best captured by Henry Jenkins's comprehensive and influential definition of the form: "Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story."³ This definition of transmedia storytelling problematizes the hierarchy between text and paratext, for in the most ideally balanced example, all texts would be equally weighted, rather than one being privileged as "text" while others serve as supporting "paratexts." However in the high-stakes commercial media industry, the financial realities demand that the core medium of any franchise be identified and privileged, typically emphasizing the more traditional television or film form over newer modes of online textuality. It is useful to distinguish between Jenkins's proposed ideal of *balanced transmedia*, with no one medium or text serving a primary role over others, with the more commonplace model of *unbalanced transmedia*, with a clearly identifiable core text and a number of peripheral transmedia extensions that might be more or less integrated into the narrative whole, acknowledging that most examples fall somewhere on a spectrum between balanced and unbalanced. Most prime time television programs serve as the core text of their transmedia franchises, with the unusual example of *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* as a rare exception pointed toward a more balanced approach in which comics and films are seemingly more central to the narrative. In this chapter, I focus on examples in which the originating television series is the core text, with transmedia extensions serving as paratexts in clearer cases of unbalanced transmedia.

This issue of relative emphasis and priority across transmedia is crucial to both the industrial and storytelling logics of serial television. American commercial television's core business model is predicated on attracting viewers to a television program, aggregating them into

measurable audience segments, and selling that viewership to advertisers in the currency of Nielsen ratings. Even as television's industrial structures shift toward more flexible measures of audience practices and engagement, the emphasis still remains on generating high ratings to generate the majority of revenues used to fund both television and its associated forays into transmedia storytelling. The industrial edict to protect and strengthen the core business of watching commercial television creates a creative imperative as well: any television-based transmedia must protect the "mothership," *Lost* producers Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse's term for the central television series at the heart of their armada of transmedia extensions. For the industry, some transmedia extensions might provide an additional revenue stream, but their primary function is to drive viewers back to the television series; for creators, transmedia storytelling must always support and strengthen the core television narrative experience. These goals are particularly important within a serial form, as the gaps between episodes and seasons provide time for viewers' attention to wander—for many people within the industry, transmedia is optimistically regarded as a magnet to sustain viewers' engagement and attention across these periodic gaps.

This imperative creates challenges to mesh Jenkins's definitional ideal of balanced, distributed transmedia as a "unified and coordinated entertainment experience" with the reality that television storytellers must privilege the mothership by designing experiences that viewers can consume in a wide range of ways without sacrificing coherence or engagement, regardless of how aware they may be of the paratextual extensions. This challenge of differential engagement plays a crucial role in one of this chapter's case studies, as *Lost* embraced a wide range of transmedia strategies that tried both to protect the mothership for television-only viewers and to reward participation for transmedia-savvy fans. The chapter's other case study, *Breaking Bad*, considers an alternative approach to paratexts that treats canonicity and narrative continuity quite differently, suggesting varying ways that transmedia storytelling might work within extended storyworlds. But before turning to these detailed examples, it is important to chart out some of television's earlier transmedia experiments to clarify precisely what is meant by "storytelling" when discussing transmedia.

Precedents of Transmedia Television

Storytelling typically suggests the centrality of narrative events, where a story consists of “what happens.” Certainly events are crucial ingredients of any story, but as discussed in the introduction, narratives are also composed of characters and settings, two additional components that are crucial to transmedia storytelling. Complex television treats these facets as cumulative and consistent within the storyworld, with everything that happens and everyone we see as part of this persistent narrative universe. As discussed throughout this book, such cumulative persistence is one of the chief ways that serial storytelling is defined against episodic television—an episodic drama or sitcom may have the same characters and storyworld, but such characters rarely remember previous events and there is little sense of continuity between episodes, enabling viewers to watch intermittently and out of chronology.

For fans of serial television, charting the canonical events, characters, and settings featured in a storyworld is a central mode of engagement, with viewers striving for both narrative comprehension and deeper understanding of a fictional universe, often through the orientation practices discussed in chapter 8. The rising prevalence of transmedia television alongside the increase in complex seriality has complicated this question of cumulative canon, forcing producers to make difficult choices about how transmedia serial storytelling situates its paratexts in relation to the core television canonical mothership. We can see the important precedents for these issues playing out through older examples of transmedia television in the forms of tie-in books and videogames.

Books have a long history as paratexts to moving-image media, both in conventional prose and comic-based graphic forms, but their role is typically derided as nonessential add-ons rather than integrated transmedia. For many film properties, the most common books are novelizations, direct *retellings* of the story events, characters, and settings previously seen on-screen and typified by uninspired mass-market paperback novelizations and their comic-book counterparts. Although such novelizations are far from the model of coordinated, dispersed transmedia storytelling as envisioned by Jenkins, they frequently do add material to the storyworld by filling in gaps in the story, whether it be events not

seen on-screen or internal character thoughts or backstories that are far easier to convey by the written word—I remember first watching *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and wondering how Indiana Jones survived the submarine going underwater, only to have a friend point me to the novelization for the answer. Strict novelizations that retell on-screen stories are much rarer for series television, with most examples found in the realm of cult television classics such as the original 1960s-era *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek*, both of which saw many of their episodes adapted to the novelized format. In these television franchises and others in film, such as *Star Wars*, the novels can become part of the canonical storyworld, with details and characters that have been expanded in the novels sometimes appearing in future on-screen installments.

The narrative form of series television encourages another, more common form of tie-in novel, with a book functioning like a *new episode* of an ongoing series. This approach makes sense for highly episodic programs, as established characters and settings can easily host a new set of narrative events without much need to police canonical boundaries—we see this type of tie-in novel frequently in series that connect to popular fiction genres, such as police procedurals from *Dragnet* to *Columbo* to *CSI*. In such episodic narratives, the books function mainly to stay true to the characters, tone, and norms of the narrative universe—the actual plots are frequently irrelevant to larger continuity, and thus questions of canonicity rarely matter. For the cult realm of science fiction, tie-in novels are quite common, but the questions of canon are more fraught. The original *Star Trek* featured dozens of tie-in new-episode novels in addition to novelized retellings; while most were regarded as noncanonical by the franchise's creative team, many fans embraced them, especially in the decades between the original series leaving the air and the emergence of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in the late 1980s. *Doctor Who* similarly used novels to fill the era between 1989 and 2005 when there was no television series in production, with novels sometimes serving to inspire story elements in the rebooted television series.

Novelistic extensions from more contemporary serials often fall in the awkward realm of semicanon: endorsed by the program's creative team but not fully integrated into its complex serial arcs. Examples of this include *24*, whose novels typically predate the program's continuity by telling tales from characters' backstories, and *Buffy the Vampire*

Slayer, which features both novelized retellings and new-episode novels (in both prose and comic forms) exploring a broad chronology in the franchise's mythology. Such tie-ins are usually written independently from the program's core writers but based on story outlines that are approved by showrunners and production studios—except for notable instances when a program's producer pens his or her own canonical tie-in, as with *Buffy* creator Joss Whedon writing an arc of comic books that came to be known as "Season 8," continuing the series continuity after it left the air. Such print extensions of beloved series can be quite popular among fans, who often have a love/hate relationship with the books, as they try to police boundaries of canon, seek tonal consistencies, and otherwise explore the borders of their favored fictional storyworlds.

While fans typically judge print extensions on how well they capture the tone, setting, and characters of the mothership, the type of integrated transmedia that Jenkins explores in the example of *The Matrix* franchise places more emphasis on narrative events, so that the plot is distributed across media.⁴ Few television series have attempted to create transmedia extensions that offer such *canonic integration*, with interwoven story events that must be consumed across media for full comprehension. This is surely in large part due to the industrial demands of a commercial television system that depends on revenue from selling eyeballs to advertisers, which mandatory transmedia might seem to undermine. Additionally, the broad (if erroneous) cultural assumption that television is a low-commitment, passive, "lean back" medium would argue against experiments that demand more from viewers beyond just sitting and watching an episode. As complex narratives have demonstrated, viewers will actively engage with challenging television, and thus producers have been willing to try more overtly canonically integrated transmedia storytelling, albeit with very mixed results.

One of the first examples of a canonically integrated tie-in book came from the complex television pioneer *Twin Peaks*, with the publication of *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* in 1990 between the broadcast of the first and second seasons. *Secret Diary*, written by series cocreator David Lynch's daughter Jennifer, functions as a distinctive form of transmedia: a *diegetic extension*, in which an object from the storyworld gets released in the real world. Most diegetic extensions are objects that do not bear much storytelling weight, such as Davy Crockett's coonskin cap or items

bearing the logo of an in-story brand, such as a Dunder Mifflin mug from *The Office*. *Secret Diary* was a reproduction of Laura's diary as featured on the series, with pages ripped out to obscure crucial narrative revelations still to come, making it both an object from the series and an early experiment in integrated transmedia storytelling. The diary, which sold quite well at the peak of *Twin Peaks'* cultural relevance, provided numerous clues about Laura's murder and her hidden dark past. While a viewer need not read the diary to comprehend the program's plotlines—although with *Twin Peaks*, comprehension is always an elusive goal—the diary provided relevant canonical story information about both events and characters, material that was later explored in the prequel feature film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*. The series followed up the diary with two other diegetic tie-in books, an autobiography of Agent Dale Cooper, transcribed from his iconic dictated tape-recorded notes to "Diane," and a travel guide to the town of Twin Peaks, but neither were particularly popular given the program's deflated ratings and second-season cancellation.

Diegetic extensions are no guarantee of integrated transmedia, as they can also be noncanonical. For instance, the hit 1980s mystery *Murder, She Wrote* released numerous novels—the 42nd book in the series was released in 2014, almost two decades after the television series concluded in 1996—attributed as cowritten by main character Jessica Fletcher (along with actual writer Donald Bain), mirroring Jessica's career as a mystery novelist on the series. However, unlike the diegetic novels that are framed as fully fictional on the television series, the real-world novels star Jessica Fletcher as a mystery writer who solves murders, making them function like new episodes of the television series. Yet with the authorial label of Fletcher attached to the books, they also function as diegetic extensions, albeit with somewhat muddled consistency as to exactly where the boundaries between characters on the TV series, novels, and authorial branding may lie. But presumably, given the huge success of both the television and book series, *Murder, She Wrote* fans did not care about canonical coherence but rather embraced the series across media because they offered consistent tone and familiar characters within the well-established norms of the mystery genre. While few people would point to *Murder, She Wrote* as a pioneering innovator of transmedia, it offers a good reminder that success can be

measured in a number of different ways, not just in achieving Jenkins's integrated definition.

Although tie-in videogames do not have as long of a history as television-based novels, they offer another window into the strategies and challenges of transmedia television. Again, these are not new phenomena of the 21st century, as *Star Trek* games date back to 1970s text-only adventure games and 1980s flight simulators, and *Doctor Who* similarly had tie-in games from early on (not to mention even earlier precomputerized board games). However, we can see a set of strategies emerging in games tied into recent contemporary television serials in terms of how they negotiate the elements of characters, events, and storyworld and tackle the question of canon. While most of these games are not part of larger transmedia narrative campaigns, they do highlight the challenges of extending an ongoing serial across media.

Nearly every tie-in game foregrounds the storyworld of its original television franchise, allowing players to explore the universe as previously only seen on television. With settings as diverse as the mean streets of *The Shield*'s Los Angeles, the suburban cul-de-sac of *Desperate Housewives*, or the deep-space exploration of *Battlestar Galactica*, television tie-in games fulfill Henry Jenkins's suggestion that game narratives function primarily as spatial storytelling—we explore the virtual representations of the storyworlds created in serial television as a way to extend the narrative experience and participate in the fictional universe.⁵ The tie-in games that seem most popular are those that re-create their television universes with vivid and immersive storyworlds, such as the virtual Springfield found in a number of *Simpsons* games, with game worlds often surpassing the televisual versions in their level of detail and breadth. While such games need not relay vital narrative information through their spatial reconstructions, one key criterion that fans use to judge the merits of such games is the accuracy with which they re-create the storyworld and the degree to which they feel consistent with the fictional spaces viewers have come to know over the years of a television series; in this manner, such games can function as interactive maps, as suggested in chapter 8.

The treatment of characters within tie-in games has proven to be trickier to navigate. While the digital animation of games enables developers to re-create television settings with depth and fidelity, the creation

of robust and engaging people is still a technical challenge and an area where games clearly lag behind television production. Adding to the challenge is the frequent problem of games not featuring the original actors voicing their parts, widening the gap between a television character and its game avatar for viewers. Arguably the most intense bond that fans of a television serial has with the program is their affection for and connection with the characters; thus a game that fails to re-create a beloved, well-known character often alienates fans. Even when original actors are used, players often bristle at how limited game versions of beloved characters become, often reducing complex character depth into a set of quirks or a limited menu of actions. For instance, the game *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* allows you to play many different characters from the series (some with original voices and others with sound-alikes) but limits what you can do as each character to navigating virtual Sunnydale, fighting monsters, and spouting wisecracks—for *Buffy* fans, this is an oversimplification of beloved figures whom viewers feel they know personally. The desire to try on the skin of a favorite television character is certainly a core appeal for licensed games, but seemingly no television tie-in game has been able to re-create the core pleasure of spending time with fully realized characters in a television serial, an issue discussed more later in the chapter.⁶

One common strategy to overcome this gap between television and game characterizations is to focus a tie-in game on a new protagonist placed within an already established storyworld. For example, in *The Sopranos* game *Road to Respect*, you play as Joey LaRocca, the never-before-mentioned son of the late gangster Big Pussy, exploring fictionalized New Jersey locales from the television series, such as the Bada Bing and Satriale's, and interacting with core characters including Tony, Christopher, and Paulie Walnuts. Even though Joey is a new character unburdened by the need to accurately re-create a television version, the action of the game reduces the storytelling scope to focus solely on the violent life of a mobster, thus eliminating the interplay between Tony's dual "families" that helped define the series as a television landmark. Similar examples of tie-in games using new characters include *The X-Files Game*, *Prison Break: The Conspiracy*, and *Lost: Via Domus*, which use new characters as a way to navigate an existing storyworld and interact with established television characters. Thus whether tie-in

games are exploring established or new characters, they are marked by a narrowing and simplification of characters, contrasting with how they frequently expand on the original in creating an immersive and expanded storyworld.

Issues with tie-in characters often stem from lack of fidelity to the original, but the third facet of story events suffers more from issues of confounded coordination with the serialized source material. Tie-in games typically follow the two options outlined for novels for what narrative events will be told. The first is to retell events from the source material, allowing players to participate in the original core narrative—this strategy is common for film tie-ins, as most games from franchises such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Toy Story* vary little from the original films' narrative events, although I have yet to find a television-based game using a retelling strategy comparable to novelizations. More common to television tie-ins is treating the game as a new episode in the series, depicting events that could feasibly function as an episode from the series but have not. Thus the *24* and *Alias* tie-in games both place our heroes in situations very similar to an arc from the original series, interacting with core characters in familiar locales, but the plots are essentially stand-alone stories amid highly serialized narratives. At their worst, such "new episode" tie-in games are merely conventional, formulaic games in a typical genre such as espionage or action, with a thin veneer of another diegetic world and cast of characters ported from a television series, not fully realized games that capture the tone or spirit of the original narrative. At their best, in games such as *The Walking Dead*, television tie-ins offer new stories from an established world that allow players to navigate storyworlds and interact with established characters, but such successes are comparatively rare.

Even when television tie-ins are enjoyable gaming experiences, most fail to provide a transmedia storytelling resonance. Sometimes such games are peppered with mythological information allowing a die-hard fan to recognize a reference to the program's backstory or ongoing mystery, but I have yet to find a television tie-in game that delivers an integrated narrative payoff that feels tied to a serial canon in a significant rather than superficial way, aside from creating a navigable storyworld. I do not attribute this to any lack in the videogame medium, as many stand-alone games create compelling narrative experiences, deep and

nuanced characters, and engaging plotlines. And Jenkins's example of *The Matrix* franchise demonstrates how a videogame can offer canonical integration into a series narrative, even though *Enter the Matrix* itself was seen by most players as a less-than-satisfying game-play experience. This lack of an effective television-based integrated game speaks to a creative challenge that plagues the entire transmedia enterprise: how do you create narrative extensions from an ongoing core franchise that reward fans seeking out canon but do not become essential consumption for single-medium fans, especially when the core narrative experience is serialized over time and requires a sustained investment in time and attention? In other words, the constraints of the television industry and norms of television consumption insist that *transmedia extensions from a serial franchise must reward those who partake in them but cannot punish those who do not*. This delicate balance comes to the foreground in the case of *Lost*, arguably complex television's most ambitious transmedia storytelling franchise.

Lost in Transmedia Television

While individual transmedia extensions such as novels or videogames can exemplify some general strategies that storytellers use to expand their narrative horizons, it is useful to look at how a particular series mounts an extensive transmedia campaign to get a sense of the scope that a television serial might embrace. There are significant research challenges to exploring transmedia storytelling, as many paratexts are hard to access after their initial release, whether they are websites that are taken offline, ephemeral objects that disappear from circulation, or emergent practices that change over time. In many cases such as ARGs, the paratext itself is experiential more than textual, making it impossible to re-create the narrative moment of participation. Thus as researchers, we must rely on either our own experiences or secondhand accounts of transmedia consumption rather than being able to revisit a story for analytical purposes.

There are a number of expansive transmedia television landmarks that might prove effective as a primary case study, including *Heroes*, *24*, and *The Office*, but I have chosen to focus on *Lost* for two main reasons. First, it is undoubtedly one of the most extensive and expansive

examples of both complex television narrative and transmedia storytelling, with extensions sprawled across nearly every medium throughout the program's six-season run.⁷ Second, I study *Lost's* transmedia as a participant-observer, having been highly involved in following and documenting the first ARG and consumed most of the other paratexts in real time as they were released, as discussed in chapter 8. Many of these transmedia texts no longer exist in accessible form, so I hope to use my personal consumption as a source for critical reflection on how the series used transmedia storytelling within the context of an ongoing serial narrative.⁸

Lost's approach to transmedia storytelling is expansionist, not only working to extend the narrative universe across media but introducing many new characters, settings, plotlines, time periods, and mythological elements. While few viewers would accuse *Lost's* television mothership of being too simplistic in its narrative scope, the series used transmedia to extend itself into tales that surpassed the wide scope of the series itself. This expansionism led *Lost* to augment its six television seasons with five alternate reality games, four novels, a console/PC videogame, multiple tie-in websites, two series of online videos, DVD extras, and an array of collectible merchandise. Due to both its fantasy genre and its storytelling commitments to a create rich mythological universe, *Lost* is well suited to this expansionist approach to transmedia, using paratexts to extend the narrative outward into new locales and arenas through an approach we might term *centrifugal storytelling*, as discussed more in chapter 6.

Lost was ripe for transmedia extensions in large part due to its unique locale in a mysterious place with a rich history. The unnamed island had been inhabited for centuries by various factions of people, dating back at least to ancient Egyptian times, and offers a deep well of backstory to be drilled into. Showrunners Lindelof and Cuse have used the metaphor of an iceberg to represent the storyworld—the material appearing on the series is what is visible above the waterline, but there are underwater depths and layers beneath the surface that are never seen on television. Like other deep mythologies, such as Tolkien's Middle Earth or the *Star Wars* universe, *Lost's* producers tapped into a wide range of styles, characters, and eras to extend the narrative universe to other media, following a trend that Jenkins notes in transmedia franchises of

focusing on world building more than event-driven storytelling.⁹ And such transmedia extensions helped encourage viewers to engage with the series and its paratexts as forensic fans, drilling into paratexts to crack their hidden meanings and discover secrets, and to collaborate to create extensive databases and orienting paratexts of story information.

Throughout *Lost's* run, the television series created openings to invite viewers to explore the storyworld in more depth. Such invitations, sometimes called "Easter eggs" if they are bonus features or moments that lead no further or "trailheads" if they open up to larger narrative pathways, rarely were central to *Lost's* core narrative but typically provided a bit of backstory, cultural references, or deep history of the island. Lindelof and Cuse have discussed in interviews and podcasts that they had a specific litmus test for what mythology to reveal and explore on television versus in the transmedia extensions: if the main characters care about it, it will appear on television; if the characters do not care, it will not. While we might quibble as to how precisely Lindelof and Cuse followed their own edict, it is instructive in establishing the program's orientation toward character-centered drama rather than mythological fantasy. The blast door map discussed in chapter 8 is a telling case of both the opportunities and the pitfalls of using transmedia to expand the program's mythological universe. In the aftermath of its first appearance in "Lockdown," the character Locke cared deeply about the map, attempting to re-create the image and discover its secret, until the bunker is destroyed and the map's origins are revealed in a flashback during the second-season finale; the blast door map was not directly referenced on the television series again. However, the map reappeared within a number of paratexts, including in the videogame *Lost: Via Domus*, as a hidden, glow-in-the-dark image on the back of the official *Lost* jigsaw puzzles, as a pull-out poster in the official *Lost* magazine, and hidden within the final complete series collectible DVD box set, with each version offering slightly different details and encouraging further forensic fan decoding. But to what ends? The transmedia versions of the map detach it from Locke's character motivations and the core island narrative events, making it a fun puzzle to play with deriving from *Lost's* story but offering little integrated storytelling payoff. Yet the continued transmedia circulation of the map, even after the series ended, helped create the expectation of narrative rewards on the mothership, feeding

a hungry fan base eager for additional mythological revelations where there were none to be found.

Lost, in large part due to its centrifugal use of transmedia, offered a wide range of genres, styles, and appeals simultaneously within the core television text: a puzzling science-fiction mystery, a dimension-spanning romance, a rip-roaring outdoors adventure, and a religious parable about letting go of the past and finding fellowship. As discussed in chapter 10, the television finale downplayed the puzzle-box trailheads it had left throughout its journey and, in doing so, betrayed the expectations of many of its most hardcore fans. *Lost* always struggled to manage the rabid fan base's divergent expectations: viewers were invested in a wide range of the program's narrative facets, from the complex mythology to romantic relationships, heady time-traveling science fiction to adventure-driven action sequences. While at times fans split on the relative merits of particular plotlines, episodes, or characters, as a whole the series did an admirable and arguably unprecedented job of servicing such a broad array of appeals and fan bases. A key strategy for accomplishing this storytelling breadth was to center the core television series around characters, their adventures and dramas, and how they encounter the mythology and to allow the more in-depth mythological explorations and explanations to flower in transmedia properties.

The majority of *Lost*'s transmedia extensions prioritize storyworld expansion and exploration instead of building on the program's emotional arcs and character relationships, with some narrative events posited in an awkward relationship to the narrative canon. Two high-profile paratexts, the videogame *Lost: Via Domus* and the novel *Bad Twin*, which was posited as a diegetic extension authored by the deceased Oceanic 815 passenger Gary Troup, were initially framed as canonical extensions but later were partially recanted by the showrunners as not fully connected to the core story. In both cases, Lindelof and Cuse highlighted that the outsourced creators of these extensions took the plotlines they outlined in new directions that contradicted the core canon from the television program; instead, both fell into familiar traditions of "new episode" storytelling that is outside the core canonical arc but troublesome for a highly serialized program in which episodes always add to larger arcs. One of the chief challenges for creating canonically integrated transmedia for an ongoing serial is that the demands of running

a complex series already tax the energies of producer-managers, as discussed in chapter 3, leaving paratexts in the hands of hired-gun writers who frequently fail to meet the expectations of producers—creating coherent complex transmedia narratives requires a degree of storytelling control that the current system of television production seems unable to fully meet, and given reduced production budgets in recent years, it is hard to imagine that future programs will have the personnel to successfully manage such integrated narratives.

Aside from the video minisodes that appeared online and on DVDs (which were produced by the standard television production personnel), the transmedia paratext that was most controlled by the core writers' room was arguably its most innovative: the first ARG, *The Lost Experience*. Running in the summer of 2006, *The Lost Experience* (*TLE*) was the first extensive ARG to emerge during an ongoing, mainstream, hit television series, filling the hiatus between the program's second and third seasons. Lasting four months and spanning an array of media across the world, including websites, podcasts, television appearances, voicemail, live events, and merchandise, it is also arguably the most ambitious and extensive ARG yet attempted for a television series and thus established many of the industry's assumptions about the form, its possibilities, and its limitations. *TLE* was conceived by *Lost* showrunners Lindelof and Cuse, with leadership from staff writer Javier Grillo-Marxuach, making the ARG an integrated aspect of the program's narrative canon and core production team.

Lost's producers have suggested that *TLE* had three main goals: to offer narrative revelations for hardcore fans that would not be addressed in the series itself, to experiment with innovative forms of storytelling, and to keep the program active in press coverage and the public consciousness during its summer hiatus.¹⁰ The last of these was clearly a success—the experiments of *TLE* generated a good deal of press coverage, including a June *Entertainment Weekly* story teased on the magazine's cover, effectively avoiding a summer slump of waning enthusiasm and placing ARGs in the mainstream consciousness like never before. As an innovative form of narrative, *TLE* provided lessons from storytelling mistakes and problems, outweighing any compelling formal innovations. *TLE* consistently had to balance the desires of ARG players to be challenged with innovative puzzles and the clamoring of television fans

for more direct narrative payoffs. The in-game story of Rachel Blake investigating the Hanso Foundation rarely resonated as much more than a skeleton on which to hang clues, and the game did not stand apart from the storyworld established on the television series as a compelling narrative experience. The game play and immersive engagement was too erratic in quality and sophistication for hardcore ARGers, driving many of them away after the first few weeks and leaving less experienced players to try to work through subsequent puzzles. Additionally, the integrated marketing with sponsors such as Jeep, Verizon, and Sprite struck many players as crass and intrusive, violating the playful spirit that ARGs aim to capture.¹¹

As to the goal of revealing narrative mythology for the ongoing television series, the ARG proved to be more frustrating than rewarding—the canonical narrative content was not sufficiently integrated into the television series as a whole, making some players feel like they had wasted their time on “trivia,” rather than getting a head start on what was to come during *Lost’s* third season. *TLE*’s biggest revelations were in the so-called Sri Lanka Video, which included an “orientation film” featuring Alvar Hanso, explaining the origins and mission of the DHARMA Initiative, the meaning of the “numbers” (which had been a central mystery from the program’s first two seasons) as being part of an equation predicting the end of the world that was being researched by the DHARMA Initiative, and numerous other clues that connected directly with the television canon. However, these revelations never appeared in the series itself, and the numbers were given a different (but not contradictory) explanation in the program’s final season. For fans who participated in the ARG, the mystery of the numbers was already solved, and the new explanation felt like a slap in the face undermining fans’ engagement by placing the narrative events uncovered in the ARG into an ambiguous paracanonical status. In contrast, some of *TLE*’s revelations were considered “unanswered questions” by television fans who were left unsatisfied with *Lost’s* lingering mythological ambiguity—for such fans, knowing that the numbers and DHARMA were further explained in the ARG increased frustration over the television program’s narrative, as they wanted to be able to comprehend the series fully without requiring “online research.” Even for *TLE* players who learned the secrets of the Sri Lanka Video (which has received over one million

views on YouTube, still a small fraction of the program’s global television audience), the fact that the television series never addressed, and subsequently contradicted or displaced, its revelations made the game play more frustrating in retrospect, feeling more like a waste of time than a storytelling bonus.

The scaled-down efforts to use ARGs in the *Lost* franchise in subsequent years suggest that many of these lessons were in fact learned, as the producers moved to create transmedia experiences that were less ambitious and complex but ultimately less disappointing to their target audiences. Lindelof and Cuse found the challenges of running a narratively integrated ARG within the already complicated television production process far too daunting to try again, and thus they scaled back the subsequent ARGs to be less integral to the program’s canon. No matter how enjoyable such games and extensions were to fans, they often fell short in rewarding the core edict of adding to the franchise’s storytelling without taking away from the main television experience. One of the great contradictions of *Lost* is that the series built as robust a mythological universe as has ever been devised for television but then undermined the importance of its own mythology by relegating many of its mysteries to transmedia extensions that it deemed as “bonus content” rather than core storytelling. The series was unmatched in its ability to posit mysteries and encourage fans to immerse themselves expansively into clunky alternate reality games and poorly paced videogames and novels with the hope of uncovering answers. Yet by the final season, the series offered emotional character resolutions and thrilling adventure storytelling but left many mythological questions unaddressed within the television series itself or ambiguously vague in its answers. On its own, I found *Lost’s* emotional payoffs and sweeping character arcs sufficiently engaging and entertaining; however, its use of transmedia and cultivation of a forensic fandom encouraged us to expect more, leading many fans to revolt against the series in its final hours for not delivering its answers in a clearly marked package, a tension I discuss more in chapter 10.

This dichotomy between forensic fans watching (and playing) for coherence and emotional viewers getting swept up in the adventure and romance, as discussed in chapter 7, mirrors one of the program’s main thematic structures: the contrast between rational and supernatural

outlooks, embodied by the battle between Jack Shepard's "man of science" and John Locke's "man of faith." Even though neither survives the narrative, it is clear by the program's conclusion that faith trumps science, with Jack sacrificing himself to the island's mystical forces and endorsing John's vision of fate and spiritual meaning. In choosing faith over science, and in turn privileging the genre of fantasy adventure over science fiction, *Lost* was willing to let many dangling mysteries go unexplained within the context of the television series, offering instead a spiritual celebration of Jack's (and, by extension, our) "letting go" of the need for rational understanding in the program's closing moments. And yet the program's transmedia strategy still sided with the rational exploration of island mythology, despite its frequently frustrating incoherence—the final DVD release contained a bonus 12-minute "epilogue" video that provided a flood of answers to dangling questions about the island, DHARMA, Walt, and various other mythological mysteries. The playful video winks at viewers, with a DHARMA worker chastising Ben by saying, "Wait. You can't just walk out of here. We deserve answers!" tweaking fans' dissatisfaction with the finale, as discussed in chapter 10. And even though the answers resolve some ambiguity, it becomes clear that this additional content is canonical but nonessential, relegated to a paratext simply to appease those hardcore forensic fans who would not follow the finale's advice, to let go.

Thus *Lost*'s transmedia tries to follow some clear parameters: use paratexts to expand access to the storyworld and island mythology but keep character arcs and core events centered on the television mothership. While this might reward hardcore fans willing to expand their narrative consumption across media, it does create frustrations for both transmedia consumers underwhelmed by the payoffs and television fans who do not want to have to do "homework" to understand their favorite series. Although most *Lost* fans who were left frustrated by the finale probably had not been transmedia consumers, the program's reliance on transmedia to parcel out answers did set up expectations that answers would be found via forensic rationality rather than the spiritual acceptance that the finale offered. *Lost*'s commercial and creative successes have established the series as a model for transmedia television, inspiring numerous clones in both television and transmedia formats, including *Heroes*, *FlashForward*, and *Revolution*. But another

case study suggests a more modest approach to television transmedia that might ultimately be more successful.

Breaking Bad as Character-Driven Transmedia

If *Lost* uses transmedia to expand its narrative universe outward to the breaking point, *Breaking Bad* demonstrates the alternate vector, creating transmedia to fold in on itself via *centripetal storytelling*. As discussed in chapter 6, *Breaking Bad* is an intense character study of a chemistry teacher gradually turning into a drug kingpin, mixing riveting suspense and pitch-black comedy to most closely resemble a television serial as made by the Coen brothers. Most television series that have embraced transmedia aggressively are in fantastic or comedic genres, such as *Heroes* and *The Office*. Fantasy and science-fiction programs can use transmedia to create more expansive and detailed versions of their storyworlds, which typically are a core appeal within the genre—the emphasis on world building through paratexts is a time-honored strategy for narratives set in universes with their own scientific or magical properties that beg further investigation and exploration. For comedies, transmedia can be a site to develop additional gags or to highlight throwaway plotlines for secondary characters without disrupting the plot and character arcs of the television mothership.

While *Breaking Bad* was modest in its use of transmedia compared to programs in these other genres, its strategies offer an interesting contrast. If *Lost*'s expansive transmedia offered new narrative events and broadened the storyworld, *Breaking Bad*'s focus was primarily on character. This use of character-based transmedia makes sense given *Breaking Bad*'s genre and narrative strategies: there is no underlying mythology or complex mystery to parse, so the transmedia extensions offer virtually no narrative events that seem particularly relevant to the story as a whole. As discussed more in chapters 4 and 6, *Breaking Bad*'s focus is firmly on characters and their transformations, so its transmedia strategy is well matched to the program's core narrative tone and scope. *Breaking Bad*'s storyworld is a fairly realistic version of Albuquerque, New Mexico, so its transmedia give almost no attention to the setting itself. This deemphasis on setting and plot arcs within its transmedia is partly tied to the program's genre of serious drama, but even a

similarly dramatic series such as *Mad Men* grounds its small excursions into transmedia within its periodized world, such as its online Cocktail Guide and Fashion Show sites.

Instead, *Breaking Bad*'s transmedia extensions focus on character over setting or plot, providing additional depth to a series that already features highly elaborated characters. Most of this transmedia character development focuses on secondary figures rather than the main protagonist, Walter White, and highlights the program's comedic rather than dramatic tone, with additional videos and websites illuminating the amusing backgrounds of Hank, Marie, Badger, and Saul, some of the least serious characters in the series—one enjoyable example is the diegetic extension promotional website for Saul Goodman's law firm, bettercallsaul.com, serving as a dual parody of both ambulance-chasing lawyers and cheesy website design, and more recently as a promotion for the 2015 spin-off series *Better Call Saul*. Even when the program's dark main character, Walter, is featured in a minisode, it paints him in a more comedic light, with short videos that show him listening to his future brother-in-law Hank's prewedding sexual hijinks or carrying out a bungled breaking-and-entering with a drugged-out Badger. These minisodes do not contradict the program's plot arcs but offer a different but compatible comedic tone that tends to be secondary on the darker mothership.

Although *Breaking Bad* lacks the mythological expanses that encourage tie-in games to explore the storyworlds, the series has spawned two online minigames that point to another direction for game-based transmedia. Both were created for AMC's website with direct coordination from the program's producers, featuring motion-comic-style graphics with an interactive narrative design; the first, *The Interrogation*, was launched during the third season in spring 2010, while the follow-up, *The Cost of Doing Business*, was released for both the web and mobile devices prior to season 4 in summer 2011. *The Interrogation* places us in the shoes of DEA agent Hank as he interrogates a suspect member of a drug-smuggling organization; in *The Cost of Doing Business*, we play as Jesse, trying to get paid what he is owed from a drug customer. Neither plotline is canonical to the series, but both feel like plausible moments for the characters in the new-episode model common to tie-in games; Gordon Smith, the series writer's assistant who scripted the games,

suggests about each game, "Hopefully [it] is true to the characters as they are on the show, but it's not stories that literally take place in the timetable of the series. We feel like they're part of the show that somebody could have experienced at some point, [with events that] had the same *feel* of something on the show."¹² This emphasis on creating extensions that coordinate character identities and consistent tone with the series points to a strength of *Breaking Bad*'s transmedia: by downplaying plot, the extensions work by allowing viewers to spend time with the characters without encouraging the forensic attention to story as with most canonic extensions.

The minisodes featuring Jesse are indicative of this approach: his storylines on the series can frequently be quite dark and serious, but his minisodes focus comedically on his fledgling band and artistic creations, rather than his struggles with addiction, quest for self-discovery as Walt's surrogate son, or search for moral clarity in the face of his criminal acts. Most interestingly, one video previews a hypothetical animated series, *Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.*, featuring superhero versions of the characters as created by Jesse and transformed into a crime-fighting team rather than a burgeoning criminal enterprise.¹³ Not only does this video offer an amusing take on the program's characters for die-hard fans, but it also provides a compelling look into Jesse's psychology via how he narrativizes and rationalizes his own experiences and positions his impressive artistic skills in relation to his criminal actions. Nothing that happens in this video is canonical, as it is clearly outside the storyworld—perhaps it could be read as a diegetic extension of something Jesse would make if he had the time, expertise, and dedication, but more likely it is a hypothetical game of speculation, playing with genre, tone, and production mode while retaining a consistency of character. Like most of *Breaking Bad*'s transmedia, such videos draw you into the core television series and offer some additional depth rather than expanding the storyworld's scope and breadth. All of the program's extensions seem like they could easily be canonical, if only due to their modest scope that rarely intersects with the main thrust of the television story, but they do not invite the type of intense dissection of plotlines typical of *Lost*'s transmedia.

None of *Breaking Bad*'s transmedia extensions reward viewers with trailheads into deeper narrative experiences, flesh out the fictional universe, or relay any seemingly vital story events. Instead, they allow

us to spend more time with characters whom we have grown close to over the course of the television serial, extending the parasocial relationships I discuss more in chapter 4. While these paratexts may not seem as innovative or immersive as *Lost's*, they might even work better as extensions to the core narrative by playing to the strengths of serial television: establishing connections to characters. Nobody exploring *Breaking Bad's* transmedia would have his or her expectations of the series transformed or misdirected, as they are clearly positioned as supporting, nonessential “extras” rather than vital transmedia plotting. But in their modest success, I think they more successfully accomplish the goal of rewarding viewers who consume them but not punishing those who do not. And as we see further experimentation and innovation with transmedia storytelling, *Breaking Bad* and *Lost* both offer valuable lessons to how to balance viewers’ expectations, canonical concerns, and the relative importance of events, storyworld, and characters.

“What Is” versus “What If?” Transmedia

In the contrast between *Lost's* and *Breaking Bad's* paratextual strategies, we can see two larger tendencies that typify the practices of transmedia storytelling, dueling approaches that we might label “What Is” versus “What If?” The former is embodied on television by *Lost* and fits with Jenkins’s definition of the form as exemplified by *The Matrix*. “What Is” transmedia seeks to extend the fiction canonically, explaining the universe with coordinated precision and hopefully expanding viewers’ understanding and appreciation of the storyworld. This narrative model encourages forensic fandom with the promise of eventual revelations once all the pieces are put together—the emblematic example of a “What Is” paratext might be *Lost's* jigsaw puzzles, which literally require the assembly of all the pieces of four separate puzzles to reveal extra narrative information hidden within its glow-in-the-dark image of the blast door map. If one goal of consuming a story is mastery of its fictional universe, then “What Is” transmedia scatters narrative understanding across a variety of extensions to be collectively reassembled by a team of die-hard fans to piece together the elaborate puzzle.

The majority of official storytelling extensions seem designed to fulfill the goals of “What Is” transmedia, and the measuring stick that critics

and fans use to assess those paratexts typically defines success through canonical coordination and narrative integration. However, an opposite mode of transmedia points to different narrative goals and markers of success: the “What If?” extension as suggested by *Breaking Bad's Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.* This approach to transmedia poses hypothetical possibilities rather than canonical certainties, inviting viewers to imagine alternative stories and approaches to storytelling that are distinctly not to be treated as potential canon. The goal for “What If?” transmedia is to launch off the mothership into parallel dimensions, foregrounding tone, mood, character, or style more than continuity with canonical plots and storyworlds. We are never meant to believe that Jesse *really* created a comic and animated series fictionalizing his friends as a superhero team, but we are presented with the possibility that he could have and invited to imagine “What if he did?” This style of hypothetical narrative paratext highlights the fictionality of all narrative, as there is nothing more “real” in the characterization of Walter White as accidental drug dealer than Jesse’s reinterpretation of him as Doctor Chemistry, fighting off zombies “for the right to be awesome,” as both are equally artificial works of fiction, albeit with one clearly marked as subsidiary to the other. Just as we embrace serial narrative for its creation of compelling storyworlds in which we can immerse ourselves, “What If?” transmedia multiplies the possibilities of those fictions into the realm of hypothetical variations and transmutations.¹⁴

Both “What Is” and “What If?” transmedia can best be seen as vectors or tendencies rather than distinct categories, with fluidity and blur between the dual approaches—for instance, we might think of the *Lost* tie-in novel *Bad Twin* as conceived as a “What Is” diegetic extension that transformed through its troubled production process into a “What If?” hypothetical paratext. Many tie-in novels and games function as noncanonical “What If?” paratexts but lack the playful variation and imagination of *Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.*; instead, they often appear as failed “What Is” extensions, setting up viewers to futilely search for narrative continuities and canon only to come up empty. Both transmedia tendencies embrace a ludic narrative quality but draw on different styles of play, as influentially categorized by Roger Caillois as a contrast between rule-driven *ludus* and free-play *paidia*.¹⁵ “What Is” transmedia extensions work more like *ludus* puzzles with proper solutions and final revelations,

while “What If?” paratexts feature more of a sense of *paidia* dress-up or performative role-play, spinning off scenarios with no “real” outcome or canonical narrative function.

We can see important precedents for both of these transmedia modes in the realm of fan productions and consumption practices. Some fan cultures produce paratexts clearly in the “What Is” realm, typified by the detailed schematics of the technology in the *Star Trek* universe, analyzed by Bob Rehak as “blueprint culture.”¹⁶ Such orienting paratexts provide definitive guides to both canonical motherships and various transmedia extensions, all driven by the goal to arrive at the singular, correct account of complex narrative material. This strategy of mapping and cataloguing fictions has seen a boom with the rise of wikis, as fans can collaborate in creating encyclopedic documentation of a storyworld, as with *Lostpedia* or *Star Trek’s Memory Alpha*, as discussed in chapter 8. Such modes of affirmational fan engagement prioritize canonical authenticity, seek narrative mastery, authorize the role of controlling showrunner, and search for connections and theories to fill narrative gaps—all facets prioritized by “What Is” transmedia and discussed more in chapter 3.

The best-known models of fan productivity follow the “What If?” paradigm, with fan fiction, remix videos, and other forms of fan creativity that make few claims to canonical authenticity but playfully posit a range of hypothetical narrative possibilities. Such paratexts are valued for their transformational expansiveness, thinking beyond the terrain of canon by positing possibilities that clearly could not be “real” within the fictional universe—whether building on subtexts that could never be explicitly represented, offering intertextual crossovers to other franchises or real life, or creating parodies that playfully revise a program’s genre, style, or tone. Some “What If?” fan creations tell stories that strive to seamlessly fit within the canonical mothership or offer alternative interpretations that fans may view as in keeping with the spirit of their vision of a series—sometimes even more faithfully than the canonical ongoing narrative does. However, such fan creativity nearly always positions itself as outside the core canon and embraces its hypothetical possibilities, even when it might be regarded as more satisfying than the official narrative canon.

An interesting case of fan-produced transmedia that plays with both of these vectors is an unofficial alternate reality game for *Alias*, produced

in 2005 and generally referred to as the Omnidam ARG. Launching during the program’s third season and after ABC had produced official ARGs during the first two seasons, the Omnidam game did not announce itself as an unofficial paratext but, in keeping with ARG style, presented itself as part of the “real world” without reference to the television series as fiction—it only became clear over the course of game play that it was not licensed by ABC and was instead created and run by fans. Interestingly, the unofficial ARG was much more faithful to *Alias*’s spirit of conspiratorial complexity than were the official ARGs, which featured more stand-alone, web-based minigames using the program’s iconography and storyworld. The Omnidam game appeared to offer “What Is” integrated story information about the overarching Rambaldi mythology—except it was distinctly unofficial and unsanctioned by the program’s creative team, making its pseudocanon decidedly “What If?”¹⁷ This tension speaks to both the desire of some fans to have transmedia experiences that pay off with significant narrative integration and the urge of other fans to create their own stories that mimic the canonical, regardless of authorial endorsement or in-series confirmation.

If fans step in to create pseudocanonical “What Is” transmedia as in the Omnidam case, there is potentially tension in the opposite direction as well. As the terrain of “What If?” has been occupied primarily by fans, there is legitimate concern that the industry producing such extensions could work to co-opt fannish creativity and close down the realm of the hypothetical to fan producers. For instance, Sci-Fi Network offered an online video site for *Battlestar Galactica* fans to create their own remixes, but only within the channel’s chosen clips and usage policies, effectively constraining the free play of “What If?” creativity.¹⁸ But I would contend that the official production of a video such as *Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.* celebrates the fannish “What If?” impulse without closing down possibilities and validates it by using the official talent of the program’s cast members to make the hypothetical feel more fully realized. While fans cannot get Aaron Paul to record voice-over for their creative work, the video opens up new raw materials and hypothetical directions for future fan transmedia without enforcing a hierarchy between licensed and unlicensed material around the question of canon.

Jenkins’s model of “What Is” balanced transmedia in which plot coherence is distributed across media is an exciting possibility for

storytellers and deserves the attention it has gotten. But for transmedia properties with a clear mothership in serialized television, it may be an untenable model, as the commercial system cannot effectively sustain a franchise that risks eroding television ratings points for viewers who are uninterested in straying beyond a single medium, not to mention the storytelling challenges of crafting complex plots that can function both over time and across media. I would point to the comparatively unexplored (at least via official paratexts) realm of “What If?” transmedia storytelling as a potentially more productive avenue for serial television to develop, building on the medium’s strengths of character and mood over plotting and mythology and tapping into the clear fan interest in imagining noncanonical possibilities. The proliferation of hypothetical transmedia narratives offers its own “What If?” scenario of another dimension of complexity that has yet to be discovered.

10

Ends

Every television series begins, but not all of them end—or at least not all series conclude. Endings are not quite a parallel part of the narrative frame to beginnings, a distinction that carries over linguistically. *Begin* is solely a verb, needing to be transformed into the noun *beginning*, while *end* and *ending* work as both nouns and verbs—in this chapter, I explore the dual meanings of *end* as both “the final part of something” and “a goal or result that one seeks to achieve.”¹ In the case of serial television, the ending is often the ends, or the ultimate target that a series extends toward, at an unplanned future date. We can learn much about how complex serials work by considering how they strive toward their final episodes and what happens when they manage to reach them. Similarly, this chapter concludes by reaching the book’s end, exploring the ends of serial criticism as a practice of academic writing, offering an appropriately meta conclusion for *Complex TV*.

Every series that is no longer in production has a final episode, but actual finales are quite rare for American television series, with a range of other, much more common techniques of ending. The most prevalent form of ending is the *stoppage*, an abrupt, unplanned end to a series when the network pulls the plug midseason (usually in the series’s first season). A stoppage is always extratextually motivated, usually when a network loses faith in a series’s ratings or potential for growth or sometimes when a personnel issue with a creator or cast member creates a crisis, resulting in a premature cessation of a series without narratively motivated closure or finality. Fox’s 2005 series *Reunion* is a good example of the perils of stoppage, with an abrupt cancellation after the airing of nine episodes that left the central murder mystery unresolved. Fox executives were asked to explain the planned resolution in press interviews to satisfy fans’ demands, but they refused to fully reveal what would have happened because the writers still had not decided how to resolve the open-ended set of possibilities.² This unresolved enigma became

a cautionary example for both network executives and fans about the dangers of complex serialization, as the fear of a premature stoppage might create reluctance among viewers in sampling a new serial, worried that it might be canceled without closure or even sufficient narrative development.

The next category in this spectrum of closure is the *wrap-up*, a series ending that is neither fully arbitrary nor completely planned. Typically, wrap-ups come at the end of a season, when producers have come to a natural stopping point but without planned series finality. For programs with seasons that are crafted with a planned unity and internal structure, such as *Veronica Mars*, each season's end could serve as the series wrap-up, but none offer a clearly conclusive end to the story—the fact that season 3's final episode was the last of the series was not narratively motivated, as a teaser was even shot for a potential fourth season, set in the FBI academy, and years later a feature film was produced to continue the story, disregarding the FBI plotline as noncanonical. Cable programs with shorter seasons often treat every season finale as a potential series wrap-up, as single-season programs such as *Terriers* and *Rubicon* both ended with a degree of closure but not outright finality. On such series, the majority of a season's episodes have typically been written before the series begins to air, so a single season of 10–13 episodes is treated as a narrative unit with a possible wrap-up but with enough open-ended threads that potential renewal feels desirable and motivated. As Greg Smith describes such seasons, they wrap up with “punctuation marks” of climactic narrative events and partial resolution but with “game changers” that set up the possibility for a new narrative direction if the series gets renewed.³

Less common still is the *conclusion*, when a program's producers are able to craft a final episode knowing that it will be the end. Sometimes a conclusion is planned in advance by the producers, and sometimes it is thrust on them—compare Joss Whedon's pair of programs, with *Buffy*'s seventh season planned as its last from the season's beginning, while *Angel* was canceled in midseason, leaving Whedon to rework the final set of episodes to offer a somewhat rushed last-minute conclusion. For the single-season series *Last Resort*, the producers were told that it would be canceled with enough lead time to make a final episode with a

good deal of narrative finality, while *Pushing Daisies* was merely able to tack on a concluding epilogue to the season-ending episode upon notice of cancellation. Conclusions offer a sense of finality and resolution, following the centuries-old assumption that well-crafted stories need to end; however, such resolutions are comparatively rare for American television; the industry equates success with an infinite middle and delegates endings to failures. This tension between narrative and economic impulses can create conflicts, as with *Lost*'s challenges in early season 3, as the producers reflected that they were forced to “tap-dance” to delay narrative progress without a sense of when they could start implementing their planned endgame—midway through the season, they negotiated an unprecedented specified end date three seasons into the future, allowing them to plan toward an eventual finale and craft a noninfinite middle for the remaining seasons.⁴

There are a few variations on these possibilities. One is a *cessation*, which is a stoppage or wrap-up without a definite finality that it will be the end of the series. It is fairly common for a series to go on hiatus mid-season, leaving its narrative future in limbo until it either returns to the air or disappears from next year's schedule. Less common is the series that wraps up at the end of the season but is left ambiguously uncertain about future return; the most high-profile example of such a cessation is *Deadwood*, which was denied its planned final fourth season, morphing into unmade-for-TV movies that were long discussed as if they might someday be produced. A cessation is lodged at the crosshairs intersecting creativity and commerce, as storytelling progress is held in check by the bottom line of profitability, leaving the narrative world in a state of perpetual limbo and awaiting a possible return.

The inverse of a cessation is a *resurrection*, when an already concluded series returns, either on television or in another medium. Some programs are resurrected after being cut short through cancellation after stoppages or wrap-ups, as with *Firefly* being reborn as the feature film *Serenity*, while other series return postconclusion as ongoing comics, as with Whedon's other programs *Buffy* and *Angel*—in all of these instances, the motivation seems to be having more stories left to tell and the freedom to tell them differently in another medium. Commercial imperatives can also override creative goals when a series is resurrected

despite the wishes of the producers, as with *Scrubs'* return for a ninth season despite the conclusiveness of season 8's episode "My Finale." A series can also hover in between cessation and resurrection, as wrapped-up programs such as *Arrested Development* and *Veronica Mars* had been frequently discussed as spawning feature films for years after their cancellations, but it was not until 2013 that both were resurrected, with the former getting a fourth season on Netflix and the latter leveraging Kickstarter to produce a feature film.

Finally, we have the *finale*, which is a conclusion with a going-away party. Finales are defined more by their surrounding discourse and hype than any inherent properties of the narrative itself, as they feature conclusions that are widely anticipated and framed as endings to a beloved (or at least high-rated) series. Finales are not thrust on creators but emerge out of the planning process of crafting an ongoing serial, and thus the resulting discourses center around authorial presence and the challenges of successfully ending a series. Such conclusions are often presented embedded within a set of paratexts, with high-profile press features and interviews, televised specials offering retrospectives, and the promise of eventual DVD extras that will add even more weight to the final episode. Such 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.

As with most aspects of American television, public awareness of industry practices of ratings, scheduling, and seasonal renewal or cancellation has grown more prominent in the Internet era, as fans can track the potential futures of their favorite programs as well as consume hype around a planned finale. The knowledge of a series's upcoming finale recasts fans' expectations for the final season and potentially serves to overshadow the various ways fans have engaged throughout a long-running season, with the enormous weight of needing to "stick the landing" for a final conclusive episode. Three high-profile finales and their corresponding final seasons provide key insights into some of the strategies of conclusion that complex television uses to come to an end and the ways that viewers engage with such endings: *The Wire*, *Lost*, and *The Sopranos*.

Preparing for the End: Metastorytelling in the Final Seasons of *The Wire* and *Lost*

Arguably, *Lost* and *The Wire* had as much hype and pressure to conclude successfully in their final seasons as any series in American television history. The pressure on *The Wire* related to discourses of quality and sophistication—going into its fifth and final season in 2008, it had been hailed by many critics as not only the best series American television had ever produced but a program that transcended its medium to be considered the contemporary equivalent of a Dickens novel or Greek tragedy. For such aesthetic accolades to be justified, *The Wire* needed to conclude in a way that met centuries-old standards of narrative unity and tragic endings, as well as paying off creator David Simon's long-standing claims that the series functioned rhetorically as dissent and made cogent arguments about American social conditions.

Few critics would elevate *Lost* to such timeless standards of cross-media aesthetics or lofty social pronouncements, but its final season bore other burdens that surpassed the norms of the television medium. Many analyses, including this book, argue that *Lost* functioned as much as a game as a serial narrative, posing questions and puzzles that demanded answers.⁵ This framework was reinforced by showrunners Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse's active public presence that regularly assured fans that every mystery had an answer and that they were not making it up as they went along. Throughout the final season, *Lost*'s hyperactive online fan base generated to-do lists of unanswered questions and even questioned whether new answers might be yet more enigmatic red herrings. Additionally, the end of *Lost* had been hyped for years through its innovative industrial precedent of negotiating a planned end date, meaning that many viewers had been scanning the horizon for this finale for years of anticipation and hype, knowing full well that the producers had a clear timetable to work toward a satisfying end.

In light of these heightened expectations, the final seasons of both *Lost* and *The Wire* disappointed many viewers. For *Lost* fans, too many questions were left unanswered, and the series failed to deliver on its ludic promises, shifting in the end to a faith-based approach to its narrative enigmas—both offering religious faith as an ultimate thematic

conclusion and asking for viewers' faith in the series's creators that the resulting ambiguities were ultimately more satisfying than a litany of explicit answers. *The Wire's* final season is seen by most fans and critics as a step down from the heights of seasons 3 and 4, as its hyperrealism is overshadowed by overtly unrealistic tales of fake serial killers and lying newsmen. But the narrative strategies used to conclude both series bear some important similarities and highlight a key technique used in many serial endings: the inward turn toward metafiction. This strategy highlights a series's own storytelling strategies and frequently offers moments that address the audience more directly than is typical within otherwise realist modes of narration. We can see such tendencies play out in previous generations of television finales, typically through trick endings such as on *St. Elsewhere* or *Newhart* that rip the rug out from our long-standing storyworlds by positing them as a fantasy or a dream, respectively. Even programs that are less overtly metafictional frequently design their final episodes to culminate with a final act of saying goodbye to offer overt closure for both the characters and the audience, as with *M*A*S*H*, *Mary Tyler Moore*, and *Cheers*.

Among contemporary serials, key examples of meta finales include *Arrested Development*, *Seinfeld*, and *Six Feet Under*. *Arrested Development's* final moments (at least in its original Fox airing prior to its 2013 resurrection) pay off the program's many layers of reflexivity as Maeby pitches her family's story as a television series to Ron Howard, the narrator and producer of the actual series; he rejects the pitch but suggests that it might make a good movie, setting up the unrealized possibilities of cinematic resurrection (but not predicting its actual serialized return via Netflix). On *Seinfeld*, the main characters are put on trial for their antisocial ways, providing a parade of old characters to testify against their years of moral misconduct as chronicled on the series and thus impaneling viewers as a jury to judge the virtue of misanthropic characters we have spent years observing and potentially rooting for. *Seinfeld* also offers a circular final moment echoing Jerry's opening dialogue from the pilot about the location of a shirt button, but now located in a jail cell rather than a diner, providing a narrative special effect for attentive viewers. For *Six Feet Under*, the powerful final minutes dramatize the program's underlying themes of mortality and grief by flashing forward to the deaths of every character. Even though it lacks the overt

reflexivity of *Newhart* or *Arrested Development*, the finale places us in a position both to emotionally engage with the characters' final moments and to reflect on the spectacular storytelling used to witness all of the characters' deaths in a style evoking the program's long-standing "death of the week" intrinsic norm. Such balance of attention between the storyworld and the storytelling is typical of the operational aesthetic of contemporary complex serials, and thus it is not surprising when a series finale exhibits such tendencies.

Neither *Lost* nor *The Wire* use such overt reflexivity and narrative play, but the metafictional elements within their final seasons might retrospectively reframe some disappointments. One strategy that both *Lost* and *The Wire* employ is what Carlton Cuse refers to in a DVD commentary as "curtain calls." With viewers having spent years with characters and in a fictional setting, final seasons offer a last chance to check in with the people and places we have come to know, whether in the clunky cameos featured in *Seinfeld's* final trial or in the more artful callbacks gracing *Six Feet Under's* final montage. On *The Wire*, the plot is stretched to provide excuses to deliver single encore scenes for Avon, Prez, Nick Sobatka, Randy, Namond, Bunny Colvin, Poot, and Cutty, as well as to visit locales from earlier seasons, such as the docks, Edward Tilghman Middle School, and the boxing gym. Callbacks can also be used more subtly as rewards for viewers paying close attention, as with the dock worker Johnny Fifty appearing briefly as a homeless man. While such scenes and moments are far from organic to the season's main storylines or character arcs, the pleasures of recognition and remembrance can outweigh the longing for tight plotting, as many season 5 viewers highlight such curtain calls as one of the season's high points.

Curtain calls highlight a series's storytelling mechanics via the operational aesthetic without taking us away from the dramatic pleasures of seeing characters reappear, often with great emotional resonances, as with Randy's return as a hardened bully. *Lost* embraces a similar emphasis on returning to past people and places as part of the final season's thematic emphasis on remembering and letting go. Thus we get a guided tour of the island, returning to locations such as the caves, the beach, the Hydra cages, and "New Otherton," but framed by the characters themselves articulating their memories of such places. These moments are designed to remind us of where we have been over the years of the

series, as well as to offer a bit of closure paralleling the characters' experiences of coming to terms with their pasts and future fates—we witness characters remembering their past experiences in each locale as a reflected proxy of our own narrative memories.

On both *The Wire* and *Lost*, many old characters are deceased and thus unavailable for a traditional curtain call. The former uses the genre-appropriate device of a quick montage of crime photos in the opening credits to offer split-second curtain calls for many deceased characters, a strategy similarly employed by *Breaking Bad*'s montage of Hank looking at mug shots of deceased characters in the final season. Mixed in with these photos in *The Wire*'s credits is a portrait of Officer Ray Cole, a minor character on the series but played by executive producer Robert Colesbury, who died during preproduction for the third season; Cole's continued visual presence in the credit sequence is both an homage from the producers and a shout-out to knowledgeable viewers who both remember the minor character and know about Colesbury's off-camera role in the series.

Lost takes advantage of its broader generic palette to bring back fallen characters in a variety of ways. Hurley's inexplicable ability to speak to the dead allows Michael to return as a ghostly cameo on the island, serving as a spectral source of mythological answers concerning the role of whispers and spirits on the island. But the bulk of the dead cameos occur off-island through the sixth season's new narrative device of the "flash-sideways" world, as more than 15 previously dead characters appear in this universe, whose relationship to the main storyworld remains mysterious until the finale's final moments. It is this sideways world where *Lost*'s final season most directly embraces its brand of metafiction. For the entire season, the sideways stories function as a new mystery for a series already burdened with layered enigmas; however, the sideways mystery is of a different order than the identities of Adam and Eve or the origins of the four-toed statue. For most of season 6, the sideways realm poses an epistemological enigma as to what the world is and how it relates to the storyworld where we have spent five years, with the most widely held hypothesis being that the detonation of a nuclear bomb at the end of the fifth season created a parallel alternative universe where the island was destroyed in 1977. However, at the end of "The End," we learn that the sideways realm is actually a transitional afterlife for the

characters. As Jack's dead father, Christian, explains to him in *Lost*'s final scene, "This is the place that you all made together, so that you could find one another. The most important part of your life was the time that you spent with these people. That's why all of you are here. Nobody does it alone, Jack. You needed all of them, and they needed you . . . to remember and to let go." As an emotional denouement to the series, this resolution worked well for me and many others to provide closure and help us viewers let go. But as a coherent explanation for what we had spent the past season watching, it requires a bit more unpacking.

For most of season 6, the sideways stories function as an extended narrative game of "What If?" giving us a chance to imagine different narrative arcs for our beloved castaways had they never crashed on the island and been swayed by Jacob's mystical influence. As discussed in chapter 9, *Lost*'s transmedia extensions typically operated with a "What Is" logic of canon or pseudo-canon, but it is within the series itself that *Lost* most directly explores a "What If?" impulse via this sideways realm. Many of these parallel possibilities are fun hypothetical storyworlds—fans were quick to imagine a spin-off series with Miles and Sawyer as rogue cops, as inspired by the episode "Recon"—but it is unclear how such playful narrative alternatives might help characters who are reconciling their pasts and coming together as a community to move on to the afterlife, per Christian's final explanation. Some stories are more thematically relevant than others, as Jack becoming a father as a means to reconcile his own "daddy issues" makes more thematic sense than Kate continuing to be a fugitive on the run. But they all provide viewers an opportunity to see a long-beloved character in a somewhat new light, and often playing out fantasy scenarios concerning relationships with other characters, such as Ben Linus serving as a loving mentor for Alex, his daughter whom he sacrificed in the main time line. As discussed in chapter 4, even though *Lost* is most renowned for its elaborate enigmas and ludic plotting, its producers consider its characters and their relationships as the program's core appeal, and thus it is not surprising that the final season's narrative innovation prioritized emotional payoffs regarding characters over plot coherence.

An unsympathetic reading is that *Lost*'s sideways storyline is a cheat, designed to mislead the audience into assuming it was a parallel universe in which the island did not exist but revealed in the end to be internally

incoherent without resorting to a higher power. My more sympathetic reading acknowledges that it is a cheat but views the payoff as more thematically coherent than narratively motivated. As viewers, we hope that we got to spend the most important parts of these characters' lives with them and want to believe that our connection to them mattered. We also enjoyed spinning theories in search of coherence within a fantasy narrative that often made little logical sense, and the sideways world was our last opportunity to play such interpretive games. The sideways world is *Lost's* embedded metafiction, the rumination on why we enjoyed spending time with these characters, a celebration of the series's shaggy mélange of genre influences and diverting puzzles, and a delivery system of moments of emotional engagement to pierce through its silly but fun pulpy narrative. Looking back from the finale, it becomes clear that the entirety of season 6 worked to refocus our attention on the characters and away from the mythology, for both the characters themselves and the viewers, providing the wish fulfillment of a happy ending and the joy of returning departed friends and reunited relationships without the baggage of the island's mysteries. In the finale's closing moments, Christian Shephard is talking to us viewers, saying that this world is what we would make if we imagined new "What If?" tales for our heroes, functioning as a form of embedded fan fiction. The fact that it cheats to let us spend more time with dead characters and debate possible theories on Lostpedia does not matter—and ultimately the purpose of fiction is not to pass a test of logical coherence but to keep us emotionally engaged and entertained.

Fans and critics reacted to the hyped *Lost* finale with a huge range of responses. A vocal contingent decried the overtly sentimental episode, protested the lack of overt answers, and scoffed at the religious cop-out to explain the sideways universe. The critic Emily Nussbaum sums up fans' disenchantment, calling the sideways world "a mystical way station, like weak fan fiction with a therapeutic kick," and accusing the series of becoming too involved with itself: "But by the end of its run, *Lost*, for all its dorm-room chatter about good and evil, had become something different: It was a hit series about the difficulties of finding an ending to a hit series. Cuselof [i.e., Cuse and Lindelof] had a deadline for years, which should have allowed them to pace out their puzzle's solutions. Instead, we got cheesy temple vamping and a bereavement

Holodeck. It became a show about placating, even sedating, fans, convincing them that, in the absence of anything coherent or challenging, love was enough."⁶

But for many fans, love was enough, especially when peppered with speculative metafiction. The finale used the "What If?" sideways realm to deliver moments that many fans yearned for but the "reality" of the narrative denied: Charlie and Claire reuniting over the birth of Aaron; Sawyer reconnecting with his dead lover, Juliet; Ben apologizing to Locke for killing him. The sideways world is an extended bit of fan service, delivering character confrontations, romantic pleasures, and a sandbox for theoretical speculation as a reminder of what made us love *Lost* for years and highlighting how in the end (and "The End"), it was not about resolving the mysteries as much as enjoying the time spent watching together. *Lost's* ludic, enigma-driven approach to storytelling turned out to be less central than was typically thought. Instead, the series was about how flawed people could establish relationships and a community to discover themselves, to explore their beliefs, and to ultimately make choices that were noble and/or damaging to themselves and others. The mythology was the backdrop for this human drama, and it provided much fun for fans to puzzle out over six seasons; however, ultimately the mysteries of the island were designed not to be answered but rather to facilitate the character arcs and to maximize *Lost's* entertainment value.

The Wire had grander purposes beyond just entertainment, working as fictionalized journalism to shine a light on urban conditions that are rarely explored in any medium. The metafiction of *The Wire* is both more clearly articulated and less likely than on *Lost*, as the program's realist ethos and avoidance of self-conscious storytelling techniques would seem to make it an unlikely candidate for any form of overt reflexivity. Yet the fifth season featured two major intertwined plotlines focusing on the theme of storytelling and the lines between fiction and truth: the lying journalist Scott Templeton and Jimmy McNulty's fake serial killer. For many critics of the final season, this focus on unrealistic and unlikely scenarios seemed like a distraction from *The Wire's* tradition of realist storytelling and social engagement. But through the lens of metafiction, these plotlines reinforce the series's function as a site of social realism and critique.

For McNulty, the big lie of the serial killer is a necessary fiction to gain the attention and resources needed to address the truth of the drug boss Marlo Stanfield's orchestrated killing spree, and we watch as he experiments with various narrative strategies to hook his bosses on his whopper of a tale. For the newsroom storyline, Templeton's escalating lies reveal the commercial and editorial pressures that cause journalism to miss the real news and focus on either simplistic or sensational stories, regardless of their social importance or actual truth value. Together, the two storylines of the season ask us to think about the boundary between truth and fiction and, more centrally, to question how we know what we know. It is clear that if we only relied on the *Baltimore Sun*, we would not know the stories of the how drug dealers organize distribution and exert political influence, how the dockworkers' union fights to sustain itself in the wake of deindustrialization, how a rigged system against urban kids creates casualties out of the most promising students, or how corruption at City Hall jukes the stats for political gain. It is only through the fiction of *The Wire* that these true stories (or at least stories grounded in larger truths) of Baltimore are told, and we watch the newspaper miss the truths that matter.

Season 5 asks us to reflect on the process of storytelling and our own culpability in privileging the big lie. The season's most meta moment, from the episode "Unconfirmed Reports," portrays the newspaper editors debating how best to tell the story of the city's failing schools. The heroic editor Gus Haynes argues for a series of articles showing the interconnectedness between institutions rather than just "beating up" on the schools, saying, "I think you need a lot of context to seriously examine anything," a line that could serve as a mission statement for *The Wire* itself. But the villainous publisher James Whiting warns against ending up with "an amorphous series detailing society's ills," a succinct negative gloss on what some skeptics might say the series amounts to. This metacommentary extends as McNulty's serial killer stands in for the sensationalist crime dramas that get ratings buzz, with allusions to series such as *CSI* and *Dexter* peppered throughout the season, while Bunk's *Wire*-like "real police work" goes unnoticed and underfunded. Meanwhile Templeton wins awards for his lies while Gus and Alma are demoted for their refusal to play along, a not-so-veiled commentary

on *The Wire*'s lack of Emmys and other industry accolades that had been given to more conventional fictions. The final season portrays the downfalls of the gangsters Proposition Joe and Omar Little, while the *Sun* misses both stories and chooses not to cover their deaths. The season's most emotionally powerful story, Bubbles's recovery, is highlighted by the rare act of quality journalism in the form of a long-form narrative feature, but we can appreciate his understated triumph in climbing his sister's stairs only through the lens of fictional drama.

Thus the unrealistic exaggerations of season 5 only make sense in the context of the series's metafictional ruminations on how television drama can serve a journalistic function in today's media environment.⁷ Clearly David Simon is not arguing that this is a good thing, as his background as a newspaperman suggests that he yearns for the good old days of well-staffed newsrooms doggedly pursuing stories, as evoked through references to H. L. Mencken and stories shared by grizzled old journalists. Thus *The Wire* frames its own journalistic acumen within the realm of farce, mocking the excesses that McNulty and Templeton must go through to create their fictions, while winking at the audience for recognizing the extremities: the only way to get anyone to notice a crime story is to make it stretch beyond credulity, a critique aimed at both newspapers and television fiction. *The Wire* always was willing to stretch the bounds of credulity for the sake of addressing a larger truth, whether in Stringer's attempt to run drug meetings via Robert's Rules of Order or Major Colvin's outlandishly maverick move in creating Hamsterdam. The series embraces such hyperbole for grand statements but always ties them to the human costs—the drawn-out sequence of McNulty kidnapping and relocating a disabled homeless man in the reflexively named episode "The Dickensian Aspect" is shocking in its extremity but ultimately demonstrates how much Jimmy and Lester have fallen, dehumanized by their attempts to fight the good fight against an intractable system.

While *Lost*'s final episode foregrounds its own storytelling mechanics and possibilities, *The Wire*'s finale avoids breaking its realist frame for anything so overtly metafictional. Yet it still highlights storytelling as a crucial facet of social engagement, offering numerous moments when characters are forced to reckon with their own narrative arcs and the

stories that people tell about them. Bubbles learns to accept the newspaper profile that Fletcher wrote about him, allowing it to be published as an act of humility and acceptance on his road to recovery. Daniels sacrifices his police career because of his unwillingness to buy into the fabrications of the “stat game,” drawing the line on what stories he is willing to tell. Marlo attempts to move forward under the new character of a legitimate businessman but finds that he is unable to break from his corner-based story, falling back into his old patterns. McNulty leaves the police force with a staged wake, with Landsman colorfully retelling his story as “natural police.” And finally the cyclical nature of Baltimore’s institutions and crises sees the same stories being replayed with a new generation of characters, with Sydnor as the new McNulty, Michael taking over Omar’s role, Fletcher getting Gus’s old job, and most tragically, Dukie following in Bubbles’s drug-using tracks. While *The Wire* never overtly acknowledges its own storytelling mechanics, it clearly is self-consciously concluding and working to offer closure that thematically resonates with its own meditations on storytelling, journalism, and using fiction to portray truths.

For both *Lost* and *The Wire*, the atypical storylines and structures of their final seasons are best appreciated as reflections in their own narrative mirrors. But why do serials seem to embrace the meta so often in their final seasons? In part, creators seem to become hostages to their own storyworlds, so embedded in the process of storytelling that they feel the need to use fiction as an outlet to explore their own processes of letting go of their narratives, as well as to offer closing arguments for the relevance and missions of their programs. This connects to the role of hype in promoting finales and generally fueling ongoing serial narrative—unlike stand-alone fictional forms such as films or novels, the creative processes of serial television occur in parallel with viewers’ and critics’ reaction. Hype and reception discourses help shape expectations for both viewers and creators, and thus the pressure to stick the landing seems to matter more for an ongoing serial. The metafictional finale is a key example of how producers come to terms with the ends of their storyworlds as shaped by years of cultural circulation and conversation that are unique to the serial form. And no finale generated more conversation and debate than the landmark HBO series *The Sopranos*.

He’s Dead to Me: Debating the Ending of *The Sopranos*

On June 10, 2007, *The Sopranos* legendarily ended with a scene of Tony’s immediate family eating in a diner and listening to the Journey song “Don’t Stop Believin,” before cutting to a silent black screen for 10 seconds preceding its final credits. This edit is a narrative special effect played in reverse, an antispectacle offering a moment of spectacular storytelling. If traditional special effects push screen and sound systems to their limits, this cut to black suggested technological failure, inviting many viewers to surmise that their cable had gotten disconnected or their televisions had died at the least opportune moment. This moment of dead air was certainly the most analyzed and debated edit in the program’s history and one of the most contentious endings in television history. Looking at the sequence and the debates it inspired helps explain the functions of finales and *The Sopranos*’ role in contemporary television storytelling.

As a whole, *The Sopranos* is less immersed in the culture of forensic fandom and online television debate than many other programs discussed in this book. In large part, this stems from its casual attitude toward serial plotting; as discussed in chapter 1, the series embraces more episodic plots than most prime time serials and often allows itself to pursue digressions and fantasy sequences in lieu of narrative enigmas, mysteries, or even plot-driven curiosity questions. More than most complex television series, *The Sopranos* invites interpretation for theme or symbolism but not the mysteries, structural games, or serial builds toward narrative climaxes that typify many comparable dramas with more robust online fan bases. Thus it is quite surprising that the last scene in the entire series prompted such an outpouring of forensic fandom trying to discern what it meant in terms of both basic narrative comprehension and thematic significance. And appropriately as this book’s conclusive case study, the analysis takes us back to the most basic concept of narrative analysis that was discussed in the introduction: the distinction between story and narrative discourse.

Much of the motivation to understand the finale was driven by the episode’s status as a highly hyped finale, with viewers knowing full well that the series was ending and thus expecting a conclusive sense of

finality or at least some closure, rather than the ambiguous and open-ended cut to black that “Made in America” delivered. It was not surprising that the final scene took place over a family meal, as the first three season of *The Sopranos* similarly concluded with somewhat anticlimactic moments of familial dining; what was surprising was that rather than fading to black or offering a memorable final image, the only violence portrayed was to the typical formal devices of television editing, as the midmoment cut to silent blackness felt like a violation of the medium’s norms and expectations. Since serial storytelling thrives on the gaps between episodes to encourage conversation and interpretation, the lack of a next chapter after such an unusual moment encouraged viewers to fill the lack of forthcoming storytelling and authorial explanation with their own speculations and analyses. Even though the final season of *The Sopranos* did not embrace metastorytelling as much as *Lost* and *The Wire* did, this final moment encouraged viewers to reassess how the narrative had led to this point and what it might mean at the level of both story and discourse.

Viewers developed a range of explanations to make sense of this unconventional ending. The most immediate reaction seems to have been an assumption of technical failure, such as broken televisions or disconnected cable; while obviously incorrect, this is also a justified reaction, as such an extreme violation of media norms leads people to assume that it was some sort of error, not a choice to intentionally break the rules. Of course, it is an intentional edit, not an arbitrary one, occurring precisely as Tony looks up to see Meadow entering the diner (presumably) and as the Journey song offers the lyrics “don’t stop” one last time. Notably, creator David Chase wanted to end the episode with 30 seconds of blackness, eliminating all credits until the final HBO bumper, but both HBO and the Directors Guild vetoed the idea of forgoing closing credits.⁸ Instead, the 10 seconds of black served as enough of a gap to create technological panic among viewers but without eliminating all vestiges of a normal episode ending. Chase’s desire to extend the black screen does suggest that the blackness signifies something, not just demarcating the end of the story—a distinction that becomes crucial for subsequent debates over the ending.

Once a viewer realizes that the black screen is not a technical glitch but an artistic choice, the key question in order to make sense of *The*

Sopranos’ ending is whether the cut to black signifies anything within the storyworld itself or just at the level of storytelling. There is no doubt that it is significant at the level of narrative discourse, signaling the end of the program’s active narration and manifesting an absence of audio and visual information to cue viewers that there will be no more storytelling to come. This absence is so provocatively asserted that it needs to be understood and analyzed as a shot itself, a presence of nothingness rather than a default null state lacking content and form. In the abrupt shift from Tony to blackness, from Steve Perry’s singing voice to silence, nothing happens overtly at the level of story; however, at the level of storytelling, this “nothing” happens actively and insistently—we notice this nothingness, with the sequence rubbing our noses in the interminable gap between images of Tony and the first credit. So what does the nothingness mean?

Following ideas explored in chapter 3, we might attribute this moment to a distinct message from David Chase, or at least our notion of Chase as the text’s inferred authorial function, to his viewers: many took the ending as a direct attack on viewers’ desire for closure, justice, or a moral message, providing instead a lack of a conclusion out of a spiteful contempt for norms of narrative pleasure and television viewing expectations. Although Chase has been oblique in discussing the finale, he has vehemently denied that he would use his final moment to be contemptuous or audacious toward the audience but rather has insisted that his goal was always to “entertain them.”⁹ Nonetheless, the choice to violate the norms and expectations of television storytelling was interpreted by many people as an audacious and aggressive “screw you” to viewers and their preconceived notions of closure, rather than providing what fans had come to expect throughout the series.

A variant on the reading of the abrupt cut as an act of aggression against fans is to frame it as a rupture to viewing norms, not out of contempt for viewers but to get them to feel the ending as a sudden demise through the episode’s sudden cessation. As critic Matt Zoller Seitz sums up this position, “The lack of resolution—the absolute and deliberate failure, or more accurately, refusal, to end this thing—was exactly right. It felt more violent, more disturbing, more unfair than even the most savage murders Chase has depicted over the course of six seasons, because the victim was us. He ended the series by whacking the

viewer.¹⁰ Under this interpretation, any concluding moment in a story is as arbitrary as the next. There is always more story to tell, and any conclusive ending is an illusion; thus the decision to end in the midst of the diner sequence is as valid as any other: abrupt and jarring but ultimately no less conclusive than any other arbitrary “resolution.” In other words, it is a way of stopping, but not ending, the story, via an abrupt end to the storytelling. Taken to a broader level, this is a bold critique of the arbitrary structures of serial narration and a refusal to comply with the medium’s expectations and norms, a skeptical attitude toward television that *The Sopranos* consistently offered. The ending’s arbitrariness stems from how the narrative stoppage is not connected to any event in the storyworld, as the scene is framed as uneventful despite the sense of menace and danger produced by taut editing coupled with viewers’ expectations that the final moment is pending. The key action is at the level of narrative discourse, where the violent act is committed at the cost of viewers’ knowledge and comprehension—Tony’s story could continue in a wide range of possibilities, but we are not able to experience it anymore after we are “whacked.” It is an act of aggressively ambiguous storytelling, refusing any clarity or motivation concerning what happens subsequently in the story.

Of course, another widespread interpretation does argue that the cut to black is motivated by story events: namely, that we are witnessing Tony’s death from his point of view. This analysis has been promoted by many viewers, most notably in copious detail by the pseudonymous “Master of Sopranos” in his epic forensic fan blog called “Definitive Explanation of ‘The End.’” In more than 45,000 words, Master of Sopranos attempts to prove, without any ambiguity, that “Tony’s death is the only ending that makes sense.”¹¹ This argument relies primarily on formal analysis of continuity editing to suggest that the cut to black is Tony’s point of view upon being shot in the diner, supported by thematic and symbolic markers found throughout the episode and numerous cues earlier in the season that frame death as a surprise absence, such as Bobby’s twice-repeated line “You probably don’t even hear it when it happens.” The argument is so detailed and well supported that it is hard to imagine reading it and not being convinced that if there is a story motivation for the final edit, it is only explicable as Tony’s final moments of life.

The reason why the debate continues years after the episode aired is because some people find the attempt to be so “definitive” in an explication to be working against the ambiguity that Chase seems to have designed as the finale’s legacy—as the critic Todd VanDerWerff suggests, accepting this interpretation “robs the mystery out of a series that was always replete with it, and it forces things that could mean many things to mean only one thing.”¹² The series as a whole embraces ambiguity and openness to thematic interpretation and occasionally a lack of narrative clarity as to what precisely happened, so attempting to be definitive does seem counter to its intrinsic norms. However, the final moments of any finale are clearly atypical, as a conclusion always begs further reflection, contemplation, and, in the case of such ambiguity, analytical interpretation. There is no doubt that the final sequence is designed to be nonobvious in its meaning; the lingering question is whether it can be read as obliquely suggesting a conclusive set of narrative events (Tony’s death) or must remain openly ambiguous with the cut to black belonging solely to the level of narrative discourse.

Personally, I do interpret the final sequence as portraying Tony’s death, although not with the “definitive” weight that some forensic fans insist on, but with the oblique presentation adding to its narrative effect. For advocates of ambiguity, such as VanDerWerff and Seitz, the moral ethos of *The Sopranos* points away from the rendering of a final death. Seitz writes, “Chase spent eight years railing against films and TV shows about violent criminals that absolved viewers of feelings of guilt and complicity by showing the hero being led away in handcuffs or shot down in the street. Why would he then reverse course in the final moments of the final episode and kill Tony? And if what we were looking at was indeed a killing of that specific character, why was it presented in an arty, confusing way?”¹³ However, I contend that the scene’s oblique narrative form of presenting Tony’s murder works to avoid this moral conundrum by distancing viewers from such emotional reactions, which Chase clearly worked to avoid.

The “arty, confusing” presentation avoids the trap that Seitz articulates: if we saw Tony’s death, we could absolve ourselves from years of witnessing his atrocities and even revel in the blood lust as a sense of retribution. If we saw Tony’s body, some viewers might feel moral superiority over the fallen criminal, while others might experience grief for our

protagonist or pity for his family witnessing the assassination—but none of these emotional responses fit with the ambiguous attitude the series had fostered toward the main character. Instead, we feel no emotional reactions to Tony's death because we do not even realize that it happens until after analytic reflection and analysis. We arrive at the realization of his death at an analytic distance so that we are not emotionally tied up in the storyworld: we are not present in the diner with the family and thus do not experience their moment of loss. We have already had a moment of mourning, but the grief is over the loss of the *series*, not the character. Viewers experience *The Sopranos* as less morally ambiguous than the character of Tony Soprano, and thus we can feel grief and loss over the end of the series without either being complicit in or feeling moralistically superior toward Tony's crimes.

The abrupt termination of the series and Tony's life distances us from the storyworld by keeping us at the meta level of narrative discourse, and it is there that we experience the five stages of grief: we deny the ending by blaming it on the cable company; we grow angry at Chase for denying us closure; we bargain by seeking out clues and rational explanations; we become depressed that there is no clear answer forthcoming; we accept the inevitable that the series has ended and that life (and television) must go on. Our emotions are focused at the level of the inferred author Chase and his storytelling, not Tony and his story. This is Chase's ultimate victory, as he managed to kill off his hero without allowing the audience to fall into any conventional emotional traps, but still create a visceral and engaged emotional reaction to the finale.

Or perhaps he did not, and Tony's story continued after the storytelling stopped. The risk of *The Sopranos'* experimental ending was that it teased the possibility that conclusions do not matter, that they are arbitrary and ambiguous rather than final and conclusive—HBO threw a party for the series finale, but the guest of honor disappeared before the celebratory toast. Some viewers embraced that openness and refusal to conclude, while others sought a sense of narrative clarity amid the ambiguity. Either way, the finale highlights the degree to which endings matter in serial television, serving as the lasting image (or lack thereof) that will be remembered and discussed long after the rest of the series fades from memory.

The Ends of Serial Criticism

Reflecting on ends is quite an appropriate topic for the conclusion of this book, serving as another example of a serially authored text turning inward upon arriving at its end. As argued earlier, television creators seem to become hostages to their own storyworlds by the final season, so embedded in the process of storytelling that they feel the need to use fiction as an outlet to explore their own experiences, as well as offering closing arguments to prove the relevance and mission of their series. The metafictional finale is one way that producers come to terms with the ends of their storyworlds, which have been shaped by years of cultural circulation and conversation that are distinctive to the serial form. While the conclusion to *Complex TV* is far less hyped or even noticed than a television finale, I do feel like I am being held captive by my project, and the only way out is through the mirror of the meta.

So what are the ends of serial criticism? For most scholars analyzing a media text, typical core research questions are “what does it mean?” and “why does it matter?” Such analyses explore the political meanings of a text in terms of representations, ideologies, and competing positions on issues of cultural importance. Those textual meanings can be contextualized within the larger cultural field of contemporary capitalism, class struggle, identity categories, and political power to highlight why such moments matter beyond just representations within a television series. As discussed in the introduction, these are important issues of culture and politics that certainly do matter and deserve their central place in the field of media studies. However, these are not the questions that have motivated my work in *Complex TV*.

Instead, I have focused on two related but distinct questions: “how does it mean?” and “how does it matter?” To answer the first question, I use historical poetics to understand the formal storytelling techniques employed by television series, placing those choices in the contexts of the industry and its creative personnel to understand why meaning making happens the way it does in these televisual texts. The second question focuses on the cultural circulation of these programs, considering how critics, viewers, and fans continue serial television's signification beyond the texts themselves—at times, such circulation makes series

"matter" in the explicitly material sense, creating paratexts that further the processes of meaning making. By fusing historical poetics and cultural studies, I have tried to offer a better understanding of how serial television programs work as both aesthetic texts and cultural practices.

For some critics, these questions are sufficient, providing ample room to explore issues of form and function that seem significant for television seriality. However, many media scholars conceive of the field as exclusively dedicated to uncovering meaning and analyzing cultural politics, and thus a project that focuses on the "how" as its end goal is insufficient unless used as a means toward answering other questions. I find myself at a middle ground in this debate—I am sufficiently interested in the "how" to dedicate this book to studying poetics and practices but believe that questions of meaning and power are important enough to want them to be part of my scholarly equation. I see the historical poetic approach I have been exploring as both an end in itself and a means to get toward different ends.

So in the book's final pages, I want to shift goals to consider how we might apply some of the ideas I have explored in the rest of the book to address questions of power and politics. Thus I will shuffle these questions into two new ones: "what does it mean through how it means?" and "why does it matter through how it matters?" In other words, how can we use historical poetics and cultural circulation to explore questions of political meaning and social significance? Uncontroversially, I believe that having a more robust account of how television storytelling works should give us a deeper understanding of its meanings and cultural power, but as I will demonstrate, accounting for the formal mechanics and cultural practices of seriality makes politicized textual analysis much more complex.

To explore political interpretation, consider the opening segment of *Homeland*'s first-season finale, "Marine One," which aired on the premium cable channel Showtime on December 18, 2011. The episode begins with a single-take video testimonial that Sergeant Nick Brody is making to explain why he plans to die as a suicide bomber while killing numerous American politicians and military personnel as part of a conspiracy led by a radical Middle Eastern terrorist. Staring directly into the camera, he says the following:

My name is Nicholas Brody and I'm a sergeant in the United States Marine Corps. I have a wife and two kids, who I love. By the time you watch this, you'll have read a lot of things about me, about what I've done. And so I wanted to explain myself, so that you'll know the truth. On May 19, 2003, as part of a two-man sniper team serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, I was taken prisoner by forces loyal to Saddam Hussein. Those forces then sold me to an Al-Qaeda commander, Abu Nazir, who was operating a terrorist cell from across the Syrian border, where I was held captive for more than eight years. I was beaten, I was tortured, and I was subjected to long periods of total isolation. People will say I was broken, I was brainwashed. People will say that I was turned into a terrorist, taught to hate my country. I love my country. What I am is a Marine, like my father before me and his father before him, and as a Marine, I swore an oath to defend the United States of America against enemies both foreign and domestic. My action this day is against such domestic enemies: the vice president and members of his national security team, who I know to be liars and war criminals responsible for atrocities they were never held accountable for. This is about justice for 82 children whose deaths were never acknowledged and whose murder is a stain on the soul of this nation.

The video then cuts off as the episode continues onto a conventionally shot and edited scene.

To try to make sense of this sequence, we need to consider it in multiple contexts, as that is certainly how it might be variably consumed. For a few viewers, this may have been the first episode of *Homeland* they had seen, making for quite a confusing viewing experience. Assuming that such a novice viewer recognizes it as belonging to a fictional program, the clip is still marked as "authentic" via excessive mediation—visible viewfinder symbols, a red "Record" indicator, the black-and-white image, and the direct address to the camera all connote that this is actuality footage being made within the storyworld. Brody's tone and emotional intensity convey that he is telling the truth or at least what he believes to be true. And if true, it is quite a radical political statement: accusing the vice president of being a war criminal, responsible for mass killing children and covering up their deaths, and

claiming that the patriotic duty of a U.S. Marine is to commit an act of violent retribution.

Of course, most viewers saw (or will see) this footage in a broader context following 11 hours of storytelling, stretched out over two months of screen time (or less if consumed after its initial airing). Throughout the season leading up to this moment, we questioned whether Brody had been turned to work for his captors, witnessed his conversion to and faithful practice of Islam, saw via flashback the brutality inflicted on Brody during his captivity, and eventually discovered his plot to become a suicide bomber against Vice President Walden. Most importantly for this sequence, we witnessed the event that turns him firmly against his government via flashback: a U.S. drone bombing that destroys a school in Syria and kills 82 children, including the terrorist leader Abu Nazir's son Issa, whom Brody had lived with as his teacher and friend. After the attack, Nazir shows Brody the vice president's news conference where he denies that any children had been wounded in the bombing, thus inspiring Brody's act of vengeance. For viewers like myself, this serial context validates Brody's statements and beliefs such that his video declaration of patriotism through terrorism rings emotionally true in a fashion that seems utterly out of place on commercial American television.

The original airing of *Homeland*'s first season in fall 2011 marked the first time that many of its viewers had seen the issue of drone strikes debated on American television—press coverage of the issue was quite marginal within U.S. media, growing some in frequency and depth of coverage in late 2011 after one high-profile strike, but it still remained a specialized “fringe” issue reaching only dedicated news consumers until it became more openly debated in 2013.¹⁴ By dramatizing a drone strike, visualizing the deaths of innocent children, and having a sympathetic, white American character empathize with the Arab victims, *Homeland* offers dramatic fuel for a dissenting view against American military action that was typically found only on the extreme antiwar left and never on mainstream television.

In this context, what is the political meaning of this clip? As it begins the episode, it is a shocking moment of emotionally motivated outrage, giving legitimacy to the perspective of terrorists who see themselves as victims of terrorism carried out by the American military. We have come to care about Brody as a character, seeing him as deeply flawed

and (despite his denial in the video) broken but also justified to take extreme action against a corrupt and arguably criminal administration, thus marking this video as a radical statement that viewers are invited to endorse or at least consider as valid. However, the episode continues: Brody leaves the memory card containing his confessional video for his terrorist allies and then carries out the plan to become a suicide bomber to kill the vice president, the secretary of defense, CIA leaders, and numerous other politicians, military personnel, and civil servants within a military bunker. Brody does attempt to trigger the bomb, but it fails; after repairing the bomb in the bathroom, he gets a phone call from his teenage daughter, Dana, who inspires him to abandon his plan in the name of family, as he realizes what his suicide attack would do to his wife and children. The episode ends with Brody shifting plans to become an agent of Nazir from within the government, rather than violently disrupting it. This development serves the dramatic needs of seriality, as it allows Brody to reappear next season as well as sustaining the dual espionage and romance plots between Brody and Carrie Mathison, the CIA agent who is convinced that he is a traitor. But it also shifts the terms of Brody's dissent away from the political and toward the personal, as his familial connection to Dana eclipses his ties to his surrogate son, Issa. If the opening video frames an act of anti-American violence as the duty of a patriotic Marine, the episode's conclusion counters such radicalism to reframe Brody's dissent as a simpler act of revenge for a loved one's death and shifts our allegiance back to Carrie and her unquestionably patriotic pursuit of Brody and Nazir.

But season 1 is not the only context for this video, as it returned nine months later (as originally aired) in *Homeland*'s second season. The video appears in five of that season's 12 episodes, creating a serialized ripple effect for everyone who watches it. In the season's second episode, the CIA division chief Saul Berenson discovers the video hidden among the belongings of a suspect in Beirut and shows it to Carrie in the next episode, who reacts with flooding emotion as she realizes that her discredited accusations against Brody were correct. The fourth episode begins with Saul showing the video to his boss at the CIA, David Estes, to confirm that Brody, who is now a congressman and likely vice presidential candidate, is a traitor. In these reiterations of the video, its meaning transforms from a statement of political dissent into

a piece of evidence for U.S. agents fighting terrorism—the sentiments that Brody expresses are irrelevant and not repeated on-screen, as all that matters for the CIA is how they prove that Brody is a traitor who must be stopped. The video's radical politics are erased as it becomes an object within the investigation, and the drama focuses on how the agents will catch Brody and what the consequences of his betrayal might be. In Robert Allen's use of the terms, the video switches from being a "syntagmatic" element that moves the plot forward to serving as a "paradigmatic" element to trigger characters' reactions and emotions—and notably these reactions never consider Brody's arguments that resisting American military hegemony might be viewed as a form of patriotism.¹⁵ The serial succession of characters viewing the video invokes *Homeland*'s reflexive impulse as established in early episodes, in which viewers saw themselves mirrored in Carrie's video surveillance of Brody, emphasizing the central role that the act of watching characters watch other characters in their most intimate and unguarded moments plays in *Homeland*; regular viewers learn that such scenes depicting one character watching another on a screen matter.

The fourth appearance of Brody's video in the second season is when Brody himself sees it in episode 5, "Q&A." Captured by the CIA and interrogated to learn what he knows, he is forced to watch his own confession after denying any involvement with Abu Nazir or knowledge of Issa; the scene is visualized here via the appropriately meta device of surveillance cameras as we watch Carrie in the observation room watch Brody watch himself on video. Viewing the video serves both as a paradigmatic trigger for Brody's emotional reaction to his own past actions and as a plot device to create a compelling procedural game for the rest of the episode to see how Brody and Carrie attempt to outmanipulate each other. "Q&A" completes the video's depoliticization, as Carrie frames Brody's betrayal within the realm of the personal, both in his love for Issa and in Walden's individual monstrosity for ordering and covering up the drone strike, but avoids the political debate of whether the United States itself is culpable for such military action and whether resisting such American dominance can be seen as noble. By the end of the dramatically compelling episode, it is clear that Carrie and her CIA colleagues are the good guys, Brody wants to redeem himself by helping them, and the violence that should be decried is the acts of

individual "monsters" such as Vice President Walden and Abu Nazir, not the broader military action of drone strikes.

The video's final appearance in the second-season finale restores its political function, but reinscribed into dominant hegemony: after the CIA headquarters is bombed, Al-Qaeda releases the video to the U.S. media to frame Brody for the attack, marking its radical sentiments as clearly villainous and foreign by dissociating them from the sympathetic character of Brody himself. This dissociation is reinforced as we watch Brody's family view the clip on television; his daughter Dana's shock and denial underscores the sense that this is not who Brody is now, if he ever really had been. Brody himself, on the run with Carrie, sees the video on television, reminding viewers of Brody's current innocence and ultimate refusal to undertake his original plan, while reinforcing that the "real" terrorists are the foreign Arabs who released the video, not the white Marine voicing dissent. The video does not appear in the third season, which concludes Brody's story arc by making him a secret martyr in service of American intelligence but known publicly as the terrorist responsible for destroying the CIA building.

So within these broader serial contexts, what is the political meaning of Brody's video? Is it a radical critique of American military policy, an irrational statement by a grieving and broken man that might later be retracted, or the ventriloquized voice of Arab terrorists speaking through a brainwashed soldier? Each of these interpretations could be correct, depending on when you ask—*Homeland*'s serial time frame changes the video's meaning, even though the video itself remains static. And this is the challenge of trying to analyze meaning in a serial text: it changes as you watch it, or how it means shapes what it means. Its past is not undone, for despite the later reframing of Brody's video, its initial airing still conveyed a radical critique that does not fully disappear, either within the storyworld or in the minds of viewers. Yet any attempt to account for *Homeland*'s political meanings must remain open and unfinished until the series concludes, as it has demonstrated a willingness to revisit and revise its politics quite drastically.

This need to wait for an end is not equally true of all series—it seems pretty clear after the first season of *The Wire* or *24* which side of the political fence each will be pitching its tent, but both do shift somewhat over time concerning particular issues, such as gender representations

or the role of ethnicity. But for a series like *Homeland*, whose politics are more ambiguous and thus more in need of interpretation, any analysis before it ends must be contingently grounded only within that moment of storytelling, not an overall perspective. Such a need to wait for finality is not because a conclusion provides ideological closure and thus resolution but because it simply means that there is no more time to revise and resubmit its positions.¹⁶

We can understand these serial instances of political reframing through the concept of *articulation*, as defined by Stuart Hall as both discursive utterances and politicized connections between distinct cultural elements.¹⁷ Dominant forms of political ideology are forged by the contingent linking of social practices to cultural meanings, which frequently shift and transform within new contexts—Brody first articulates a terrorist bombing to American patriotism, then *Homeland* rearticulates the video to antiterrorist pursuits and eventually to condemn terrorism and frame Brody as wrongly accused, solidifying the dominant notion that terrorists are Arab foreigners, not white Marines. Serial articulation depends on the practice of reiteration, in which repeating and reframing helps define which linkages are maintained and discarded over the course of a series, highlighting how the political interpretations of any series are always subject to revision and recontextualization.

This mode of altering and revising a political perspective through serial reiterations is not the only way that a meaning can be rearticulated throughout a series. Another important factor is how distance reshapes a narrative event over time. Take another serialized moment critiquing U.S. military policies: in the second-season *Lost* episode “One of Them,” a flashback portrays Sayid’s service during the Persian Gulf War. While we have known that he was in the military and functioned as a torturer, in this episode we learn that he was trained, encouraged, and paid to torture by the U.S. Army. When this episode aired in 2006, as details of U.S. torture and abuse of prisoners in Iraq were still coming to light, mainstream media representations of the U.S. military condoning torture were quite controversial and taboo, made even more so by the suggestion that such policies dated back to the 1990s. Future episodes of *Lost* never retracted, contradicted, or revised such political meanings but simply ignored them: Sayid’s alliances with the U.S. military were never referenced again, and that aspect of his history simply receded

into the background over the next 82 episodes. Most *Lost* fans likely view this bit of narrative history as simply another detail in a vast sea of character information, not a lasting political critique that significantly shapes their view of either the series or U.S. military policy, suggesting that serial storytelling can emphasize or ignore particular meanings simply by the amount of attention afforded to them through serial reiterations and articulations.

The *Homeland* and *Lost* examples focus on the question of “how does it mean?” as a factor in shaping a program’s politics, such that serial poetics impact interpretation. To explore “how does it matter?” or the ways that a program’s cultural circulation over the course of a series shapes political significance, I return to an issue discussed in chapter 7: the gender politics of *Breaking Bad*. As argued in that chapter, focusing our attention on the character of Skyler highlights the underlying melodramatic cues running throughout the series, with Skyler slowly revealing herself to be an abused spouse fearfully trying to protect herself and her kids from her monstrous husband, Walt. This perspective comes into focus most clearly in the fifth season, such as in the episode “Fifty-One,” in which she fakes a breakdown as a pretext to get her kids out of the house and cowers from an aggressive, domineering Walt in their bedroom. It is not a stretch to interpret such sequences and story arcs as clearly inviting us to side with Skyler and to condemn Walt’s long slide into amorality as destroying any sense of love and compassion he may have once had for his wife.

However, the long arc of Walt’s perspective has inspired a large portion of *Breaking Bad*’s fans to dislike or even hate Skyler, treating her as the series’s true villain—for one of many instances, a Facebook page called “Fuck Skyler White” has more than 31,000 fans, with posts and comments dripping with violent, misogynistic hatred. For such viewers, their Skyler hate seems unwavering in the face of serial rearticulations, prompting vitriolic comments in which they seem to be rooting for Walt to abuse Skyler or worse and even extending such violent fantasies to the actress Anna Gunn. *Breaking Bad*’s creator Vince Gilligan has stated his perspective on this issue, calling the Internet’s den of Skyler haters “misogynists, plain and simple,” and suggesting that he sees no other way to justify such antipathy toward a character who is often a voice of reason in the face of Walt’s amoral selfishness.¹⁸ Anna Gunn took

her defense a step further via the unprecedented step in writing a *New York Times* editorial decrying the anti-Skyler vitriol and calling out the misogyny expressed via such fan hatred. As Gunn suggests, "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."¹⁹ The series itself critiques Skyler hate by putting the misogynistic words of these viewers in Walt's mouth, having him perform them at the character's peak of evil and hatred in the nuanced phone call from the episode "Ozymandias." This mirror found its reflection on anti-Skyler Facebook pages, with comments such as, "I climaxed when Heisenberg called Skyler a stupid bitch. I've been waiting five seasons for that." Needless to say, not all fans perceived the phone call as multilayered.

However, we cannot dismiss anti-Skyler sentiments as simple misreadings, whether driven by misogyny or more reasonable perspectives. We must acknowledge that the ways people make meaning around an ongoing serial do matter, even if they seem to be "wrong" by standards of textual design, authorial intent, moral judgment, or even basic human decency.²⁰ Hating Skyler is a significant part of *Breaking Bad*'s cultural circulation and thus an aspect of its gender politics as articulated, if not textually intended or justified. Seriality is constituted by the gaps between episodes, when contingent meanings come to matter in often material ways, and we cannot ignore such in-process interpretations and paratextual traces—such serial practices of articulation, however contingent or loathsome, are how a series matters, which shapes why it matters. Although I find these cultural practices of hating Skyler both deplorable and unjustified by the text, they still matter.

So what are the gender politics of *Breaking Bad*? I would never call it a misogynist text and could even argue that it critiques deep-seated assumptions of patriarchy in keeping with an antisexist, if not feminist, politics. But whatever intents we might attribute to the series, it is a text that has prompted misogyny, both by attracting such people to its audience and by triggering hateful reactions among a significant subset of viewers, and such cultural practices cannot be simply overridden or invalidated by a nuanced textual analysis. We must acknowledge such material practices of interpretation, no matter how distasteful

and irrational, as part of the series's "matter," notably significant and, in a word, complex.

It is telling that I have left these questions of cultural politics to the end of the book, despite how central they are to the field at large, as they highlight how such analysis is both too easy and too hard. It is fairly straightforward to interpret a television program using the field's well-established critical tools, isolating the particular episodes and moments that best support your argument and opinions without leading to much beyond labeling a text ideological and/or progressive. But once you account for how serial television works over time and across various cultural sites, it becomes hard to say anything about an ongoing program's politics with any conviction that is not draped in contingency, partiality, and competing perspectives, leaving me with that most shameful conclusion for an academic: "I don't know." That is not to suggest that we ignore issues such as *Homeland*'s presentation of patriotism or *Breaking Bad*'s perspective on patriarchy, but such questions require us to reframe what we mean by "interpretation" itself as a serial endeavor—always in flux, replete with gaps and ellipses, inclusive of endless contexts and paratexts, and frustrating in its incompleteness. Writing serial criticism requires the critic to accept such potential shifts and open-ended contingency as part of the terrain, giving up the certainty that is typically asserted in academic arguments.

Ending Serial Criticism

This book offers no broad arguments about the politics of serial television but rather focuses on the poetic and cultural practices that constitute the mode and medium of storytelling. Arguably the most significant way that the book is "political" is at the meta level concerning publishing practices; this is a case of small-scale politics, looking not to overturn capitalism or to renounce patriarchy but to affect a change in how scholarly knowledge circulates. By posting drafts of the book chapters online in serial succession, it allowed more people of all kinds to access it, invited readers to serve as peer reviewers providing feedback on a draft, and hopefully can inspire other scholars to undertake their own innovative publishing projects—and in that way, it seeks to

rearticulate how scholarship circulates. The online version of *Complex TV* is “serial criticism” in two ways: it is a critical work about serial texts, and it is criticism that was published serially. Keeping with the theme of this chapter, I conclude the book by returning to the meta level about the ends of this latter aspect of serial criticism.

I began posting the book to MediaCommons Press in March 2012, posting a new chapter every two weeks or so until June, posting the eighth chapter in August, and taking an unplanned hiatus until May 2013, when I overcame scheduling overload and writer’s block to complete the ninth chapter. The final chapter was posted in July 2013, marking a conclusion to that part of the serial publication process. However, all academic writing is implicitly serialized, with installments developed for presentations, teaching, articles, and chapters to eventually build up into a larger project and often continuing thereafter into new spin-offs and reiterations. As mentioned in the introduction, this book was written serially, emerging over the course of 10 years of thinking through its ideas, researching various case studies, and presenting parts in various lectures, essays, and blog posts. Gaps between such installments are hopefully productive for authors, incorporating feedback and further reflection into the next iteration, which I certainly tried to do throughout the process. The main difference in my approach was clearly bundling each chapter as part of a whole and releasing the chapters openly in succession, allowing anyone who was interested to follow the book’s development as an explicit serial.

I chose to serialize the open-access draft of the book largely in response to Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s experiences publishing her manuscript all at once on MediaCommons Press, as she found the later chapters generated far fewer comments and page views than the early ones did.²¹ I had hoped that serializing would build momentum and interest rather than having it dwindle, but it fell short of that goal: both page views and comments declined as publishing progressed. But of course the more than 35,000 unique visitors to the site (as of September 2014) surpass the number of people typically browsing an academic book, although I have little way of knowing how much of the book those visitors read, aside from the 50 people or so who commented. Regardless of the effectiveness of the serial release, the open-access publishing of the draft manuscript accomplished the core goal of making the

material available to a much wider readership than is typical for academic publishing.

A secondary goal for serial publishing was to better understand the serial creative process itself, as I wanted to experience what it is like to have part of a work released while still writing later installments. I had hoped that the feedback from early chapters would both help me revise those parts for final publication, which is distinctly unlike what serial television creators do, and inspire improvements and changes in subsequent chapters, which is more common on television—and both outcomes proved to be true. I also hoped that having chapters circulating when they were ready to be read rather than waiting for the entire book to be done would help gather interest and impact other scholarship, and this has been the most successful part of the process. Chapters of the book-in-progress have been taught in at least 15 different courses, were listed on at least one graduate student’s preliminary examinations, and even got cited in *The New Yorker*.²² Since writing an academic book is typically an isolated and lonely process, this publicly circulating model has definitely made me feel more like I was part of an ongoing conversation and community.

Writing serially in public required a degree of flexibility and willingness to make changes to my initial plan. In some cases, this resulted in “outsourcing” my own analysis to other scholars who admirably covered issues that I had originally planned to address. Thus in the original proposal, I included a chapter on television temporality—but then had the chance to read Paul Booth’s book *Time on TV*, which built on some of my early work to tackle some topics I had hoped to address with more detail than I would have managed, and thus I relegated such issues to citing Booth’s work, highlighting how scholarship can work as productive dialogue between academics in a more compressed (and circular) time frame than is traditionally possible via the pace of scholarly publishing.²³ Another chapter similarly got excised within the serial writing and prepublication process: a chapter on the history of television’s narrative complexity prior to the landmark year of 1999. That chapter would have traced the history of prime time television’s narrative form, looking at key precedents such as the two-parter, the recap, and the cliff-hanger as they developed within earlier programs and the critical reactions they triggered, exploring the gradual development of television’s

complex narrative strategies, and positing some explanations for why the 21st century has seen such an acceleration of storytelling innovation. In retrospect, that is a book in and of itself, so I cut it from the chapter plan before completing the manuscript, while incorporating some of the ideas into various chapters; however, the plan for these eliminated chapters endures in the online versions of the book proposal and introduction. Such accessible in-process writing has the added benefit of providing an open record of how at least one author develops a monograph, offering perspective on academic writing processes that are typically invisible and obscured.

Of course, this openness also meant that when I ran into trouble, anyone could see it. Had I not been posting chapters online, I probably would have finished writing the book a year earlier, as I could have dedicated the time that I spent formatting the website, responding to comments, and revising old chapters toward finishing the final sections. And my nine-month hiatus felt like a very public failure, letting down readers through my stalled momentum and providing visible evidence of the all-too-common instance of an academic missing publishing deadlines. But such failure can be extremely productive, as the chapter I was struggling with transformed radically during my break, shifting from being broadly about genre to more specifically focused on serial melodrama, in reaction to new scholarship that was published during my long, dormant winter; had I finished writing the chapter back in 2012, it would not have worked as well as (I hope) the new version does. The public versioning of the book allows readers to see the improvements that hopefully have occurred through feedback, revisions, and rethinking from the proposal to online drafts to final print manuscript, and hopefully such visibility will lead other scholars and publishers to embrace similar serial and open-access experiments to make the academic publishing ecosystem more transparent, open, and accessible. The online comments were quite helpful in addressing specific details and suggesting nuances, new examples, clarity of wording, and counterarguments, while the traditional press reviewers of the full manuscript focused more on the book as a whole, considering structural and conceptual issues. Together, my commenters have helped make the book much stronger than I could have written on my own.

So facing the end, and getting appropriately reflexive about my own ends, I am left wondering how best to conclude the book. I am tempted to look to my subject matter and take inspiration from television finales. I could follow *Lost* and offer some grand moral statement or mimic *Six Feet Under* and flash-forward to the future demise of complex television. Or I could ape *The Sopranos* and cut off in the middle of a sentence. But instead, I will look for inspiration from the finales of programs such as *Homeland*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Good Wife*, and *Louie*, which as of this writing exist only in the realm of infinite possibilities and potential, dodging the inevitable disappointment of finality by remaining still unfinished. While this book does end, the practice of serial scholarship pauses rather than concludes, as we find ourselves revisiting material, revising arguments, and spinning off in new directions. And thus I end my book with the three sweetest words for a scholar of seriality: to be continued.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. According to Nielsen ratings, *The Agency* ranked number 49 out of prime time broadcast programs for the 2001–2002 season, with 10.3 million estimated average viewers per episode, while *Alias* was at number 60 with 9.7 million and *24* was number 76 with 8.6 million; see "How Did Your Favorite Show Rate?" *USA Today*, May 28, 2002, <http://www.usatoday.com/life/television/2002/2002-05-28-year-end-chart.htm>.
2. See David Lambert, "24's TV-on-DVD Success Leads to New DVD Concepts," *TVShowsOnDVD.com*, October 22, 2003, <http://www.tvshowsondvd.com/news/24/764>.
3. See Michael Kackman, "Conclusion: Spies Are Back," in *Citizen Spy: Television, Espionage, and Cold War Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 176–190, for a fine example of such cultural analysis.
4. See Stacey Abbott and Simon Brown, *Investigating "Alias": Secrets and Spies* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007); and Steven Peacock, *Reading "24": TV against the Clock* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), for representative ranges of scholarship on these two series.
5. For important earlier explorations of television's narrative form, see Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1974); John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Horace Newcomb, "Magnum, Champagne of Television?," *Channels of Communication*, May–June 1985, 23–26; Jane Feuer, "Narrative Form in American Network Television," in *High Theory / Low Culture*, ed. Colin MacCabe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 101–114; Sarah Kozloff, "Narrative Theory and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. Robert C. Allen, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 61–100; Christopher Anderson, "Reflection on *Magnum, P.I.*," in *Television: The Critical View*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 112–125; Thomas Schatz, "St. Elsewhere and the Evolution of the Ensemble Series," in *Television: The Critical View*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 85–100; Marc Dolan, "The Peaks and Valleys of Serial Creativity: What Happened to/on *Twin Peaks*?" in *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to "Twin Peaks"*, ed. David Lavery (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 30–50; Greg M. Smith, "Plotting a TV Show about Nothing: Patterns of Narration in *Seinfeld*," *Creative Screenwriting* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 82–90;

- Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From "Hill St. Blues" to "ER"* (New York: Continuum, 1996); Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997); Robin Nelson, *TV Drama in Transition: Forms, Values and Cultural Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997); Robyn R. Warhol, "Feminine Intensities: Soap Opera Viewing as a Technology of Gender," *Genders*, no. 28 (1998), http://www.genders.org/g28/g28_intensities.html.
6. For more recent examples of such work, see Robyn R. Warhol, *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003); Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Glen Creeber, *Serial Television: Big Drama on the Small Screen* (London: BFI, 2004); Jeffrey Sconce, "What If? Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries," in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 93–112; Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon, eds., *The Contemporary Television Series* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2005); Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005); Michael Newman, "From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative," *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 58 (Fall 2006): 16–28; Sean O'Sullivan, "Old, New, Borrowed, Blue: Deadwood and Serial Fiction," in *Reading "Deadwood": A Western to Swear By*, ed. David Lavery (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 115–130; Greg M. Smith, *Beautiful TV: The Art and Argument of "Ally McBeal"* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007); Sean O'Sullivan, "Broken on Purpose: Poetry, Serial Television, and the Season," *StoryWorlds* 2 (2010): 59–77; Shawn Shimpach, *Television in Transition: The Life and Afterlife of the Narrative Action Hero* (Malden, MA: Wiley, 2010); Paul Booth, "Memories, Temporalities, Fictions: Temporal Displacement in Contemporary Television," *Television & New Media* 12, no. 4 (July 2011): 370–388; and Anthony Smith, "Putting the Premium into Basic: Slow-Burn Narratives and the Loss-Leader Function of AMC's Original Drama Series," *Television and New Media* 14, no. 2 (March 2013): 150–166.
 7. I explore this model more fully in Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
 8. See David Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema," in *The Cinematic Text: Methods and Approaches* (New York: AMS, 1989), 369–398; Henry Jenkins, "Historical Poetics and the Popular Cinema," in *Approaches to the Popular Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
 9. See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Torben Grodal, *Moving Pictures: A New Theory of Film Genres, Feelings, and Cognition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
 10. Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
 11. See Will Brooker, "Living on *Dawson's Creek*: Teen Viewers, Cultural Convergence, and Television Overflow," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4, no. 4 (December 1, 2001): 456–472; Jonathan Gray, "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 64–81; Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010); Matt Hills, "The Dispersible Television Text: Theorising Moments of the New *Doctor Who*," *Science Fiction Film & Television* 1 (April 1, 2008): 25–44; Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).
 12. This vision of textuality was convincingly argued decades ago by John Fiske, "Moments of Television: Neither the Text nor the Audience," in *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*, ed. Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutzner, and Eva-Maria Warth (New York: Routledge, 1989), 56–78. See Derek Kompare, "More 'Moments of Television': Online Cult Television Authorship," in *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, ed. Michael Kackman, Marnie Binfield, Matthew Thomas Payne, Allison Perlman, and Bryan Sebek (New York: Routledge, 2010), 95–113, for an update for the digital era. Frank Kelleter, "Toto, I Think We're in Oz Again (and Again and Again): Remakes and Popular Seriality," in *Remake/Remodel: Film Remakes, Adaptations, and Fan Productions*, ed. Kathleen Loock and Constantine Verevis (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2012), offers a compelling model of such "sprawling textuality" for the study of serial media.
 13. See Lostpedia, "Statistics," <http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Special:Statistics> (accessed March 24, 2012).
 14. We have no specific metrics on Lostpedia's readership during the show's original airing, but Benjamin Mako Hill, "Editor-to-Reader Ratios on Wikipedia," *Copyrighteous* (blog), February 6, 2011, <http://mako.cc/copyrighteous/20110206-00>, calculates that an average of 0.025% of Wikipedia readers have made at least five edits. If we were to extrapolate this ratio to the 10,000 Lostpedians with at least five edits, it would place the site's readership at around 40 million; this figure is undoubtedly high but clearly points to the likelihood that a good percentage of *Lost* viewers were actively reading Lostpedia or other fan sites without being tabulated.
 15. For more on television style, see Jeremy G. Butler, *Television Style* (New York: Routledge, 2009); and G. Smith, *Beautiful TV*.
 16. For a chronicle of this device and its use across television and other media, see the TV Tropes entry "How We Got Here," <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HowWeGotHere> (accessed March 24, 2012).
 17. Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

CHAPTER 1: COMPLEXITY IN CONTEXT

1. My use of "narrative complexity" bears some resemblance to Robin Nelson's term "flexi-narrative," especially as Glen Creeber employs it. However, my emphasis is

- less on quick-edited segmentation than Nelson's, and my analysis was developed independent from his work. See Robin Nelson, *TV Drama in Transition: Forms, Values and Cultural Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997); Glen Creeber, *Serial Television: Big Drama on the Small Screen* (London: BFI, 2004).
2. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 155.
 3. Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in Film and Television* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).
 4. For more on conventional episodic and serial norms, see Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 227–234.
 5. Jeffrey Sconce, "What If? Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries," in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 93–112.
 6. I use the concept of *storyworld* as developed by David Herman to suggest a viewer's mental construct of a fictional universe containing the setting, events, people, and rules of any given narrative; see David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).
 7. Louis C.K. posted this comment on *The A.V. Club* review for the "God" episode, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/god,44549/>.
 8. Quoted in Matt Webb Mitovitch, "Heroes Creator Solves Finale's Biggest Mystery," *TV Guide*, May 23, 2007, <http://www.tvguide.com/news/heroes-creator-solves-16552.aspx>.
 9. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).
 10. For more on the role of gaps in serial storytelling, see Sean O'Sullivan, "Old, New, Borrowed, Blue: *Deadwood* and Serial Fiction," in *Reading "Deadwood": A Western to Swear By*, ed. David Lavery (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 115–129; Sean O'Sullivan, "Broken on Purpose: Poetry, Serial Television, and the Season," *StoryWorlds* 2 (2010): 59–77.
 11. It is telling that in recent years, network and cable programs that contain advertising breaks are less likely to feature lengthy title sequences, as producers feel squeezed by limited screen time, while the longer and less strictly timed premium-cable series on Showtime and HBO are free to create lengthy and imaginative title sequences that help define the series and shape our expectations.
 12. Stephen V. Duncan, *A Guide to Screenwriting Success: Writing for Film and Television* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 220.
 13. See Paul Booth, *Time on TV: Temporal Displacement and Mashup Television* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), for a fuller discussion of temporal play in complex television.
 14. See Sean O'Sullivan, "The *Sopranos*: Episodic Storytelling," in *How to Watch Television*, ed. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 65–73; and Dana Polan, *The Sopranos* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009),

for more on Chase's approach to serialization and the program's episodic and seasonal structure.

15. For a less positive take on this transformation, see Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
16. For more on the key industrial and technological transformations of television in the 1990s and 2000s, see Jennifer Gillan, *Television and New Media: Must-Click TV* (New York: Routledge, 2010); and Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: NYU Press, 2007).
17. See Newman and Levine, *Legitimating Television*, for more on this shift in television's cultural legitimization.
18. See Warren Buckland, ed., *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
19. For an overview of television's production processes, see Mittell, *Television and American Culture*.
20. This claim was stated by Carlton Cuse in a personal interview with Cuse and Damon Lindelof, March 23, 2010.
21. It is important to note that beyond the first airing on American television, a cable channel's brand identity matters little to viewers who watch a series on DVD or Netflix or see it through global distribution. As these alternative models become even more prominent, we could see the goal of establishing a cable brand becoming less prominent, although such transformations are hard to predict.
22. Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005).
23. See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), for an influential take on these shifts in participatory culture.
24. Another important technological development in recent years is the rise of HDTV and digital television, allowing for higher-resolution images and more "cinematic" production styles and genres. This shift has less impact on narrative form than do recording technologies such as DVDs; for more on HDTV's impact on television's cultural legitimacy, see Newman and Levine, *Legitimating Television*.
25. See Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).
26. I discuss *The Wire*'s cross-media comparisons in Jason Mittell, "All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling and Procedural Logic," in *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 429–438; see also Frank Kelleter, *Serial Agencies: "The Wire" and Its Readers* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014).
27. Derek Kompare, "Publishing Flow: DVD Box Sets and the Reconception of Television," *Television and New Media* 7, no. 4 (2006): 335–360.
28. For more on *Lost*'s issues with the perception that there is no master plan, see Ivan

- Askwith, "Do You Even Know Where This Is Going?": *Lost's* Viewers and Narrative Premeditation," and Jason Mittell, "Lost in a Great Story: Evaluation in Narrative Television (and Television Studies)," both in *Reading "Lost": Perspectives on a Hit Television Show*, ed. Roberta Pearson (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 119–138, 159–180.
29. See Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997).
30. O'Sullivan, "Old, New, Borrowed, Blue."
31. Sconce, "What If?"
32. Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
33. See Tom Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy," in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1995), 87–105; and Lisa Trahair, "The Narrative-Machine: Buster Keaton's Cinematic Comedy, Deleuze's Recursion Function and the Operational Aesthetic," *Senses of Cinema*, no. 33 (October 2004), http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/33/keaton_deleuze/, for examples of the operational aesthetic applied to film comedy.
34. See Wanda Strauven, ed., *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).
35. Such narrative special effects have a literary analogue in "unnatural narratives," in which the storytelling mechanics deviate from mimetic realism in a manner to call reader attention to the narrational mechanics. See Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson, "Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models," *Narrative* 18, no. 2 (2010): 113–136.
36. Alan Sepinwall, "'Parks and Recreation' Mike Schur on the Eventful Season Finale," *HitFix*, April 24, 2014, <http://www.hitfix.com/whats-alan-watching/parks-and-recreation-mike-schur-on-the-eventful-season-finale>.
37. For more on the Baroque influence on complex television, see Angela Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); and Angela Ndalianis, "Television and the Neo-Baroque," in *The Contemporary Television Series*, ed. Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2005), 83–101.
38. For more on the procedural logic of games, see Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008).
39. See Buckland, *Puzzle Films*.
40. Quoted in Jace Lacob, "The Good Wife: Robert and Michelle King on Alicia, Kalinda, Renewal Prospects, and More," *The Daily Beast*, March 12, 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/03/09/the-good-wife-robert-and-michelle-king-on-alicia-kalinda-renewal-prospects-and-more.html>.

CHAPTER 2: BEGINNINGS

- I discuss pilots more in Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); see pages 46–52 for a discussion of the industrial

- practices of pilot production and pages 258–267 for a detailed analysis of *Lost's* pilot.
2. Television pilots often forgo opening credits until they are prepared for broadcast, although producer Mark Frost recalls that *Twin Peaks'* iconic credit sequence was produced for the original pilot. See my Twitter conversation with Frost, May 27, 2014: <https://twitter.com/mfrost11/status/471406258021355520>.
 3. A copy of the *Alias* pilot script was posted online, but was removed from the website since I downloaded it.
 4. For more on the series, see Rhonda V. Wilcox and Sue Turnbull, eds., *Investigating "Veronica Mars": Essays on the Teen Detective Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).
 5. See the Television Without Pity recap for a description of the originally aired pilot, at http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/show/veronica_mars/pilot_84/.
 6. See Rob Thomas's site, at <http://www.slaverats.com/>.
 7. The permanent status of this version is complicated by the fact that the version available on iTunes and Amazon as of May 2014 is the shorter broadcast edit. Even though DVDs are becoming less central to the television aftermarket, they still do serve more of an archival permanence than do downloadable or streaming files, which can be altered or withdrawn.
 8. Rob Thomas, interview on Television Without Pity, March 8, 2005, http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/show/veronica_mars/the-rob-thomas-interview-part/.
 9. The line "that's where I come in" is distinctly featured in the 1967 relaunch of *Dragnet*, although it probably appears in episodes of the program's 1950s radio or television run, which are less widely available now. Interestingly, the line also appears in the 1955 pilot of *Gunsmoke*, a Western featuring a *Dragnet*-style introductory voice-over by Marshall Dillon.
 10. Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).
 11. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
 12. Noël Carroll, "Narrative Closure," *Philosophical Studies* 135, no. 1 (2007): 1–15.
 13. Showrunner Rob Thomas describes these contractual obligations in his interview with Television Without Pity, March 8, 2005, http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/show/veronica_mars/the-rob-thomas-interview-part/10/.
 14. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

CHAPTER 3: AUTHORSHIP

1. See Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1974); Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley, *The Producer's Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
2. See Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), for more on the pilot production process.

3. This room-based model is less common in other national television systems, where individual episode authors frequently have more independence; see Matt Hills, *Triumph of a Time Lord: Regenerating "Doctor Who" in the Twenty-First Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), for a discussion of authorship in the British case of *Doctor Who*.
4. Quoted in Brett Martin, *Difficult Men: From "The Sopranos" and "The Wire" to "Mad Men" and "Breaking Bad"* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 258.
5. Quoted in Tim Molloy, "Damon Lindelof's History of *Lost* (a Show He Longed to Quit)," *The Wrap*, September 23, 2011, <http://www.thewrap.com/tv/print/31281>.
6. For more on *Lost*'s authorship, see Denise Mann, "It's Not TV, It's Brand Management," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed. Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2009), 99–114.
7. See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993), 29–43; Dwight Macdonald, *Masscult and Midcult: Essays against the American Grain* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011).
8. See Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, eds., *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
9. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).
10. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).
11. See Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2011), for a discussion of television's authorship and cultural legitimization.
12. Newman and Levine frame television authorship's evaluative function solely as a process of legitimization (*ibid.*), which is too narrow of an understanding of the various ways authorial identity can brand a program's aesthetic roles.
13. Emily Nussbaum, "Roux with a View," *New Yorker*, October 1, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/television/2012/10/01/121001crte_television_nussbaum.
14. Quoted in Jonathan Kirby, "Not Just a Fluke: How Darin Morgan Saved *The X-Files*," *PopMatters*, October 29, 2007, <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/not-just-a-fluke-how-darin-morgan-saved-the-x-files>.
15. For more on these validating discourses around *The Wire*, see Jason Mittell, "All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling and Procedural Logic," in *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 429–438.
16. These interviews can be extremely popular, as with the showrunner "walkthrough" series on *The A. V. Club*—according to the site's former TV editor Todd VandWerff (personal email), these multipart interviews received high readership in 2011 for showrunners including *Community*'s Dan Harmon (over 163,000 hits), *Parks and Recreation*'s Michael Schur (92,000) and *Louie*'s Louis C.K. (81,000).
17. See Kurt Lancaster, *Interacting with "Babylon 5": Fan Performance in a Media Universe* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).
18. See Myles McNutt, "Replying with the Enemy: Showrunners on Twitter II," *Antenna* (blog), November 11, 2010, <http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2010/11/11/replying-with-the-enemy-showrunners-on-twitter-ii/>.
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20. Suzanne Scott, "Who's Steering the Mothership? The Role of the Fanboy Auteur in Transmedia Storytelling," in *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, ed. Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson (New York: Routledge, 2012), 43–52. For more on the fan-friendly author, see Hills, *Triumph of a Time Lord*; and Derek Kompare, "More 'Moments of Television': Online Cult Television Authorship," in *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, ed. Michael Kackman, Marnie Binfield, Matthew Thomas Payne, Allison Perlman, and Bryan Sebok (New York: Routledge, 2010), 95–113. See Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), for more on authorial paratexts.
21. Kompare, "More 'Moments of Television'."
22. See the semiannual Hollywood Writers Report released by the Writers Guild of America, West, http://www.wga.org/subpage_whoware.aspx?id=922; the last available statistics were that women writers were only 30% of the television writing workforce in 2013.
23. For more on the strike and its public circulation, see Miranda J. Banks, "The Picket Line Online: Creative Labor, Digital Activism, and the 2007–2008 Writers Guild of America Strike," *Popular Communication* 8, no. 1 (2010): 20–33.
24. For more on *Dr. Horrible*, see Anouk Lang, "'The Status Is Not Quo!': Pursuing Resolution in Web-Disseminated Serial Narrative," *Narrative* 18, no. 3 (2010): 367–381.
25. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); for a compelling history and synopsis of the various ways the implied author has been used, see Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller, *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006).
26. Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 130.
27. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 62.
28. Jan Alber offers a similar model for cinema under the term "hypothetical film-maker," although that model seems less derived from reception practices and contextual discourses. See Jan Alber, "Hypothetical Intentionalism: Cinematic Narration Reconsidered," in *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses*, ed. Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 163–185.

29. Kindt and Müller, *Implied Author*, 152–154.
30. Torben Grodal, “Agency in Film, Filmmaking, and Reception,” in *Visual Authorship: Creativity and Intentionality in Media*, ed. Torben Grodal, Bente Larsen, and Iben Thorving Laursen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2005), 15–36.
31. Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
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33. See Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), for a historical account of such serial consumption practices.
34. Dan Harmon, “Mea Culpa for Those Needing One. Onward and Gayward,” *Dan Harmon Poops* (blog), November 5, 2011, <http://danharmon.tumblr.com/post/1237752020/mea-culpa-for-those-needing-one-onward-and-gayward>.
35. See Ivan Askwith, “‘Do You Even Know Where This Is Going?’: *Lost’s* Viewers and Narrative Premeditation,” in *Reading “Lost”: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show*, ed. Roberta Pearson (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 159–180.
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CHAPTER 4: CHARACTERS

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- University Press, 1999), 217–238; Michael Z. Newman, “Characterization as Social Cognition in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*,” *Film Studies: An International Review* 8 (Summer 2006): 53–67; Greg M. Smith, *Beautiful TV: The Art and Argument of “Ally McBeal”* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007); Roberta Pearson, “Anatomising Gilbert Grissom: The Structure and Function of the Televisual Character,” in *Reading “CSI”: Crime TV under the Microscope*, ed. Michael Allen (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 39–56; Roberta Pearson, “Chain of Events: Regimes of Evaluation and *Lost’s* Construction of the Televisual Character,” in *Reading “Lost”*, ed. Roberta Pearson (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 139–158; Jens Eder, “Understanding Characters,” *Projections* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 16–40; Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Rolf Schneider, eds., *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010); Murray Smith, “Just What Is It That Makes Tony Soprano Such an Appealing, Attractive Murderer?,” in *Ethics at the Cinema*, ed. Ward E. Jones and Samantha Vice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 66–90; and Robert Blanchet and Margrethe Bruun Vaage, “Don, Peggy, and Other Fictional Friends? Engaging with Characters in Television Series,” *Projections* 6, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 18–41.
3. Eder, “Understanding Characters,” 18.
 4. TV Tropes, “Real Life Writes the Plot,” <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/RealLifeWritesThePlot> (accessed March 24, 2012).
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14. Blahey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); see also Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006).
 15. Pearson, "Anatomising Gilbert Grissom," 55–56.
 16. See also Scott Meslow, "As TV Evolves, a Glaring Problem: Characters Who Don't Change," *Atlantic*, February 22, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/02/as-tv-evolves-a-glaring-problem-characters-who-don-t-change/253454/>.
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 18. Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
 19. See Gaby Allrath, "Life in Doppelgangland: Innovative Character Conception and Alternate Worlds in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*," in *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*, ed. Gaby Allrath and Marion Gymnich (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 132–150.
 20. See M. Smith, "Gangsters," for relative morality in film.
 21. Margrethe Bruun Vaage, "Blinded by Familiarity: Partiality, Morality and Engagement with So-Called Quality TV Series," in *Cognitive Media Theory*, ed. Ted Nannicelli and Paul Taberham (New York: Routledge, 2014), 268–284, makes the compelling argument that tight alignment can "blind us with familiarity" by making us feel a kinship with Tony despite our moral disgust, even in cases where the character's actions are relatively immoral.
 22. See M. Smith, "Just What Is It"; and Noël Carroll, "Sympathy for the Devil," in *"The Sopranos" and Philosophy: I Kill Therefore I Am*, ed. Richard Greene and Peter Vernezze (New York: Open Court, 2012), 121–136, for discussions of the program's antiheroic sympathies.
 23. M. Smith, "Gangsters," 236.
 24. Vermeule, *Why Do We Care*, 86.
 25. For more on the series, see Douglas Howard, "*Dexter*: Investigating Cutting Edge Television" (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010).
 26. Margrethe Bruun Vaage, "Fictional Reliefs and Reality Checks," *Screen* 54, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 218–237.
 27. For more on television's gender norms concerning antiheroes, see Amanda Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television and American Masculinities in the 21st Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2014). For an early discussion of the limits of television's portrayal of unsympathetic women, see Julie D'Acci, *Defining Women: Television and the Case of "Cagney & Lacey"* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). For more on the comedic figure, see Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

28. Vince Gilligan, from Nerdist Writers Panel podcast, recorded January 20, 2012, <http://www.nerdist.com/2012/03/nerdist-writers-panel-28-vince-gilligan-julie-plec-josh-friedman-jeff-greenstein/>.
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 34. See Anthony N. Smith, "Putting the Premium into Basic: Slow-Burn Narratives and the Loss-Leader Function of AMC's Original Drama Series," *Television & New Media* 14, no. 2 (March 2013): 150–166.
 35. Vermeule, *Why Do We Care*, 93.
 36. See Lotz, *Cable Guys*, for a compelling discussion of Walter in the context of contemporary masculinity within television drama.
- #### CHAPTER 5: COMPREHENSION
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 2. See David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); David Bordwell, "Cognition and Comprehension: Viewing and Forgetting in *Mildred Pierce*," in *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 135–150.
 3. Beyond Bordwell, see David Herman, *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences* (Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2003); Patrick Colm Hogan, *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts: A Guide for Humanists* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
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5. Bordwell, *Narration*, 30.
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 9. Jonathan Gray and Jason Mittell, "Speculation on Spoilers: Lost Fandom, Narrative Consumption, and Rethinking Textuality," *Particip@tions* 4, no. 1 (2007), http://www.participations.org/Volume%204/Issue%201/4_01_graymittell.htm. Thanks to Jonathan for allowing some of that work to be repurposed here; see also Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).
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 12. Quoted in Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 60.
 13. Bordwell, *Narration*, 57–61.
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 19. See Virginia Heffernan, "Gotta Minute? So, There's This Guy Tony . . .," *New York Times*, April 6, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/06/arts/television/06sopr.html>.
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CHAPTER 6: EVALUATION

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2. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 365–368.
3. See Daniel Chamberlain and Scott Ruston, "24 and Twenty-First Century Quality Television," and Steven Peacock, "24: Status and Style," both in *Reading "24": TV against the Clock*, ed. Steven Peacock (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 13–34, for more sympathetic takes on the program's style and aesthetics.
4. See Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, *MTM: "Quality Television"* (London: BFI, 1984); Philip W. Sewell, "From Discourse to Discord: Quality and Dramedy at the End of the Classic Network System," *Television & New Media* 11, no. 4 (July 2010): 235–259; and Dorothy Collins Swanson, *The Story of Viewers for Quality Television: From Grassroots to Prime Time* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).
5. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007). See also Mark Jancovich and James Lyons, *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, the Industry and Fans* (London: British Film Institute, 2003); and Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From "Hill St. Blues" to "ER"* (New York: Continuum, 1996), for other corpus-defining efforts.
6. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*, 13.
7. Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good?" 29–30.
8. See Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz, *Television Studies* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2011), for an account of the field's push away from questions of aesthetics.
9. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), for the landmark work on the topic; John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), offers an influential application of Bourdieu to television and other popular media.

- Arguably, Bourdieu's own theory is more complex and multifaceted than how it has been adopted within American media studies, with his notion of fields complicating the interplay between production and consumption. However, his work's influence on television scholars has primarily been through the lens of Fiske, who reads him as a rebuke to aesthetics and as a warning to ward off evaluative criticism.
10. See Antoine Hennion, "Pragmatics of Taste," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture*, ed. Mark Jacobs and Nancy Weiss Hanrahan (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 131–144, for an elaboration of this critique of Bourdieu.
 11. Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 7.
 12. See Hennion, "Pragmatics of Taste." See also Sudeep Dasgupta, "Policing the People: Television Studies and the Problem of 'Quality,'" *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2012), <http://www.necsus-ejms.org/policing-the-people-television-studies-and-the-problem-of-quality-by-sudeep-dasgupta/>, for a strong critique of Newman and Levine and such celebration of the "popular" within television studies.
 13. Gray and Lotz, *Television Studies*, 54.
 14. Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965); Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128–140.
 15. See Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes*; Jacobs, "Issues of Judgment"; Geraghty, "Aesthetics and Quality"; Michael Bérubé, *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); Jacobs, "Television Aesthetics"; Alan McKee, *Beautiful Things in Popular Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006); G. Smith, *Beautiful TV*; John Corner, "Television Studies and the Idea of Criticism," *Screen* 48, no. 3 (September 21, 2007): 363–369; Matt Hills, *Triumph of a Time Lord: Regenerating "Doctor Who" in the Twenty-First Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010); and Matt Hills, "Television Aesthetics: A Pre-structuralist Danger?," *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 8, no. 1 (April 2011): 99–117.
 16. See Matt Zoller Seitz, "The Greatest TV Drama of the Past 25 Years, the Finals: *The Wire* vs. *The Sopranos*," *Vulture* (blog), New York, March 26, 2012, <http://www.vulture.com/2012/03/drama-derby-finals-the-wire-vs-the-sopranos.html>.
 17. For more on *The Wire*'s visual style, see Erlend Lavik, *Style in "The Wire"*, video essay, Vimeo, 2012, <http://vimeo.com/39768998>.
 18. See Jeremy G. Butler, *Television Style* (New York: Routledge, 2009), for a discussion of zero-degree style. I offer the term *maximum-degree style* as its opposite, bearing some similarity to John Caldwell's historically grounded notion of "televisuality," which emphasizes visual excess that can (like *Breaking Bad*) evoke cinematic traditions or embrace a video-centered aesthetic. See John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

19. I discuss *The Wire*'s approach to simulating urban systems more in Jason Mittell, "All in the Game: *The Wire*, Serial Storytelling, and Procedural Logic," in *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 429–438. See also Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall, "*The Wire*: Urban Decay and American Television" (New York: Continuum, 2009); and Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro, eds., "*The Wire*: Race, Class, and Genre" (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012).
20. For an influential take on television's realism, see John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1987).
21. See Linda Williams, *On "The Wire"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
22. See Anmol Chaddha, William Julius Wilson, and Sudhir Venkatesh, "In Defense of *The Wire*," *Dissent*, Summer 2008, <http://dissentmagazine.org/article/in-defense-of-the-wire>, in which the authors write, "Quite simply, *The Wire*—even with its too-modest viewership—has done more to enhance both the popular and the scholarly understanding of the challenges of urban life and the problems of urban inequality than any other program in the media or academic publication we can think of." See also Frank Kelleter, *Serial Agencies: "The Wire" and Its Readers* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014), for an analysis of this realist reading strategy.
23. Jason Mittell, "On Disliking *Mad Men*," *Just TV* (blog), July 29, 2010, <http://justtv.wordpress.com/2010/07/29/on-disliking-mad-men/>; as of September 2014, the post has been viewed over 16,000 times and has received more than 100 comments. The anthology it was slated to appear in is Lauren Goodlad, Lilya Kaganovsky, and Robert A Rushing, eds., "*Mad Men*," *Mad World: Sex, Politics, Style, and the 1960s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).
24. Carl Wilson, "Let's Talk about Love": *A Journey to the End of Taste* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 156.
25. Mark Grief, "You'll Love the Way It Makes You Feel," *London Review of Books*, October 23, 2008, 15.
26. Todd VanDerWerff, "'Look! They're Doing Math!': *Mad Men*," *South Dakota Dark* (blog), October 12, 2007, <http://southdakotadark.blogspot.com/2007/10/look-theyre-doing-math-mad-men.html>.

CHAPTER 7: SERIAL MELODRAMA

1. See Jason Mittell, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
2. For influential takes on film melodrama, see Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987); Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 42–88; Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

3. Robyn R. Warhol, *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003).
4. See Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
5. See Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), for a detailed discussion of this and other radio serials.
6. Frank Kelleter, "Trust and Sprawl: Seriality, Radio, and the First Fireside Chat," in *Media Economies: Perspectives on American Cultural Practices*, ed. Marcel Hartwig, Evelyne Keitel, and Gunter Suess (Trier, Germany: WVT, 2014), 46–65.
7. See Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 83, for an account of this early history.
8. Such formats could span these categories, as with *The Jackie Gleason Show*, which offered a variety-style set of new sketches each week, alongside the embedded series of "The Honeymooners," whose consistent setting and characters eventually spun off into a more typical "episodic" sitcom.
9. Jane Feuer has been one of the more high-profile advocates of this position, but more in brief asides than in a fully fleshed-out argument. For instance, in her account of *Six Feet Under*, she mentions that HBO "quality drama was always . . . a peculiar elevation of soap opera narrative structure," with no further elaboration. Jane Feuer, "HBO and the Concept of Quality TV," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 155.
10. For a telling instance, Jane Feuer recounts a female-centered television conference where someone critiques male scholars who claim that "narrative complexity did not occur in television until *Lost*": "There was a big laugh from the audience when we gals all agreed that these men do not realize the shows they are fetishizing are soap operas." Jane Feuer, "Conference Report: Television for Women: An International Conference," *Television & New Media* 15, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 83.
11. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*.
12. See Laura Stempel Mumford, *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women, and Television Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 33–35. Even though daily viewing is essential for soap fans, they do have techniques for filling narrative gaps that might arise from missed episodes, including elaborate communities of home taping and trading, the intergenerational sharing of narrative knowledge, and the use of paratextual publishing with magazines such as *Soap Opera Digest* and detailed fan sites.
13. Caryn Murphy, "Selling the Continuing Story of Peyton Place: Negotiating the Content of the Primetime Serial," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 33, no. 1 (2013): 115–128.
14. See Newman and Levine, *Legitimating Television*, 82–84, for more on primetime serials in the 1960s and 1970s.
15. For more on *Mary Hartman*, see Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 202–207.
16. I discuss *Soap's* genre mixing and Harris's own claims of the program's connection to soap operas in Mittell, *Genre and Television*, chap. 6.
17. Linda Williams, "Mega-Melodrama! Vertical and Horizontal Suspensions of the 'Classical,'" *Modern Drama* 55, no. 4 (2012): 526.
18. Williams uses "suspense" to describe the narrative impulse of melodrama, following a broader notion of the term that is closer to what I call "anticipation" in chapter 5.
19. Williams, "Mega-Melodrama!," 529.
20. See Williams, "Mega-Melodrama!"; Linda Williams, *On "The Wire"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). For another take on *The Wire's* use of melodrama, see Amanda Ann Klein, "'The Dickensian Aspect': Melodrama, Viewer Engagement, and the Socially Conscious Text," in *"The Wire": Urban Decay and American Television*, ed. Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2009), 177–189.
21. For one of many examples of such distinctions, see Jane Feuer, "The Lack of Influence of *thirtysomething*," in *The Contemporary Television Series*, ed. Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2005), 27–36.
22. Newman and Levine, *Legitimating Television*, 82.
23. Robyn R. Warhol, *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003). See also Kristyn Gorton, *Media Audiences: Television, Meaning and Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).
24. Note that Warhol uses the term "antieffeminate," as she argues that there is no real antonym to "effeminate"; however, I prefer the not-quite-parallel term "masculinist" because it has less of an oppositional connotation than "antieffeminate," as I am trying to explore how the dual modes can coexist.
25. See Sue Turnbull, "Nice Dress, Take It Off: Crime, Romance and the Pleasure of the Text," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 67–82, for a revealing account of female fans of crime fiction.
26. See Williams, *On "The Wire"*.
27. Such genres have always had an active female fan base, and many viewers of both genders frequently worked to highlight sentimental and affective subtexts that were often buried within more overtly masculinist programs, such as *Star Trek* or *Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, but are more overtly central today.
28. Michael Kackman, "Quality Television, Melodrama, and Cultural Complexity," *Flow*, March 5, 2010. <http://flowtv.org/2010/03/flow-favorites-quality-television-melodrama-and-cultural-complexity-michael-kackman-university-of-texas-austin/>.
29. Warhol, *Having a Good Cry*, 41–50.

30. Ibid., 43.
31. Ibid., 47.
32. Ibid.
33. Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 98.
34. Ryan McGee, "Lost, 'The Constant,'" *The A.V. Club*, December 24, 2011, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/lost-the-constant,66980/>.
35. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1987).
36. Many scholars have explored such recent paradigms of television gender representation—see Susan J. Douglas, *The Rise of Enlightened Sexism: How Pop Culture Took Us from Girl Power to Girls Gone Wild* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2010); Amanda D. Lotz, *Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Amanda D. Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television and American Masculinities in the 21st Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).
37. Lotz, *Cable Guys*, 57.
38. *Breaking Bad*, "Más," season 3, episode 5, originally aired April 18, 2010.
39. Todd VanDerWerff, "The Good Wife Has Proven Itself a Worthy Successor to *The Wire*," *The A.V. Club*, May 17, 2011, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/the-good-wife-has-proven-itself-a-worthy-successor,56168/>.

CHAPTER 8: ORIENTING PARATEXTS

1. See Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), for a comprehensive analysis of media paratexts.
2. Emily Nussbaum, "Pugnacious D: *The Wire* Creator David Simon on His New HBO Series, *Treme*," *New York*, April 4, 2010, <http://nymag.com/arts/tv/features/65235/>.
3. This video aired on the BBC program *Doctor Who Confidential* in the United Kingdom on October 1, 2011, and is described in Charlie Jane Anders, "River Song's Chronology on *Doctor Who*, from River's Own Point of View," io9, October 3, 2011, <http://io9.com/5845981/river-songs-chronology-on-doctor-who-from-rivers-own-point-of-view>.
4. See pyramidhead, "Lost: Flight 815 Crash in Real Time," YouTube, September 12, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKcKtjrL5bc>.
5. See Dave Itzkoff, "In a Twist on the Remix, Fans Recut TV Series," *New York Times*, June 9, 2013, C1, for a discussion of such analytic remixes, including remixes of *Lost* and *Arrested Development*.
6. See Mark Andrejevic, "Watching Television without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans," *Television & New Media* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 24–46.
7. Shahed Syed, "Dexter's Victims," last updated September 27, 2013, <http://www.shah3d.com/dexters-victims-season-8-update/>.
8. jcham979, "Breaking Bad Finale Theory: A Case for Walt Poisoning Brock," YouTube, October 5, 2011, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BROfjhjCycY>.

9. See Dave Walker's "Treme Explained," posts at NOLA.com, May–June 2011, <http://topics.nola.com/tag/treme-explained/index.html>.
10. See The Tommy Westphall Universe, "The Master List," <http://thetommywestphall.wordpress.com/the-master-list/> (accessed June 15, 2014).
11. See Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), for a discussion of the ARG style of fan engagement.
12. Steve Murray, "Loved & Lost," *National Post*, May 21, 2010, <http://www.nationalpost.com/arts/lost/index.html>.
13. See MGK, "Alignment Chart Week! *The Wire*," MightyGodKing.com, December 9, 2010, <http://mightygodking.com/index.php/2010/12/09/alignment-chart-week-the-wire/>.
14. Tim Appelo, "Secrets behind *Game of Thrones* Opening Credits," *Hollywood Reporter*, April 9, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/race/secrets-game-thrones-opening-credits-179656>.
15. See Bob Rehak's *Graphic Engine* blog for his in-process writing on the topic: <http://graphic-engine.swarthmore.edu/?tag=blueprint-culture>.
16. Neither of these online maps is available any longer, but both were online in 2012 when I was researching this chapter.
17. For more on media tourism, see Nick Couldry, "On the Set of *The Sopranos*: 'Inside' a Fan's Construction of Nearness," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York: NYU Press, 2007), 139–148; David Crouch, Rhona Jackson, and Felix Thompson, *The Media and the Tourist Imagination: Converging Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Leshu Torchin, "Location, Location, Location," *Tourist Studies* 2, no. 3 (December 1, 2002): 247–266.
18. "Timeline: Flash-Sideways Timeline," Lostpedia, http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Timeline:Flash-sideways_timeline (accessed March 24, 2012).
19. For more on wikis as participatory culture, see Jason Mittell, "Wikis and Participatory Fandom," in *The Participatory Cultures Handbook*, ed. Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Henderson (New York: Routledge, 2012), 35–42; and Booth, *Digital Fandom*.
20. See Jason Mittell, "Sites of Participation: Wiki Fandom and the Case of Lostpedia," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 3 (Fall 2009), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/118/117>, for a more detailed analysis of Lostpedia. All Lostpedia content referred to can be found on <http://lostpedia.wikia.com>.
21. Henry Jenkins, "Do You Enjoy Making the Rest of Us Feel Stupid?: alt.tv .twinpeaks, the Trickster Author, and Viewer Mastery," in *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to "Twin Peaks"*, ed. David Lavery (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 51–69.
22. Because of the fluid nature of wikis, quotes from Lostpedia might change over time. Whenever appropriate, I cite a date on which the page did include the

- material; if not otherwise noted, the quotes were part of Lostpedia on March 20, 2009.
23. For more on collective online fan engagement, see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006); Booth, *Digital Fandom*.
 24. "The Lostpedia Interview: Carlton Cuse & Damon Lindelof," Lostpedia, April 17, 2009, http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/The_Lostpedia_Interview%3ACarlton_Cuse_%26_Damon_Lindelof.
 25. See Christy Dena, Jeremy Douglass, and Mark Marino, "Benchmark Fiction: A Framework for Comparative New Media Studies," *Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference*, December 2005, 89–98; and Bruce Mason and Sue Thomas, "A Million Penguins" Research Report (Leicester, UK: Institute of Creative Technologies, De Montfort University, April 24, 2008), for examples of more creative uses of wikis.
 26. See Sarah Toton, "Cataloging Knowledge: Gender, Generative Fandom, and the Battlestar Wiki," *Flow* 7 (January 2008), <http://flowtv.org/?p=1060>.
 27. See Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2012).
 28. See Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington, *Fandom*, for an array of fan practices across historical eras and media.
 29. See <http://en.battlestarwiki.org/>.
 30. As of this writing, the clip is still available on YouTube: jkh9005, "Incredible Commercial/Product Placement," March 19, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEDjAFiyoJ4>.

CHAPTER 9: TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

1. See Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); M. J. Clarke, *Transmedia Television: New Trends in Network Serial Production* (New York: Continuum, 2012); and Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media, and Daily Life* (New York: Routledge, 2011), for in-depth accounts of transmedia television.
2. Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).
3. Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia 2.0: Further Reflections," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* (blog), August 1, 2011, http://henryjenkins.org/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html, emphasis in original.
4. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).
5. Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 118–130.
6. Note that I do not believe that this gap of characterization is inherent to the videogame medium, as numerous games such as *Red Dead Redemption* and the

- Final Fantasy* series have created vivid and compelling characters. This issue arises more when attempting to port established characters from television to games, as the latter medium typically fails to re-create the depth and breadth of an ongoing television character.
7. See Ivan Askwith, "TV 2.0: Turning Television into an Engagement Medium" (master's thesis, MIT, 2007), <http://cms.mit.edu/research/theses/IvanAskwith2007.pdf>; Aaron Smith, "Transmedia Storytelling in Television 2.0" (honors thesis, Middlebury College, 2009), <http://sites.middlebury.edu/mediacp>; and Frank Rose, *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories* (New York: Norton, 2011), for other accounts of *Lost*'s transmedia strategies.
 8. See Jason Mittell, "Sites of Participation: Wiki Fandom and the Case of Lostpedia," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 3 (Fall 2009), <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/118/117>, for more on my role within *Lost* fandom.
 9. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.
 10. Personal interview with Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof, March 23, 2010.
 11. See Jason Mittell, "Lost in an Alternate Reality," *Flow*, June 16, 2006, <http://flowtv.org/2006/06/lost-in-an-alternate-reality/>, for a discussion of playing *The Lost Experience*.
 12. From the *Breaking Bad* "Insider Podcast" for episode 409, September 13, 2011, <http://www.amctv.com/shows/breaking-bad/insider-podcast-season-4>.
 13. AMC, "Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.: Breaking Bad Animated Webisode," <http://www.amctv.com/breaking-bad/videos/team-s-c-i-e-n-c-e> (accessed March 2010).
 14. See Jeffrey Sconce, "What If? Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries," in *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 93–112, for a discussion of the "What If?" impulse within television serials.
 15. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (1961; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).
 16. Bob Rehak, "Franz Joseph and Star Trek's Blueprint Culture," *Graphic Engine* (blog), March 11, 2012, <http://graphic-engine.swarthmore.edu/?p=1602>.
 17. See Henrik Örnebring, "Alternate Reality Gaming and Convergence Culture," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 4 (December 1, 2007): 445–462, for a detailed discussion of the *Altas ARGs*.
 18. See Julie Levin Russo, "User-Penetrated Content: Fan Videos in the Age of Convergence," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 125–130.

CHAPTER 10: ENDs

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3. Greg M. Smith, "Caught between Cliffhanger and Closure: Potential Cancellation

- and the TV Season Ending" (paper presented at the Society for Cinema & Media Studies conference, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2011).
4. Personal interview with Carlton Cuse and Damon Lindelof, March 23, 2010.
 5. See also Steven E. Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
 6. Emily Nussbaum, "A Disappointed Fan Is Still a Fan: How the Creators of *Lost* Seduced and Betrayed Their Viewers," *New York*, May 28, 2010, <http://nymag.com/arts/tv/reviews/66293/>.
 7. See Linda Williams, *On "The Wire"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), for a compelling discussion of *The Wire's* journalistic functions.
 8. See Bill Carter, "Fans Online Sift for Clues in the *Sopranos* Finale," *New York Times*, June 16, 2007, for reference to Chase's desire to extend the blackness.
 9. For one of many places where Chase denies showing contempt for viewers, see Alan Sepinwall, "David Chase Speaks!," NJ.com, June 11, 2007, http://blog.nj.com/alltv/2007/06/david_chase-speaks.html.
 10. Matt Zoller Seitz, "The Sopranos Mondays: Season 6, Episode 21, 'Made in America,'" *The House Next Door* (blog), Slant, June 11, 2007, <http://www.slantmagazine.com/house/2007/06/the-sopranos-mondays-season-6-ep-21-made-in-america/>.
 11. See Master of Sopranos, *The Sopranos: Definitive Explanation of "The END"* (blog), last updated June 19, 2013, <http://masterofsopranos.wordpress.com/the-sopranos-definitive-explanation-of-the-end/>.
 12. Todd VanDerWerff, "The Sopranos—'Made in America,'" *The A.V. Club*, December 19, 2012, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/made-in-america,89671/>.
 13. Matt Zoller Seitz, "The Sopranos," *Sight & Sound* 23, no. 9 (September 2013): 112.
 14. Tara McKelvey, "Media Coverage of the Drone Program" (discussion paper, Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, February 2013), <http://shorensteincenter.org/2013/02/media-coverage-of-the-drone-program/>.
 15. Robert C. Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
 16. For more on the role of serial narrative and ideological closure, see Laura Stempel Mumford, *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women, and Television Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
 17. Lawrence Grossberg, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 45–60.
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 19. Anna Gunn, "I Have a Character Issue," *New York Times*, August 23, 2013.
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21. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).
22. Emily Nussbaum, "Tune in Next Week," *New Yorker*, July 30, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/television/2012/07/30/120730crte_television_nussbaum?currentPage=all.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Mittell is Professor of Film and Media Culture and American Studies at Middlebury College. He is the author of *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (2004) and *Television and American Culture* (2009) and coeditor of *How to Watch Television* (NYU Press, 2013), as well as author of numerous essays about media studies. He runs the blog *Just TV*.